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Unpacking the Elite–Public Foreign Policy (Dis)Connect: “Jealously Preserving” Military Neutrality in Serbia, Yet for Different Reasons?

Tijana REČEVIĆ¹

Abstract: Public opinion on foreign policy was for decades largely dismissed in international relations and foreign policy studies, typically under the assumption that it merely mirrored elite preferences. Subsequent scholarship, however, has challenged this view by documenting numerous instances of “foreign policy disconnects”, showing that public and elite attitudes diverge more frequently and persistently than initially assumed, with significant implications for policymaking. Distinguishing between preference-level (mis)alignment, understood as support for or opposition to a given policy, and belief-level (mis)alignment, which captures the reasoning behind such positions, this article seeks to unpack these disconnects, enabling a more nuanced understanding of the elite–public nexus in foreign policy. On this basis, it introduces a novel matrix of foreign policy (dis)connects, yielding four ideal types: full connect, divergent connect, convergent disconnect, and full disconnect. The framework is applied to the case of Serbia’s military neutrality, often portrayed as a stable consensus between policymakers and the public within Serbia’s multi-vector foreign and security policy. Drawing on discourse analysis of Serbia’s strategic framework since 2007 and original 2023 survey data, the article shows that while both policymakers and the public endorse neutrality, their underlying justifications diverge, with public attitudes appearing less normative and idealistic than elite narratives suggest. As a divergent connect, the case demonstrates that apparent preference alignment can obscure belief-level tensions, with such mismatches capable of both limiting and enabling policy change.

Keywords: foreign policy, elite-public nexus, public opinion, military neutrality, Serbia, discourse analysis.

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Introduction

While scholars and experts differ on whether military neutrality is an optimal stance for Serbia, or even whether it constitutes genuine neutrality at all, they generally agree that its demonstrated endurance largely stems from the public's swift and strong attachment to it and, consequently, from policymakers' reluctance to challenge it even if they privately question its strategic value. Notably, although military neutrality was introduced without prior public or political debate, without clear meaning and strong legal foundation, it was rapidly embraced by the Serbian public. Polls conducted shortly after its adoption showed support at 45% (BCBP 2012),² with that figure only rising steadily to around 60% in early 2020s (CRTA 2022). Moreover, since the citizens' opposition to the policy has never exceeded 10%, based on the publicly available data, and no public outburst against it has ever occurred, military neutrality stands out as Serbia's least contested foreign policy stance over the past two decades. Policymakers themselves often acknowledge the strength of this public support, occasionally even conceding its constraining effect (Rečević Krstić 2025, 144).

Nevertheless, despite consistent survey data indicating strong public support for Serbia's policy of military neutrality, little is known about what enabled its rapid consolidation and sustained it over time. The puzzle becomes more striking when considering that over one-third of respondents openly admit to not knowing what military neutrality entails, and more than half believe the policy should be more clearly defined (BCBP 2017). Thus, although political elites have provided little explanation and the public has shown only limited understanding, military neutrality in today's Serbia is widely accepted as a given by both its proponents and opponents. To unpack how a seemingly robust social consensus could emerge in the absence of clear elite messaging or broad public comprehension, and how it has not only endured but intensified, it is necessary to move beyond survey data that merely measure support or opposition to this policy and instead examine the belief structures underpinning these stances. To illuminate the broader policy lifecycle of military neutrality in Serbia, one must ask whether the public simply follows elite cues, however ambiguous, or

² The absence of any publicly available surveys on military neutrality prior to the late 2000s underscores that the policy of military neutrality was introduced without thorough preparation or genuine engagement with public attitudes. It also suggests a dubious historical continuity of military neutrality in the country's foreign policy discourse and doctrine, frequently invoked by its political proponents.

whether it has developed an independent logic that leads to the conviction that military neutrality must indeed be “jealously preserved” (RSE 2022), as officials frequently assert.

To unpack this issue, the first chapter draws on the Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) literature that examines the role of the public and its relationship with policymakers in foreign policy. By distinguishing between preference-level and belief-level alignment, it introduces a novel matrix of foreign policy (dis)connects, allowing for a more nuanced assessment of the stability of political and social consensus in foreign policy and the effort required to sustain or alter it. The second chapter applies this framework to Serbia’s policy of military neutrality, combining an analysis of the official foreign policy narrative, as articulated in strategic documents since 2007, with regression analysis of original survey data collected in 2023 on a nationally representative sample. The conclusion underscores the broader significance of critically unpacking presumed political and social consensus – or dissensus – on foreign policy both in the examined case and more generally.

The Foreign Policy (Dis)Connect Matrix: Unpacking the Elite–Public Relationship Through the Preference–Belief Nexus

Over several decades of FPA scholarship on the role of the public in foreign policy, it became increasingly evident that citizens hold more prudent and coherent foreign policy attitudes than previously assumed (Almond 1950; Lippmann 1955; Page and Shapiro 1982; Shapiro and Page 1988; 1992). This recognition spurred a growing body of both public-centred and elite-centred studies exploring the political consequences of public opinion in this domain, primarily asking who listens to whom (for an overview, see Aldrich et al. 2006; Park and Hawley 2020; Kaarbo 2015). In response to mixed and often contradictory empirical evidence about whether and when publics and elites follow or ignore one another, attention increasingly turned to the phenomenon of “foreign policy disconnects,” in which publics and elites hold different views despite their mutual influence (Page 2007; Page and Bouton 2008). Drawing on diverse strands of social, political, cognitive, and clinical psychology – from genetic predispositions, via cognitive heuristics, to socially driven factors – scholars have produced valuable insights into the public–elite nexus in foreign policy, marked by theoretical eclecticism and a strong methodological individualism characteristic of FPA (Morin and Paquin 2018). While the

theoretical and methodological heterogeneity of this literature makes any attempt at a comprehensive synthesis or the identification of a singular “gap” largely futile, two levels of (dis)connect have emerged as dominant in the field.

The prevailing approach focuses on *preference-level* (dis)connects, assessing alignment between public preferences and policymakers’ foreign policy choices. Preferences are here outcome-oriented stances on specific options, expressed through yes-or-no judgments of support, opposition, or relative priorities. Usually captured through binary polls or electoral results, the preference-level approach has driven the field’s most significant advances. Early skepticism about the public’s role, initially reinforced by data suggesting volatile and inconsistent preferences (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964; 1987), was later overturned by sustained opposition to the Vietnam War and improved polling techniques showing greater stability and coherence in public’s foreign policy preferences (Verba et al. 1967; Caspary 1970). While Page and Shapiro (1982; 1988) showed that apparent volatility in public opinion was largely prudent, responding to meaningful international developments, later studies confirmed the uneven stickiness of views on issues such as arms control, military intervention, and terrorism, is often shaped by heuristics that enable quick judgments without extensive knowledge (Jentleson 1992; Jentleson and Britton 1998; Herrmann, Tetlock, and Visser 1999; Sobel, Furia, and Barratt 2012; Kertzer 2013). An illustrative line of research on public preferences for war and casualties, initially assumed to follow a linear pattern of declining support as casualties rose (Mueller 1971; 1979; Milstein 1974; Klarevas, Gelpi, and Reifler 2006), later demonstrated that tolerance is contingent on various cues such as perceived mission success, legitimacy, or elite consensus (Eichenberg 2005; Gelpi, Reifler, and Feaver 2007)

Typically captured through binary polls or electoral results, the study of preference-level (mis)alignment between elites and the public has been particularly valuable for understanding whether, when, and how the public constrains elite decision-making. The notion that foreign policy makers “waltz before a blind audience” has been increasingly challenged by evidence showing that voters perceive differences in candidates’ foreign policy positions and cast their ballots accordingly (Aldrich and McKelvey 1977; Aldrich et al. 1989; Anand and Krosnick 2003; Gelpi, Reifler, and Feaver 2007; Reifler, Scotto, and Clarke 2011; Tomz, Weeks, and Yahri-Milo 2020). Research has shown that foreign policy preferences can decisively shape electoral outcomes, while studies of the U.S. presidential approval further demonstrated that foreign policy performance may weigh more heavily on public evaluations of leaders than domestic policy does (Gelpi, Reifler, and Feaver 2007; Wilcox and Allsop 1991; Nickelsburg and Norpoth

2000; Campbell 2004). This research has, however, also highlighted the conditional nature of public's influence, showing that foreign policy becomes electorally relevant only when parties adopt clear and opposing positions, the public has access to these stances, and the issues achieve sufficient political and media salience (Aldrich et al. 1989; Baum and Groeling 2008; 2009; 2010; Baum and Potter 2008). Studies grounded in audience cost theory, for instance, showed how public's foreign policy preferences shift depending on whether policymakers uphold or abandon their commitments, particularly in the context of war (Tomz 2007; Guisinger 2009; Potter and Baum 2014; Kertzer and Brutger 2016).

A particularly rich body of literature on electoral outcomes and the political influence of public opinion in foreign policy has emerged from research linking public preferences to partisan alignment. While evidence remains mixed – even within the deeply consolidated two-party system of the U.S. – most studies indicate that party affiliation is one of the most powerful predictors of public foreign policy preferences (Brody 1991; Zaller 1992; Berinsky 2007; 2009; Reifler, Scotto, and Clarke 2011). Other studies emphasize the influence not only of party leadership but also of a broader range of elites from whom the public learns what it needs to know, including the military establishment (Golby, Feaver, and Dropp 2018), foreign leaders (Murray 2014), and international institutions (Thompson 2006; Chapman 2009; Grieco et al. 2011). While these studies suggest that the public can hold stable preferences, they nonetheless portray them as mere cue-takers, implying that “the balance of public opinion on foreign policy issues is largely driven in a top-down fashion by the balance of elite opinion” (Kertzer and Zeitzoff 2017, 2). Yet, considerable evidence shows that the public can hold divergent views even in the face of strong elite or partisan consensus, with studies demonstrating that elite influence is often mediated by bottom-up cues and frames (Hayes and Guardino 2010; Kreps 2010; Mayer and Armor 2012; Druckman 2001; Druckman and Nelson 2003; Steenbergen, Edwards, and De Vries 2007), but also that public attitudes are often more stable and deeply rooted than mere reliance on heuristics would suggest.

By probing beneath surface-level preferences, the *belief-level* studies examine the assumptions, convictions, worldviews, and causal understandings of international relations that anchor them. Unlike preferences, which reflect immediate stances on specific foreign policies, beliefs are embedded in cognitive-affective frameworks about how the world works, serving as stabilizing forces that shape or constrain preferences and condition their alignment with elite perspectives. Much of this research, centered on the U.S., has focused on beliefs about international engagement in both war and peace. Several studies have, thus, shown that the American public falls along a continuum between

cooperative and militant internationalism (Mandelbaum and Schneider 1978; Maggiotto and Wittkopf 1981; Wittkopf and Maggiotto 1983; Oldendick and Bardes 1982; Mayer 1992). Although earlier works differed somewhat in their emphases and findings (Campbell et al. 1960; Converse 1964), most converge on the conclusion that, much like elites, the American public has consistently favored international involvement, particularly on traditional foreign policy issues, while remaining divided on the balance between militant and cooperative approaches. Importantly, while many studies of this kind were conducted outside the U.S., Gravelle, Reifler, and Scotto (2017) demonstrate that similar underlying structures shape foreign policy attitudes across the Atlantic, showing that publics in the U.S., the United Kingdom, Germany, and France share core constructs in how they form views on international engagement.

To explain the stability of foreign policy preferences, some studies highlight hierarchically organized belief structures in which core values shape general postures such as militarism, anti-communism, or isolationism, which in turn give rise to specific foreign policy orientations (Hurwitz and Peffley 1987; Hurwitz, Peffley, and Seligson 1993; Peffley and Hurwitz 1992). Building on this framework, Rathbun (2007) finds that conservative values are closely linked to assertive internationalism, reflecting a predisposition toward forceful foreign relations, whereas universalist values most strongly predict cooperative internationalism, characterized by a preference for multilateralism and cosmopolitan engagement. More recent work further examines how sets of values, including moral ones, shape foreign policy attitudes (Kertzer 2013; Kertzer and McGraw 2012). For instance, Kertzer et al. (2014) demonstrate that both cooperative and militant internationalism are rooted in moral values, though grounded in different moral logics. By unpacking the role of values and moral beliefs in structuring worldviews about international relations, this perspective, thus, suggests that public preferences reflect relatively stable and predictable orientations that delineate the outer boundaries of what is politically feasible, famously described as a “system of dikes” channeling elite action (Key 1961), or as a “slumbering giant” that awakens when foreign policy decisions threaten deeply held values (Rosenau 1961).

Both preference- and belief-level approaches have, therefore, provided important insights into the public–elite nexus in foreign policy, revealing that public opinion on foreign affairs is more of an “odd bird” than once assumed. Preference-level analyses have enabled scholars to trace moments of convergence and divergence between the public and policymakers, especially during politically salient periods such as elections. This line of research has shown how preferences can shift quickly in response to cues, both top-down

and bottom-up, underscoring that they are neither fixed nor self-evident but must be carefully unpacked to understand how they are formed, justified, and rendered politically salient. By contrast, belief-level research has often questioned whether apparent stability is simply the result of cue-following and instead sought to uncover the internal (in)coherence of public views. By tracing attitudes back to deeper cognitive-affective structures, such as moral foundations, value orientations, and identity narratives, this work highlights why public's foreign policy attitudes often tend to be "stickier," in contrast to earlier views that characterized public opinion in foreign policy merely as "mood" (Almond 1950). In doing so, it helps explain why certain foreign policies fail to resonate with the public despite elite consensus, and conversely, why others easily gain traction even when the public has little expertise or knowledge, as is often the case.

While these two approaches have mostly evolved in parallel, largely due to scholars' different research aims and methodological affinities, their stronger bridging and integration could, nonetheless, offer a more nuanced and layered understanding of the elite–public relationship in foreign policy. Examining whether elite–public (mis)alignment at the preference level is supported by shared belief structures as well – or conversely, whether similar beliefs still lead to divergent preferences among public and elites – can yield critical insights into the legitimacy of policymaking, the mechanisms that sustain the status quo, and the conditions under which meaningful change becomes possible. Theorizing this interplay can draw on insights into how beliefs translate into preferences through cognitive mechanisms, as shown in classic work on cognitive consistency (Festinger 1957) and motivated reasoning (Kunda 1990), as well as more recent dual-process models (Kahneman 2011), which demonstrate how individuals strive for coherence between values, beliefs, and choices. Equally important are studies on moral foundations theory (Haidt 2012), affective intelligence (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000), emotion regulation (Gross 2015), the somatic marker hypothesis (Bechara and Damasio 2005), and social neuroscience (Lieberman 2013), which show how intuitive moral judgments, embodied affective cues, and socially embedded emotions channel beliefs into concrete preferences, particularly under conditions of uncertainty or crisis. Leaving more elaborate theorization for later stages, this article takes an initial analytical step by introducing a novel matrix of foreign policy (dis)connect designed to capture the layered and often paradoxical nature of elite–public relations in foreign policy.

The interplay between these two dimensions generates four ideal types of foreign policy (dis)connect: *full connect*, where preferences and beliefs align;

divergent connect, where preferences align but beliefs diverge; *convergent disconnect*, where preferences differ but belief systems are similar; and *full disconnect*, where misalignment exists at both levels. Each type of the four types of (dis)connects between public and elite reveal distinct mechanisms shaping foreign policy support and legitimacy, as well as distinct risks and opportunities for foreign policy design and implementation. Full connect might represent the rarest, most stable and deeply legitimate configuration, but only if the pluralism of ideas and information is allowed. Divergent connect, more common in practice, involves agreement on policy but divergent underlying beliefs, making support fragile and potentially short-lived. Convergent disconnect captures cases where shared values exist but policy preferences diverge, highlighting opportunities for persuasion and reframing rather than deep conflict. In contrast, full disconnect signals a legitimacy crisis, often preceding foreign policy failure, mass dissent, or the rise of populist challengers. While this paper identifies (dis)connect through quantitative thresholds (e.g. an absolute majority of the population supporting or opposing a given policy stance) and qualitative indicators (e.g. the extent to which elites and the public prioritize similar arguments, causal logics, or normative frames in justifying their positions), the definitive criteria merit further exploration and theorization in future work.

Table 1. *The Foreign Policy (Dis)Connect Matrix:
Illustrating the Preference–Belief Nexus Underpinning
the Public–Elite Relationship in Foreign Policy*

Preference-level Belief-level	Alignment	Misalignment
	Alignment	Misalignment
Alignment	Full Connect	Convergent Disconnect
Misalignment	Divergent Connect	Full Disconnect

As a highly salient yet ambiguously defined foreign policy stance, Serbia's military neutrality offers a compelling case for probing the foreign policy (dis)connect matrix. Although it enjoys broad public support, the policy is rarely debated openly, with many citizens endorsing it without a clear understanding of its meaning – an illustration of how the public can hold firm foreign policy preferences even in the absence of knowledge, sustained by deeper belief structures. Moreover, by delineating the boundaries of other pillars of Serbia's foreign and security policy, military neutrality reveals how broader elite frames

and public worldviews interact in dynamic, and at times paradoxical ways, making it an especially illuminating case for examining both the public–elite (dis)connect and the preference–belief (dis)connect in Serbian public attitudes toward foreign policy. Finally, since its meaning and relevance are contested (Agius and Devine 2011) and debated not only in Serbia but elsewhere (Trapara 2016; Kuvekalović-Stamatović 2021; Kostić Šulejić 2024) – alternatively framed as essential or obsolete, as pragmatic strategy or normative commitment – unpacking the beliefs that sustain military neutrality reveals why it endures as a viable option within an evolving global order and security architecture.

Military Neutrality in Serbia: (Mis)Alignment of Elite and Public Preferences and Beliefs

Even before declaring military neutrality in 2007, Serbia's foreign policy was marked by a complex, multi-pillared, multi-vector approach that sparked ongoing debates about its coherence and effectiveness. Much of the literature remains critical, particularly in regard to Serbia's security and defence posture, portraying it as unsustainable (Novaković 2019; Ejodus 2008; 2011; 2014b; Milosavljević 2016; Teokarević 2016) or even schizophrenic (Ejodus 2008, 66; Varga 2018). Those criticizing neutrality *per se* question its relevance in contemporary international relations, calling it outdated (Teokarević 2016, 106), obsolete (Litavski 2012, 3), or costly strategic option (Ejodus 2008; 2014a).³ Other scholars, however, defend Serbia's multidirectional foreign policy and military neutrality as "wise," "foresighted," or the "only viable option," arguing that it ensures diplomatic flexibility and balanced cooperation, with justifications grounded not only in geopolitical reasoning and historical rationales, but economic benefits as well (Vuković 2016; Kovač 2016; Blagojević 2016, 2022; Gaćinović 2018; Jovanović 2022; Forca 2016; 2022; Stojanović and Šaranović 2022; Stojković and Glišić 2018). Finally, while some scholars stress the lack of legal codification as rendering Serbia's military neutrality void (Litavski 2012; Teokarević 2016; Beriša i Barišić 2016; Novaković 2019), others counter this critique by invoking the concept of "soft recognition," pointing to tacit acknowledgements of Serbia's neutrality by foreign officials (Jovanović 2022; Forca 2022, 170).

³ For an overview of media and civil society frames opposing military neutrality, see Mitić and Matić (2022).

Nevertheless, whether critical or supportive of the policy, nearly all researchers agree that Serbia's unique strategic posture is strongly shaped by prevailing public attitudes (Đukanović 2016, 272–273; Ejodus 2011, Forca 2022). The enduring appeal of military neutrality, in particular, stems largely from how swiftly and deeply it resonated with the public, so much so that it remains a political taboo. Even if some policymakers privately consider it suboptimal, they feel constrained from discussing it publicly (Rečević Krstić 2025), let alone advocating a change, a phenomenon some scholars refer to as “crypto-Atlanticism” (Ejodus and Hoeffler 2024). Yet, while available studies and data suggest that this political and societal consensus emerged with minimal effort from elites and has endured with similar ease, little is known about the underlying beliefs that sustain it. Explanations often highlight opposition to NATO or invoke the legacy of the Non-Aligned Movement, yet such accounts remain incomplete, since the meaning of this legacy rests on particular beliefs about international relations that have been equated with neutrality and framed positively. Nor can opposition to NATO be reduced to outright rejection, given the paradoxical situation in which EU membership is not viewed as unacceptable by the Serbian public. Moreover, the steady growth of support for neutrality over time suggests that more durable and encompassing beliefs have taken root, extending beyond nostalgia or resentment over past events.

In this context, a fuller explanation requires tracing how policymakers have justified Serbia's policy of military neutrality and how the public has understood it. Is the apparent consensus merely the product of elite cues, or does it reflect independent public reasoning that renders neutrality a sensible option – helping to explain both its rapid adoption in 2007 and its continued maintenance despite shifting regional and global circumstances? If the consensus rests primarily on elite guidance, a policy shift would be relatively straightforward, provided elites take the lead – a scenario that runs counter to the prevailing view among policymakers and experts that military neutrality in Serbia is highly “sticky.” If, however, the consensus is rooted in the public's own reasoning, then it becomes crucial to identify these justifications and examine how they align with or diverge from the official elite narrative.

Policymakers' Narrative on Serbia's Military Neutrality

Serbia's 2007 proclamation of military neutrality, hastily adopted in anticipation of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, was defined in largely negative terms by Article 6 of the National Assembly's Resolution on the Protection of Sovereignty, which declared that “the Republic of Serbia shall

maintain a position of neutrality with regard to existing military alliances until a referendum is held to determine the final decision on this matter” (National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia 2007). Describing neutrality as the most suitable option “for now” (Brozović 2010; RTV 2010), some official statements even suggested that the policy was not envisioned as a long-term strategic commitment. Perhaps the clearest indicator of the lack of political will to confidently define or institutionalize military neutrality was its complete absence from the 2009 National Security Strategy and Defence Strategy (Ministarstvo odbrane Republike Srbije 2009a; 2009b). Moreover, despite being increasingly invoked by state officials, and despite changes in regimes and governments, no steps were taken to clarify, codify, or legally entrench military neutrality for over a decade. It was only in 2019 that the new National Security Strategy and Defence Strategy (Ministarstvo odbrane Republike Srbije 2019a; 2019b) officially referenced military neutrality. Nonetheless, no substantial progress was made in defining it even then, as the originally negative definition of military neutrality has only slightly evolved to explicitly emphasize that neutrality does not entail isolation but is compatible with cooperation across a range of security and defence partners (Ministarstvo odbrane Republike Srbije 2019a).

Lacking a substantive or detailed official definition, unaccompanied by meaningful public debate, and never actively championed or contested by major political parties, references to military neutrality in Serbia have remained fragmented and repetitive. Over the years, the term has functioned as a convenient placeholder, readily invoked to legitimize a wide array of otherwise contradictory foreign policy choices, such as Serbia’s selective participation in international peacekeeping missions or its inconsistent voting patterns on UN resolutions addressing global crises (Rečević Krstić 2025, 112–120). Despite increasingly frequent affirmations that Serbia is and will remain militarily neutral, especially during moments of international or regional tension, the official discourse has offered little clarity on what this neutrality actually entails. When its rationale is, however, inferred from the broader narrative of Serbia’s multifaceted foreign policy 2007, as outlined in key strategic documents (e.g. National Security Strategy and Defense Strategy from 2009 and 2019, White Papers on Defence from 2010 and 2023) and foreign policy officials’ exposes (e.g. by presidents, prime ministers, foreign and defence ministers), neutrality emerges as a posture underpinned by three intersecting lines of justification: normative, geopolitical, and pragmatic.

The strong normative and affective appeal embedded in policymakers’ narratives has arguably been the most powerful component in justifying military neutrality since the very beginning. The wording of the 2007 Resolution – citing

“the overall role of NATO” – effectively institutionalized a sense of resentment and anger toward the existing security and defence order (National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia 2007). It was made clear that the policy of military neutrality was an expression of dissatisfaction and spite against the unjust treatment of Serbia, primarily by the Western states, portraying neutrality as a morally superior position. Often echoing long-standing tropes that Serbia has always fought for ideals and resisted injustice and great power domination, even at significant sacrifice (Koštunica 2007; Ministarstvo odbrane Republike Srbije 2010), military neutrality is constructed as a source of national pride, as “the right to be itself on its own land, to have the right to safeguard its freedom, its skies, and its land, alone, without anyone’s help” (Vučić 2022). While the occasions were rather different, the rhetoric kept presenting neutrality as unique, admirable, and noble, however difficult and costly – as a principled refusal to accept the rule of the stronger, not only in defence of Serbia but also in solidarity with other small and vulnerable states in the international order. When occasionally confronted with critiques that neutrality actually unethical in the face of contemporary global conflicts, or with accusations of hypocrisy and double standards, officials typically respond by emphasizing that Serbia’s neutrality is a military one, not political (Vučić 2022). In this way, normatively and affectively charged elements remain deeply embedded in the discourse surrounding military neutrality, portraying the refusal to take sides as Serbia’s continued commitment to being on the “right side of history” (Rečević Krstić 2025, 160–171).

The notion that Serbia stands between West and East, often invoked to further emphasize its European identity (Vučić 2016; 2022; Ministarstvo odbrane Republike Srbije 2010; 2019a; 2019b), serves as yet another justification that renders the policy of military neutrality appear natural. Some references even draw a line from alleged medieval articulation of Serbia as “the West to the East and the East to the West,” through Yugoslavia’s Cold War policy of non-alignment, to Serbia’s present position. Although the 2007 proclamation of military neutrality was framed in an anti-Western tone and often emphasized ties with the East, it ultimately rests on a narrative of historical continuity that portrays Serbia’s unique position – frequently described through metaphors like “building a house at the crossroads” (Vulin 2018) – as a source of enduring strategic importance to great powers. The narrative of Serbia’s unique geographical and geopolitical position is often accompanied by reminders that such a position demands particularly vigilance and self-reliance. The most recent White Paper on Defence (Ministarstvo odbrane Republike Srbije 2023) reaffirmed that, as a militarily neutral state, Serbia “primarily relies on its own capabilities and resources” to address security challenges. This idea is also echoed in statements that neutrality must be

“jealously preserved” (Vučić 2016), implicitly invoking the presence of external threats to its sustainability and reinforcing the emphasis on self-reliance. Although public discourse occasionally features claims of “creeping NATO membership” (Novaković and Savković 2019), there has been no formal request for Serbia to abandon its military neutrality and both NATO and EU officials have repeatedly acknowledged its chosen stance.

Alongside more identity-based narratives, the pragmatic argument put forward by policymakers in support of military neutrality is that taking sides in international relations is not a viable strategy for a country like Serbia. While elite narratives in the early 2000s were not explicit in this regard – the strategic objective of a “return to Europe” implied a clear orientation, and the use of the term “Euro-Atlantic” suggested that NATO membership was not entirely excluded (Kancelarija Vlade Republike Srbije za pridruživanje Evropskoj uniji 2005) – this began to change over time. Especially after the outbreak of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014, which served as a big test of Serbia’s military neutrality, official statements more frequently emphasized that Serbia should balance and avoid taking sides in international affairs. These hedging arguments are sometimes supported by references to the changing structure of the global order and the decline of unipolarity, and at other times to Serbia’s small size, implying that a small state should avoid entanglement in the rising rivalries of great powers (Rečević Krstić 2025, 160–163). Subsequent crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and Serbia’s vaccine diplomacy, were also cited as evidence of the advantages of maintaining equidistance from the global centres of power. When the war in Ukraine escalated in 2022, neutrality was once again invoked to justify Serbia’s decision to support selected UN resolutions condemning Russia’s aggression, while refraining from aligning with EU sanctions. Hence, although military neutrality was essentially proclaimed in opposition to a specific side, it has increasingly been interpreted as a balancing position within the evolving global security architecture.

Finally, while military alignment with any bloc is cast as unacceptable, the most direct positive framing of military neutrality rests on the idea that, in an interest-driven international system, cooperation with all actors is both necessary and desirable. The 2019 National Security Strategy, for example, states that Serbia develops partnership cooperation with both NATO and Collective Security Treaty Organisation “based on” or “in accordance with” the policy of military neutrality (Ministarstvo odbrane Republike Srbije 2019). Strategic documents place particular emphasis on security and defence cooperation with the EU, while also underscoring growing engagement with China and other countries, especially those in the immediate region (Ministarstvo odbrane 2009;

2010; 2019; 2023). Importantly, since this pragmatic framing appears primarily aimed at diffusing domestic opposition to cooperation with NATO, officials simultaneously emphasize that such engagement is balanced and extended equally to all international partners (Rečević i Krstić 2019). This balancing rhetoric fosters the illusion of equal engagement with Russia or the CSTO and NATO – an impression not supported by empirical evidence (Novaković and Savković 2019). In practice, Serbia has consistently conducted significantly more joint military exercises with NATO than with Russia.⁴ This illusion of balanced engagement was further undermined by the 2022 moratorium on international military cooperation, officially introduced to uphold neutrality amid escalating global tensions, as its only exceptions involved exercises with NATO partners (RSE 2023). Moreover, Serbia even deployed ten soldiers to the US-led Multinational Force and Observers (MFO) in Sinai – its first mission outside the UN or EU frameworks since declaring military neutrality (Ministarstvo odbrane Republike Srbije 2025).

Therefore, although never clearly articulated, Serbia's policy of military neutrality has been sustained through a 'buffet-style' narrative that blends moral appeal, geopolitical determinism, and pragmatic rationality – not always in a coherent or consistent manner. From its very inception, it is framed as a symbol of national dignity, resilience, and moral superiority, rooted in Serbia's historical legacy of non-alignment, resistance to great power domination, and a principled refusal to take sides in unjust conflicts, particularly given its unique geopolitical position "in between" and "at the crossroads" of major powers. At the same time, policymakers justify neutrality as a pragmatic strategy for a small state navigating a polarized and unstable international environment, emphasizing the advantages of cooperating with all actors without formally aligning with any. This raises the key question of whether public support for military neutrality is grounded in the multilayered rationale articulated by political elites.

Public's Preferences and Beliefs on Serbia's Military Neutrality

Whether this was a matter of strategic foresight, political luck or both, despite being introduced abruptly in November 2007, military neutrality quickly captured public attention and resonance. According to the earliest publicly available data from 2012, when asked to choose between four options for the improvement of the security situation in Serbia, the vast majority chose military neutrality (45%), while the rest split between the option of strengthening

⁴ For instance, since joining the Partnership for Peace in 2006, Serbia has participated in 150 exercises with NATO member states, while it has conducted 12 exercises with Russia (BCBP 2018).

security cooperation with the Russia (18%), EU (16%), or NATO (4%) (BCBP 2011, 2012). Over the time, the support for military neutrality only grew in comparison to other options, reaching 69% in 2022, opposed to 17% who believed that Serbia should make a military alliance with Russia (17%) or with the West (9%) (CRTA 2022). Moreover, even though in the earliest stages the EU membership attracted slightly higher support, the portion of population opposing military neutrality has never crossed 10%, which makes it perhaps the most popular foreign policy of all in average (BCBP 2017). Such consistent support for military neutrality has been further evident during major international crises – while some events have prompted shifts in even in some of the so-called “old neutrals”, like Finland and Sweden (Forsberg 2024; Mitchell et al. 2025), they appear to have further solidified support for neutrality in Serbia. For instance, in response to the 2022 Russian aggression against Ukraine, more than two thirds of the Serbian public believes that military neutrality should be kept, even at the cost of European integration (CRTA 2022).

Such strong support for military neutrality at the preference level becomes even more intriguing when considered alongside the public’s limited understanding of what this policy entails in practice. According to data from 2017, half of those who support military neutrality believed the policy should be preserved, but also that it requires further clarification (BCBP 2017). Although there is limited data investigating the public knowledge of military neutrality, survey results on other aspects of Serbia’s security and defence integration also indicate widespread confusion. Despite Serbia’s intensive security and defence cooperation with NATO under the Partnership for Peace framework and its far more limited cooperation with Russia (Topalović 2024), much of the public continues to downplay or even reject engagement with Western partners as incompatible with neutrality, while overstating ties with Russia (BCBP 2017; 2020).

The results of a survey conducted in 2023 further confirms that the policy of military neutrality has become notably ‘sticky’ among the Serbian public.⁵ Nearly

⁵ The survey was conducted face-to-face across Serbia (excluding Kosovo and Metohija) from July 1 to 9, 2023, using a three-stage stratified random sample of 1,213 adults (18+), with a margin of error of $\pm 2.8\%$. Data collection involved TAPI (Tablet Assisted Personal Interviewing), with fieldwork monitored via GPS and daily reports. The sample was weighted using census data and Wittgenstein Center estimates to ensure national representativeness. The survey was conducted by Sprint Insight for the project *Monitoring and Indexing Peace in the Balkans (MIND)*, led by the University of Belgrade – Faculty of Political Science and supported by the Science Fund of the Republic of Serbia (grant no. 7744512).

half of respondents (46.7%) support maintaining neutrality, either fully (20.7%) or mostly (26%), while only 20.3% consider it suboptimal. With 22.2% remaining ambivalent and additional 10.8% expressing uncertainty, a sizable portion of the population, however, remains undecided. Conversely, when asked whether abandoning neutrality would make sense in light of Serbia's international position, 44.1% rejected the idea, 20.1% supported it, and 24.5% remained neutral. These findings indicate that, while support for military neutrality is not universal even at the preference level, it obviously remains stable enough to serve as a meaningful constraint on elite decision-making. However, to fully grasp public–elite dynamics, it is essential to move beyond the question of whether the public supports neutrality and instead examine whether the rationale behind their support or the opposition to it resonates with what the officials' have offered as justification for this policy. Ranked by their mean values, Table 2 shows the extent to which various beliefs embedded in the strategic framework and policymakers' narratives resonate with the public.⁶

⁶ The beliefs presented in the Table 2 represent operationalizations of the tripartite elite justification of military neutrality outlined in the previous section, articulated through statements about international relations and Serbia's position within it. For a more detailed account of the discourse and content analysis conducted as part of the broader doctoral project, see: Rečević Krstić 2025.

Table 2. *Resonance of Policymakers' Strategic Beliefs on International Relations and Serbia's Military Neutrality Among the Serbian Public*

Belief	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know	Mean
<i>The strong do what they want, the weak suffer what they must.</i>	1.0%	4.0%	17.8%	23.7%	50.5%	2.9%	4.22
<i>Serbia's role in history is unappreciated by European countries.</i>	1.6%	6.1%	18.7%	25.0%	41.8%	6.9%	4.07
<i>Serbia is located at the crossroads and is therefore important to great powers.</i>	2.1%	6.2%	17.4%	27.8%	41.9%	4.6%	4.06
<i>A state must fight for ideals and values at all costs.</i>	1.8%	6.6%	20.5%	26.6%	41.8%	2.8%	4.03
<i>Serbia has always been on the right side of history.</i>	3.0%	8.6%	22.3%	26.2%	32.3%	7.6%	3.82
<i>Serbia is part of Europe.</i>	3.0%	6.0%	25.4%	29.4%	27.6%	8.6%	3.79
<i>In international relations, there are no eternal friends, only eternal interests.</i>	9.4%	4.8%	22.0%	29.5%	30.0%	4.2%	3.69
<i>Serbia is between East and West.</i>	4.8%	9.4%	33.5%	25.1%	19.3%	8.0%	3.49
<i>A state should cooperate with everyone, regardless of differences.</i>	10.8%	10.7%	23.3%	27.2%	24.3%	3.6%	3.45

Belief	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neither Agree nor Disagree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know	Mean
<i>Serbia is part of the East.</i>	12.7%	13.1%	31.8%	20.3%	12.8%	9.3%	3.08
<i>Serbia is part of the West.</i>	11.8%	20.3%	36.6%	15.2%	6.6%	9.4%	2.83
<i>A state should not choose a side in international relations.</i>	26.1%	28.0%	27.8%	9.1%	5.1%	3.9%	2.37

The Table 2 reveals that, although the Serbian public does not uniformly adopt all elite-promoted positions, it nonetheless appears to accommodate a considerable degree of policymakers' eclecticism in strategic positioning within international relations. Judging by the beliefs' mean values, which indicate both their prevalence and strength, the Serbian's public's belief system is not particularly coherent, but rather a composite of normative and pragmatic elements that sometimes reinforce each other, yet very often come into conflict. For instance, a significant share of the public subscribes simultaneously to the realist maxim that in international relations there are no eternal friends, only eternal interests (mean = 3,69), and to the normative conviction that a state must fight for ideals and values at all costs (mean = 4,03). In some respects, the public appears slightly more consistent than Serbian officials, as in expressing the belief that Serbia has always been on the right side of history (mean = 3,82) and that taking sides in international relations is desirable (mean = 2,37). These convictions, however, coexist with considerable uncertainty about what that "right side" might entail today, as the findings suggest, that a significant share of citizens remain undecided about the country's orientation in terms of the East (mean = 3,08) and West (mean = 2,83), and that even the notion of a position "in between" fails to resonate with at least half of the public (mean = 3,49). Once the sizeable proportion of undecided respondents – sometimes close to half – is added to the picture, the overall belief structure indicates a state of solid confusion about international relations among the Serbian public, in which hardly any clear foreign policy direction can appear self-evident. Yet it might be precisely the layered and unstable nature of both elites' and the public's belief structures that paradoxically underpins the resilience of Serbia's multi-directional foreign policy and its policy of military neutrality.

Nevertheless, the regression analysis indicates that not all beliefs presented in Table 2 are equally relevant for citizens' judgments on military neutrality. Only five of the twelve tested beliefs show a statistically significant association with attitudes toward neutrality, while the remaining seven appear to exert little or no influence. This disparity suggests that the justifications for military neutrality advanced by Serbian policymakers over the years do not necessarily translate into public attitudes – rather than being directly opposed, public and elite beliefs may simply diverge in emphasis or structure. Identifying which beliefs from Table 2 are significantly associated with citizens' views on maintaining or abandoning neutrality provides, however, a clearer “profile” of the typical supporter or opponent of this policy in Serbia, revealing the layered structure of public reasoning on military neutrality (Table 3).

Table 3. *Regression analysis between the public's belief structure and the attitude on Serbia's military neutrality*

<i>Belief</i>	<i>Coefficient</i>	<i>P-value</i>
<i>A state should not choose sides in international relations.</i>	-0.26631	3.26e-14 ***
<i>In international relations, there are no eternal friends, only eternal interests.</i>	0.26165	7.74e-15 ***
<i>Serbia belongs to Europe.</i>	0.25935	6.64e-12 ***
<i>A state should cooperate with everyone, regardless of differences.</i>	0.24512	6.73e-15 ***
<i>Serbia is between the East and West.</i>	0.24150	2.95e-11 ***
<i>Serbia belongs to the West.</i>	0.13286	0.000269 ***

At the core of public reasoning about military neutrality lie beliefs that take the form of pragmatic, interest-based “recipes” for navigating international relations. Consistent with expectations, the analysis reveals that the more individuals believe that states must choose sides in international affairs, the less likely they are to support Serbia's military neutrality (coefficient = -0.26631, $p < 0.001$). Given the widespread nature of this belief among the Serbian public (with 54% considering the choice of sides sensible), it likely weakens the overall stickiness of military neutrality and contributes to the notable ambivalence or

indifference toward the policy observed among roughly a third of citizens. In this sense, the Serbian public may support neutrality despite simultaneously endorsing the logic of alignment, indicating that neutrality is not necessarily embraced as a form of covert alignment with or against some actor, but is instead sustained by other beliefs. Among these, the strongest positive association with support for neutrality is found in the belief that, in international relations, there are no eternal friends, only eternal interests (coefficient = 0.26165, $p < 0.001$), followed closely by the notion that a state should cooperate with everyone, regardless of differences (coefficient = 0.24512, $p < 0.001$). These beliefs point to a worldview in which hedging, flexibility, and transactional relations are seen as sensible – in a world where states are assumed to pursue their own interests, the Serbian public may regard neutrality as a stance that enhances Serbia's strategic autonomy.

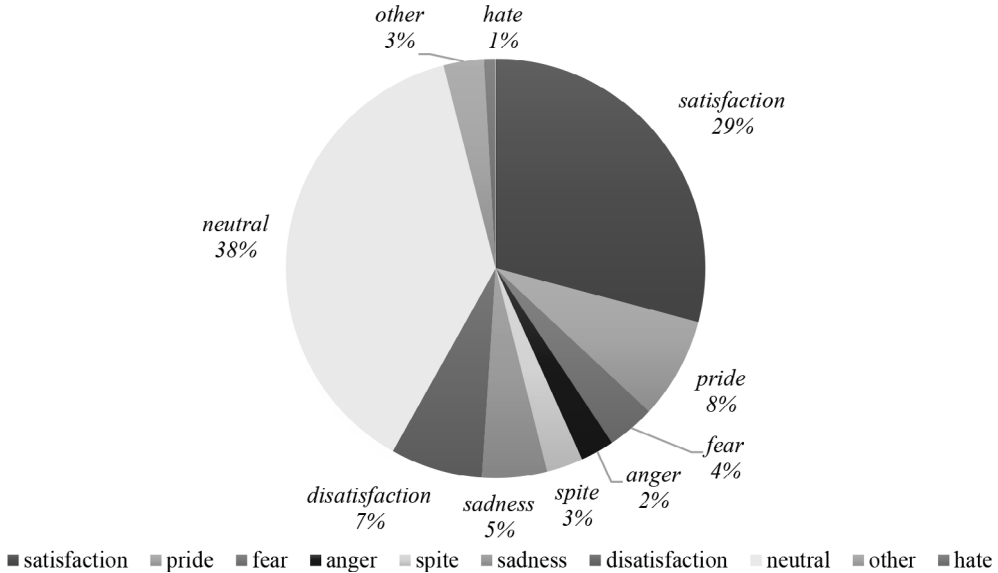
Surprisingly, one of the most overtly realist beliefs, that “the strong do what they want, and the weak suffer what they must”, while among the most widely endorsed statements by the Serbian public (mean = 4.22), shows no significant correlation with their attitude about military neutrality. This indicates that citizens' views on military neutrality are not shaped primarily by perceptions of global power distribution or by Serbia's relative position within it. In other words, whether individuals regard neutrality as a sensible policy does not depend on whether they perceive Serbia as strong or weak, small or middle-sized. This finding challenges the assumption, often implicit in official discourse, that Serbia's neutrality represents either prudent restraint by a small state seeking to avoid entanglement or, on the other hand, a posture of its spite and defiant independence aimed at “punching above its weight.” Today, it appears that the Serbian public appears to evaluate neutrality less as an act of reactive self-preservation or geopolitical resistance, as it may have been initially, and more as a question of strategic logic or principled positioning.

A second cluster of beliefs influencing public attitudes toward military neutrality relates to Serbia's perceived geopolitical positioning. The belief that Serbia belongs to Europe emerges as the strongest predictor of support for neutrality (coefficient = 0.25935, $p = 6.64\text{e-}12$), while it is negatively associated with the inclination to abandon neutrality (coefficient = -0.20123, $p = 2.1\text{e-}07$), challenging the common assumption that neutrality reflects anti-Western sentiment or even rejection of Euro-Atlantic integration. Less consequential, yet significant, for public support is the belief that Serbia is positioned “between East and West” (coefficient = 0.24150, $p = 2.95\text{e-}11$). Serbia's imagined position between East and West thus seems to generate support for balancing rather than aligning, reinforcing neutrality as both a pragmatic and identity-consistent

choice. Interestingly, although relatively few people believe that Serbia belongs to the Western security community, those who do are more likely to support neutrality (coefficient = 0.13286, $p = 0.000269$). By contrast, there is no statistically significant relationship between support for neutrality and the belief that Serbia belongs to the East. If anything, correlation analysis suggests a slight tendency for those who identify Serbia with the East to support abandoning neutrality (coefficient = 0.04093, $p = 0.06349$), though this does not hold in the regression model. Taken together, these findings tentatively suggest that military neutrality may be more challenged by East-oriented than West-oriented segments of the public.

In contrast to pragmatically grounded or strategically framed beliefs, those based on moral considerations lack statistical significance and seem to function as secondary justifications, reinforcing a stance primarily anchored in pragmatic reasoning and symbolic ambiguity. For instance, the belief that European countries fail to appreciate Serbia's past contributions, while highly resonant among the public (mean = 4.07), shows no meaningful correlation with either support for or opposition to military neutrality. This is particularly striking given how often elite discourse frames neutrality as a response to historical grievances or to the international misrecognition of Serbia's contribution to European peace and security. Similarly, strongly endorsed normative statements such as "Serbia has always been on the right side of history" (mean = 3.82) and "ideals are worth fighting for at any cost" (mean = 4.03) also show no significant association with attitudes toward neutrality. These findings suggest that the Serbian public does not necessarily interpret military neutrality through a moral lens or as a principled ethical stance, despite officials' cues that often invite such readings. Instead, while it might have been different back in 2007, military neutrality today appears to be viewed less as an ethical imperative or a reaction to perceived injustice, and more as an "amoral" strategic instrument for navigating the international order. While normative beliefs may shape broader worldviews or resonate at an abstract level, they do not appear to be directly mobilised when assessing the appropriateness of neutrality as a specific foreign policy choice for Serbia. The structure of Serbian citizens' emotional attachment to military neutrality, based on the 2023 survey, further supports this: while a dominant share (39.7%) expresses positive affective attachment, a significant portion (37.8%) remains neutral (Chart 1).

Chart 1. *Affective Structure Underlying Public Attitudes Toward Serbia's Policy of Military Neutrality*



Taken together, these insights point to a case of *divergent connect* between Serbian policymakers and the public regarding military neutrality. At the preference level, there is a robust and consistent alignment between elite decisions and public support, with more than half of the population endorsing the policy since 2007. Yet although outright opposition remains marginal, a significant portion of the public is ambivalent – an attitude that becomes more intelligible when underlying belief structures are examined. Public beliefs indeed broadly overlap with the layered justifications elites have advanced for Serbia's foreign and security policy, but the statistical analyses show that citizens neither rely on all of them nor prioritize them in the same way when evaluating Serbia's neutrality. Whereas elites have predominantly framed this course in normatively charged and identity-laden terms, often invoking Serbia's historical grievances or civilizational distinctiveness, the public tends to view it more as a rational, interest-based choice, at least in the contemporary moment. Moreover, while elite rhetoric has frequently portrayed neutrality in anti-Western terms, public support for the policy appears positively associated with the belief, held by a majority, that Serbia belongs to Europe, or even to the West rather than the East. The findings, therefore, tell a more complex story of the public–elite consensus on military neutrality in Serbia than is commonly acknowledged in either scholarly or policy circles.

Conclusion

While underscoring the value of both preference-level and belief-level approaches in FPA literature on elite–public nexus, this paper did not seek to give a final theoretical answer to when, how and why public and elites (dis)agree on foreign policy, but to offer a more nuanced analytical framework that moves beyond the dominant binary view of their (dis)connect. Importantly, although this framework sheds light on which configurations may produce more or less stable foreign policy outcomes, it does not presuppose which one is normatively ideal: although full alignment between public and elite preferences may indicate democratic accountability, and complete disconnection might suggest a legitimacy crisis or systemic malfunction, neither should be assumed without careful consideration of the underlying factors. Each component of the proposed matrix, therefore, offers significant potential for theoretical innovation, whether in examining the composition of belief structures, the processes through which beliefs are translated into preferences, or the mechanisms by which disconnections emerge. Methodological innovations, particularly those that enable bottom-up exploration of public beliefs independent of elite cues, would also significantly enhance our understanding of the convergences and divergences that unfold at each level, capturing both the persistence of the status quo and the conditions under which gradual or abrupt foreign policy changes may occur.

Although further empirical research is needed to explore other aspects of Serbia's foreign and security policy and to fully capture the analytical potential of the proposed matrix, the case of military neutrality provides a particularly revealing example of divergent (dis)connect. While neutrality has often been treated as a "sacred cow" in public discourse, the data suggest that both preference-level and belief-level consensus between policymakers and citizens in Serbia should be approached with caution, as each leaves room for dissent. The observed divergence does not necessarily undermine the consolidation of military neutrality in Serbia, but the ambiguity of the country's belief structure appears to limit stronger endorsement: even at the preference level, and even for Serbia's most popular foreign policy, a significant share of the public remains ambivalent. In this sense, public opinion on foreign policy is not merely a constraint on, or a dependent variable of, policymakers' choices, but constitutes a site of ongoing contestation and negotiation, where competing preferences and belief systems circulate and collide, shaping the boundaries of what is immediately sensible and what remains politically unacceptable in a given society at a given time. In Serbia, such studies are long overdue, especially

considering that, beyond binary attitudes toward a few major policies, little is known about the structure of public knowledge and beliefs in foreign affairs. This is particularly important given that foreign policy continues to hold considerable salience for the Serbian public – to the extent that some scholars argue it has been a determining factor in the rise and fall of nearly every Serbian government since 1990 (Novaković 2013, 11). Understanding this interplay is therefore essential not only to account for apparent anomalies in elite–public alignment on foreign policy, but also to inform the design of more legitimate and sustainable foreign policies.

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Tijana REČEVIĆ

**RASVETLJAVANJE (NE)SKLADA IZMEĐU ELITA I JAVNOSTI
U SPOLJNOJ POLITICI: „LJUBOMORNO ČUVANJE“ VOJNE NEUTRALNOSTI
U SRBIJI, ALI IZ RAZLIČITIH RAZLOGA?**

Sažetak: Javno mnjenje o spoljnoj politici decenijama je bilo zanemarivano u studijama međunarodnih odnosa i spoljne politike, najčešće pod pretpostavkom da ono umnogome samo odražava preferencije elita. Kasnija istraživanja, međutim, osporila su ovu pretpostavku dokumentujući brojne primere „spoljnopolitičkih nesklada“, pokazujući da se stavovi javnosti i elita razilaze češće i upornije nego što se ranije smatralo, uz značajne posledice po procese spoljnopolitičkog odlučivanja. Praveći razliku između (ne)usklađenosti na nivou preferencija, shvaćenih kao podrška ili protivljenje određenoj politici, i (ne)usklađenosti na nivou uverenja, koja obuhvata razloge iza tih stavova, ovaj rad nastoji da rasvetli pomenute (ne)sklade i omogući nijansiranije razumevanje odnosa elita i javnosti u spoljnoj politici. Na toj osnovi uvodi se nova matrica (ne)sklada u spoljnoj politici, koja obuhvata četiri idealna tipa: potpuni sklad, divergentni sklad, konvergentni nesklad i potpuni nesklad. Ovaj okvir primenjuje se na slučaj vojne neutralnosti Srbije, koja se često tumači kao stabilan konsenzus između donosilaca odluka i javnosti u kontekstu multivektorske spoljne i bezbednosne politike Srbije. Na osnovu analize strateškog diskursa od 2007. godine i originalnih podataka iz ankete sprovedene 2023, rad pokazuje da, iako i elite i javnost izražavaju podršku vojnoj neutralnosti, njihova uverenja se razlikuju tako da stavovi javnosti deluju manje normativno i idealistički nego što to sugerišu narativi elita. Kao primer divergentnog sklada, slučaj ukazuje da prividna usklađenost na nivou preferencija može prikriti tenzije na nivou uverenja, pri čemu ovakva nepodudaranja mogu i ograničiti, ali i otvoriti prostor za promenu politike.

Ključne reči: spoljna politika, odnos elita i javnosti; javno mnjenje, vojna neutralnost, Srbija, analiza diskursa.

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On the Edge: Serbia between the West, Russia, and Its Own Course

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Abstract: The war in Ukraine deepened global divisions and pushed even actors with limited power to articulate their positions. Serbia's reaction — a public condemnation of the invasion, but with a refusal to impose sanctions — goes beyond the usual behaviour of small and medium-sized states that oscillate between balancing and bandwagoning and reflects a thoughtful attempt to manage uncertainty by retaining manoeuvring room within an increasingly fragmented global order. This article examines Serbia's foreign policy between 2022 and 2025 through the lens of hedging, a strategy that allows smaller states to navigate uncertainty by engaging with rival powers while deferring irreversible choices. Rather than reducing foreign policy to a binary of alignment or resistance, this analysis highlights Serbia's use of ambiguity as a conscious and calculated position. The theoretical framework is neoclassical realism, which links structural pressures with domestic political dynamics, such as the preferences of the political establishment and the public opinion. This research draws on a qualitative analysis of documents and discourse, including UN voting records, statements by domestic and foreign officials, and EU reports. The findings suggest that Serbia has temporarily sustained its autonomy by exploiting the gaps between competing external expectations. However, as geopolitical lines harden, the space for manoeuvre narrows. This paper argues that Serbia's hedging strategy illustrates both the opportunities and limitations facing small states that seek to shape, rather than simply absorb, global pressures.

Keywords: Serbia, foreign policy, hedging, neoclassical realism, EU, Russia, Ukraine.

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Introduction

Russia's invasion of Ukraine in early 2022 reshaped the foreign policy calculus of small, strategically exposed states, especially EU candidates caught in the normative and geopolitical crosswinds between East and West. The pressure to "take a side" was strongest on small states caught between larger powers. For EU candidate countries, the line was clear: align with Brussels or risk losing credibility and support. However, Serbia did not follow this logic straightforwardly. Serbia endorsed Ukraine's territorial integrity but refused to join the sanctions against Russia. The choice followed a deeper logic in how the country positions itself internationally.

Serbia's EU trajectory is characterised by prolonged engagement with little resolution. Accession talks began in 2014, nearly a decade and a half after the country's initial turn to Europe. Since then, 22 of the 35 chapters have been opened, but only two have been provisionally closed. The pace is revealing: this is not a process that moves forward with confidence. While enlargement fatigue in Brussels plays a role, deeper inertia lies within. Stagnation in the rule of law, fragile democratic institutions, and the unresolved question of Kosovo and Metohija continue to weigh down Serbia's progress—not as matters of image, but as structural impediments that no rhetoric can conceal.

At the same time, Serbia's ties with Russia remain tight—not just out of habit or sentiment, but because they provide concrete leverage: energy sources and consistent support for Kosovo in the UN Security Council. Although political elites often describe the relationship as "traditional" or "historical", its significance is not only symbolic; it functions as an active part of Serbia's foreign policy calculus. During the Ukraine War, Serbia tried to find a middle ground. It condemned the invasion in UN forums, supported resolutions, and made statements in support of international law, but did not join the EU sanctions. These foreign policy moves cannot be explained solely by external pressures. Domestic political factors are equally important. Opinion surveys from 2022 and 2023 did not just suggest sympathy for Russia; they revealed a deeper alignment. Politicians in Serbia are well aware of these numbers and act accordingly.

This approach explains why states choose specific foreign policy strategies, unlike classical realism which focuses on systemic outcomes (Rose 1998; Ripsman, Taliaferro, and Lobell 2016). Serbia's foreign policy during the Ukraine war can also be understood as hedging. Instead of fully bandwagoning with the West or adopting a confrontational balancing posture against it, Serbia has pursued a hedging strategy—positioning itself in the space between balancing

(Walt 1987) and bandwagoning (Walt 1987; Schweller 1994), where flexibility and ambiguity allow for short-term risk management without long-term commitment (Kuik 2008; 2016; 2021). This study explores how Serbia employed this strategy between 2022 and 2025. The focus is on three key areas: diplomacy, energy and economic ties, and military security cooperation. The analysis also includes internal drivers—perceptions, interests of the political regime, and public opinion. By combining theory and empirical data, this study aims to better understand what hedging looks like in practice for a small European state in a time of great power competition.

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Regarding the theoretical framework, Serbia's foreign policy strategy for 2022–2025 is explained through the analytical application of neoclassical realism. It seeks to overcome the limitations of neorealism (or structural realism) by incorporating domestic factors into the explanation of foreign policy. According to neoclassical realism, systemic forces and the distribution of power set the general foreign policy framework, but their impact on specific decisions is neither direct nor uniform; it is mediated by internal factors such as the perceptions and preferences of decision-makers, state institutions, and social pressures. In other words, as Rose (1998) summarised, the ambition of a country's foreign policy is primarily determined by its relative material power; however, the effect of that power is filtered through internal lenses, necessitating an analysis of both the international and domestic contexts in which the policy is formulated. This approach, developed in the late 1990s and the 2000s (Rose 1998; Ripsman et al. 2016), aims to explain why states choose specific foreign policy strategies, in contrast to classical realism, which focuses on the outcomes of the international system itself. Neoclassical realism holds that while the international system sets the outer limits of what states can do, it does not dictate specific foreign policy choices. How a state reacts to external pressure depends not only on its structural position but also on how its decision-makers interpret threats and opportunities and on whether domestic institutions are capable of acting on them. In Serbia's case, its stance toward EU demands to impose sanctions on Russia is shaped not only by its place in the global order, but also by the political mood of its electorate, the ideological leanings of its leadership, and the ability of state institutions to absorb the cost of shifting direction.

The hedging strategy is useful for studying the recent foreign policy of Serbia. The term in international relations is borrowed from financial terminology and refers to a risk management strategy employed in situations of high uncertainty. This strategy primarily emerged as a framework for explaining the behaviour of smaller Asian states during the post–Cold War rivalry between China and the United States (for example, Southeast Asian countries’ policies toward Beijing and Washington). Evelyn Goh (2005) was among the first to define hedging as a strategy through which small states avoid taking sides by simultaneously engaging in cooperative and assurance measures toward rival powers. Roy (2005) describes hedging as a strategy aimed at maintaining multiple strategic options to guard against potential threats. Kuik (2008) describes it as a strategy in which a state actively engages with competing powers without committing to either side, using ambiguity as a tool to manage risk. He also identifies five key components of this strategy: economic pragmatism, binding engagement, limited bandwagoning, dominance denial, and indirect balancing, each of which allows smaller states to defer irreversible commitments while maintaining agency.

According to recent analyses, Serbia clearly demonstrates the specific features of its foreign policy. Vuksanović (2021) characterises this approach as a “delicate balancing act” between East and West. Nikolić (2023) finds that Serbia’s foreign policy over the past decade reflects all five of Kuik’s core hedging components. Ejodus (2024) sees Serbia’s hedging as a deliberate combination of conflicting alignments designed to extract benefits from both the East and the West. Němec and Zorić (2024) show that Aleksandar Vučić (Serbian President and the dominant political figure) does not pursue a consistent foreign policy but rather uses a range of recurring narratives—about sovereignty, sanctions, the military, and Kosovo—to continuously redefine the boundary between compliance and resistance. With this language, he simultaneously calls for understanding from Brussels and loyalty from Moscow. Tzifakis and Vasdoka (2025) argue that Serbia sends mixed messages to both Western and non-Western actors to strengthen its domestic legitimacy and maintain its political support structures. Vučković and Radeljić (2024) state that Serbia’s foreign policy lacks a clear strategic direction, and its attempts to balance have been seen as more reactive than coherent, which has made external partners doubt. Petrović (2024) argues that while Serbia formally commits to the EU accession path, in practice, it pushes it to the margins. Political elites, he notes, invoke the unresolved Kosovo issue as a shield — a way to explain the stagnation in areas like the rule of law and human rights. The result is that reforms are delayed, not denied, and the EU framework remains in place more as posture than as a

priority. Other researchers argue that Serbia's ambivalence is less a strategic move and more the result of internal conflicts within its own identity. Belloni (2023) employs the concept of ontological security to support his claim that Serbia's reluctance to punish Russia reveals both its conflicted sense of self and its geopolitical calculations. He portrays Serbia as a country caught between being useful to the EU and serving as a symbol of Russia. Dufalla and Metodieva (2024) agree with this interpretation. They claim that Serbia's ties to the EU are primarily strategic, while its relations with Russia are based on emotional and identity-based stories. An additional contribution comes from recent research by Đukanović, Dašić and Krstić (2025), who offer a structured analysis of Serbia's foreign policy trajectory in the 21st century, focusing on the role of institutional actors, the formulation of strategic goals, and the country's positioning toward key international partners.

Methodologically, this study relies on primary and secondary sources. Primary materials include official documents of the Republic of Serbia, the European Union, and the United Nations General Assembly. Secondary sources include academic literature and policy analyses by various think tanks, as well as research by scholars who have examined specific dimensions of Serbia's international position during this period. Reports on public opinion and media narratives—including those by Freedom House, the International Republican Institute (IRI), and the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy—were also used to capture the domestic perception environment.

Discursive analysis focuses not only on statements by Serbian officials but also on key foreign actors—particularly representatives of the EU and Russia—whose rhetoric shapes the interpretive field in which Serbian foreign policy operates. Special attention is given to how messages are constructed and adjusted depending on the intended audience, whether addressing the domestic public, Western counterparts, or Russian officials. The analysis pays close attention to presidential speeches, interviews, and media appearances, identifying recurring patterns of strategic ambiguity, such as simultaneous affirmations of Serbia's European trajectory and invocations of "traditional ties" with Russia.

The material was analysed through content and discourse analyses. Content analysis traced specific foreign policy actions, comparing choices oriented toward EU alignment with those that retained or deepened ties with Russia. Discourse analysis sought to map how official narratives are shaped to maintain ambiguity, delay alignment, and adapt to competing pressures. The material was thematically organised, with recurring patterns identified and interpreted through the theoretical framework.

Despite the breadth of the empirical base, some methodological limitations remain. These include the partial availability of sources and opacity of decision-making processes. Some challenges also stem from the nature of hedging itself, which is an interpretive and context-sensitive strategy that is often difficult to define precisely. How ambiguity is read depends on the reader's position. Despite this, to ground the analysis, this study turns to concrete indicators: Serbia's voting record at the UN, its refusal to impose sanctions on Russia, the direction of trade and investment flows, the content of bilateral agreements, and the language used by different officials. A further limitation concerns the temporal scope of the study. The years from 2022 to 2025 may not define Serbia's long-term foreign policy course, but they do mark a moment of concentrated pressure. A stress test, of sorts, exposing both the outer limits and inner flexibility of the country's strategic stance.

Key Foreign Policy Events, 2022–2025.

The following sections examine how Serbia's foreign policy behaviour unfolded across three interrelated domains between 2022 and 2025. Rather than offering a descriptive overview, the analysis engages with empirical material to assess whether Serbia's actions in diplomacy, energy, and security align with the logic of strategic ambiguity and delayed alignment. The focus is not only on what Serbia did but also on how and under what pressures those decisions were made and what they reveal about the state's room to manoeuvre in a fragmented international landscape.

Diplomatic Positioning and Voting in the UN

A week into the war, on 2 March 2022 Serbia cast its vote at the UN General Assembly, siding with more than 140 countries to condemn Russia's invasion and demand its withdrawal (UNGA 2022a). A month later, in April 2022, Serbia voted for Russia's suspension from the UN Human Rights Council because of human rights violations in Ukraine (UNGA 2022b). This decision provoked outrage among pro-Russian circles in the country, and right-wing groups accused the government of "betraying" its Russian ally. It was a risky move by the authorities to appease the EU, but soon after, there was a course correction towards Moscow. In November 2022, when the Assembly voted to establish a mechanism for war reparations, Serbia declined to support the resolution (UNGA

2022c). In 2023 it backed another resolution calling for a just and lasting peace based on the UN Charter (UNGA 2023).

In parallel with these votes, Serbia distanced itself from the West's sanctions against Russia. From the beginning of the war, Belgrade made it clear that it would not impose sanctions on Russia. The President stated on 25 February 2022 that Serbia principally considers undermining territorial integrity to be wrong, but also that it cannot forget Russia's support regarding Kosovo and in the Security Council, stating that, due to vital national interests, Serbia would not impose sanctions on Moscow (Krainčanić Božić 2022).

In September 2022, during the UN General Assembly in New York, then Serbian Foreign Minister Nikola Selaković signed a two-year plan for foreign policy consultations with Sergey Lavrov (Ćirić 2022). The document was not legally binding, nor did it introduce anything new, but it was not neutral either. While the war in Ukraine dominated global diplomacy, Serbia chose to reaffirm its regular coordination with Moscow. For many in Brussels and for parts of the domestic pro-European public, the gesture was seen not as continuity but as provocation. The opposition accused the government of turning its back on the EU and dragging the country closer to Russia. European officials also expressed "serious concern" that a candidate country was signing a cooperation agreement with the Russian regime at a time when it was under sanctions due to its aggression. Serbia described the agreement as a routine matter and reiterated its commitment to EU membership. However, the message was clear: Belgrade wanted Moscow to know that votes in New York did not mean renouncing its relationship with Russia. Serbia supported all resolutions affirming the basic principles of international law: the condemnation of aggression and annexations, which helped Serbia maintain its image as an actor respecting the UN Charter and avoiding diplomatic isolation. In February 2025, Serbia stumbled. On a UN resolution that explicitly named Russia as the aggressor in Ukraine, the government planned to abstain, but the Serbian delegate voted in favour (UNGA 2025). This mistake was quickly noticed. President Aleksandar Vučić publicly admitted the error, apologised to Moscow, and stated that Serbia should have remained neutral. He blamed himself, saying that he "was tired" and missed the details. Vučić emphasised that Serbia does not wish to "cater to either the Russians or the Americans" but rather to safeguard its own interests (Giordano and Melkozerova 2025).

This unusual incident illustrates how sensitive each step is: Belgrade tries to express a minimum of solidarity with Ukraine and the majority of the world while avoiding rhetoric that would offend Moscow. Besides the UN, the pressure for Serbia to align with Western policy was also reflected bilaterally. In 2022 and

2023, European and Western officials stepped up their presence in Belgrade, pressing Aleksandar Vučić to clarify Serbia's foreign policy. During a visit in June 2022, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated in plain terms that EU candidates are expected to impose sanctions on Russia and align with the Union's foreign policy (*Global Europe* 2022). A similar message came from the European Commission: during her October visit, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen praised Serbia's reform efforts but made clear that progress towards membership also depends on Serbia's willingness to follow common EU decisions (Gedošević 2022). In other words, "you cannot sit on two chairs" became a frequent implicit message from Brussels.

While EU pressure mounted, Serbia's actual alignment with Brussels told a different story. The rate of compliance with EU declarations and positions remained low and inconsistent, an unmistakable signal that Belgrade was not prepared to follow a single track. In 2021, Serbia aligned with 64% of EU foreign policy positions. That number fell sharply to 46% in 2022, inched up to 54% in 2023, and by September 2024, stood at just over half—51% (EC 2022; 2023a; 2024). Behind these shifts lay a steady habit: Serbia repeatedly steered clear of EU declarations that directly criticised Russia's actions.

On the Russian side, public pressure was rarer and subtler—Moscow traditionally counted on friendship with Belgrade and did not want to jeopardise it. However, there were occasional Russian complaints: after Serbia voted for the suspension of Russia from the UNHRC in April 2022, Russian officials expressed "disappointment." The culmination of tensions came between 2023 and 2025, when Moscow accused Serbia of supplying weapons to Ukraine (more on this below), marking the first time open doubt arose between allies (RSE 2025). A striking event demonstrated the limits of Serbia's foreign policy manoeuvring due to the war: the planned visit of Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov to Belgrade in June 2022 had to be cancelled because the surrounding countries (all NATO members) prohibited the overflight of Lavrov's aircraft through their airspace. This move caused discontent in Belgrade; the Serbian president called the situation a "diplomatic scandal" and pointed out that international norms regarding the freedom of movement of high-ranking officials were being violated to Serbia's detriment. Analysts noted that this incident shows how isolated Serbia has remained, surrounded by countries that are part of Western structures and unwilling (or unable) to provide logistical support even for a visit from a close Russian ally (*AlJazeera* 2022). For Moscow, this was a signal of Serbia's limited utility in times of escalation (as geographically and politically, Serbia cannot significantly aid Russia beyond rhetoric). For

Belgrade, the incident was a warning that hedging was becoming increasingly difficult as the conflict between great powers escalated.

Energy and Economy Dimension

The EU is Serbia's main economic partner, while Russia retains leverage in energy. In 2023, nearly 60% of Serbia's trade was with the European Union, which also accounted for almost half of all foreign direct investment. Despite China's growing role—contributing around a quarter of FDI between 2021 and 2023—the EU remains firmly ahead, both as Serbia's main trading partner and source of capital. EU Pre-Accession Funds add another layer of financial dependence (EC 2024, 54). This economic structure leaves little room for confrontation.

At the same time, in the fields of energy and economy, Serbia has been striving since 2022 to maximise its special position: it has retained preferential contracts with Russia for energy supply while simultaneously initiating (under pressure from circumstances) diversification and reducing dependence on Russia. This ambivalence is reflected in two parallel trends: deepening cooperation with Russia in 2022 for short-term energy security and gradual alignment with EU energy projects in 2023–2024 for long-term sustainability. In May 2022, Vučić and Putin agreed on a three-year gas deal under favourable terms, while Europe struggled with energy shortages (President of Russia 2022). The old ten-year contract expired on 31 May 2022 and this agreement ensured the continuity of supply for Serbia at a price which was several times lower than European ones at that time. After the conversation with Putin, Vučić stated that he had received a “fantastic gas price” and that the citizens of Serbia would have a secure winter (*Reuters* 2022b). This move illustrates the advantages of a hedging approach: while EU members imposed sanctions and feared the loss of Russian gas, Serbia, as the only European country besides Belarus, secured an uninterrupted flow of Russian gas.

By late 2022, EU sanctions forced Serbia to stop importing Russian crude through the JANAF pipeline, impacting NIS (controlled by Gazprom Neft), though alternatives were secured (Paszkowski 2022). However, as sanctions tightened, the issue of Russian ownership in the NIS came into focus. In January 2025, the U.S. imposed broad sanctions on Russia's energy sector, ordering Gazprom Neft and Gazprom to exit their 56.15% ownership in Serbia's NIS within 45 days (*Reuters* 2025). In other words, Washington effectively requested that Serbia “cleanse” its oil industry of Russian capital. Each transaction regarding the

transfer of ownership was required to receive approval from the U.S. Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) (Stojanović and Baletić 2025).

This was followed by a stretch of uneasy diplomacy. The initial deadline was extended several times, first by a month in February and then again in late March. Finally, in late April, Serbia secured a new deferment until 27 June giving the NIS and the government additional breathing space (*FoNet* 2025). Vučić publicly thanked the United States for what he described as “understanding Serbia’s position,” while at home, the announcement was framed as a win: time had been bought, and the crisis delayed.

This move is a precedent. For the first time, Western sanctions directly imposed on Serbia an internal decision regarding the restructuring of ownership in a strategic company. The implications of U.S. sanctions are far-reaching. Russian investors would ultimately have to divest, likely transferring their stake either to the Serbian state or a third party acceptable to Washington. This would remove Moscow’s key foothold and end Serbia’s access to discounted Russian energy. Vučić himself warned that meeting Washington’s demands could mean the loss of “privileged gas supplies” and a shift that would be difficult to disguise—a pivot away from Russia under pressure, not by choice. However, noncompliance is equally perilous. Refusing to act would have opened the door to secondary sanctions, financial blowback, and a possible rupture with the West. For Belgrade, the NIS episode became a litmus test of how narrow the hedging space had become. Balancing great powers was no longer a matter of diplomatic phrasing. It now came with deadlines, licences, and threats of real consequences.

In December 2023, Serbia completed its gas interconnector with Bulgaria, funded by a €50 million EU grant and EIB loans. The pipeline provides Serbia with long-sought access to gas that bypasses Russia—from Azerbaijan and potentially from LNG terminals in Greece. At the ceremonial launch, attended by the presidents of Bulgaria and Azerbaijan, officials described the project as a shift in the region’s energy map, shaped by the lessons of war and the urgency of diversification. Days after its completion, Serbia signed a contract to import 400 million cubic meters of Azeri gas per year starting in 2024—a modest share of the national demand, but politically significant (MRE 2023). The European Commission openly praised this, as the diversification of the Balkan region is part of a broader strategy to reduce reliance on Russian gas after Russia reduced or halted supplies to many EU countries in 2022 (EC 2024).

In parallel, agreements were also reached with Hungary regarding gas storage: Hungary allowed Serbia to store part of its gas reserves in its storage

facilities, which increased energy security in winter (The Government of the Republic of Serbia 2022). This indicates that, although Serbia did not impose sanctions on Moscow, it was quietly preparing for a potential break in Russian supplies or the need to join sanctions in the future. A new gas connection was agreed upon between Serbia and North Macedonia in late 2024—a planned 70-kilometre pipeline capable of transporting around 1.2 billion cubic metres of gas annually. The route would run from Greece, offering Serbia another entry point and reducing its energy dependence. An oil connection was also discussed (Government of the Republic of Serbia 2024). The deal fits into Serbia's quiet push for diversification without cutting old lines. Serbia has maintained its long-standing economic ties with Russia, especially in the energy sector (Stanojević 2025).

The economic sphere was also marked by the fact that EU sanctions and the drop of the ruble in 2022 forced many Russian firms and individuals to seek refuge in Serbia. Belgrade remained one of the few European cities with direct flights to Russia (Air Serbia continued its flights to Moscow and St. Petersburg). Tens of thousands of Russians—including IT professionals and entrepreneurs—moved to Serbia during 2022–2023 under the visa-free regime (Yale School of Management 2024). This brought economic benefits, but also challenges such as rising real estate prices in Belgrade and the integration of newcomers. Vučić balanced here as well – Serbia formally voted for a UN resolution calling for support for refugees from Ukraine, but at the same time opened its arms to Russian emigrants affected by mobilisation and sanctions. Thus, the country became an unusual vent for both sides: both Russians and Ukrainians found refuge in Serbia during the war, somewhat improving Serbia's "neutral" image as a country not involved in the conflict.

Military-security dimension

Between 2022 and 2025, Serbia navigated its security policy under the banner of military neutrality—since 2007 declared stance that was quietly recalibrated as the war in Ukraine redrew the lines of pressure. While formally outside all military alliances, Serbia has balanced cooperation with both NATO and Russia without formal commitments. This dual-track approach allowed space for manoeuvre until the war in Ukraine made such balancing far more delicate.

After Russia's invasion in February 2022, Serbia suspended all military exercises, officially citing 'vital national interests' (Government Conclusion 2022). Unofficially, it was a tactical pause—avoiding deeper isolation from the West or

backlash at home where support for Russia remained strong. By June 2023, Serbia resumed military exercises, joining U.S., U.K., and French troops in ‘Platinum Wolf’ (MoD 2023). For Western observers, this signaled alignment; the U.S. embassy described it as Serbia ‘picking a side’ (RFE 2023). However, in Belgrade, the gesture was handled with care: loud enough to be noticed, quiet enough not to burn bridges elsewhere. Military exercises with Russia, including the traditional ‘Slavic Brotherhood’ drills, did not resume—a silent indication that ties with NATO were being prioritized.

Serbia’s arsenal reflects its neutrality—combining Russian MiGs, Chinese FK-3s, and Western helicopters—shaped by ties with rival powers (IISS 2024). But the war in Ukraine threw this balance off course. Russian equipment grew harder to service, parts stopped arriving, and future deals—once discussed openly—faded without a word.

In 2024, Serbia signed a €2.7 billion contract for 12 French Rafale jets—its first Western combat aircraft since Yugoslavia. The deal was not framed as a political turn but as a “rational modernization decision”. However, the implications are evident: military-technical ties with Russia have stalled, and long-term interoperability is now being built with NATO-standard partners (*Le Monde* 2024). In parallel, Serbia became the first European buyer of China’s FK-3 missile system in 2022, drawing concern in Brussels and Washington (Yuandan and Xuanzun 2025). Belgrade described the purchase as “purely commercial.” The message: Serbia is not closing its doors—just reorganising its options.

This triangulation extends beyond military hardware. Cooperation with Russia’s security services, such as the low-profile Humanitarian Centre in Niš, was never formally severed—just pushed offstage. Similarly, joint patrols of the Chinese and Serbian police, introduced in 2019, have continued to be implemented in Belgrade, even during the period of changing geopolitical conditions (The Government of the Republic of Serbia 2024). Their presence is modest in scale but not in symbolism: at a time when some relationships are being reexamined, this one has not been called into question. Serbia, here as well, chooses not to close any doors, even if they are just kept ajar.

However, this balancing act has become riskier. In 2024, reports revealed that Serbian weapons reached Ukraine through intermediaries in Turkey, Slovakia, and Poland—despite official claims of neutrality. The FT estimates nearly one billion US dollars in sales linked to Serbia’s defense industry (Russell and Dunai 2024b). In June 2025, Russia’s foreign intelligence agency again criticized Serbia, and this time, the tone was sharper. Belgrade was accused of “profiting from the blood of a brotherly nation.” Belgrade moved quickly. After

a high-level military meeting, President Vučić ordered the full suspension of arms exports. Officially linked to internal priorities, the timing nonetheless aligned with Russia's accusations. The Serbian Ministry of Defence tightened controls, requiring National Security Council approval for future exports (Manojlovic 2025). Notably, Russia stopped short of retaliation. No sanctions, no disruption of energy flows—just a pointed reminder that some lines should not be crossed.

Even under pressure, Serbia did not cut its military ties with the West. It remained active in NATO's Partnership for Peace, kept its troops in UN peacekeeping missions—from Cyprus to Lebanon to the Central African Republic—and stayed involved in EU operations, such as EUTM Mozambique and the missions in Somalia (*FoNet* 2022). At the same time, its formal link with the CSTO remained only on paper. After 2022, nothing has changed. The seat remained warm but empty.

This double-track policy has drawn criticism from both sides. Western diplomats warned that future purchases of Russian arms could trigger CAATSA sanctions from the United States (U.S. Congress 2017), while Moscow occasionally expressed "disappointment" over Serbian votes at the UN. However, neither imposed serious penalties. Neither side closed the doors. Russia kept the gas flowing and left its security ties with Belgrade intact. The West, especially the EU, continued to fund programs and maintain cooperation across key sectors, including security.

In hindsight, Serbia's strategy during this period was not about realignment; it was about momentum. It froze cooperation with Moscow when needed, intensified ties with the West where useful, and retained links to China as a third option. It maintained its neutrality intact, at least rhetorically, while gradually shifting in practice. The logic of hedging—avoiding irreversible commitments while extracting maximum flexibility—was present in every layer of the country's security policy. However, as global divisions harden, the risk is clear: the space to hedge is not infinite.

Domestic Pressures: Public Sentiment and the Regime's Calculus

Neoclassical realism begins from a simple but often overlooked premise: foreign policy does not come only from the outside. It begins within. Beneath the structural pressures of the international system lie domestic variables—public attitudes, identity narratives, elite preferences, and regime priorities—

that often dictate the form and limits of a country's foreign policy. Serbia's hedging behaviour between 2022 and 2025 cannot be explained solely by external factors. It has been deeply shaped—and, in many ways, sustained—by internal logic.

Public Sentiment and Identity Perception

Public opinion in Serbia has remained a structural constraint on its foreign policy alignment. Unresolved historical trauma has created a perception of Russia as close and the West as suspect. Two wounds still burn: the 1999 NATO bombing and Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence in 2008. Both left deep marks. Russia was perceived as the sole ally—a narrative that endured. In contrast, the West, especially the United States, came to symbolise force without justice and power without principle.

These perceptions did not vanish when Russia invaded Ukraine. In fact, they remained firm. In a 2022 poll conducted by the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, only 11.8% of respondents considered Russia responsible for the war. In contrast, 31.6% blamed NATO and 29.2% pointed to the United States (BCSP 2022). A 2024 International Republican Institute (IRI) poll showed that only 10% of people supported a clearly pro-Western stance, while 31% preferred strategic neutrality and 27% expressed pro-Russian leanings (IRI 2024).

This orientation has policy implications. Moves such as aligning with NATO or sanctioning Russia are seen by many as a betrayal, not of policy, but of identity. President Vučić, always attuned to the national mood, framed his resistance to Western pressure as an expression of “the people's will.” However, public opinion is far from uniform. Beneath the surface, a more nuanced position emerges: most citizens do not demand alignment or defiance but room to manoeuvre. Around half support cooperation with both East and West—not out of indecision, but from a desire to keep Serbia's options open (BCSP 2022). This middle path—an intuitive hedging—appeals to a public seeking stability.

Serbia's refusal to impose sanctions on Russia cannot be reduced to public attitudes or energy dependence. Analyses of Russian influence in Serbia emphasize less visible channels—political ties, security cooperation, media narratives, and financial links—which continue to shape the regime's room for manoeuvre (Szpala 2014; Nyemann 2023). At the same time, Russia's stance on Kosovo has lost much of its practical effectiveness since 2022. The frequent

invocation of the Kosovo precedent to justify the annexation of Crimea has undermined Serbia's diplomatic argument in multilateral forums and created an unfavourable context for Belgrade (Baranovsky 2015).

The Serbian media landscape amplifies and reinforces these preferences. Most national broadcasters remain under the tight control or influence of the ruling party. Since 2022, they have leaned heavily on Russian talking points while painting Western actors as aggressors. Critical views, especially from pro-Western civil society or opposition figures, struggle for visibility. A feedback loop emerges: public sentiment is reinforced through media narratives that closely align with government messaging. As Freedom House (2024) and the European Parliament (EP 2025) have noted, Serbia's media pluralism has significantly declined, while pro-Kremlin disinformation has surged. Ejodus (2024) argues that narrative control has evolved into a strategic tool used not just for electoral success but also as a national security mechanism that enables hedging by managing dissent and expectation.

The Logic of the Authorities

Alongside public sentiment, Serbia's political leadership has contributed to the institutionalisation of hedging. Since 2012, the authorities around the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), under a leadership structure dominated by the President, have gradually consolidated control over institutions and the media—a trajectory some authors classify as the emergence of a hybrid or competitive authoritarian regime (Castaldo 2020; Pavlović 2019; Vladislavljević and Krstić 2023). In such a system, foreign policy is shaped less by doctrine than by the imperatives of political consolidation.

Foreign policy decisions reflect both the executive structure and the President's prominent role. The leadership often acts tactically, adjusts to pressure, and frames concessions as national victories. These choices, shaped by calculations as much as by structural limits, add ambiguity to Serbia's external posture. The ruling coalition's endurance rests not only on electoral performance but also on its ability to navigate between Moscow and Brussels, with the President remaining the most visible political actor. European enough to keep the West engaged, Russian enough to reassure his base—at home and abroad.

After the 2022 elections, under pressure to show commitment to the European path, pro-EU figures were placed in the spotlight. Meanwhile, the security sector remained under officials with longstanding ties to Moscow (EWB

2022). These appointments sent a dual message: to Brussels, Serbia stayed on the reform track; to Moscow, traditional bonds remained intact.

To Western partners, the executive presents itself as a regional stabiliser, essential to Balkan peace (*Tanjug* 2024). This image has secured geopolitical tolerance even amid concerns about democratic standards. Russia, for its part, was offered symbolic loyalty—especially on Kosovo, where its UN Security Council veto is vital to Serbia. China provided infrastructure and loans, allowing Belgrade to claim sovereign alternatives to the EU. The outcome is a position from which Serbia extracts benefits from all sides. Hedging here is not indecision but deliberate design. Domestically, it balances competing factions; internationally, it maintains flexibility.

Nationalist parties such as *Zavetnici* and *Dveri*—the former joining the governing coalition in 2024—denounce ambiguity and call for an alliance with Russia (Russell and Dunai 2024a). The pro-European opposition remains divided and detached from mainstream sentiment. For much of the population, hedging appears both viable and preferable. It is portrayed as defending peace and the economy, shielding Serbia from global turmoil (*Tanjug* 2023). Yet this equilibrium shows cracks.

Protests from 2023 to 2025 exposed corruption, weak institutions, and public anger, turning the balancing strategy into a domestic as well as a geopolitical challenge. Serbia's hedging may falter less from foreign pressure than from the erosion of internal control (Morina and Vascotto 2025). If EU funds decline, energy costs rise, and global divisions deepen, Serbia's balancing act may collapse from within. For now, the myth of equidistance persists. Hedging sells—at home and abroad. The question is not whether Belgrade can continue, but how long, and at what cost.

External Pressures and the Boundaries of Hedging

Serbia's foreign policy has never existed in isolation. Since the outbreak of the war in Ukraine in early 2022, the fragile balance between East and West has come under increasing pressure. As global lines harden and the space for ambiguity shrinks, hedging is no longer just a strategic choice; it has become a test of endurance. What was once flexible now demands constant recalibration. The world is less forgiving of in-betweens, and Serbia is being forced to walk an increasingly narrow line.

Western Pressure: Between Expectation and Containment

The European Union quickly defined its stance. Within weeks of the Russian invasion, Brussels made clear that candidate countries were expected to align with EU foreign and security policy, including sanctions. Serbia's refusal was flagged in the Commission's 2022 report as a "serious concern"—a warning repeated in later communications. Hedging was not prohibited, but its political costs rose sharply.

It was not only institutional language that shifted. National leaders delivered blunt messages. In June 2022, Olaf Scholz stated in Belgrade that EU accession and neutrality on Russia could not go together (*Politiko* 2022). Council President Charles Michel soon repeated the demand (*Hina* 2022). The message from Brussels was not only diplomatic; it was existential. In parallel, the EU introduced conditionality through financial instruments. The Growth Plan for the Western Balkans and Reform Agendas tied access to grants and loans to performance benchmarks (EC 2023b). Though focused on governance, rule of law, and administration, they also signaled an expectation of gradual alignment with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy. Chapter 31 of accession—foreign, security, and defence policy—remained among the most sensitive. In its 2024 report, the Commission noted Serbia's CFSP alignment rate of only 51 per cent and highlighted refusal to join restrictive measures against Russia as a major obstacle (EC 2024).

American officials joined this chorus. Ambassador Christopher Hill, newly appointed to Belgrade, quickly emerged as one of the most outspoken voices. In interviews, he stressed Serbia must "think hard about where its true interests lie," emphasising they lay "in the West" (*The Geopost* 2022).

The pressure was not only rhetorical. In late 2022, Serbia was cut off from Russian-origin oil after the EU imposed sanctions enforced via Croatia, blocking its transport through the Adriatic (JANAF) pipeline. Since NIS, Serbia's largest oil company, is majority-owned by Gazprom Neft, this forced Belgrade to switch to more expensive alternatives (Paszkowski 2022). The message was clear: Brussels had levers that could hurt without directly targeting Serbia. Visa policy offered another pressure point. As Serbia became a key route for migrants heading to the EU, Brussels warned: align your visa regime—or lose visa-free travel. Belgrade acted within weeks, reintroducing visa requirements for several countries, including India and Tunisia (*AP* 2022). This was not about principle but leverage. When the freedom of movement of its citizens was at risk, the government moved quickly.

Despite this tightening grip, the Western approach avoided maximalist tactics. Pressure was constant, but the door remained open. In early 2023, Serbia entered EU energy assistance schemes, received financial support to weather the crisis, and parts of accession remained active. The path was not closed as long as Belgrade did not walk away. Officials continued to speak of Serbia's European perspective, even as alignment remained partial.

This was not indulgence but calculated restraint. Brussels and Washington were aware of the risks. Push too hard, and Serbia might break away, tilting toward Moscow or Beijing. The reasoning was that gradual rapprochement was safer than rupture. This fits with literature on "stabilitocracies" in the Western Balkans. Bieber (2020) notes the EU often tolerates authoritarian patterns to preserve stability. Richter and Wunsch (2020) emphasize the EU accepts formal changes without deep reforms, seeing patience as less risky than losing influence. Half-steps were frustrating, but ruptures worse. Even when the European Parliament called for freezing pre-accession funds, the Commission and Council held back. Washington praised minor gestures—such as Serbia's UN vote condemning the invasion—as progress rather than criticizing inaction.

This tolerance, however, is not indefinite. By 2023–2024, voices from Eastern and Baltic EU states warned that leniency encouraged Serbia to turn hedging into a permanent stance. They cautioned that strategic ambiguity could soon become strategic defiance. There are clear red lines. If Serbia allowed a Russian base or deepened security ties with Moscow, Western tolerance would end. The same applies to regional flashpoints: escalation in Kosovo or Bosnia would force Belgrade to take a side. In such crises, neutrality is untenable. So far Serbia has avoided crossing these thresholds. But room to manoeuvre is narrowing. As the war drags on and blocs harden, the space between chairs shrinks. If it becomes long-term doctrine, Brussels and Washington will shift from accommodation to confrontation.

Reactions and Limitations from Russia (and China)

On the other side, Russia played a quieter but deliberate game. Instead of open pressure, it relied on long-standing symbolic capital in Serbia. Through shared religion, historical alliances, and cultural myths, Moscow built influence without direct commands, operating like a reflex. Reactions were therefore muted. When Serbia supported UN resolutions condemning Russian aggression, the Kremlin voiced only "disappointment" but added it understood the "complex circumstances" (B92 2022). The message was clear: loyalty was expected, but

limited deviation was tolerated. The relationship persisted not through coercion but through the narrative both sides sought to maintain.

There were no measures to suspend energy supplies or end agreements. On the contrary, Russia extended favourable gas arrangements, and Putin praised Vučić as a “true leader.” The clearest pressure came in October 2022, when Deputy Foreign Minister Alexander Grushko warned in Belgrade that sanctions would amount to “political suicide” for Serbia (*Beta* 2022). Belgrade took the warning seriously: sanctions risked losing Russian support on Kosovo and provoking backlash among pro-Russian voters. Russia’s red line was clear—sanctions were unacceptable. Almost everything else, from UN votes to guarded language on Ukraine, was tolerated. Even in 2024, when Moscow accused Serbia of indirectly arming Ukraine, Belgrade avoided escalation. Vučić framed the issue as commerce, not allegiance. Moscow again chose restraint. Despite rare reproaches, there were no sanctions or broken agreements; disappointment did not translate into punishment (Samorukov 2025).

As the war dragged on, events celebrating Russian-Serbian friendship became more common (Vlada Republike Srbije 2024). A mural of Putin in Belgrade, though defaced, remained—a symbol of divided public sentiment and domestic reassurance (Miletić 2022). The signal was directed inward as much as outward. From Moscow’s view, what mattered was that Serbia stayed out of sanctions and continued to invoke “traditional friendship.” The hedging strategy pursued by Serbia’s officials combined gestures to the West with symbolic alignment with Russia.

China acted even more discreetly. It rarely commented on Serbia’s hedging, except to praise its “independent policy.” This encouraged Belgrade to believe that ties with the East brought benefits without major costs. Yet limits from the East remain implicit. Should Serbia move closer to NATO, Moscow would likely retaliate through energy leverage, regional networks, or media pressure. For now, Russia accepts Serbia’s formal military neutrality and NATO distance. But if Belgrade imposed sanctions or allowed a greater NATO presence, pressure would rise, from energy restrictions to political manoeuvres over Kosovo. Given its war in Ukraine, Russia currently lacks capacity for harsher punishment.

Serbia’s hedging continues because the great powers’ costs remain moderate. Belgrade is not openly hostile to either side. In the long term, however, deepening polarization narrows options. If the West–Russia conflict hardens into a new Cold War, small states like Serbia will face ultimatums. Both the EU and Russia still tolerate Serbia’s inconsistency, but an open NATO–Russia or West–China clash would make neutrality untenable. Brussels already signals

that Serbia “must decide,” while Moscow reacts sharply to gestures toward the West. Serbia’s alignment with EU statements has fallen below 50%, prompting talk in Brussels about the future of negotiations. Pressure comes from West and East alike, tolerated only as long as both sides can be balanced.

How close the breaking point is depends on the outcome of the war in Ukraine and wider great-power relations. If peace emerges, hedging may remain viable. If conflict spreads, for instance to Taiwan, states with multi-directional policies will face ultimatums. Serbia has already been told to prepare for a decision, but continues to postpone it.

Conclusion: Between Rational Choice and Strategic Expiration

Serbia’s foreign policy posture from 2022 to 2025 is marked by a striking level of continuity amid a growing global rupture. While the war in Ukraine redrew geopolitical boundaries and narrowed the margins for ambiguity, Serbia has so far succeeded in prolonging its strategy of hedging by maintaining ties with both East and West without formal alignment to either. This balancing act, often reduced to the phrase “sitting on two chairs”, is neither an indecision nor an inertia.

In its diplomacy, economy, and security policy, Serbia has maintained a consistent pattern—not of alignment, but of calculated ambiguity. Serbia supported key UN resolutions condemning aggression, while refusing to impose sanctions. It nurtured strong economic ties with the EU while retaining energy dependency on Russia and embracing Chinese capital. Militarily, it preserved neutrality, avoided joint exercises with Russia, and selectively intensified cooperation with NATO countries—all without crossing Moscow’s red lines.

At the heart of this strategy lies not only external constraints but also internal logic. Public opinion remains a structural variable: emotionally anchored in the memory of Western interventions and drawn to symbolic kinship with Russia. The political establishment has channelled this sentiment into a posture that protects regime stability while deferring difficult decisions. The government maintained media control, balanced elite appointments, and projected an image of a besieged but principled state—not choosing sides but choosing Serbia (*Politika* 2024).

Theoretically, the Serbian case validates the core assumption of neoclassical realism that foreign policy is filtered through the domestic lens. Structural

pressures may suggest a path, but internal calculations reshape, delay, or resist it. Serbia has not aligned with the West not because it misunderstood the stakes of the war but because alignment through sanctions would carry substantial political costs domestically, particularly among pro-Russian voters, and could further erode regime legitimacy in a polarized media environment. But hedging has limits. It depends on external tolerance and internal cohesion—both increasingly under strain. Western partners have grown louder in warning that Serbia can no longer afford to walk the middle line. Once seen as stable, the strategy now reveals strain: protests intensify, and even media control faces public and EU criticism.

Serbia's current posture may be rational for now, but it is not indefinitely sustainable. As international divisions harden and thresholds narrow, the cost of in betweenness rises. At some point, hedging ceases to be a strategy and becomes evasion. The question is no longer whether Serbia can balance—but how long it can continue, and at what cost.

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Ana JOVIĆ-LAZIĆ

NA IVICI: SRBIJA IZMEĐU ZAPADA, RUSIJE I SOPSTVENOG KURSA

Apstrakt: Rat u Ukrajini produbio je globalne podele i primorao i aktore s ograničenim uticajem da artikuliraju svoje pozicije. Reakcija Srbije – javna osuda invazije, ali uz odbijanje da se uvedu sankcije – prevazilazi uobičajeno ponašanje malih i srednjih država koje se kreće između balansiranja (balancing) i svrstavanja (bandwagoning) i odražava promišljeni pokušaj da se upravlja neizvesnošću zadržavanjem prostora za manevrisanje unutar sve fragmentiranijeg globalnog poretka. Ovaj članak istražuje spoljnopolitički pristup Srbije između 2022. i 2025. godine kroz koncept hedžinga – strategije koja manjim državama omogućava da se nose s neizvesnošću tako što sarađuju s rivalima, odlažući konačne, nepovratne izbore. Umesto da spoljnu politiku posmatra kroz binarnu logiku usklađivanja ili otpora, analiza pokazuje kako Srbija koristi dvosmislenost kao aktivnu i promišljenu poziciju. Teorijski okvir čini neoklasični realizam, koji povezuje strukturne pritiske sa unutrašnjim političkim dinamikama – kao što su preferencije političkog establišmenta i javnog mnjenja. Istraživanje se oslanja na kvalitativnu analizu sadržaja dokumenata i diskursa, uključujući glasanja u UN-u, izjave domaćih i stranih zvaničnika i izveštaje EU. Nalazi ukazuju na to da je Srbija privremeno očuvala autonomiju koristeći pukotine između sukobljenih spoljnopolitičkih očekivanja. Međutim, kako se geopolitičke linije učvršćuju, prostor za takvo manevrisanje postaje sve uži. Rad tvrdi da srpska strategija hedžinga osvetljava i mogućnosti i ograničenja s kojima se suočavaju male države koje nastoje da oblikuju – a ne samo da trpe – globalne pritiske.

Ključne reči: Srbija, spoljna politika, hedžing, neoklasični realizam, EU, Rusija, Ukrajina.

Montenegro's Foreign Policy Evolution: Caught Between Serbia and the West

Mira ŠOROVIĆ¹

Abstract: This article examines Montenegro's political and foreign policy transformation between 1997 and 2000, focusing on its gradual shift from alignment with Serbia toward its independent international orientation. The hypothesis is that this shift was driven by internal political changes and Montenegro's evolving identity as a distinct political actor, shaped by key regional events, such as the Kosovo issue and the NATO intervention. The research is grounded in three theoretical frameworks: constructivism, which highlights the role of identity and political narrative in shaping foreign policy; federalism, which explains internal tensions within the federation; and small state theory, which analyzes how small navigate regional conflicts to assert autonomy. The objective is to understand how domestic and international factors interacted to redefine Montenegro's diplomatic behavior and strategic choices. A qualitative historical-analytical methodology is employed, using primary and secondary sources to trace this evolution. The research demonstrates that Montenegro's shift was not merely reactive, but part of a broader redefinition of its identity and foreign policy, laying the foundation for its future path toward statehood and international recognition.

Keywords: Montenegro, Serbia, Yugoslavia, Democratic Party of Socialists, Milo Đukanović, diplomacy

Introduction

In Europe, no political party has managed to dominate the political scene as long as the Democratic Party of Socialists (*Demokratska partija socijalista*, DPS) has managed in Montenegro. The party remained continuously in power

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from the advent of multiparty politics in 1990 until 2020, when the first electoral change of power occurred (Laštro et al. 2023, 210).²

The prolonged rule of this dominant party played a significant role in shaping the broader regional shift toward authoritarianism across the Western Balkans (Pavlović 2016). The DPS emerged on the political scene as the successor to the League of Communists of Montenegro (*Savez komunista Crne Gore*, SKCG).³ It remained in power continuously from 1945 to 2020, despite significant leadership changes and internal reforms (Bešić and Baća 2024, 2). However, this continuity should not be taken to imply that the party was monolithic or unresponsive to change. On the contrary, the reforms undertaken in 1989 and again in 1997 reflected shifts in the political landscape and represented efforts to adapt to evolving societal and geopolitical dynamics (Biber 2020, 63).

The DPS has a communist background, marked not by a break from the 56+ “old regime” and its replacement with a democratic one, but rather by a top-down reform within the existing ruling structure (new political elite of “young, good-looking and intelligent” - the trio of Momir Bulatović, Milo Đukanović and Svetozar Marović). This “system” ensured the preservation of a strong political infrastructure, party membership, institutional resources and ideological legacy. Also, the DPS controlled Montenegrin state institutions and resources, shaping the economy to serve its political and clientelist interests (Uzelac 2003; Lazić 2018).

During the early multiparty era (until 1997), the party maintained a pro-Serbian orientation and fostered close ties with Serbia, cooperating closely with and aligning itself with the Socialist Party of Serbia (*Socijalistička partija Srbije*, SPS) led by Slobodan Milošević. That year marked a turning point in the recent history of Montenegro. Thereafter, the DPS increasingly aligned itself with the project of Montenegrin nation-building and the creation of an

² Montenegro was, until August 2020, the only European country that never seen a change of government through elections since introducing parliamentary voting in 1906.

³ For years, the Montenegrin government operated out the premises leased from the DPS, which the party has inherited from the republican SKCG. In that way, the ruling party, by renting office space to the government, generated millions of euros in revenue (OSCE/ODIHR 2009).

independent country, establishing itself as a so-called “state-building party” (Šorović 2024, 144; Laštro et al. 2023, 222). By distancing itself from Serbian nationalism and Milošević, the DPS carved out a new political space, while maintaining a firm grip on power. Centers of political influence were consolidated during the party’s rule, with Đukanović exercising tight control over the levers of power. During this period, a *de facto* presidential system was established. Regardless of whether he held the position of Party Leader, Prime Minister or President, Đukanović consistently remained the central figure of informal power (Biber 2020, 64-65).

The DPS has been characterized by a flexible ideological orientation and significant shifts in its political program. Over the course of the three decades in power, the party underwent several ideological transformations, spanning a broad spectrum, many of which were contradictory or mutually exclusive. These shifts subtly altered the political trajectory of the party, moving it “from socialist to neoliberal, from pro-Serb to Montenegrin nationalist, from social democratic to populist, and from authoritarian to pro-European”, in a huge range of ideological orientation (Laštro et al. 2023, 222). Thus, over the decades, the DPS built a patronage network to secure support (Keil 2018; Džankić 2018) and it used populist rhetoric to justify undemocratic practices as defenses against a shifting “ethno-national other” (purportedly striving to weaken the Montenegrin statehood and alter its political course), while patterns of discrimination and stigmatization remained consistent (Komar and Živković 2016; Džankić and Keil 2017; Bešić and Baća 2024; Baća 2024).

Within the political framework of Montenegro, the DPS is characterized as a dominant political actor, with its role and governance generally examined across two distinct phases. The first phase, spanning from 1990 to 1997, is often described by scholars as a form of competitive authoritarianism (Biber 2020). The second phase begins in 1997, when the DPS established the first multiparty government with the support of ethnic minority groups, thereby positioning Montenegro within the category of an electoral democracy.⁴ However, depending on the specific period under investigation, researchers

⁴ This period can be understood as an ideological transformation (Kovačević 2007), as well as a consequence of a high degree of party institutionalization (Vuković 2013). Similarly, it can be seen as a strategic alignment with prevailing national divisions in Montenegrin society, between pro-Montenegrin and pro-Serbian identity (Komar and Živković 2016).

have applied different theoretical approaches to explain the mechanisms behind the political dominance of the DPS. The success of this party prior to 1997 is largely attributed to electoral manipulation, the use of internal mechanisms of ethno-political clientelism, extensive propaganda efforts and comprehensive control over the media, particularly through state institutions, such as Radio Television of Montenegro (RTCG) and the daily newspaper *Pobjeda*. Repressive and institutional control was exercised by the ruling elite, alongside the systematic use of public resources for political purposes, manifested through practices of clientelism and patronage (Darmanović 2003, 147; Vuković 2013, 4-5).

Regardless of this proposed periodization of the DPS governance, recent research continues to affirm the undemocratic character of the DPS rule, classifying Montenegro as a competitive authoritarian regime even after the transitional year of 1997 (Levitsky and Way 2021). Furthermore, despite suffering a political defeat in the parliamentary elections (August 30th, 2020), the DPS has remained committed to its ideological and party agenda. This was reaffirmed by then-party leader Milo Đukanović at the Ninth Party Congress, where he asserted that “there is no civic and European Montenegro without a strong and progressive DPS at its core” (DPS 2021). This statement underscores the party’s ongoing ambition to regain power or participate in a newly formed ruling coalition.

Finally, the evolution of Montenegro’s foreign policy remains a relevant subject, particularly given the country’s ongoing efforts to balance its historical ties with Serbia and its strategic orientation toward the West. In a shifting geopolitical environment, this dilemma continues to shape domestic politics and international relations in the Western Balkans.

Theoretical Framework

Regarding this complex history between 1997 and 2000, Montenegro experienced a fundamental and strategic shift that redefined its foreign policy, transitioning from strict alignment with Serbia under the regime of Slobodan Milošević to a more autonomous and independent international stance. This shift was driven by internal political divisions within the DPS, responses to

the Kosovo conflict and Montenegro's distinct diplomatic actions during key regional crises, culminating in the emergence of a new foreign policy concept oriented toward sovereignty and greater international engagement.

The hypothesis of this study is grounded in the theory of constructivism in international relations, which emphasizes how international identity and political narratives shape diplomatic behavior and strategic choices (the evolving self-perception of Montenegro as a distinct political entity being central to understanding its foreign policy redefinition). The constructivist theory is based on the belief that concepts such as security, international order or national interest are not objective categories, but rather the products of social construction shaped through identities, narratives and discourses (Kolodziej 2005, 260-262). The identity of a country, how it perceives itself and how it is perceived by others, plays a crucial role in determining its foreign policy behavior (Wendt 1992, 396-399). However, actors in international relations do not act according to "reality" itself, but according to the meanings they assign to it. The international order, institutions and strategies are products of such constructions. Countries, just like individuals, interpret the world through their own identity-based lenses. Narratives about "the other" - often perceived as a state enemy - help consolidate self-identity and legitimize political actions. Therefore, the sense of belonging and the readiness to defend one's constructed identity often outweigh historical or factual disputes (Puljić 2023). Nations are fundamental intersubjective constructs, rooted in imagined bonds among people who may never meet. As Benedict Anderson puts it, a nation is an "imagined political community" (Anderson 1991, 6), held together by shared meanings rather than objective realities.

Unlike liberalism and realism, constructivism does not assume universal notions of human nature, but focuses on how actors interpret themselves and their surroundings. This allows us to adapt specific cases and avoid normative bias. Also, constructivism integrates domestic politics into the analysis of foreign policy, recognizing that the legitimizing narratives often emerge within the international arena. Through its connection with political theory (especially poststructuralism), constructivism offers deeper insight into the interplay of truth, power and discourse (Lyotard 1991; Foucault 1994). Rather than seeking universal solutions, it centers on subjective perceptions

and meanings, providing a more flexible and context-sensitive tool for analyzing international relations (Puljić 2023).

The second theoretical framework employed in this article is the federalism approach, which explains the internal tensions within the third Yugoslavia and Montenegro's trajectory toward autonomy amid the disintegration of the federal system. Federalism is the most suitable model for political association in which different communities retain their identity, while striving toward common goals (Friedrich 1963). Liberal democracy is necessary, but not sufficient for the existence of a genuine federation, while formal constitutions without substantive content lead to so-called "façade federations". This was the case with the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), which Milan Popović describes as a fictitious federation lacking real equality, similar to communist states such as the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), Czechoslovakia and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (Popović 1996, 120). Also, Carl J. Friedrich emphasizes that true federal systems require constitutionally protected autonomy, which was absent in the Soviet model (Friedrich 1963, 596). Federalism and nationalism are not inherently opposed. Rather, their relationship depends on the structure of the political entities that are involved (Šorović 2024, 95).

The third framework is crisis diplomacy, which analyzes how small countries negotiate their international positioning and leverage diplomatic opportunities during regional conflicts (e.g., the Kosovo issue and NATO intervention). This theoretical approach provides an adequate example of how internal political shifts influenced external relations and foreign policy innovation during a critical period of regional upheaval.

In accordance with the theme of this article and the issues discussed, this research employs a qualitative historical-analytical methodology, combining primary and secondary sources to trace Montenegro's political and diplomatic evolution from 1997 to 2000. However, the Montenegrin political transformation between 1997 and 2000 is best understood through the lens of constructivist theory, which emphasizes the central role of identity, narratives and perception in shaping foreign policy behavior. Montenegro gradually distanced itself from the Milošević regime and began to assert a more autonomous position on the international stage, domestic debates over sovereignty and independence intensified. It was not merely reacting to

external events, but actively redefining its own political identity. This evolving self-perception, as a distinct entity separate from Serbia, played a crucial role in legitimizing its shift in foreign policy. Constructivism allows us to see how internal political discourse, particularly within the ruling DPS and among Montenegrin elites, constructed a narrative of sovereignty and international engagement that resonated with broader societal aspirations. Rather than acting based solely on material interests or objective threats, Montenegro responded to its interpretation of international norms, regional development (the Kosovo crisis) and its own imagined political community. This constructed identity became a strategic tool in navigating complex diplomatic challenges and in redefining Montenegro's role within the collapsing Yugoslav federation.

The Split Between Đukanović and Milošević: The Division Within the DPS

In the early 1990s, the President of Montenegro and the leader of the DPS, Momir Bulatović, publicly claimed that the party leadership was incapable of creating an independent Montenegrin state (Bulatović 2020, 93). Ironically, just a few years later, that same party would begin charting a course toward Montenegrin independence. Following the DPS's strong performance in the 1996 elections, tensions within the party leadership began to escalate. In 1997, Bulatović, under the pressure from Belgrade, attempted to marginalize then Prime Minister and Vice President of DPS, Milo Đukanović, in a surprising power play to regain control (Nikolić and Popović 2013). Initially, at the March 1997 session of the DPS Main Board (*Glavni odbor DPS-a*), Bulatović secured majority support for his initiative to reduce Đukanović's power (Šorović 2024). However, in an unexpected shift, the party majority turned in Đukanović's favor. On July 11, 1997, at the 17th session of the Main Board, a vote of no confidence was passed against Bulatović (Andrijašević 2021, 356-357), resulting in his political expulsion.

The split within the DPS marked a significant political rupture. It was the first time in Montenegrin parliamentary history that a ruling party, after winning an election and forming a government, internally fractured without external pressure (Šćekić 2012, 121; Bulatović 2020). The reasons for the

schism extended beyond personal rivalry and were rooted in conflicting political visions of Montenegro's future. One of the primary catalysts for the split was Đukanović's growing criticism of Slobodan Milošević. In an interview for Belgrade newspaper *Vreme*, Đukanović described Milošević as a politician "devoid of strategic vision" and "a politician from the past". This statement, according to Montenegrin newspaper *Monitor* (April 25th, 1997), symbolized the "cutting of the umbilical cord" between Montenegro and Serbia (Janković 2020; Pavlović 2016). From that point on, Đukanović began gradually distancing himself from the Yugoslav President and from hard-line policies emanating from Serbia.

Political analyst Milka Tadić Mijović argued that Đukanović's shift was strategic, that he was a "political survivor" and knew how to adapt to remain in power (Janković 2020). His break from Belgrade included a firm rejection of the growing influence of the Yugoslav United Left (*Jugoslovenska udružena levica*, JUL), led by Milošević's wife, Mira Marković. In fact, Đukanović refused to allow JUL-affiliated cadres to assume control over Montenegrin economic institutions and publicly criticized her party as ideologically regressive and economically unrealistic. He famously advised JUL members to "remain just spouses", alluding directly to Marković, which triggered a smear campaign from Belgrade, branding Đukanović and his allies as "smugglers" and "mafia figures" (Nikolić and Popović 2013, 29). According to Đukanović, the final rupture occurred after a visit to Washington in early 1997, when fabricated letters alleging his support for Montenegrin secession were circulated in Belgrade to justify his political removal (Štavljanin 2008). This was a statement Đukanović made during an interview with Radio Free Europe (*Radio Slobodna Evropa*). From today's perspective, despite his persuasive rhetoric and demagoguery, it was not merely a political conflict or the spreading of falsehoods, but rather a much deeper divergence within the Yugoslav political elite (Šorović 2024, 147). Later, Momir Bulatović admitted that the political split stemmed from differing visions: he remained loyal to Milošević's idea of a unified Yugoslavia, while Đukanović increasingly promoted Montenegrin autonomy. Also, Bulatović accused Đukanović of facilitating illegal economic activities, including cigarette smuggling and money laundering through offshore companies. He claimed that Western powers, particularly the U.S.A., exerted pressure on Đukanović to abandon Milošević, further deepening the

rift (Nikolić and Popović 2013, 40; Bulatović 2020, 269-274; Perović 2019).

Academic analyses support the interpretation of the DPS split as a reflection of broader international developments.⁵ As stated in an interview with Dr. Dejan Jović (July 13, 2023), the year 1997 had represented a turning point: the West, seeking to prevent further conflict in the Balkans, began supporting liberal democrats over authoritarian nationalists. The UK Prime Minister Tony Blair, U.S. President Bill Clinton and German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder saw regime change in Serbia as a prerequisite for regional peace. Montenegro, under Đukanović, presented an opportunity for the West to weaken Milošević from within the federation. However, former Yugoslav Foreign Minister Goran Svilanović noted in an interview on August 2, 2023 that Đukanović anticipated the inevitable failure of Milošević's policies (militarily and diplomatically) and made the right decision by distancing himself. Similarly, Professor Gordana Đurović similarly stated (in an interview held on March 15, 2023) that Montenegro's political elite realized they had no meaningful influence within federal decision-making processes and were treated as subordinates rather than partners (Šorović 2024, 145-146).

This divergence resulted in the formation of two separate parties. Bulatović founded the Socialist People's Party (*Socijalistička narodna partija Crne Gore*, SNP), claiming to represent the "true" DPS, while Đukanović retained the DPS name and transformed it into a pro-European, reformist party and also included minority national parties in the government. This produced two political and identity camps: one advocating a continued union with Serbia and a Serb national identity (SNP), and another promoting a distinct Montenegrin identity and future independence (DPS) (Darmanović 2007; Šćekić 2012, 165).

The DPS split deepened social divisions in Montenegrin society, particularly among Orthodox Christians, who began politically identifying as either Montenegrins or Serbs (Džankić 2015; Vuković 2015; Bešić and Baća 2024). Over time, Đukanović's DPS shed its religious elements by

⁵ The three views presented in this article (those of Jović, Svilanović and Đurović) are based on interviews conducted by the author as part of her doctoral research for the dissertation titled "The Influence of Montenegro on the Foreign Policy of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (1992-2006)".

incorporating minority parties into government, whereas the SNP aligned with Serbian Orthodoxy and traditional nationalist discourse. Despite a tense and divided political climate, Đukanović won the 1997 presidential elections and solidified his position in the parliamentary elections of 1998. During the NATO intervention (1999), Montenegro remained officially neutral and rejected Belgrade's mobilization orders, signaling an open break with Milošević.⁶ Later, Montenegro introduced the German mark as legal tender, took control of customs and foreign trade and reduced federal institutions to symbolic entities. These moves signaled the final phase of Đukanović's break from the old DPS ideology (Darmanović 2006, 15). Following Milošević's fall on October 5th, 2000, Montenegro accelerated its push for independence. The new DPS ideology, now centered on the "subjectivization of Montenegro", laid the foundation for the independence referendum in 2006 (Rastoder 2011, 258). Bulatović, in contrast, remained loyal to Milošević and continued advocating for a Yugoslavia "without alternative".

The Kosovo Issue

Based on a literature review of how the issue is represented, the conflict between Serbs and Albanians in Kosovo and Metohija (K&M) has deep and complex historical roots. Many scholars and political analysts offer varying interpretations of its origins. Some associate it with early Albanian migrations, others with the establishment of the League of Prizren (1878), the Balkan Wars (1912–1913), two world wars or with tensions during the communist period and the dissolution of Yugoslavia (Woehrel 1999). The fact is: for Serbs, Kosovo is a powerful national and spiritual symbol, representing the center of the medieval Serbian state and the site of important Orthodox Christian heritage. Conversely, for Albanians, the formation of the League of Prizren marked the

⁶ Up to a certain point, Montenegrin public supported Milošević and his approach to leading Yugoslavia. This loyalty was partly rooted in his Montenegrin heritage - he was originally from Lijeva Rijeka (northern part of Montenegro), so many Montenegrins referred to him as „on of ours“. It was also, to some extent, due to his open defiance of the West, which resonated with Montenegro's historical tradition of rebellion and resistance (Vladislavljević 2020, 214).

beginning of their national awakening. But, in the 19th century, as the Ottoman Empire began to weaken and gradually withdraw from the Balkans, conflicting Serbian and Albanian national aspirations began to emerge in the region (Vladisavljević 2020; Crnobrnja 1996; Biserko 2012). Since then, tensions, conflicts and misunderstandings between the two ethnic groups have continued in K&M, and unfortunately, even today, not much has changed in that area. After 1945, Kosovo was granted the status of an autonomous province within the Socialist Republic of Serbia, as well as some of the prerogatives of the republics. More precisely, the postwar Yugoslav leadership, led by Tito, tried to address Kosovo's demands by granting it greater autonomy, economic aid and recognition of Albanian national rights rather than full republican status. Through constitutional changes in 1968, 1971 and particularly 1974, Kosovo gained significant autonomy, including the right to participate in federal governance and display its symbols. These reforms reduced Serbian influence and promoted decentralization across Yugoslavia. However, this shift fueled regional and ethnic divisions, especially within the ruling Communist Party, which remained authoritarian, but became fragmented along ethnic lines (Kofos and Veremis 1998; Pavlowich 1988, 82).

While the Albanian population expanded their corpus of rights, including language recognition and education in their mother tongue, many Albanians sought broader political status, some even demanding republican status within Yugoslavia. However, in 1981, massive protests erupted in Kosovo, demanding greater provincial autonomy or even unification with Albania. These demands were rejected by the Serbian and Yugoslav leaderships, leading to rising tensions and an increase in the emigration of Serbs (and Montenegrins) from the province due to perceived pressure (Hudson 2003, 64-65; Poulton 1991, 57).⁷ The Kosovo issue was the first to unsettle

⁷ In 1913, Metohija was incorporated into the territory of Montenegro. According to professor Vladisavljević, at one point, approximately 15% of the population in Kosovo identified as part of the Montenegrin minority, which was officially recognized as distinct from the Serbian population through specific legal and administrative classifications. However, due to the overlapping and non-exclusive nature of Montenegrin and Serbian identities, these communities were eventually grouped together, particularly in the context of Serb-Albanian relations. This convergence reflected political expediency and the fluidity of national identities in the region during that period (Vladisavljević 2020, 111).

Yugoslavia's leadership. Originating from 19th century irredentist nationalism, it persisted throughout the 20th century and ultimately signaled the beginning of Yugoslavia's collapse following the death of Josip Broz Tito (Kofos and Veremis 1998).

Within international centers of power, the Kosovo issue held a prominent position among the acute crisis hotspots in the Balkans, a region that had long been neglected and marginalized (Simić 2000, 20). In 1989, the Serbian government revoked Kosovo's autonomy, further intensifying the crisis. Soon, the issue of Kosovo became central in international diplomacy. The U.S.A. and NATO increasingly framed the crisis as a human rights concern, advocating intervention under the pretext of "humanitarian intervention". This approach was seen by some analysts as part of a broader Western strategy to reshape the post-Cold War international order, particularly in the Balkans. On the other side, according to the NATO Commander, General Wesley Clark, the intervention was a case of coercive diplomacy – the use of armed force aimed at imposing political will on the FRY, specifically on Serbia (Clark 2001, 418).

Following the Račak incident, an unsuccessful round of negotiations took place in Rambouillet.⁸ These peace talks, organized under the auspices of the Contact group and led by U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, aimed to resolve the escalating conflict. However, the negotiations functioned more as an ultimatum than a diplomatic process. The proposed agreement offered Kosovo broad autonomy within the FRY, including a potential future referendum on its final status. A detailed analysis of the Yugoslav/Serbian delegation and the Kosovo Albanian delegation will not be presented here, as this topic has already been extensively covered by numerous authors (Spirou 2021; Kovačević 2004; Hudson 2003; Rastoder and Adžić 2020). In brief, while the Kosovo Albanian delegation accepted the proposed terms, the Serbian side, under Milošević, rejected the plan without consulting or including Montenegro. Although Montenegro did not take part in the negotiations, it expressed concern regarding its status within the federal structure. NATO's bombing campaign against the FRY lasted 78 days, from March 24th to June 10th, 1999. Montenegro's territory remained largely

⁸ Whereas Priština refers to the incident as "massacre", the officials in Belgrade consider it to be an "anti-terrorist action" (MoD 2019).

unaffected, except for the Murino incident in April 1999, where six civilians were killed, including children (Softić 2024). On June 10th, 1999, NATO troops entered Kosovo following the signing of the Kumanovo Agreement. Whereas the campaign was internationally justified as a humanitarian intervention, aimed at “stopping ethnic cleansing”, in practice it resulted in the marginalization of Serbian rule over the province and the migration of the majority of Kosovo Serbs towards Central Serbia, and a minor part towards Montenegro. In addition, Camp Bondsteel, one of the largest U.S. military regional bases, was established in Kosovo (Kuto 2013, 7).

Challenges of the Union: The Fall of Milošević and the Turn Toward Montenegrin Sovereignty

The union between Serbia and Montenegro, based on common cultural and historical heritage, was formally established by the Constitution of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) on April 27th, 1992, known as the ‘Žabljak Constitution’. It was an attempt to preserve a joint statehood between Serbia and Montenegro after the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). From its inception, this new federal entity faced serious internal and external challenges. In fact, on the international front, the FRY remained excluded from major international organizations, including the United Nations and the Council of Europe. Also, it was subjected to heavy economic sanctions by the international community, due to wars in Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. In fact, the period between 1992 and 2000 was marked by increasing centralization of power in Belgrade, alongside growing political distancing by Montenegro, especially after Đukanović rose to power in the late 1990s. By the end of that decade, Montenegro had begun charting its own Western-oriented course, introducing the German mark as a parallel currency and gradually adopting a more sovereigntist political discourse.

To be more precise, by 1999, Montenegro had significantly distanced itself from Belgrade, asserting autonomy: politically by refusing to support the Yugoslav army during the Kosovo conflict and economically, through the adoption of the German mark to gain monetary independence. Ironically, this separation deepened after Serbia’s democratic transition in 2000, as the DPS

was no longer seen as the primary pro-Western actor. Thus, the reintegration of Serbia into the international community faced major obstacles: unclear relations with Montenegro, the unresolved Kosovo issue and obligations to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). These problems hindered both sides and their aspirations, as Montenegro's path remained entangled with Serbia's challenges, particularly the ongoing Kosovo dispute, which continued to influence Serbo-Montenegrin relations even after Montenegro became an independent country (Petrović 2019, 24-25; Vučković and Petrović 2022, 62). Also, one of the clearest expressions of Montenegro's political divergence and distance from Belgrade that became apparent by 1999 was its boycott of federal institutions, which began in 1998 following the electoral victory of the DPS. Montenegrin representatives withdrew from the work of the Federal Assembly and other federal bodies, effectively suspending the republic's institutional participation in the joint state. This boycott included the period of NATO's bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999. Despite formally being part of the FRY, Montenegro avoided military confrontation with the West and acted as a *de facto* neutral republic/territory during the conflict. Its relationship with Belgrade deteriorated further during this time. Although Montenegro never formally declared independence, its actions increasingly reflected a functional separation from the federal structure.

It is relevant to mention that, during the protracted negotiation process in Rambouillet, the seat of Montenegro remained vacant. This symbolically underscored the republic's subordinate position within the Milošević regime and reflected the increasingly adversarial relationship between the FRY and the broader international community, regarding the Kosovo issue (Rastoder and Adžić 2020). Nevertheless, the global public was informed that Montenegro had expressed a willingness to accept the proposed agreement. However, it lacked the authority and the capacity to make binding decisions. Former Member of Parliament, Miodrag Vuković emphasized that any final agreement reached in Rambouillet "must not call into question the legal order of Montenegro", warning that any such outcome would signify "the end of the existing Yugoslavia" (Đuranović 1999, 10-11).

Although Montenegro was not the central subject of the peace conference, its future was closely tied to its outcomes. The Montenegrin ruling elite expressed concerns regarding the republic's status within the

federation, particularly amid speculation that Kosovo might be granted the status of a federal unit within the FRY. In a telephone conversation between the chief negotiator, U.S. Secretary Albright and President Đukanović, assurances were given that Montenegro's interests would be safeguarded by the international community. This position was later reaffirmed by representatives of Western powers, following direct discussions with President Đukanović. It was promised that no solution presented at the negotiation table would compromise Montenegro's status or its equality within the federation (Rastoder and Adžić 2020, 1309-1310).

The political elite in Montenegro emphasized their situation during the NATO intervention, pointing to the fact that there were fewer human casualties and less material destruction on Montenegrin territory. However, if we take an objective look at the situation at that time, it becomes clear that the international community, led by the U.S., was primarily focused on removing Milošević from power. Since Đukanović had already distanced himself from Milošević beforehand, he was not seen as a primary target. Otherwise, the pressure would have extended to him as well, as stated by Prof. Dr. Dejan Jović in an interview on July 13, 2023 (Šorović 2024, 164).⁹

During Milošević's rule, the possibility of Yugoslavia joining the European integration process was virtually non-existent. The wars and political turmoil of the 1990s pushed it far from the European path (Dragojlović et al. 2011, 279). As the European Union (EU) introduced a regional approach and launched the stabilization and association process for post-Yugoslav countries, Yugoslavia faced NATO bombing in 1999. In the midst of the crisis, the Federal Assembly of Yugoslavia sought an alternative solution – declaring the country's accession to a union with Russia and Belarus (Đukanović 2019, 126). In a striking speech to the Federal Assembly, then-Prime Minister Momir Bulatović declared that NATO's aggression was not just an attack on Yugoslavia, but on the very foundations of international law. He framed the alliance with Russia and Belarus as historically significant – a unification in defense of peace, national interest and future development. Though largely symbolic, the speech reflected a deeper search for allies beyond the West, at

⁹ This political observation presented in this article is based on an interview with Professor Dejan Jović, conducted by the author during the research for her doctoral dissertation.

a time when Yugoslavia found itself increasingly isolated. This idea of forming a union with Russia and Belarus carried no real political weight. It was neither accepted nor implemented (Dragojlović et al. 2011, 284-285).

Milošević's regime was marked by authoritarianism cloaked in democratic elements, a form of rule best described as "caesarism" (Darmanović 2002, 179-180).¹⁰ Although Serbia formally transitioned from a one-party to a multi-party system, these reforms were superficial and lacked genuine democratization. As the famous Tocqueville warned, continuity with authoritarian traditions often gives rise to new forms of despotism (Podunavac 2018, 66). Milošević maintained power through nationalism, manipulating historical myths and capitalizing on crises, such as the wars in Croatia, Bosnia and Kosovo.¹¹ Each conflict marked a distinct phase of his regime: from its rise and consolidation (1991-1995), through stagnation (1995-1998), to eventual collapse (1998-2000). His exploitation of state institutions for personal and political gain, particularly the militarization of the police and erosion of federal structures, led scholars to characterize the final phase of his rule as "sultanistic" (Darmanović 2002, 178-185).¹² The NATO intervention in 1999 dealt a serious blow to Milošević's regime. Although he managed to stay in power in the aftermath, the opposition began to consolidate, bolstered by growing support from the West. In 2000, the

¹⁰ It is a negative form of political regime that, unlike other types such as tyranny, dictatorship or autocracy, is characterized by a ruler attempting to lend their authoritarian rule a semblance of democratic political legitimacy.

¹¹ Milošević rose to power amid political unrest by portraying himself as the protector of the Serbs. He invoked national myths and historical grievances to fuel ethno-nationalist sentiment and legitimize his rule. Promising a more prosperous socialism, he reshaped public values and gained popularity as trust in elites declined. His opposition to police violence in Kosovo Polje in 1987 further boosted his image as the unquestioned leader of the Serbian people (Čolović 1997, 41-48; Šorović 2024, 168-169; Fišer 2009, 489-525; Vladislavljević 2020, 206).

¹² As Milošević consolidated power, he ruled through repression, dismantled institutions and centralized control in the presidency. He extended his influence beyond Serbia, weakening federal structures and shifting from authoritarian to personalist, "sultanistic" rule. Rising tensions over Kosovo and the NATO intervention further isolated his regime. In response, repression deepened, with loyalists placed in key roles and opposition suppressed. His rule ended on October 5th, 2000, after a popular uprising (Darmanović 2002, 180-185; Šorović 2024, 169-170).

Democratic Opposition of Serbia (*Demokratska opozicija Srbije*, DOS) was formed with backing from the U.S.A. and the EU, uniting a broad coalition behind a single presidential candidate, Vojislav Koštunica. He was viewed as a moderate nationalist, a critical opponent of Milošević and foreign interference. Koštunica emerged as a compromise figure – acceptable to domestic voters wary of the West, yet also palatable to international actors seeking regime change (Vladisavljević 2020, 9). Following the disputed elections in September 2000, mass protests on October 5th led to the collapse of Milošević's regime. Security forces largely stood down, refusing to suppress the demonstrators. Under mounting pressure, Milošević conceded defeat and Koštunica was officially recognized as the new president.

An important factor in Milošević's downfall was Montenegro's political shift away from Belgrade. Led by Đukanović, Montenegro began distancing itself from Serbian control after 1997, embracing cooperation with the West. The republic became a haven for opposition forces and moved toward independence, despite EU and U.S. efforts to preserve the Yugoslav federation. Following Milošević's fall, Serbia began a gradual process of democratization and re-engagement with the international community. Yet this transition was not driven solely from within. The West used the elections (2000) to achieve through political means what military intervention had not - regime change in Belgrade and Serbia's alignment with the neoliberal, post-Cold War order.

Throughout Milošević's rule, Montenegro was searching for a different solution. Recognizing the growing political rift with Serbia, it proposed a peaceful dissolution of the Yugoslav federation, modeled after the split of Czechoslovakia, envisioning the creation of a new union between two internationally recognized states, Serbia and Montenegro. This proposal received little support. The international community, especially the EU and the U.S., viewed Montenegro as a potential destabilizer, labeling it a "troublemaker", while official Belgrade was equally dismissive. Once seen as a pillar of regional stability, Montenegro in that period became a source of concern (Darmanović 2001).

The democratic changes in Serbia after October 5th, 2000 and the rise of the pro-reform government led by Zoran Đinđić marked a new phase in the federal dynamics. Ironically, although Montenegro had until then been

perceived as the “more democratic” part of the federation, democratic reforms in Serbia somewhat eclipsed this image. At the same time, a reformed Serbia began pushing for a redefinition of relations within the federation, resulting in the new state formation between Serbia and Montenegro. Hence, in the early 2000s, the international community showed little support for Montenegro’s push for independence. This reluctance was largely due to the greater priority of the time, stabilizing and promoting democratic transformation in Serbia, the region’s largest and most influential country. Additionally, there were concerns that supporting Montenegro’s secession could encourage Kosovo to pursue its own independence more aggressively. In order to manage this situation, a breakthrough came through EU mediation. On March 14th, 2002, the Belgrade Agreement (*Beogradski sporazum*) was signed, establishing the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (*Državna zajednica Srbija i Crna Gora*), a temporary arrangement between two semi-independent entities. This union was set to last for three years (owing to the three-year moratorium) after which either republic had the right to hold a referendum on full independence. This period was used by Montenegro to transfer powers to its authorities, prepare for a potential referendum and simultaneously begin UN-led negotiations between Belgrade and Priština over the political status of Kosovo. As a result, the political processes in Montenegro and Kosovo became closely intertwined, despite the fact that Kosovo was officially part of Serbia, while Montenegro was a separate federal unit (Vučković and Petrović 2022, 63).

However, the new Union was more a symbolic framework than a functional federation. Over the following years, Montenegro continued building its own state institutions. Although Montenegro’s status was often linked in international discourse to the Kosovo issue, it is important to note that there was always a clear legal basis for Montenegrin independence, unlike the case of Kosovo, which has remained legally and politically contested in the international arena. Though brief and vague in its wording, the agreement implied a high degree of Montenegrin autonomy, most notably in areas such as currency, customs, trade policy and even diplomatic representations. In essence, the union functioned more as a formal construct than a cohesive state, with limited coordination between its constituent parts. Still, the very “temporary clause” in the agreement laid the legal groundwork

for Montenegro's 2006 referendum on independence. Despite international hopes for rebuilding a joint state, the structure put in place pointed clearly toward eventual separation (Šorović 2024, 179). The process of independence culminated on May 21st, 2006, in the referendum, in which 55.5% of voters supported independence. The joint statehood ended between Montenegro and Serbia, which was marked by many tensions, redefinitions and diverging visions regarding the country's internal structure, international positioning and future.

The Definition of a New Foreign Policy Concept

When objectively examining the period of this research (1997–2000), it is important to acknowledge that there was significant domestic resistance in Montenegro to Euro-Atlantic integration. Nevertheless, this strategic orientation secured strong international support for the country - support that was not merely diplomatic or rooted in the provision of external legitimacy. Rather, it represented a vital financial lifeline, particularly during the rule of Slobodan Milošević.¹³ This assistance enabled the Montenegrin leadership to consolidate power and build a robust police force capable of resisting the Yugoslav Army, which remained stationed on Montenegrin territory and under Milošević's command (Marović 2018).¹⁴

In 1997, the political elite in Montenegro aligned itself with the EU and the U.S.A., initially as a form of opposition to the Milošević regime and later through cooperation within the ICTY. This alignment continued with Montenegro's support for independence in Kosovo (2008) and culminated in the country's accession to NATO in 2017. Each of those political decisions

¹³ At the time, support for the regime was sustained through cigarette and drug smuggling, involving top government officials and organized crime networks that still affect Montenegro and our region. Also, informal and poorly regulated financial flows helped maintain power by fueling a widespread clientelist system.

¹⁴ During the NATO intervention, the Yugoslav and Montenegrin forces were effectively on opposing sides. The Milošević regime tried to force Montenegro into submission through mobilization against the population's will and by cracking down on critics, particularly educated and dissenting voices (Rastoder and Adžić 2020, 1313).

reflects a clear pattern of Montenegro's foreign policy orientation toward the EU, even when doing so meant opposing major global actors, particularly Russia. The historically close and friendly ties between Montenegro and Russia, which date back to 1711, are beyond the scope of this discussion, though they remain a relevant backdrop to the country's geopolitical choices (Biber 2020, 66). Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, many in Serbian politics and academia rejected the idea that Montenegro has a distinct identity or future separate from Serbia. This belief was strongly supported by Milošević's regime, which viewed Montenegrin autonomy with distrust; however, this distrust did not end with the fall of Milošević and continued to a certain degree with Vojislav Koštunica. Although the Constitution of the FRY promised equal status for Serbia and Montenegro, the reality was different. Montenegro was treated as the junior partner and federal institutions served to extend Belgrade's control. As a result, Montenegro began building its own political and institutional independence during the late 1990s.

After the democratic shift on October 5th, 2000, Serbia's new government focused on internal reforms, but largely ignored the federal relationship. Earlier in the 1990s, Montenegrin leaders like Bulatović and Đukanović had supported Milošević. He was the one who supported them in coming to power. But, by the late 1990s, Montenegro started moving in a different direction, turning toward Europe, diplomacy and away from the nationalism and isolationism still dominant in Belgrade. Montenegro increasingly perceived the federal system as flawed and unworkable. It lacked decentralization, legal balance and true power-sharing. Foreign affairs, for instance, were almost always controlled by Serbian officials aligned with the regime, with brief exceptions like Goran Svilanović and Vuk Drašković, who, despite being more moderate, were nonetheless Serbian appointees. While Montenegro pursued regional cooperation and Euro-Atlantic integration, Serbia remained stuck in a post-conflict and anti-Western mindset, especially immediately following the NATO bombing. These divergent paths deepened the rift between the two republics, which continued to affect their relations even after the democratic changes in Serbia and its enhanced cooperation with the European Union.

Conclusion

This article presents the political transformation of Montenegro from 1997 to 2000, a critical juncture in the post-Yugoslav space. The period was marked by the internal fragmentation of the DPS, the gradual detachment from Serbia and the redefinition of Montenegrin state identity. The evolution of the DPS was of particular interest to academic observation. The political transformations it underwent were significant: the party initially emerged as the successor of the Communist Party in Montenegro, then shifted to a nationalist stance, later adopted a reform-oriented agenda and eventually became a pro-European political force. In line with the aforementioned developments, the DPS illustrates the adaptability and strategic pragmatism that enabled it to maintain dominance for decades. However, this dominance was not solely the result of electoral success, but of entrenched mechanisms of patronage, institutional control and the manipulation of identity narratives.

The ideological and political split between Milo Đukanović and Slobodan Milošević marked a fundamental shift in domestic and foreign policy orientations of Montenegro. By rejecting militarization and embracing diplomacy during the Kosovo crisis, the Montenegrin leadership positioned itself as a relatively autonomous actor within the FRY, despite formal constitutional constraints. This period exposed the limitations of federalism in the Yugoslav context, revealing the asymmetry of power and the lack of substantive autonomy within the structures of the FRY. Through the lens of constructivist international relations theory, Montenegro's redefinition of its identity and foreign policy is best understood as a process shaped by discursive practices, shifting narratives of self and other and the strategic reframing of sovereignty. The interplay between identity politics, federal dysfunction and crisis diplomacy highlights how small states can navigate and reshape their geopolitical space during periods of upheaval.

Ultimately, since its independence in 2006, Montenegro has pursued a pro-Western foreign policy, marked by NATO membership in 2017 and continued progress toward EU accession. However, this trajectory has been complicated by deep-rooted historical, cultural and religious connections and recent past with Serbia. These ties frequently influence public opinion and political discourse, creating internal divisions between pro-Western and pro-

Serbian (and often pro-Russian) factions. Also, tensions between Podgorica and Belgrade have periodically surfaced, particularly as Montenegro has sought to assert an independent foreign policy stance. Domestically, polarization over national identity and foreign alignment challenges the consistency and credibility of Montenegro's international positioning.

This case study demonstrates that Montenegro's path toward sovereignty was neither linear nor inevitable. It was shaped by contested visions within the ruling elite, external geopolitical pressures and the ability of key actors, particularly Đukanović, to reinterpret the meaning of nationhood and political legitimacy. The period from 1997 to 2000 thus laid the ideological and institutional foundations for Montenegro's eventual independence, positioning the DPS as a beneficiary and an architect of a newly imagined political order. However, Montenegro's foreign policy remains a key indicator of broader regional dynamics in the Western Balkans. As the country navigates between competing influences, its choices will have significant implications for regional stability and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. This enduring tension underscores the continued relevance of examining Montenegro's foreign policy direction.

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Mira ŠOROVIĆ

EVOLUCIJA SPOLJNE POLITIKE CRNE GORE: IZMEĐU SRBIJE I ZAPADA

Apstrakt: Ovaj članak proučava crnogorsku političku i spoljnopolitičku transformaciju u periodu između 1997. i 2000. godine, fokusirajući se na njen postepeni zaokret u odnosu na usklađivanje sa Srbijom, ka sve nezavisnijoj međunarodnoj orijentaciji. Hipoteza je da je do ove promene došlo usled uvođenja unutrašnjih političkih promena i razvojem crnogorskog identiteta kao zasebnog političkog aktera, oblikovanog ključnim regionalnim događajima, kao što su kosovsko pitanje i NATO intervencija. Istraživanje se oslanja na tri teorijska okvira: konstruktivizam, koji ističe ulogu identiteta i političke naracije prilikom oblikovanja spoljne politike; federalizam koji objašnjava unutrašnje tenzije; i teorije koje se bave načinima na koje male države manevrišu u složenim regionalnim konfliktima kako bi očuvale svoju autonomiju. Cilj istraživanja je razumeti kako su unutrašnji i međunarodni faktori međusobno isprepleteni u redefinisaju diplomatskog ponašanja i strateških izbora Crne Gore. Korišćena je kvalitativna, istorijsko-analitička metodologija, koja se oslanja na primarne i sekundarne izvore kako bi se ispratila ova evolucija. Istraživanje pokazuje da crnogorski zaokret nije bio samo reaktivan, već dio šire redefinicije njenog identiteta i spoljne politike, čime su postavljeni temelji za budući put ka državnosti i međunarodnom priznanju.

Ključne reči: Crna Gora, Srbija, Jugoslavija, Demokratska partija socijalista, Milo Đukanović, diplomatija.

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South–South Cooperation across the Mekong: Practices, Dilemmas, and Pathways of Competitive Regionalism

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Abstract: In recent years, intensifying global strategic competition has given rise to what is prominently characterized as “competitive regionalism.” Under this framework, the present article shifts the focal point from great power rivalry to the South–South Cooperation dynamics through a comparative analysis of Chinese and Indian engagement in the Mekong River Basin. The article offers a comparative overview of how the two countries’ regional initiatives embody divergent development visions: China advanced a state-centric, infrastructure-driven pathway, while India emphasizes soft cooperation and humanistic connectivity. Aiming to show how the pursuit of power balance and institutional cooperation intertwine within mainland Southeast Asia, the author inquires into how the institutional and governance practices of emerging Asian powers (along with their development resource distribution patterns) reshape the traditional principles of South–South Cooperation, especially mutual benefit and solidarity with the Mekong countries. Likewise, to what extent does the interplay between Chinese Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and Indian Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI) contribute to the evolution of competitive regionalism in the sub-region? A more specific focus is placed on examining how regional states, especially regional powers, employ self-initiated institutional mechanisms as instruments of strategic competition. Research conclusions point out that Chinese and Indian competitive engagements yield critical insights for the paradigm of emerging power “co-

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competition,” Global South regional governance, and embedding South-South Cooperation within the evolving world order.

Keywords: Global South, Mekong Countries, Lancang-Mekong Cooperation, Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative, strategic rivalry.

Introduction

The term *Global South* generally refers to states whose political and economic trajectories have been shaped by historical inequalities rooted in colonialism and imperialism (Sud and Sánchez-Ancochea 2022). Beyond its geographical connotations, the term constitutes the ideology articulating the collective concerns of developing countries—despite the growing heterogeneity in their individual political and economic progression. Since the end of the Cold War, Global South has assumed a prominent role in global governance, acquiring heightened geopolitical and geoeconomic significance. This shift has renewed interest in South-South Cooperation (SSC), first defined as the mutual exchange of resources, technology, and knowledge to build capacity among developing countries (Mawdsley 2012). SSC now embodies a long-term endeavor to address the enduring legacies of poverty and developmental marginalization. Today, state and non-state actors in Global South are actively reshaping SSC as both a pragmatic governance mechanism and a transformative agenda. It functions as an organizing principle for historical change, grounded in the norms of mutual benefit and solidarity among actors structurally disadvantaged within the prolonged Western-constructed global order (Carmody 2013). The cooperation reflects an aspirational vision through collective action. Global South communities aim to reconfigure international systems in ways reflecting their shared interests and challenge the dominance of “Northern” states and traditional international regimes (Bachmann 2019).

From another perspective, SSC is a concept closely intersects with the study of regionalism. Regionalism entails a coordinated aggregation of shared development cognitions, normative values, and tangible strategic objectives among state actors, systematically institutionalized to reinforce cooperative mechanisms among specific national or transboundary groupings (Grugel and Hout 1999). This deliberate configuration functions to (re-)produce, stabilize, or

transform structural interests within a delimited geopolitical sphere, while potentially recalibrating prevailing modalities of world order (Gamble and Payne 1996). Engel (2019b) argues that regionalism is operationalized through formalized policy architectures and developmental blueprints, which cumulatively crystallize into the morphology of regional organizations.

Contemporary regionalism aims to explore alternative models of regional governance beyond the European experience, accounting for historical persistence and political-economic structural differences globally. Amid the recent wave of (de-)globalization, state actors—particularly emerging regional powers outside the superpower core—have regarded regional strategies as instruments for mitigating uncertainties of global interdependence. Consequently, a ‘returning region’ appeal has been observed scholarly (Rees and Legates 2013). As sub-regional³ and regional geospatial layers become crucial arenas for interstate engagement, regional countries driven by rational calculations to stabilize regional order, expand avenues for collaboration, and preempt the strategic gains of rivalry competitions, have actively pursued the institutional design of cooperation frameworks (Siekiera 2020). Through such efforts, they shape the political cooperation models and economic advancement pathways within regional settings. However, strategic competition among regional powers has catalyzed confrontational dynamics, constraining and disrupting cooperative initiatives. At the same time, the post-hegemonic landscape—the fade and absence of a single unipolar power provide stabilizing, system-wide leadership within international society—has granted regional states greater strategic autonomy. In this setting, the phenomenon of competitive regionalism has emerged, illustrating that regional cooperation encompasses multidimensional processes of integration, power shifts, and contests for leadership (Burroni 2014).

³ In contrast to the broader concept of a “region,” a sub-region denotes an analytical level in international relations that lies between the global and national scales. Conceptually linked to the region as a larger territorial unit, a sub-region conveys an analogous meaning while referring to a lower spatial level. The interpretation of a sub-region is primarily concerned with “relativity.” For instance, within East Asia, both Northeast Asia and Southeast Asia are commonly recognized as sub-regions. The Mekong River Basin is considered a sub-region within Southeast Asia. Accordingly, the term Mekong Subregion is frequently employed to capture its geostrategic level of analysis.

The interactions between China and India, two leading powers of the Global South, reveal how competitive regionalism has taken shape in the 21st century. This manifestation not only reflects the profound transformation of the global power structure, but also illustrate the complex reconstruction of regional order with the inherent contradiction embedded in South-South Cooperation as a framework. The integration initiatives pursued by China and India exemplify the proactive engagement of emerging powers in shaping Global South regional governance. The two countries conduct pronounced strategic approaches of regionalism—China adopts a state-led model prioritizing infrastructure, connectivity and productivity development as formalized mechanisms for constructing an integrated scaffolding (Jia and Bennett 2018). In contrast, India promotes a consultative, multi-stakeholder regional cooperative model, emphasizing soft institutional building and the cultivation of shared identity, fostering a flexible governance architecture (Bhadauriya and Mishra 2023). These paradigmatic regionalism practices converge and collide within the geopolitical hotspot—the Mekong River Basin—ideationally and materially. In this sub-regional space, the Chinese Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and the Indian Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI) embody salient regionalism. The strategic interplay between these mechanisms reflects the broader trends in competitive regionalism, and positions the Mekong Countries⁴—Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand—as pivotal actors and beneficiaries with enhanced agency. By navigating between these contending frameworks, the Mekong Countries acquire leverage and flexibility, becoming selective recipients within the evolving landscape of Global South competitive regionalism.

Considering the aforementioned, the upcoming section will first provide a brief historical retrospective on the key terms and core research issues, including the principal research questions. This part will be followed by the literature

⁴ The Mekong Countries refers to the five states located in the Mekong River Basin: Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Vietnam, and Thailand. This group is commonly represented by the acronym “CLMVT.” The Mekong Countries also been holistically known as “Indochina” culturally, or “Mainland Southeast Asia” geographically. This article conceptualizes the Mekong Countries as a specific (sub-)region-oriented cluster of actors to more precisely define the participation and intervention of political entities in the Mekong River Basin affairs.

review to situate the research topic and specific questions within the context of regionalism studies, considering also specific Mekong political environment. The analysis will then examine empirical case studies to illustrate the dynamics discussed, before concluding with remarks that synthesize the main findings and highlight potential directions and contributions for further research.

Historical Review and Core Research Issues

In the realm of practical international politics, following World War II, the Global South embarked on regionalism through a sequence of distinct phases (Bhagwati 1993). The inaugural phase emerged in the 1950s, coincided with decolonization that restored national sovereignty to many Global South states, as well as with early phase of European integration. Rather than pooling sovereignty as in the European model, postcolonial regionalism emphasized intergovernmental cooperation that strengthened national authority and projected a shared voice for newly independent states. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), promoted by India, provided an important ideological foundation for this period. During the Cold War, these states gradually moved beyond the anti-colonial narratives that had defined their early cooperation and began developing the endogenous models based on regional histories, cultures, and socio-economic conditions. A notable manifestation was the creation of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

A second wave of regionalism arose in the late 1980s, resonating with the institutional maturation of European Single Market. For Global South along with South-South Cooperation, regionalism has exhibited as a dialectical character since the late twentieth century (Kennes 2000), complementing globalization process while maintaining a dynamic tension with it. Regionalism has also become a critical instrument for Global South countries seeking to rectify structural asymmetries of international order. The intensification of globalization has further catalyzed the emergence of diverse regional organizations, accelerating intra-regional coordination as well as innovative interregional initiatives across the South.

As previously stated, contemporary regionalism seeks alternative models of governance beyond the traditional power interventions. In the context of recent

(de-)globalization, many states have turned to regional strategies to mitigate the risks of global interdependence. Cooperative engagement through institutional and other means has become a strategic tool for maintaining stability and securing national and other interests. Chinese and Indian strategies in that regard could be observed in the context of their roles as emerging international powers. As noted in the previous section, whereas China tends to pursue a more institutionalized form of cooperation, employing a state-driven approach emphasizing infrastructure, interconnectivity, and economic capacity building; India advocates a more flexible and participatory multilateral option privileging soft institutional collaboration.

The growing focus on regionalism in the Global South highlights how South–South Cooperation unfolds in the Mekong River Basin, positioning it as a critical geostrategic arena. In this context, China and India advance respective regional initiatives, while the Mekong Countries exert strategic agency by mitigating risks of asymmetric political and economic dependence. This dynamic challenge traditional regionalism paradigm through its intersubjectively overlapping and inherently competitive logics. Building on this narrative foundation, this article addresses the following research inquiries.

The first question asks how the institutional designs and governance practices of emerging Asian powers—along with their development-aid distribution patterns—reshape the traditional principles of South–South Cooperation, particularly those of mutual benefit and solidarity with the Mekong Countries. While the SSC literature frequently assumes genuine solidarity and equality among partners, contemporary practice has grown more state- or bloc-centered and strategically selective, potentially altering these normative foundations at the stage of implementation. Second, to what extent does the interplay between Chinese Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and Indian Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI) contribute to the evolution of competitive regionalism in the sub-region? By exploring these issues through a qualitative means, the article seeks to examine how competitive regionalism manifests in SSC practice, and to assess the strategic opportunities and tensions it presents for inclusive Global South regional governance.

In synthesis, this article launches with the academic review of existing scholarship to map key terminologies and conceptual frameworks under consideration. It then proceeds with a comparative, third-party—oriented

research approach to analyze China's and India's region-facing engagements with the Mekong Countries. By comparing societal interactions, economic interdependence, and security collaboration within multilateral formats, the analysis identifies discernible features regarding political atmosphere, implementation effectiveness, and sustainability of cooperation dynamics between major East, South Asian powers, and the Mekong Countries. Ultimately, the article argues that in the regional space constituted by the Mekong Countries, competitive regionalism unfolds through the positive notion of co-competition—a terminology encompassing both the business and power politics domains (Brandenburger and Nalebuff 1996). This term refers to the phenomena where great power friction and regional cooperation concurrently constrain and reinforce one another at the institutional level. This ultimately leads to a paradox: the very structures of competition may be conducive to achieving cooperative synergies.

Review of the Scholarly Landscape

To analyze South–South Cooperation and competitive regionalism, this article develops a conceptual framework explaining how these dynamics have shaped the Global South. The article synthesizes critical scholarly debates to establish the notional foundation for empirical analysis: first, by examining SSC as a transformative normative and counter-hegemonic praxis; and second, by tracing the conceptual evolution of regionalism, culminating in its contemporary competitive manifestations.

The Theoretical Lens for Interpreting South-South Cooperation

As early as the 1940s, Karl Polanyi, in his seminal work *The Great Transformation*, observed that states opposing the *status quo* within the international system are often quick to identify the vulnerabilities of existing institutional orders and to envision alternative frameworks better aligned with their national interests (Polanyi 1944). Such perceptive state actors not only hasten the decline of the prevailing orders but also shape the evolutionary process of emerging institutional arrangements. While they may appear to function as architects of institutionalization, they are strategic beneficiaries

empowered by structural changes generated through such transformation in essence. Building on Polanyi's insights, Gray and Gills (2016) elaborate that "development" implies a concept encapsulating the complex processes of social transformation. It embodies profound promises and aspirations for billions seeking improvements in human conditions, while representing a long-term historical project aimed at liberating nations and peoples from the legacies of colonialism, oppression, and underdevelopment. South-South Cooperation emerges both as a normative framework and as an implementational set of initiatives driving transformative change. In practice, SSC is highly heterogeneous across providers, varying in policy instruments, institutional arrangements, and the depth of engagement with multilateral forums and initiatives (De Renzio and Seifert 2014). Ideationally, rooted in principles of mutual benefit and solidarity among marginalized states, SSC conveys an epistemic community within Global South, contests North-centric narrative of development, and seeks to reconstruct the material foundations and hierarchies of knowledge production order in the global system (Sidiropoulos et al. 2012).

Golub (2013) contends that SSC is framed by the dual dynamic: the collective ascent of Global South and the deepening of inter-state relations among Southern actors. As an institutional expression of Global South's intersubjective agency, SSC embodies multiple mandates. At the operational domain, it advances concrete development policies through mechanisms such as technology transfer (e.g., China–Africa agricultural aid projects) and capacity building programs (e.g., India's ITEC technical training scheme). At the structural level, SSC aims to foster alternative models for the provision of global public goods that reflect the priorities and values of Global South, as exemplified by institutions like the BRICS New Development Bank (Sithole and Hlongwane 2023). The overarching objective is to establish a normative and institutional architecture that facilitates power redistribution and embodies the contours of a genuinely "post-Western" world order. Drawing on the Southeast Asian praxis of South-South Cooperation, Engel (2019a) contends that contemporary SSC has been cast as a liberal norm with technical cooperation programmes as its key instrument. The spread of SSC norm has been incremental, shaped by state interests, regional dynamics, and the strategic preferences of initiating and recipient actors within development cooperation.

From a macro perspective, Mohan (2016) posits that South-South Cooperation constitutes a comprehensive framework for cooperation among Global South countries across a wide range of sectors. Such cooperation can occur at bilateral, regional, sub-regional, and interregional levels, enabling developing countries to collaborate by sharing knowledge, expertise, resources, and technology. The aim is not only to achieve development objectives but also to promote a more inclusive and equitable global development order. This conceptualization aligns with the definitions presented in the official United Nation documents (UNCTAD 2019).

From Regionalism to Competitive Regionalism: A Comparative Genealogy

In the sphere of governance, the ideological foundation of SSC is expressed through the ordering practices of regionalism, with the two engaged in a mutually constitutive and dynamically dialectical relationship. According to Kacowicz (1998), regionalism denotes the tendency of governments and societies to establish voluntary associations and pool resources to create shared functional and institutional arrangements. In this sense, regionalism can be perceived as a developmental process situated within a specific geographical vessel, in which diverse actors, including states, regional institutions, and other non-state entities converge around common values and norms. Kim (2004) underscores that regionalism is a normative concept encompassing shared values, collective identities, and common aspirations. He contends that regionalism consists of state-led cooperative initiatives enacted through intergovernmental dialogues and agreements, with institutionalized collaboration as its defining feature. Rozman (2005) identifies analytical dimensions of regionalism—economic integration; institutional integration through regional bodies and summits; social integration involving labor mobility and the expansion of business networks; the formation of regional identity; and security integration. In the same vein, Andrew Hurrell (1995) recognizes several key components: (1) regionalization; (2) regional awareness and identity; (3) practices of regional inter-state cooperation; (4) state-driven institutional integration; and (5) the construction of regional cohesion. Hurrell further emphasizes the nature of regionalism: on one hand, it functions as a narrow ideological or political slogan; on the other, it operates as a broader material

process propelled by market dynamics, which deepens regional linkages and fosters integration within international system.

The formative evolution of regionalism mirrors a paradigmatic shift in scholarly discourse from “old” to “new” regionalism. The former associated with the early development in the Europe, drew on integration theories built upon Karl Deutsch’s concept of supranational communities (Breslin and Higgott 2000). On the other hand, new regionalism emerging in the late 1980s is outward-oriented and emphasizes interregional linkages with broader “global regions” (Gill 1998). It has inspired various theoretical approaches, including transaction cost economics, rational choice, neoliberal institutionalism, and structural interdependence (Schults et al. 2001), highlighting multiplicity of drivers arise through spontaneous and bottom-up governance. Hettne and Söderbaum (1998) outline key distinctions: while old regionalism was Cold War–induced, protectionist, and state-centric, new regionalism arises in a multipolar order through endogenous and voluntary processes responding to global challenges beyond national capacities. It is characterized by openness to global markets, multidimensional engagement across functional domains, and the involvement of non-state actors within complex transnational networks. Overall, new regionalism signifies a comprehensive and pluralistic mode of regional governance, resonating with the principles of SSC in its emphasis on cooperative autonomy and endogenous initiative in the Global South.

Competitive regionalism advances both conceptual inquiry and methodological innovation of conventional regionalism. Narrower focus is placed on examining how regional states, especially regional powers, employ self-initiated institutional mechanisms as instruments of strategic competition. This phenomenon is expressed through several interrelated practices: the creation of rival regional institutions; the expansion of influence via existing platforms; the obstruction of alternative initiatives advanced by regional competitors; and in some cases, the dismantling of competing institutional arrangements (McCarthy 2000). Existentially, competitive regionalism relates to interregional rivalry, wherein regional mechanisms function as proxies of political power in regional competition, particularly across Global South. In Africa, various intergovernmental organizations with divergent agendas compete institutionally, at times undermining the continent’s peace and security (Franke 2007). In Asia, regionalism exhibits pronounced nation-state orientations, intensified by

“amplified nationalism” and the excessive emphasis on state-centrism. Rather than functioning as a vehicle for genuine multilateral solidarity, it serves as the geopolitical roots of competitive regionalism. This dynamic has often led to the fragmentation of institutional architectures and the proliferation of overlapping or conflicting frameworks, an outcome widely described as “institutional congestion” (Pich 2022)—a defining feature of competitive regionalism in Asian landscape, most visibly the Mekong sub-region. In the context of shifting international circumstances, regional and extra-regional actors engaged in the sub-regional governance have introduced diverse cooperation platforms under their respective commitments. These mechanisms not only entangle in membership and issue domains but also give rise to competitive dynamics of strategic contestation.

Empirical Case Studies

The empirical section grounds the theoretical discussions of South–South Cooperation, regionalism, and competitive regionalism within the concrete geopolitical setting of the Mekong River Basin. It provides a fertile site for comparative inquiry, owing the importance and active involvement of two major Global South leaders: China and India (Verma and Li 2025). As emerging regional actors and prominent advocates of South-South Cooperation, both states have each constructed regional cooperation mechanisms—the Chinese Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) and the Indian Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI)—serving as vehicles for projecting strategic interests and articulating developmental visions.

Anchoring Point of Comparative Regionalism Analysis: the Mekong Countries

From a physical geography perspective, a river system consists of a main channel and its tributaries, collectively forming a river drainage system. In Asia, the Mekong exemplifies a classic transnational drainage system, flowing across multiple countries. It can be divided into distinct segments: the Za Qu headstream as its source; the Lancang section as the upper course; and the Mekong River section forming the lower course. These segments define the objective

geographic basis of the Mekong River Basin. Hydrologically, the Mekong is a transboundary river basin—a joint system shared and managed by multiple states. Such basins are generally classified into two types: contiguous rivers, which form international boundaries and cannot be exclusively utilized by any single country; and successive rivers, which flow across territories in sequence, allowing each riparian state to exercise exclusive use of water resources within its jurisdictional reach (Zeitoun and Warner 2006). The Mekong River is a prototypical successive river. Based on elevation, hydrological, and topographic factors, it is divided into the Upper Mekong Basin (the Lancang River within China) and the Lower Mekong Basin (hereafter delimited referred to as the Mekong River Basin). The catchment areas have a surface ratio of 1:4. The Lancang section spans approximately 2,139 kilometers, while the Mekong stretches for roughly 4,880 kilometers across downstream states (Gao et al. 2017).

Beyond natural configuration, the Mekong River Basin—traversing diverse ecological zones—also carries multiple national and regional interpretation in political discourse. This diversity is most evident in China’s dualistic role as both a subject and an object of regional engagement. While many commentators portray China as the upstream hydro-hegemon,⁵ the objective hydrology of the Lancang–Mekong offers both the upper and lower riparians some bargaining leverage in hydropolitics, shaping how cross-basin development initiatives are contested and coordinated. At the national level, the concept of Lancang–Mekong Basin emphasizes physical interconnections among all six riparian states, including China. Beijing has been pursued the soft power pathway—by adopting water diplomacy in the Mekong subregion under the Lancang Mekong Cooperation (Zhang and Zhang 2021), promoting a narrative of interdependence and a common identity articulated through the “Lancang–Mekong Community

⁵ Recently, scholars have conducted rigorous investigations into the headwaters of international rivers including the Mekong, Ganga, and Indus whose sources lie on the Qinghai–Tibet Plateau, labeled in Western discourse as the “Asian Water Tower.” Empirical data indicate that mean surface runoff and glacial meltwater account for only a limited share of headwater discharge; scientific evidence further shows that local precipitation is in fact the key driver of runoff variability in the middle and lower reaches of rivers originating on the Plateau. The “water-tower” metaphor fosters a public misconception in downstream states that the Plateau unilaterally controls water supply. The misperception erodes the mutual trust necessary for transboundary cooperation and distorts the design of water-resources management mechanisms and water diplomacy policies (Tian et al. 2024).

of Shared Future (Xing 2017; Tsjeng 2024).” At the regional level, broader framings are scaled up as the Lancang-Mekong Region and the Greater Mekong Subregion have become widespread currency in regional policy and academic discourses (Ren et al. 2021).

Conversely, in regional studies (especially in analyses concerning the involvement of external and internal actors in the Mekong River Basin), Mekong Countries refer to the five downstream states situating within the cultural, historical, and human-geographical space of Southeast Asia and are often depicted as aid recipients and affected stakeholders in the political and economic dimensions of regionalism. Treating Mekong Countries as a distinct analytical unit facilitates a clearer examination of actor–structure dynamics, allowing for relational analysis both at the individual and collective aspect of their interactions with the major external regional actors: China and India.

As relatively weak actors, the Mekong Countries lack the requisite capacity to construct “regional fortresses (Bellamy 2004)” on their own. Consequently, they have adopted an outward-looking and open stance toward major powers involved in basin affairs, maintaining a positive attitude toward the participation of key actors in local governance and the establishment of sub-regional mechanisms. The Mekong Countries have also demonstrated strong resilience in safeguarding national and regional sovereignty. Rather than seeking complete dependence on, or avoidance of any external power, they have pursued political and economic hedging strategies, striving to achieve an “inclusive balancing” that simultaneously preserves regional stability and enhances the autonomy and flexibility amid power competition (Yeo 2010). This approach is reflected in the five countries’ ongoing efforts to expand inter-state groupings, develop limited-scale multilateral cooperation frameworks, and deepen integration into the ASEAN Community. Evelyn Goh conceptualizes such collective behavioral patterns—whereby small and medium-sized states draw upon multiple sources of influence through dense networks of bilateral and multilateral institutions under conditions of economic interdependence and asymmetrical power distribution—as a strategy of “omni-enmeshment” (Goh 2008).

On the other hand, although India is geographically situated outside the Basin, it has maintained long-standing religious and civilizational ties with the Mekong Countries. These enduring connections make the Mekong and the Ganga River basins spatial anchors of regionalism interaction. Historically, such

embedded linkages have shaped the bilateral cultural, economic, and political trajectories of the sub-region (Mishra 1995). From a more pragmatic standpoint, India constitutes a viable geostrategic hedging alternative, capable of helping the Mekong Countries mitigate their dual overdependence on both China and Western powers in the economic and security domains. India's overall economic scale, internal market potential, and shared interests with the Mekong Countries in border and maritime security further position it as a potential partner and strategic ally within the context of the ongoing US–China strategic rivalry.

*Lancang-Mekong Cooperation:
The Regionalism Ties of China and Mekong Countries*

Owing to the distinctive geographic position and abundant natural resources, coupled with the limited institutional capacity and political will of riparian states in the early stages of sub-regional cooperation, the Mekong River Basin has served as a key arena where multiple extra-regional actors have competed for political and economic influence since the Cold War. The United States' involvement was particularly prominent, concentrating on extensive activities in transboundary water resource management and basin-wide infrastructure development, largely executed through the institutional platform of the UN system (Ti and Lien 2003).

In 1957, under the auspices of the United Nations Economic Commission for Asia and the Far East (ECAFE), Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand jointly established the Mekong Committee. The event not only marked a historic moment of direct international participation in the planning of a transnational river basin but also symbolized the initial institutionalization of sub-regional development cooperation among state actors (Schaaf and Fifield 2021). The US extended substantial support to the Mekong Committee, assuming the role of its principal financier and material contributor. Japan, by contrast, sought to rehabilitate and earn its regional reputation through war reparations and the deployment of Official Development Assistance (ODA) (Song 2021). As the US withdrew from the sub-region following setbacks in Vietnam, economic assistance under the UN diminished significantly. Within this shifting configuration, Japan sustained its engagement by supporting the Interim Committee for Coordination of Investigations of the Lower Mekong Basin—comprising Laos, Vietnam, and Thailand—through ODA projects focused on

domestic infrastructure development. This strategy not only stimulated economic growth in Thailand, the sole non-socialist state in the Basin at the time, but also effectively safeguarded overall interests and presence of Japan and Western powers in the Mekong Countries during the late Cold War period (Nakayama 2020).

Compared with the Western-oriented frameworks, the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC) constitutes the first comprehensive, full-basin regional cooperation mechanism jointly initiated by China, as the upstream state of the river system, and the downstream Mekong Countries. Rooted in the genesis of transboundary water resource governance, the initiative seeks to cultivate good-neighborly relations and pragmatic cooperation among the six riparian states, advancing regional peace, development, and shared prosperity within the broader regionalism paradigm. The origins of the LMC can be traced to Thailand’s 2012 proposal for six-country collaboration in areas such as tourism, navigational safety, agriculture, and fisheries (Singh 2022). Formally launched in 2014, the mechanism culminated in the adoption of the 2016 Sanya Declaration, establishing the “3+5 Cooperation Framework.” This framework rests on three pillars—political and security cooperation, economic and sustainable development, and social and cultural exchanges; together with priority areas: connectivity, industrial capacity, cross-border economic cooperation, water resources, agriculture, and poverty reduction. The LMC is sustained by a multi-tiered dialogue architecture comprising working groups, senior officials’ meetings, foreign ministers’ meetings, and leaders’ summits at the highest level.

In its formative phase, LMC was consolidated through substantial Chinese financial commitments, including a 1.9 billion RMB special fund for regular projects, 10 billion RMB in concessional loans, and 10 billion USD in credit lines for industrial capacity and infrastructure development (Sovachana and Murg 2019). To date, the LMC Special Fund has financed over 500 initiatives covering sectors of agriculture, healthcare, and alternative energy, thereby embedding material foundations for sustained cooperation. Drawing on its domestic experience of “transport-oriented poverty alleviation,” China has prioritized physical connectivity as a means of deepening regional integration. The China–Laos Railway epitomizes this approach. Spanning 1,035 kilometers from Kunming to Vientiane, it forms a critical link within the Pan-Asia Railway central corridor. Beyond transport efficiency, the railway represents a significant step in

constructing shared economic space under the Belt and Road Initiative (Yoshikawa 2024). Since the 2020s, particularly in the wake of COVID-19, the scope of cooperation has expanded into new focal domains. Building upon the 2018 Lancang–Mekong Cross-Border HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control Project, the six riparian states have established joint mechanisms for epidemic surveillance, information sharing, and coordinated responses, with China providing substantial vaccine assistance during the pandemic. Concurrently, the digital economy has become a new pillar of regional engagement. Supported by Chinese technologies—including BeiDou satellite navigation and big-data platforms—LMC members have accelerated digital transformation, fostering collaboration in smart cities, industrial digitalization, and cybersecurity (Zheng and Ma 2024).

The LMC diverges from conventional regionalism models historically shaped by extra-regional great powers, marking a distinct phase of Asian cooperation under China's leadership. Its institutional design emphasizes the calibrated distribution of multilateral benefits and is distinguished by two structural features. First, it advances a cross-cutting agenda encompassing multiple functional domains. Second, it operates through a transgovernmental network governance model led by national leaders and sustained by multi-sectoral participation, which enhances policy coordination and strengthens the implementation capacity of expertise “sub-units” in conjunction with their regional counterparts (Yeh and Ni 2024). As China's global influence continues to rise, so too has its capacity and willingness to assume the leadership of LMC. Framed by the stance of “common but differentiated responsibilities,” China positions itself as the driving force of the mechanism providing strategic direction. Nonetheless, from a regionalism perspective, the long-term endurance of the LMC ultimately hinges on China's capacity to sustain resource commitments to the Mekong Countries while simultaneously advancing the BRI objectives as well as addressing domestic economic challenges (Wu 2020).

From the chronological perspective of institutional development within the Mekong River Basin, the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation is frequently regarded as the mechanism through which China competes with other extra-regional powers such as the US and Japan, for influence at the sub-regional level (Wuthnow 2017). However, LMC differs fundamentally from earlier mechanisms as China shares direct hydro contiguity with the downstream Mekong Countries,

and together facing numerous complex challenges associated with the development and governance of the transboundary Lancang–Mekong River system. These shared challenges have given rise to endogenous imperatives for cooperation (Biba 2018). Currently, six riparian states commonly confront mounting global economic challenges, alongside a range of non-traditional security threats including infectious disease control, disaster management, environmental degradation, terrorism, and cybercrime. The convergence of internal development priorities and security challenges thus constitutes the driving force behind mechanism formation. As Morse and Keohane (2014) observe, when existing transnational mechanisms are slow to adapt or functionally deficient, dissatisfied actors and stakeholders tend to advance policy agendas and development goals by initiating new institutional frameworks—thereby intensifying competitive interactions among overlapping mechanisms. The LMC’s emergence as a response to structural pressures, as opposed to the externally supported mechanisms of earlier decades, is an additionally relevant aspect within the conceptual manifestation of competitive regionalism.

Mekong–Ganga Cooperation Initiative: India’s Adaptive Regionalism Agenda

The Mekong–Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI) represents the first regionalism cooperation mechanism jointly advanced by an extra-regional major power—India, and the Mekong Countries. Established in 2000, the MGCI has undergone three distinct phases of rapid development (2000–2003), stagnation (2004–2011), and eventual revitalization from 2012 onward (Padmanabhan 2023). In its formative stage, three ministerial meetings were convened, framing cooperation around four priority sectors: tourism, culture, education, and transportation. The inaugural Vientiane Declaration laid the groundwork creating five working groups and expanding the agenda to include small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), rice cultivation technology, and public health, while emphasizing India’s comparative strengths in information technology. The Ha Noi Programme of Action (2001) outlined a six-year roadmap for intergovernmental coordination and information sharing, while the Phnom Penh Road Map introduced healthcare collaboration and the innovative “2+1” funding model (two MGCI members plus one external donor), reinforcing operational effectiveness (Singh 2007). India subsequently broadened its commitments

through financing, scientific and technical scholarships, and support for tourism ministers' meetings and SSC development programs. It further promoted entrepreneurship training centers and transportation linkages in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. From 2004, India hosted workshops on healthcare financing and e-governance, facilitating technological and administrative capacity-building of MGCI (Asian Development Bank 2004).

Following 2004, the MGCI entered a dark period of stagnation, largely due to India's domestic election affairs and regime instability in Thailand. The 2006 ministerial meeting in New Delhi yielded no new agreements, and no ministerial meetings occurred between 2007 and 2011, resulting in the delay and suspension of several projects. India's plan to construct the India-Myanmar-Thailand cross-border highway was impeded by financial limitations and non-traditional security threats, including drug and arms trafficking, ethnic conflict, and insurgent violence along the India-Myanmar border (Yhome 2015). Consequently, many MGCI agendas shifted toward bilateral implementation rather than multilateral engagement of regionalism.

The revitalization phase of MGCI began after 2012, coinciding with India's regionalism strategic transition from "Look East" to "Act East" Policy. India introduced the Quick Impact Projects (QIP) fund, with an annual budget of USD 1 million to support connectivity, education, healthcare, and other critical development sectors (Hussain 2024). The Plan of Action to Implement MGC (2016–2018) institutionalized QIP as the initiative's core development instrument. By 2019, 105 QIP projects had been approved, of which 78 were completed (Deshpande 2023). That year, MGCI expanded its livelihood-related agenda to include climate change adaptation, flood and drought management, disaster mitigation, and water governance, alongside the enhancement of capacity-building and technical training. The 2021 virtual ministerial meeting launched the official MGCI website and emphasized regional cooperation on pandemic response and digital connectivity. In 2023, ministers proposed the MGCI Business Council to foster private sector engagement and reaffirmed commitment to ASEAN integration and narrowing intra-regional development gaps, highlighting MGCI's enduring relevance as a long-term regionalism cooperation platform (Ministry of External Affairs, India 2023).

In addition, the Mekong River Basin has developed a relatively mature transboundary water governance system, encompassing mechanisms such as

Mekong River Commission (MRC) and Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC). In contrast, the Ganga River Basin in South Asia—home to nearly 500 million people—has witnessed a gradual increase in related initiatives but still lacks an effective framework for joint governance. Consequently, advancing regionalism through inter-basin cooperation with other international river management authorities has emerged as a feasible pathway for optimizing the Ganga water resource governance. Under the framework of the Mekong–Ganga Cooperation Initiative, the Mekong Program on Water, Environment and Resilience (M-POWER)—a collaborative program funded and operated by India’s Observer Research Foundation (ORF) and the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID)—established the Mekong–Ganga Dialogue (MGD), a transnational forum for cooperation on water resource management. Functioning as a secondary mechanism under the MGCI, the MGD has fostered a cross-basin network of knowledge exchange and governance linkages between the two river systems. Centered on the water–food–energy nexus, the MGD operates as a “soft institutionalization” platform that integrates both Track I and Track II dimensions connecting policymakers, practitioners, and the academic community (Observer Research Foundation and M-POWER 2014). By comparing policy frameworks, practical experiences, and sociocultural contexts across the two basins, it identifies actionable domains and solutions for cooperation, contributing via innovation to the water governance regionalism.

In summary, Table 1 below presents a comparative overview of the LMC and MGCI, highlighting their strategic orientations, core agendas, institutional architectures, and competitive regionalism dimensions, thereby elucidating the mechanisms through which China and India project and consolidate influence across the Mekong Countries.

*Table 1. Comparison of LMC and MGCI
in the Competitive Regionalism Context*

Dimension	Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC)	Mekong-Ganga Cooperation Initiative (MGCI)
Participants	China + Mekong Countries	India + Mekong Countries
Regionalism approach	Full-basin, pragmatic cooperation under Chinese guidance	Flexible regionalism, Act East policy
Core agenda/ priority areas	Political, security, economic, connectivity, water resource	Tourism, culture, education, information, health, climate change, water resource
Institutional design and multi-tiered mechanism	Working groups, senior official meetings, summits	Technical working groups, senior official meetings
Competitive regionalism component	Chinese regional leadership consolidated through economic and infrastructural development	India's trans-regional influence through ASEAN and other engagements

Source: Own Research.

Implication and Conclusion

In the practice of Global South regionalism in the Mekong River Basin, China and India encounter both opportunities and constraints. Divergent priorities in agenda-setting, cooperation scope, and institutional modalities have produced a competitive regionalism dynamic between the two emerging powers. This rivalry has generated overlapping governance schemes and hindered potential synergies between regional mechanisms. For the most part, historical and political legacies limited their cooperation to domains of low security sensitivity, such as educational exchanges and environmental governance, while consensus remains elusive on geopolitics and regional security.

Amid these shortcomings, socio-cultural cooperation may persistently offer a viable entry point for advancing regionalism engagement. Notably, the Chinese

21st Century Maritime Silk Road and the Indian Project Mausam provide opportunities for convergence, particularly in regional connectivity and cultural heritage preservation—areas that also carry political symbolism (Silva 2024). Moreover, the LMC has demonstrated preliminary coordination with other regional frameworks like the Mekong River Commission (MRC), thereby providing useful institutional references for Sino-Indian interaction—the most complex architecture of South-South Cooperation. Equally significant is the rising prominence of “triangular cooperation” as an emerging modality of Global South regionalism. This model typically entails a donor country or international organization partnering with a Southern country to deliver aid and development support to a third developing state (Zhou 2013). In the Mekong context, China and India could adopt a more accommodating posture by allowing limited mutual participation in respective mechanisms and facilitating constructive involvement of external actors, thereby lowering frictions typical for competitive regionalism. The China–Myanmar oil and gas pipeline illustrates multilateral co-construction under the BRI, while Thailand’s Eastern Economic Corridor exemplifies China–Japan–Mekong triangular cooperation. Looking ahead, China and India could jointly identify target states, strategic sectors, and early-harvest projects within the Mekong Countries, initiating low-risk triangular cooperation with demonstrative and catalytic effects.

Keohane (1984) argues that institutional creation is often facilitated by mutual trust accumulated through the operation of existing mechanisms. International cooperation rarely emerges in a vacuum but instead evolve through path dependence shaped by the interplay between established and nascent agents and frameworks. As two of the largest developing countries and leading Global South representatives, China and India are proximate neighbors whose interaction is both inevitable and consequential. Within this logic, the engagement between the two sides is most visibly characterized as *co-competition*: the coexistence of cooperation and competition under conditions of complex interdependence and the practice of competitive regionalism. Building on this insight, some scholars have introduced the term *institutional co-competition* to describe how rivalry and partnership between China and India may coexist and generate joint benefits in the Mekong sub-region. Institutional co-competition is the contingent product of compromise and negotiation among participating parties and relevant stakeholders. It combines dual advantages of inter-mechanism competition enhancing efficiency, and inter-mechanism

cooperation reducing transaction costs, while iteratively shaping both ideas and practices of regional governance (Lu and Jin 2020). For rising powers, institutional co-competition can maximize the scope and expectations of cooperation between actors and their affiliated mechanisms. Over time, it can foster co-governance and a functional division among similar mechanisms, thereby advancing the incremental construction of regional order.

While China advances the Belt and Road Initiative and India pursues the Neighborhood Diplomacy and Act East Policy, both should perceive their respective rising major-power roles as mutually constructing rather than zero-sum. Such recognition could transform rivalry into a constructive path of competitive regionalism, fostering positive-sum outcomes and shared prosperity across sub-regional, regional, and interregional levels. Under this premise, a comparative analysis of Chinese and Indian strategies toward Mekong Countries holds not only theoretical insights but also far-reaching implications for Global South governance and the formulation of South–South Cooperation policies.

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Kuang-Ho JE, Sikong LI

**SARADNJA JUG-JUG U MEKONGU:
PRAKSE, DILEME I PUTANJE KONKURENTNOG REGIONALIZMA**

Apstrakt: Tokom poslednjih godina, jačanje globalne strateške konkurencije dovelo je do pojave onoga što se sve češće označava kao „konkurentni regionalizam“. U okviru tog koncepta, kroz uporednu analizu kineskog i indijskog angažmana u slivu reke Mekong, ovaj članak pomera fokus sa rivalstva velikih sila na dinamiku saradnje Jug–Jug. Članak nudi uporedni pregled načina na koji regionalne inicijative ove dve zemlje oličavaju suprotstavljene razvojne vizije. Kina je razvila državno-centrični pristup usmeren na infrastrukturu, dok Indija naglašava meku saradnju i povezanost na osnovu prilagođavanja. Nastojeći da pokaže kako se težnja ka ravnoteži moći i institucionalnoj saradnji prepliću unutar kontinentalnog jugoistočnog dela Azije, autor istražuje na koji način institucionalne i upravljačke prakse novih azijskih sila (zajedno sa obrascima raspodele razvojnih resursa) preoblikuju tradicionalne principe saradnje Jug–Jug, posebno uzajamnu korist i solidarnost sa zemljama Mekonga. Takođe, u kojoj meri sadejstvo između kineske platforme Lankang–Mekong (LMC) i indijske inicijative Mekong–Ganga (MGCI) doprinosi razvoju konkurentnog regionalizma u ovom podregionu? Posebno težište stavljeno je na ispitivanje načina na koji regionalne države (naročito regionalne sile) koriste institucionalne mehanizme kao alate strateškog nadmetanja. Zaključci ukazuju da kineski i indijski konkurentni angažmani pružaju ključne uvide u paradigmatu specifičnog vida nadmetanja („ko-konkurencije“/„su-konkurencije“) novih sila, kao i na regionalno upravljanje na Globalnom jugu i saradnju na nivou Jug-Jug u kontekstu razvoja svetskog poretka.

Ključne reči: Globalni jug, zemlje Mekonga, Lankang–Mekong, Mekong–Ganga, strateško nadmetanje.

PRIKAZI

Šta ako Rusija pobedi u ratu? Sumoran hipotetički scenario za Evropu i NATO

Zoran R. PEŠIĆ¹

Carlo Masala, *Wenn Russland gewinnt: Ein Szenario*, C.H. Beck, München, 2025, str. 122

Profesor međunarodne politike Univerziteta Bundesvera u Minhenu Karlo Masala objavio je u martu ove godine knjigu *Ako Rusija pobedi. Jedan scenario*. Knjiga je za kratko vreme do juna 2025. godine doživela šesto izdanje i predmet je medijskog interesovanja na celom nemačkom govornom području. Masala je od početka rata u Ukrajini stalan gost u medijima širom Nemačke, prvenstveno zbog svog zagovaranja da se Ukrajini pruži безусловna finansijska pomoć i isporuka oružja kako bi za Rusiju cena rata bila velika, a Ukrajina dobila veći pregovarački kapacitet. Pri tome smatra da nije realno očekivati pobedu Ukrajine. Stavovi u knjizi su nastavak kontinuiranog angažovanja i ukazivanja na greške i zablude Zapada u poslednje tri decenije. Prethodne dve knjige govore o svetskom poretku i Nemačkoj (Masala 2022; 2023) i predstavljaju „promišljenu i lako pristupačnu analizu stanja nemačke spoljne i bezbednosne politike“ (Mauil 2024). Sada je razlika samo u načinu i formi izraza koji su mnogo više prijemčivi za većinu, s ciljem otrežnjenja onih koji još uvek ne razumeju opasnost od Rusije i svrhu pomoći Ukrajini. Knjige je napisana u formi dnevnika događaja, kao uzbudljiva priča ili politički triler koji prati logiku i dinamiku događaja, izlaže najbitnije, bez nepotrebnih dodataka i time nudi uverljivost.

Sudeći po popularnosti knjiga je uspešan pokušaj da se geopolitički događaj kao što je rat u Ukrajini postavi kao centralna unutrašnja i spoljnospolitička tema. Iako je namenjena širokoj čitalačkoj publici, ne mogu je ignorisati nosioci odlučivanja i naučna i stručna javnost s obzirom na dalekosežna pitanja o unutrašnjim i spoljnospolitičkim posledicama ishoda rata. U naklonjenoj recenziji Kin (Oliver Kün) ističe potrebu da svaki političar pročitava ovu knjigu, jer je ona upozorenje autora Zapadu da „shvati da Rusiji nije cilj samo Ukrajina, već

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uspostavljanje novog svetskog poretka“ (Kün 2025). To je u stvari i osnova sukoba, očuvanje postojećeg poretka tj. neoliberalnog hegemonizma Zapada ili njegova promena. Na stranu što to Rusija nije nikada ni krila i što je ostatak sveta to i priželjkivao.

Knjiga se sastoji od predgovora, dvadeset kratkih poglavlja i zaključka. Kratkoća poglavlja i vremensko notiranje daju dinamiku i omogućuju prikaz i uvođenje više faktora uticaja, ali i jednostavnost iskaza. Zaključak je nešto širi i izražava pretenziju autora da se hipotetički scenario shvati kao realno moguć i upozorenje da se preduzmu konkretni koraci povodom toga. Analiziraju se moguće posledice po evropsku bezbednost i NATO pakt.

U knjizi je predstavljen hipotetički scenario u 2028. godini prema kome Rusija nakon pobede nad Ukrajinom u ograničenom napadu na Estoniju osvaja grad Narvu (Narva) sa pretežnim ruskim stanovništvom i strateški važno ostrvo Hijuma (Hiiumaa). Svrha ruskog napada je testiranje spremnosti NATO-a da shodno obavezi o kolektivnoj odbrani prema čl. 5 interveniše u zaštiti svoje članice. To je početak knjige, glavna tema i argument oko kojeg se gradi radnja i koja bi trebalo da upozori sve na moguće posledice. Autor u predgovoru ističe da se oslanja na stvarne činjenice, naučna saznanja, diskusije i ratne igre a radi uverljivosti tekst sadrži scene i dijaloge zbog čega nije „strogo naučni tekst, iako je razvijen u skladu sa naučnim standardima“ (Masala 2025, 8).

U naredna šest poglavlja autor opisuje procese, aktere i događaje koji su prethodili invaziji, objašnjavajući u svakom narednom poglavlju kako je eskalacija konflikta logičan sled prethodnih događaja. Istaknuti su ograničenost diplomatije, neusklađenost interesa velikih sila i nedostatak kompromisa što je dovelo do toga da je propuštena prilika za trajni mir. Na unutrašnjem planu rast popularnosti i pritisak desnih i levih populističkih partija u Evropi za smanjenje pomoći Ukrajini dovodi ih na vlast, što korenito menja odnos Evrope prema ratu. Istovremeno su Sjedinjene Američke Države zbog preorijentacije na Aziju podršku Ukrajini svele na minimum. Ukrajina je pod pritiskom i bez pomoći prinuđena na nepravedan mir, a u Evropi vlada olakšanje zbog završetka rata i očekivanje da će mir doneti predratnu stabilnost. Svet je postao multipolaran, a hladni rat je dobio nove sadržaje koji negativno utiču na stabilnost svetskog poretka. Međutim, prema autoru, Rusija ne odustaje od svojih imperijalnih težnji. Scenario je u skladu s ciljevima koje autor postavio u uvodnoj napomeni, a to je da se čitalačka publika zapita nakon pobede Rusije nad Ukrajinom: „Da li

se zaista radi samo o Ukrajini? Šta ako je to bio tek početak? Šta ako su u stvarnosti evropska bezbednost i čitav naš liberalni svetski poredak ono što je zaista na kocki – a mi opet zatvaramo oči pred tim?“ (Masala 2025, 8). Knjiga ovim pitanjima i izvođenjem dalekosežnih zaključaka pretenduje da utiče na javno mnjenje i donosiocima odluka.

Preostala poglavlja prikazuju prve reakcije NATO-a, političke nesuglasice i probleme u donošenju brzih i adekvatnih odluka, vezu sukoba u Evropi sa globalnim krizama u kojima su uključene i druge države. SAD menjaju svoju politiku u Evropi, a u odnosu sa Rusijom kao i između pojedinih članica NATO cirkulišu tajni diplomatski pregovori. Prikazana je strategija Rusije prema Evropi u koju se uklapa i smanjenje američkih snaga u Evropi. Na globalnom planu se stvaraju novi savezi koji transformišu svetski poredak ka autoritarnom. Autor posebno ističe slabost NATO pakta i probleme dogovaranja i odlučivanja, što je dovelo do toga da nije bilo jedinstvenog odgovora. U Briselu se nisu usaglasili oko primene čl. 5, odnosno Predsednik SAD, koga autor ne imenuje, ne želi da rizikuje svetski rat zbog jednog estonskog grada. Uzgred, knjiga je završena neposredno pred inauguraciju Trampa (Donald Trump), pa je jasno o kom predsedniku je reč, dok je za novog ruskog predsednika rezervisano prezime Obmančikov ili lažljivac. Rusija je ovim izvojevala još jednu pobedu i time omogućila sebi da dalje ucenjuje Evropu.

U zaključku Masala ukazuje na više razloga zašto Rusija može da pobedi. Između ostalog i zbog eskapizma Zapada ili nespremnosti da se suoči sa realnim pretnjama u politici i izlaskom iz zone komfora. Zbog simboličke podrške Ukrajini umesto strategije i nesklada između retorike i delovanja, što narušava kredibilitet Zapada. Takođe je nemački pacifizam izazov za odbrambene mogućnosti Evrope i NATO-a. Ključna strategija Rusije je iscrpljivanje Zapada „na društvenom i političkom nivou“ (Masala 2025, 119), mada autor ne ističe da na iscrpljenost Rusije računa i Zapad. Ruski imperijalizam je trajna pretnja za Evropu i svet. Čini se da je najvažniji zaključak, kao izraz realne politike, nepoverenje u saveznike, prvenstveno u SAD, što je i najveći problem za kolektivnu odbranu i razlog za otrežnjenje. Za naknadna izdanja knjige dopunjuje svoj zaključak napomenom da Trampova nepredvidivost i politika prema Ukrajini potvrđuju realnost njegovog scenarija i predviđanja, zbog čega predlaže Evropi: zajedničku strategiju pred Ruskim pretnjama; da se ne sme zastrašiti nuklearnom pretnjom jer Rusija blefira i da; treba da deluje protiv zamora i apatije u sopstvenom stanovništvu,

posebno u Nemačkoj zbog hibridnog rata, jer su ugroženi „način na koji živimo i kako želimo da živimo“ (Masala 2025, 107).

Kritike upućene scenariju su u vezi slabosti NATO-a i instrumentalizacije u korist aktuelne politike. Tako se s pravom postavlja pitanje, ako je „spremnost na odbranu u okviru saveza toliko niska: zašto onda uopšte NATO u ovom obliku postoji?“ (Keuschnig 2025). Autoru se sa suprotnog političkog spektra vladajućoj koaliciji i zvaničnom mišljenju pripisuje pristrasnost, neobjektivnost, rusofobija i podrška vlasti koja zagovara rat. Za protivnike ogromnih finansijska sredstva za naoružavanje i pripreme države za rat, knjiga je apologija nerazumne odluke onih koji su „sami sebi izdali blanko-ček za naoružavanje....[zbog čega je Masala samo] jedan prigovarač savesti koji pokušava da nemačko stanovništvo pripremi za mogući rat u Evropi“ (Gutschke 2025). S druge strane „njegov realizam je, nažalost, opipljiv, što ga čini neophodnim upozorenjem u vreme kada perspektive prekida vatre u Ukrajini deluju veoma daleko“ (Pellistrandi 2025) zbog čega „iako spekulativan, scenario treba posmatrati, ne kao daleku fikciju, već kao plan-test za reformu Alijanse“ (*Nordic Defence Review* 2025).

Vrednosti i slabosti ove knjige zahtevaju mnogo više prostora za elaboraciju zbog čega ćemo istaknuti samo ono što je najvažnije. Dakle, vrednosti leže u upotrebi scenarija za prikaz jednog geopolitičkog problema i ambicije na uticaj, u načinu na koji je izložen i kritici ključnih aktera i neospornom animiranju javnosti na zadatu temu. Otvara i polemička pitanja o dometima uticaja teoretičara međunarodnih odnosa na praksu. Slabosti leže u postavljenim premisama koje su u najmanju ruku diskutabilne, a koje odgovaraju samom scenariju i krajnjem ishodu. Reč je o neutemeljenim imperijalnim nastojanjima Rusije prema Evropi i njenoj brznoj revitalizaciji da predstavlja još veću pretnju, pri čemu je potpuno zanemarena uloga i krivica Zapada za postojeće stanje.

Za nas je najvažnija vrednost što knjiga ilustruje deficit liderstva i poverenja u Evropi i što potreba za ovakvom knjigom i dramatičnost scenarija indirektno ukazuju da se dosadašnja ideološko politička matrica i indoktrinacija naroda od strane političke elite polako urušava i da opada podrška autodestruktivnom ponašanju Evrope i Nemačke. Koliko će politička elita i oni koji odlučuju o svemu ili daljim koracima imati sluha za to vreme će pokazati.

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The paper presents findings of a study developed as a part of the research project “Serbia in contemporary international relations: strategic development directions and strengthening the position of Serbia in international integrative processes – foreign-political, international economical, legal and security aspects“ (No. 179029) for the period 2011-2015, realized by the Institute of International Politics and Economics, and financed by the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

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Jabri, Vivienne. 2007. *War and the Transformation of Global Politics*. Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

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Firchow, Pamina. 2020. "Measuring Peace: Principles, Practices and Politics", Review of *Measuring Peace*, by Richard Caplan. *International Peacekeeping* 27 (2): 337–338.

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Reference list entry:

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Internet source

If citing an undated online document, give an access date and use the year of access as year of publication.

Reference list entry:

Oxford Library. 2012. "Library Strategy". Oxford Library. Accessed 3 June 2012. <http://www.ol.org/library/strategy.html>.

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Reference list entry:

Guzzini, Stefano. 2013. *Power, realism, and constructivism*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

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Reference list entry:

[AJ] Arhiv Jugoslavije, [KPR] Kabinet Predsednika Republike, fond 837, kutija *Kriza na Bliskom Istoku*, f. I-5-c/88, „Predlog akcija u vezi sa Bliskim Istokom“, Beograd, 29. oktobar 1973.

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Policy papers

Practical or public policy proposals (policy paper) are cited as follows: Author. Year. Title (*italicized*). Date of publication. Link.

Reference list entry:

[BCSP] Belgrade Centre for Security Policy. 2012. *Gender Advisors in the Serbian Security Sector*. January 26. <https://bezbednost.org/en/publication/gender-advisors-in-the-serbian-security-sector/>.

In-text citation:

(BCSP 2012, 3)

TABLES, FIGURES AND GEOGRAPHICAL MAPS

It is necessary to give their number and full title – e.g. *Table 1: Human Development Index among EU members* or *Figure 2: State-Building or Sovereignty Strategy* or *Map 1: Maritime jurisdiction and boundaries in the Arctic region*.

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Gregory, Derek. 2014a. "Drone Geographies". *Radical Philosophy* RP 183: 7–19. Gregory, Derek. 2014b. "The Everywhere War". *The Geographical Journal* 177 (3):238–250.

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Knjiga

Navođenje u Bibliografiji:

Vučić, Mihajlo. 2019. *Korektivna pravda pred Međunarodnim sudom*. Beograd: Institut za međunarodnu politiku i privredu.

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(Vučić 2019, 59)

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Petrović, Miloš. 2018. *Nepotpuna integracija kao prepreka političkom razvoju Istočnog partnerstva Evropske unije*. Doktorska disertacija. Fakultet političkih nauka, Univerzitet u Beogradu.

Navođenje u tekstu:

(Rohrbach 2020)

(Petrović 2018).

Izvor sa interneta

U slučaju da navodite nedatirani dokument sa interneta, priložite datum kada ste pristupili tom elektronskom sadržaju i godinu pristupa računajte kao godinu objavljivanja tog izvora.

Navođenje u Bibliografiji:

Oxford Library. 2012. "Library Strategy". Oxford Library. Accessed 3 June 2012. <http://www.ol.org/library/strategy.html>.

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Lična komunikacija

Izvori iz područja lične komunikacije obuhvataju razgovore uživo, intervjuje, materijale sa predavanja, telefonske razgovore, klasičnu i elektronsku prepisku. Izvore ove vrste navedite samo u tekstu, bez stavljanja u Bibliografiju, zato što je najčešće reč o podacima u koje čitalac nema uvid ili se zbog nematerijalnog oblika ne mogu naknadno proveriti:

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Kada su objavljena u zbirkama, pisma se navode prema godini izdanja, s tim što datum kada je poslato pojedinačno pismo navodite u samom tekstu:

U pismu koje je Univerzitet u Beogradu 13. maja 2017. godine uputio Grinovoj (Green 2012, 34) ...

Sekundarni izvor (posredno navođenje izvora)

Kada želite da navedete izvor koji ste pročitali u nekom drugom izvoru, uvek treba da ukažete na oba izvora – originalni i posredni:

Navođenje u tekstu:

U knjizi *Moć*, objavljenoj 1975. godine, Luman shvatanje moći pretežno zasniva na literaturi o društvenoj razmeni i moći zajednice (navedeno prema Guzzini 2013, 79).

Navođenje u Bibliografiji:

Guzzini, Stefano. 2013. *Power, realism, and constructivism*. Abingdon and New York: Routledge.

Arhivski izvori

Arhivski izvori se navode prema sledećem formatu:

[Akronim ili skraćeni naziv] Pun naziv ustanove, [Akronim ili skraćeni naziv] Pun naziv fonda, broj fonda, broj ili naziv kutije (ukoliko postoji), broj fascikle, signatura (ukoliko postoji), „Naziv dokumenta” (ako nema naziva, dati kratak opis odgovaranjem na pitanja: ko? kome? šta?), mesto, datum dokumenta ili n.d. ako nije naveden datum.

Molimo da koristite opštepoznate akronime institucija (MSP – Ministarstvo spoljnih poslova) ili akronime navedene na sajtu ustanove (AJ – Arhiv Jugoslavije, TNA – The National Archives (United Kingdom)).

Navođenje u Bibliografiji:

[[AJ] Arhiv Jugoslavije, [KPR] Kabinet Predsednika Republike, fond 837, kutija Kriza na Bliskom Istoku, f. I-5-c/88, „Predlog akcija u vezi sa Bliskim Istokom”, Beograd, 29. oktobar 1973.

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Predlozi politika

Predlozi praktičnih ili javnih politika (*policy paper*) navode se na sledeći način: Autor. Godina. Naslov (kurziv). Datum objavljivanja. Link.

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[BCBP] Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku. 2022. *Ka prevazilaženju crnih tačaka u sektoru bezbednosti Srbije: Reforma Saveta za nacionalnu bezbednost*. 15. februar. <https://bezbednost.org/publikacija/ka-prevazilazenju-crnih-tacaka-u-sektoru-bezbednosti-srbije-reforma-saveta-za-nacionalnu-bezbednost/>.

Navođenje u tekstu:

(BCBP 2022, 9)

TABELE, DIJAGRAMI I GEOGRAFSKE KARTE

Grafičke priloge (tabele, dijagrame, geografske karte, grafikone i sl.) numerišete i dajete im pun naslov:

Tabela 1: Indeks ljudskog razvoja u zemljama članicama EU

Dijagram 2: Strane direktne investicije kineskih kompanija u Africi (u milionima dolara)

Karta 1: Nacionalne pomorske jurisdikcije i granice na Arktiku

Ukoliko je grafički prilog preuzet od nekog drugog autora ili iz nekog dokumenta neophodno je ne samo navesti izvor, već i dobiti pisanu saglasnost za objavljivanje priloga pre podnošenja rukopisa na razmatranje Uredništvu časopisa *Međunarodni problemi*. Dobijena saglasnost se dostavlja uz rukopis.

BIBLIOGRAFIJA

Na kraju članka, a pre apstrakta na engleskom jeziku, prilažete spisak korišćenih izvora naslovljen **Bibliografija**, koji sme da sadrži samo reference koje ste koristili u tekstu.

Bibliografske jedinice navodite prema prethodno predstavljanim pravilima za navođenje izvora, a ređate ih prema abecednom redosledu.

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Gregory, Derek. 2014a. "Drone Geographies". *Radical Philosophy* RP 183: 7–19. Gregory, Derek. 2014b. "The Everywhere War". *The Geographical Journal* 177 (3): 238–250.

Rukopisi koji nisu usaglašeni sa navedenim smernicama neće biti uzeti u postupak recenziranja.

Uređivački odbor

UREĐIVAČKA POLITIKA

Međunarodni problemi/International Problems je najstariji naučni časopis u Srbiji i na Balkanu posvećen međunarodnim odnosima. Prvi broj je objavljen u aprilu 1949. godine, samo godinu dana nakon početka rada njegovog izdavača – Instituta za međunarodnu politiku i privredu iz Beograda. Objavljuje se na kvartalnoj bazi i kategorisan je kod resornog ministarstva kao nacionalni časopis međunarodnog značaja (M24).

Međunarodni problemi objavljuju rezultate naučnih istraživanja iz oblasti međunarodnih odnosa, međunarodne bezbednosti, međunarodnog prava i studija globalizacije. *Međunarodni problemi* objavljuju originalne i pregledne naučne radove i prikaze knjiga i konferencija, na srpskom ili engleskom jeziku, koji prethodno nisu nigde objavljeni niti se nalaze u postupku razmatranja za objavljivanje u nekoj drugoj publikaciji. *Međunarodni problemi* ne objavljuju stručne radove, analitičke komentare niti predloge javnih politika, pa Vas najljubaznije molimo da ne šaljete te vrste članaka.

Uređivački odbor daje prednost analizi kontroverznih pitanja savremene teorije i prakse međunarodnih odnosa uz poštovanje bogatstva disciplinarnih i sazajnih perspektiva. Bez zastupanja konkretnog političkog i teorijsko-metodološkog stanovišta, a sa namerom da podstakne obuhvatniji naučni dijalog o ubrzanim promenama u svetskoj politici u 21. veku, Uređivački odbor smatra da su prioritetne sledeće tematske celine:

- Preobražaj prirode svetske politike u ranom 21. veku;
- Fenomenologija i praksa transnacionalnosti i kosmopolitizma;
- Problemi institucionalizacije međunarodnih odnosa;
- Različita teorijska tumačenja aktuelnih globalnih procesa;
- Kontroverzna pitanja upotrebe spoljnopolitičkih instrumenata vodećih globalnih aktera;
- Uticaj naprednih tehnologija Četvrtе industrijske revolucije na oblikovanje međunarodnih odnosa u 21. veku;
- Civilizacija, religija i identitet u kontekstu svetske politike i globalizacije;
- Konceptualni i metodološki iskoraci izvan tradicionalnog epistemološkog okvira naučne discipline međunarodnih odnosa.

OBAVEZE UREDNIKA, UREĐIVAČKOG ODBORA I IZDAVAČKOG SAVETA

Izdavački savet je savetodavno telo koje aktivno doprinosi razvoju časopisa *Međunarodni problemi/International Problems*. Zadaci i dužnosti članova Saveta su: podrška razvoju časopisa, promocija časopisa, podsticanje stručnjaka u naučnom istraživanju političkih, bezbednosnih i pravnih aspekata međunarodnih odnosa da se uključe u rad časopisa kao autori i/ili recenzenti, pisanje uvodnika, recenzija i komentara o radovima.

Članovi Uređivačkog odbora imaju zadatak da u akademskoj javnosti deluju kao svojevrсни ambasadori časopisa, da pruže doprinos u vidu preporučivanja kvalitetnih

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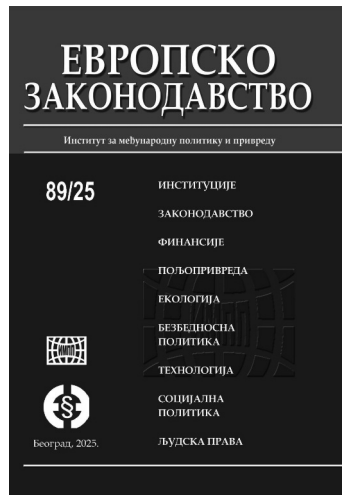
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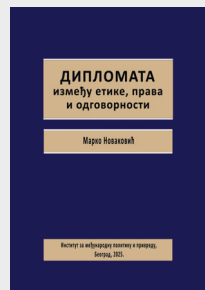
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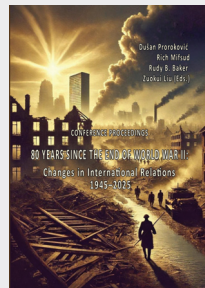
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