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**THE APPROACH OF THE REPUBLIC OF
SERBIA AND THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA
TOWARD THEIR COMPATRIOTS IN THE
REGION AND THE DIASPORA:
A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FOREIGN
POLICY AND IDENTITY STRATEGIES**

Abstract

This paper examines how the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia, as post-Yugoslav kin-states, formulate and implement policies toward their compatriots in the region and the diaspora. The study focuses on the concepts of the “Serbian World” and the “Croatian Corpus” as identity-based, political, and institutional frameworks for cross-border national cohesion. The theoretical framework is deliberately eclectic, combining constructivist approaches to identity with the concepts of the nationalizing state, transnational nationalism, diaspora governance, and soft power, each of which serves a distinct analytical purpose. The methodological approach employs a qualitative comparative case-study design that combines qualitative document analysis of legal and institutional material with interpretive qualitative content analysis of strategic documents, institutional materials and political discourse. By integrating legal articulation, political integration, cultural and educational infrastructure, and international positioning within a common comparative framework, the analysis shows that the Serbian model relies primarily on cultural and symbolic mobilization and on

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a mixed network of state institutions and non-state religious, cultural, and media actors. By contrast, the Croatian model is characterized by a higher degree of legal formalization, institutional coordination, and political integration of Croats outside the Republic of Croatia. The paper concludes that compatriots abroad are not merely objects of cultural concern for their kin-states, but also important resource for foreign-policy positioning, identity cohesion, and the projection of soft power.

Keywords: foreign policy, national identity, compatriots, diaspora, transnational nationalism, soft power, Republic of Serbia, Republic of Croatia, Serbian World, Croatian Corpus

INTRODUCTION

The policies of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia toward their compatriots in the region and the diaspora illustrate the dual role of national identity in foreign policy: it can shape how states understand their interests and obligations toward cross-border national communities, while also being institutionalized and mobilized as a resource of foreign-policy action. After the dissolution of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY), the borders of the newly established states did not fully correspond to ethnic boundaries, leaving large numbers of Serbs and Croats outside their respective kin-states. The wars of the 1990s and subsequent economic migration further shaped Serbian and Croatian communities across Europe, North America, and Oceania, which over time became important political, cultural, and economic resources for Serbia and Croatia.

Accordingly, this paper adopts a deliberately eclectic theoretical framework that combines constructivist understandings of identity with the concepts of the nationalizing state, transnational nationalism, diaspora governance, and soft power. Rather than treating these approaches as ontologically equivalent, the paper employs them at different analytical levels: constructivism to examine how identity contributes to the formation of interests and perceived obligations, and the remaining concepts to analyze how identity-based ties are institutionalized and mobilized in cross-border policy (Wendt 1999; Hopf 2002; Brubaker 1996; Nye 2004; Ragazzi 2014; Gamlen 2014).

Existing empirical scholarship has examined several important dimensions of Serbia's and Croatia's relations with their diasporas and cross-border national communities. Garding's comparative study of Armenia, Croatia, and Serbia analyzes variation in diaspora political incorporation, particularly citizenship, external voting, and access to homeland political institutions (Garding 2013). In the Serbian case,¹ Popic examines the institutional infrastructure of diaspora policy and highlights the prominence of economic and cultural engagement, while Mylonas and Žilović demonstrate how foreign-policy priorities can shape differentiated policies towards particular co-ethnic returnee groups (Popic 2020; Mylonas and Žilović 2019). Research on Croatia has focused,² among other issues, on the institutional and social-policy framework for Croats abroad and on the distinctive system of diaspora electoral representation (Winland 2020; Kasapović 2012). A related strand of research has examined the relationship between state identity and foreign-policy orientation in Serbia and Croatia, showing how historically and socially constructed identity categories enter foreign-policy discourse and practice (Kovačević 2016). Taken together, these studies provide substantial insight into individual dimensions of diaspora policy, political incorporation, migration, and foreign-policy identity, but these dimensions have generally been examined separately or within broader comparative designs. The empirical contribution of this paper is to bring legal articulation, political integration, cultural and educational infrastructure, and international positioning into a single comparative framework applied systematically to Serbia and Croatia, and to examine how these dimensions intersect in the policies analytically discussed here through the concepts of the "Serbian World" and the "Croatian Corpus."

¹ For the purposes of Serbian legislation, "Serbs in the region" refers to members of the Serbian people living in Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, North Macedonia, Romania, Albania, and Hungary (Zakon o dijaspori i Srbima u regionu [ZDS] 2009, Art. 2 (2)). Under Serbian legislation, the diaspora encompasses Serbian citizens living abroad, as well as members of the Serbian people who emigrated from Serbia or the region and their descendants (ZDS 2009, Art. 2 (1)).

² Under Croatian legislation, "Croats outside the Republic of Croatia" comprise Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, members of Croatian minority communities in other states, and Croatian emigrants and their descendants (Zakon o odnosima Republike Hrvatske s Hrvatima izvan Republike Hrvatske [ZRHH] 2025, Art. 2).

Building on this literature, the aim of this paper is to provide a systematic comparative analysis of Serbia's and Croatia's policies toward their compatriots and to assess the extent to which these policies can be understood as components of their broader foreign-policy and identity strategies. Particular attention is devoted to the concepts of the "Serbian World" and the "Croatian Corpus," which are examined as distinct but comparable frameworks of cross-border national connection. While the concept of the "Serbian World" is politically contested, the Croatian model examined here is more explicitly embedded in constitutional, legal, and administrative mechanisms. Croatia's membership in the EU and NATO constitutes a distinct geopolitical and institutional context, but the higher degree of formalization identified in this paper derives primarily from its domestic legal and institutional framework.

The paper employs a qualitative comparative case-study design that combines qualitative document analysis of legal and institutional materials with interpretive qualitative content analysis of strategic documents, institutional materials, and political discourse. The analysis proceeds from the assumption that both states pursue deliberate policies and strategies toward their compatriots, but that these policies are shaped by different historical experiences, national narratives, institutional capacities, and foreign policy priorities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: NATIONAL IDENTITY AS A CONSTITUTIVE FACTOR AND FOREIGN-POLICY RESOURCE

In contemporary international relations, national identity can enter foreign-policy analysis in two analytically distinct but interconnected ways: as a constitutive factor that shapes how states understand their interests, roles, and obligations, and as a political resource that can be institutionalized and mobilized in pursuit of foreign-policy objectives. States do not shape their international position solely through military, economic, or diplomatic power, but also through culture, values, collective memory, and enduring ties with compatriots beyond their borders (Nye 2004, 4–11; Shain and Barth 2003, 449–453). Identity occupies different analytical positions within the literature on foreign policy. In constructivist approaches, it is not merely an instrument available to actors whose interests are fixed in advance; rather, identity can help constitute those interests in the first place. Wendt's systemic

constructivism emphasizes how state identities and interests are shaped through social interaction and role relations within the international system, rather than treating them as exogenously given (Wendt 1999). Hopf, while sharing the constructivist premise that identities matter, assigns greater explanatory weight to domestic social identities, discourses, and historically embedded understandings through which foreign-policy actors interpret both themselves and the external world (Hopf 1998; Hopf 2002). The distinction is important because national identity may be generated and reproduced through both international interaction and domestic social processes.

Identity may also acquire an instrumental dimension once particular understandings of political community and belonging have been constituted. Political actors can mobilize cultural, linguistic, religious, and historical attachments through laws, institutions, symbolic practices, public diplomacy, and diaspora policies. Identity, therefore, need not be understood exclusively either as a determinant of foreign policy or as an instrument of it: it can shape the definition of interests and subsequently become a resource through which those interests are pursued. This two-stage relationship is particularly relevant to kin-state policies, because the prior definition of who belongs to the national community helps constitute the state's perceived obligations toward compatriots abroad (Brubaker 1996). Political and institutional mechanisms can subsequently translate those obligations into concrete forms of cross-border engagement and mobilization (Nye 2004; Ragazzi 2014; Gamlen 2014).

Rogers Brubaker's framework further distinguishes between the nationalizing state and the external national homeland. The former refers to states in which a titular or core nation is understood as the legitimate owner of the state but as not yet fully realized in cultural, political, or socioeconomic terms, whereas the latter denotes a state that claims a special responsibility for the welfare and interests of its ethnonational kin living in another state (Brubaker 1996, 55–76). The concept of the external national homeland is particularly relevant to the post-Yugoslav space, where the dissolution of the common state, the establishment of new borders, and wartime migrations produced substantial cross-border national communities. Furthermore, Joseph Nye's concept of soft power emphasizes the ability of a state to affect the preferences of other actors through attraction rather than coercion or material inducements. In the context of diaspora policies, identity-based

cultural ties can become one of the sources of such power. Comparative research on diaspora governance further shows that states increasingly institutionalize relations with emigrants and their descendants through dedicated institutions, rights, and programs that extend state practices beyond territorial borders (Ragazzi 2014; Gamlen 2014).

Accordingly, the theoretical framework adopted in this paper is deliberately eclectic rather than paradigmatically unified. Constructivist approaches are used to conceptualize the constitutive relationship between identity and interests; Brubaker's concepts of the nationalizing state and the external national homeland specify the relationship between kin-states and cross-border national communities; and Nye's concept of soft power, together with the literature on diaspora governance, helps identify the mechanisms through which cultural and identity-based ties are institutionalized and mobilized. These approaches rest on different ontological and epistemological premises and are therefore not treated as components of a single unified theory, but as complementary analytical lenses addressing different dimensions of the same phenomenon.

This theoretical framework allows for a clearer understanding of the differences between the "Serbian World" and the "Croatian Corpus". The concept of the "Serbian World" is not treated here as a codified state doctrine, but as a discursive, symbolic, and identity-based framework that connects Serbian communities through language, script, religion, culture, historical memory, and a sense of belonging to a shared cultural and value-based space. By contrast, the "Croatian Corpus" has a less pronounced discursive and symbolic articulation, but is more firmly embedded in the legal and institutional system of the Republic of Croatia. It is realized through constitutional norms, legal mechanisms, cultural and educational programs, and the political representation of the diaspora, making it a more formalized model of cross-border national connection.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study employs a qualitative comparative case-study design. The comparison follows the logic of structured, focused comparison, whereby the same set of analytical questions is applied to both cases in order to enable systematic comparison (George and Bennett 2005, 67–72). The research combines two complementary analytical procedures: qualitative document analysis of legal and institutional materials (Bowen

2009) and interpretive qualitative content analysis of political and discursive sources (Krippendorff 2004). Constitutional provisions, laws, strategies, and official institutional documents are examined as evidence of the formal legal and organizational design of kin-state policies, while public statements, political narratives, media materials, and symbolic practices are analyzed interpretively in order to reconstruct how these policies are framed, justified, and connected to broader identity and foreign-policy objectives (Krippendorff 2004; Bowen 2009). Legal texts are therefore not treated primarily as objects of doctrinal legal interpretation, but as empirical evidence of formal policy design and the degree of institutionalization of relations with compatriots abroad.

Serbia and Croatia were selected because of their shared Yugoslav (SFRY) legacy, geographical proximity, and experience of the dissolution of the SFRY, as well as because both have developed policies toward compatriots beyond the borders of the kin-state. Their substantial historical and structural similarities provide a common basis for systematic comparison, while differences in legal institutionalization, political incorporation, and geopolitical positioning provide meaningful variation in the forms through which kin-state policies are articulated. The temporal scope extends from Croatia's independence and Serbia's restoration of state independence to the contemporary period, with particular attention to the more recent articulation of the concepts of the "Serbian World" and the "Croatian Corpus."

The empirical corpus consists of constitutional and legal acts, strategic documents, institutional regulations and reports, public statements by state and political representatives, materials produced by institutions responsible for diaspora and compatriot affairs, and selected media content documenting political discourse. Media sources are therefore used primarily as records of political statements and public discourse rather than as substitutes for legal, institutional, or scholarly evidence.

To connect the theoretical framework with the empirical comparison, the analysis is structured across four dimensions that are applied consistently to both cases. The first, legal articulation, examines constitutional obligations, legislation, strategic documents, and specialized institutional arrangements. The second, political integration, considers mechanisms through which compatriots are incorporated into political processes, including electoral representation, consultative bodies, and other formal channels of participation. The third, cultural

and educational infrastructure, covers educational programs, cultural institutions, religious and societal actors, media support, and related forms of identity maintenance. The fourth, international positioning, examines how policies toward compatriots are framed in political discourse and connected to broader regional, diplomatic, and geopolitical objectives.

The study does not treat the “Serbian World” and the “Croatian Corpus” as equivalent official doctrines, but as distinct analytical frameworks through which broader processes of cross-border identity politics can be compared. This distinction is particularly important because the two concepts differ substantially in their degree of official codification, discursive visibility, and institutional articulation. The analysis, therefore, focuses on the observable legal, institutional, cultural and discursive practices associated with each model rather than assuming equivalence between them.

The study does not seek to measure the causal effects or effectiveness of these policies, nor to establish the degree of influence exercised by either state over compatriot communities. Its purpose is comparative and interpretive: to identify how relations with compatriots are formally organized, politically articulated, and symbolically framed, and to assess their place within broader identity and foreign-policy strategies. Legal and strategic documents reveal formal obligations, institutional arrangements, and stated policy objectives, but do not by themselves establish implementation or policy effects; public statements and media materials illuminate political framing and discourse, but cannot be treated as direct measures of policy outcomes. The conclusions should consequently be understood as analytical interpretations of policy structures and practices rather than as causal or quantitatively measurable estimates of their effects.

THE POLICY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA TOWARD SERBS IN THE REGION AND THE DIASPORA: THE “SERBIAN WORLD” CONCEPT

Historical and Legal Foundations

Following Montenegro’s declaration of independence in 2006 and the dissolution of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, Serbia became an independent kin-state in relation to substantial

Serbian communities living beyond its borders. Article 13 of the 2006 Constitution of Serbia provides that the Republic of Serbia protects the rights and interests of its citizens abroad and develops and advances relations between Serbs living abroad and their kin-state (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006, Art. 13). In the same year, the “Declaration on Relations between the Homeland and the Diaspora as Relations of the Highest State and National Interest” was adopted. It articulated the idea of a unified national corpus and emphasized the special bond between the homeland and the diaspora (Deklaracija o proglašenju odnosa otadžbine i dijaspore odnosom od najvećeg državnog i nacionalnog interesa 2006). This policy was further regulated by the “Law on the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region” (ZDS 2009, Arts. 9–12) and by the 2011 “Strategy for Preserving and Strengthening Relations between the Kin-State and the Diaspora, and between the Kin-State and Serbs in the Region” (Strategija 2011). The Strategy places particular emphasis on preserving identity, strengthening institutional ties, and supporting educational, cultural, and informational activities among Serbs in the region, including in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro (Strategija 2011). The “Agreement on the Establishment of Special Parallel Relations between Republic of Srpska and the Republic of Serbia” also provides an institutional framework for cooperation in areas including the economy, science and technology, education, culture and sport, health and social policy, tourism and environmental protection (Sporazum o uspostavljanju specijalnih paralelnih odnosa između Republike Srpske i Republike Srbije 2006, Art. 2).

At the strategic level, the 2019 National Security Strategy places care for the Serbian people outside Serbia within the broader framework of the state’s national and security interests (Narodna skupština Republike Srbije [NSRS] 2019). A more recent form of institutional articulation is the “Declaration on the Protection of the National and Political Rights and the Common Future of the Serbian People,” proclaimed at the First All-Serbian Assembly in Belgrade on 8 June 2024 and subsequently adopted by the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia (Deklaracija 2024).

Against this institutional and legal background, the contemporary discourse of the “Serbian World” can be analyzed as a broader symbolic and identity-based framework in which historical memory, national values, cultural policy, and cross-border ties intersect. In this paper, the concept is not treated as a codified state doctrine, but as a discursive

framework whose elements overlap with existing policies toward Serbs in the region and the diaspora (Ljubomirović 2024, 121–125).

“The Serbian World” as a Framework of National Cohesion

The symbolic and identity-based dimensions of the “Serbian World” are central to understanding how cultural, value-based, and political ties with Serbs beyond Serbia’s borders are articulated. In nationally affirmative interpretations identified in previous research, the “Serbian World” is presented as a cultural and value-based whole founded on language, script, religion, cultural heritage, collective memory, and historical experience (Ljubomirović 2024, 121). The contemporary articulation of the “Serbian World” frames cultural heritage, linguistic community, and shared values as resources of national cohesion and soft power, expressed through cultural, identity-based, educational, media, and commemorative practices rather than through formal legal codification as a state doctrine (Ljubomirović 2024, 125). Joint commemorations of national holidays and memorial events function as forms of collective memory and cultural connection among Serbs in Serbia, the Republic of Srpska, Montenegro, North Macedonia, the wider region, and the diaspora. The Day of Serbian Unity, Freedom and the National Flag, observed on September 15, provides a prominent example of the symbolic articulation of national unity through language, culture, historical memory and national symbols, with the participation of representatives from Serbia, the Republic of Srpska and Serbian communities in the region (Ljubomirović 2024, 106).

Public statements by Serbian officials and by Serb political actors in the region also contribute to the political articulation of the concept. Aleksandar Vulin, who was serving as Serbia’s minister of the interior at the time, argued that Serbs should become a single political nation and described this as a first step toward unification (Politika Online 2022). Andrija Mandić, president of the largest Serbian party in Montenegro, emphasized that “the borders that exist between us do not exist in our minds [...] in the end, we are one people” (Vukićević and Tuhina 2021). Taken together, these statements articulate an identity narrative centered on political and cultural unity across state borders and can be interpreted through Brubaker’s concept of the external national homeland (Brubaker 1996, 55–76).

The symbolic articulation of the concept draws on recurring elements of Serbian cultural identity, including the Cyrillic script, the Serbian Orthodox Church, cultural heritage, language, and historical memory. Through supplementary education, cultural programs, media support, and diaspora organizations, state and non-state actors maintain ties with Serbian communities abroad (Popic 2020; Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia [MFARS] 2026). Analytically, the concept can therefore be situated at the intersection of Brubaker's external-national-homeland framework and soft-power approaches: identity-based ties are understood not as evidence of measurable political influence, but as resources that political actors may seek to mobilize in support of national cohesion and foreign-policy positioning (Brubaker 1996; Nye 2004; Ljubomirović 2024).

Political Articulation and Foreign Policy of the Republic of Serbia

In practice, the "Serbian World" can be analyzed as a framework of cross-border connection in which cultural, identity-based, and symbolic affinities intersect with institutional, cultural, and foreign-policy practices directed toward Serbs beyond Serbia's borders.

A central state institution in Serbia's policy toward the diaspora and Serbs in the region is the Directorate for Cooperation with the Diaspora and Serbs in the Region within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The Directorate administers project-support programs for organizations abroad, including activities related to supplementary education, cultural initiatives, and the preservation of Serbian language, script, and identity (Popic 2020; MFARS 2026). A related institutional development was the establishment of the Office for Public and Cultural Diplomacy in 2024. Its mandate includes promoting Serbia's national interests and presenting Serbian culture, history, spirituality, art, language, science, and sport to domestic and international audiences (Uredba o osnivanju Kancelarije za javnu i kulturnu diplomatiju 2024).

Actors outside the state apparatus also participate in maintaining cross-border cultural and identity ties, including the Serbian Orthodox Church, Matica Srpska, the Vuk Foundation, "Prosvjeta," media organizations and diaspora associations (Ljubomirović 2024, 130). In this paper, the Serbian Orthodox Church is treated as an autocephalous Orthodox Church and a non-state actor with a cross-border organizational

presence. In addition to its religious role, it contributes to the preservation of language, script, historical memory, and a sense of belonging among Serbian communities beyond Serbia's borders.

Taken together, these institutional, cultural, and societal practices provide the broader context in which the "Serbian World" can be analyzed as a framework linking cross-border identity maintenance with elements of diaspora policy and public and cultural diplomacy. The analysis identifies an overlap between the identity themes associated with the concept and existing policies and practices directed toward Serbs in the region and the diaspora.

THE POLICY OF THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA TOWARD CROATS IN THE REGION AND DIASPORA: THE "CROATIAN CORPUS" CONCEPT

Constitutional and Legal Foundations

The Croatian approach to compatriots in the region and the diaspora is characterized by a high degree of legal formalization, institutional coordination, and political integration. Although the term "Croatian Corpus" is not codified in official documents, it is used in this paper as an analytical concept to describe a formalized framework of constitutional, legal, and institutional relations between the Republic of Croatia and Croats living beyond its borders. Article 10 of the Constitution of the Republic of Croatia provides that the state protects the rights and interests of its citizens living or residing abroad and promotes their ties with the homeland, while also guaranteeing special care and protection to parts of the Croatian people living in other states (Ustav Republike Hrvatske 2014, Art. 10).

On the basis of this constitutional framework, the "Law on Relations of the Republic of Croatia with Croats outside the Republic of Croatia" was adopted in 2011. It defines Croats outside the Republic of Croatia as an "equal part of one and indivisible Croatian people" and establishes a broad framework for the state's relations with these communities (ZRHH 2025, Art. 4). The Law extends this framework across cultural, educational, political, economic and diplomatic fields, establishing objectives related to the preservation of identity, the strengthening of ties with Croatia, political and social inclusion, return

and immigration, and the protection of the rights and position of Croats abroad (ZRHH 2025, Arts. 5–9).

Institutionalization is centered on the Central State Office for Croats outside the Republic of Croatia and the Council of the Government of the Republic of Croatia for Croats outside the Republic of Croatia. The Office coordinates relevant state activities and supports the protection of rights, identity, and ties with Croats abroad, while the Council serves as an advisory body whose membership includes representatives of Croatian communities outside the country. A distinctive feature of the Croatian model is the special 11th electoral constituency, through which Croatian voters without residence in the Republic of Croatia elect three members of the Croatian Parliament, thereby providing a direct institutional channel of political representation (Collyer 2014, 55–72; Garding 2013; Kasapović 2012; Zakon o izborima zastupnika u Hrvatski sabor 2019, Art. 8). In the analytical terminology of this paper, these arrangements constitute the principal institutional foundations of what is described as the “Croatian Corpus.”

Cultural and Educational Infrastructure

Cultural and educational infrastructure constitutes a key component of Croatia’s policy toward Croats outside the Republic of Croatia. Its principal functions include the preservation of language, culture, and national identity, as well as the maintenance of institutional ties between Croatia and Croatian communities abroad (Čizmić, Sopta, and Šakić 2005, 52).

At the center of this policy is the system of Croatian teaching abroad. The Ministry of Science, Education, and Youth organizes and fully or partially finances Croatian teaching in 20 countries, while additional programs are integrated into the educational systems of host countries or organized by Croatian communities and Catholic missions. The Ministry also selects and employs teachers and provides the curricular framework for Croatian teaching abroad (Ministry of Science, Education, and Youth of the Republic of Croatia [MSEYRC] n.d.). The National Plan identifies the strengthening of ties and cooperation, the use and promotion of the Croatian language, and the preservation of Croatian identity as continuing policy priorities, while its measures extend through 2027 (Nacionalni plan 2022).

Catholic missions and church institutions also form part of this cross-border cultural and educational infrastructure. The Ministry of Science, Education, and Youth explicitly identifies Catholic missions among the organizers of Croatian teaching abroad, alongside Croatian communities and the educational authorities of host states (MSEYRC n.d.). Financial support is further provided through the programs of the Central State Office for Croats outside the Republic of Croatia, which funds cultural, educational, media, and community projects of Croatian organizations abroad (Središnji državni ured 2025). Within the analytical framework of this paper, cultural and educational policies therefore constitute key mechanisms through which cross-border identity ties are institutionalized and through which what is conceptualized here as the “Croatian Corpus” acquires a concrete institutional dimension.

Political Rhetoric and the Regional Dimension

Political rhetoric concerning Croats outside the Republic of Croatia constitutes an important discursive dimension of Croatia’s cross-border policy and regional foreign-policy positioning. In this context, concern for Croats abroad is framed in Croatian law and political discourse not merely as a cultural or humanitarian matter, but as a component of domestic and foreign policy and, particularly in relation to Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina, as a national and strategic interest. This can be interpreted through Brubaker’s concept of the external national homeland, which captures the claim of kin-states to a special responsibility toward co-nationals living beyond their borders (Brubaker 1996, 63; ZRHH 2025, Art. 6; Predsjednik Republike Hrvatske 2022).

The position of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina occupies a central place in Croatian regional political discourse. President Zoran Milanović framed the issue in terms of constituent equality and political representation and described the survival, constituent status, and welfare of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a strategic interest of Croatia (Predsjednik Republike Hrvatske 2022). This emphasis is not confined to a single presidency. Former President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović emphasized that Bosnia and Herzegovina was Croatia’s number one priority, stressing that “Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina are not a diaspora, they are one of the three constituent peoples” and that Croatia has an obligation to advocate for their equality (Jutarnji list 2015).

Croatia's membership in the European Union and NATO provides an additional institutional context in which these issues are articulated. During Croatia's presidency of the Council of the European Union in 2020, Croatian diplomacy emphasized Bosnia and Herzegovina's European path, the equality of its three constituent peoples, and the need for electoral reform ensuring the legitimate representation of Croats in state institutions (Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Republic of Croatia [MFEARC] 2020). In this way, Croatian national interests are articulated through a broader European institutional and political vocabulary.

The Croatian model can therefore be understood as possessing a soft-power dimension insofar as cultural and identity-based ties with Croats abroad are connected to broader foreign-policy objectives. This interpretation is reinforced by Croatia's strategic planning documents, which identify Croats outside the Republic of Croatia as an important factor in achieving the goal of "global recognizability and strengthening the international position and role of Croatia," while treating support for the survival, continued presence, and equality of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina as a strategic interest of the Republic of Croatia (Nacionalni plan 2022).

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE SERBIAN AND CROATIAN MODELS

A comparative analysis of the policies of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia toward their compatriots in the region and the diaspora reveals two distinct, yet structurally comparable, models of cross-border national policy. Both constitutions establish obligations concerning citizens or co-nationals living beyond state borders, but the two states translate these obligations into different institutional, cultural and political arrangements (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006, Art. 13; Ustav Republike Hrvatske 2014, Art. 10). Their comparison can therefore be carried out systematically through four key dimensions: legal articulation, political integration, cultural and educational infrastructure, and international positioning.

From the standpoint of legal regulation, both Serbia and Croatia recognize in their constitutions the obligation of the state to care for compatriots beyond its borders. The difference lies in the degree of institutional elaboration. In this respect, the Serbian model places

comparatively greater weight on cultural and symbolic mechanisms, while the Croatian model is characterized by a higher degree of legal formalization and administrative coordination.

At the level of political integration, the difference is particularly visible. In Croatia, voters without residence in the Republic of Croatia elect three members of the Croatian Parliament in the special 11th electoral constituency, providing a direct institutional channel of parliamentary representation (Collyer 2014, 55–72; Garding 2013; Kasapović 2012; *Zakon o izborima zastupnika u Hrvatski sabor* 2019, Art. 8). Serbia, by contrast, elects members of the National Assembly in a single nationwide constituency and therefore has no separate electoral constituency for the diaspora or Serbs in the region (*Zakon o izboru narodnih poslanika* 2022, Art. 5). In analytical terms, the “Serbian World” is examined primarily as a discursive and symbolic framework of national cohesion, whereas the arrangements conceptualized here as the “Croatian Corpus” display a more formalized institutional and political dimension.

In the cultural and educational sphere, both states maintain programs directed toward language, culture, and identity, but the institutional arrangements differ. The Croatian model includes a state-supported system of Croatian teaching abroad: the Ministry of Science, Education, and Youth organizes and fully or partially finances Croatian teaching in 20 countries, while additional programs are integrated into host-country educational systems or organized by Croatian communities and Catholic missions (MSEYRC n.d.). In the Serbian case, supplementary education, cultural programs, media support, and cooperation with diaspora organizations are implemented through public calls, project-based support, and cooperation with state institutions and non-state religious and cultural actors (Strategija 2011; Popic 2020; MFARS 2026). The Serbian model is therefore less centrally standardized and more reliant on a mixed network of state and non-state actors, while the Croatian model is more formally standardized and administratively coordinated. Differences are also visible in political discourse. In the Croatian official statements examined here, the status of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina is framed through the language of constituent equality, legitimate political representation, European integration, and regional stability (Predsjednik Republike Hrvatske 2022; MFEARC 2020). In the Serbian documents and statements examined in this study, greater emphasis is placed on national and cultural rights, language, religion,

historical memory, and cross-border identity cohesion (Deklaracija 2024; Ljubomirović 2024). The two models also operate within different geopolitical and institutional environments. Croatia's membership in the European Union and NATO situates its policies within a Euro-Atlantic institutional context, while EU membership in particular provides additional institutional settings in which Croatian positions concerning Bosnia and Herzegovina can be articulated through the language of enlargement, constituent equality, and institutional reform (MFEARC 2020). Serbia, by contrast, remains an EU candidate country, while its 2019 National Security Strategy identifies both European integration and military neutrality among its starting points (European Commission 2024; NSRS 2019). These differences shape the institutional channels and political vocabulary through which the two models are internationally articulated, rather than determining the legitimacy of either model as such.

In synthetic terms, the comparison across the four analytical dimensions identifies two distinct configurations of transnational, or cross-border, nationalism rather than two mutually exclusive models. The Serbian case places comparatively greater weight on cultural and symbolic mobilization, mixed networks of state and non-state religious, cultural, and media actors, and discursive forms of national cohesion. The Croatian case displays a higher degree of legal codification, administrative coordination, and direct political integration through dedicated state institutions, advisory structures, and parliamentary representation. These differences are primarily differences of institutional configuration and degree: both states employ legal, political, cultural, and symbolic mechanisms, but assign them different relative weight.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the policies of the Republic of Serbia and the Republic of Croatia toward their compatriots in the region and the diaspora shows that, in the two cases examined here, national identity is not merely a matter of cultural heritage, but both a constitutive element of how kin-states understand their obligations toward cross-border national communities and a resource that can be mobilized in foreign-policy practice. Although the concepts of the "Serbian World" and the "Croatian Corpus" differ in their degree of institutional articulation, legal formalization, and symbolic visibility, the analysis shows that

cross-border national communities are incorporated into both models as relevant resources for identity cohesion, foreign-policy positioning, and the potential projection of soft power.

The Serbian model places comparatively greater weight on cultural and symbolic mobilization and on a mixed network of state and non-state religious, cultural, and media actors. The “Serbian World” is not treated in this paper as a codified state doctrine, but as a discursive and symbolic framework in which cross-border identity cohesion intersects with elements of diaspora policy, cultural diplomacy, and foreign-policy positioning. By contrast, the Croatian model is characterized by a higher degree of legal formalization and institutional integration, expressed through constitutional provisions, dedicated legislation, the Central State Office, the Council for Croats outside the Republic of Croatia, the 11th electoral constituency, and cultural and educational programs.

The empirical contribution of the analysis lies in bringing dimensions of kin-state policy that are often examined separately into a common comparative framework. Rather than approaching diaspora and kin-state policy primarily through a single domain such as citizenship, electoral participation, social protection, or migration, the study compares Serbia and Croatia systematically across four dimensions: legal articulation, political integration, cultural and educational infrastructure, and international positioning. This framework makes it possible to identify not only differences in individual policy instruments, but also broader patterns through which Serbia and Croatia organize and politically articulate relations with cross-border national communities. The boundary between domestic and foreign policy consequently becomes more porous, as policies toward compatriots connect questions of national belonging and political community with regional and international positioning. This conclusion is consistent with the constitutive understanding of identity advanced by constructivist scholarship, while the findings also illuminate its subsequent instrumental dimension: national identity contributes to defining political community, interests, and perceived obligations, whereas the resulting cultural and institutional ties can subsequently be institutionalized and mobilized in foreign-policy practice (Wendt 1999; Hopf 2002; Brubaker 1996; Nye 2004; Ragazzi 2014; Gamlen 2014). Cultural, institutional, and political ties with compatriots can be mobilized in support of identity cohesion, diplomatic and foreign-policy positioning, and soft-power strategies,

although the present study does not measure their effectiveness or the degree of influence they generate.

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ОДНОС РЕПУБЛИКЕ СРБИЈЕ И РЕПУБЛИКЕ ХРВАТСКЕ ПРЕМА СУНАРОДНИЦИМА У РЕГИОНУ И ДИЈАСПОРИ: УПОРЕДНА АНАЛИЗА СПОЉНОПОЛИТИЧКИХ И ИДЕНТИТЕТСКИХ СТРАТЕГИЈА

Резиме

Распад СФРЈ и потоњи миграциони токови довели су до тога да значајан број Срба и Хрвата живи изван граница матичних држава, због чега су односи Србије и Хрватске према сународницима у региону и дијаспори постали трајно поље преплитања националног идентитета, унутрашње политике и спољнополитичког деловања. Рад упоредно испитује правне, институционалне, културне и дискурзивне механизме посредством којих две државе обликују и одржавају везе са сународницима и настоји да утврди у којој мери се те политике могу разумети као део ширих идентитетских и спољнополитичких стратегија. Појмови „Српски свет” и „Хрватски корпус” не третирају се као истоветне нити као нужно званично кодификоване доктрине, већ као различити, али аналитички упоредиви оквири прекограничног националног повезивања. Конструктивистички приступи користе се за разумевање конститутивне везе између идентитета и интереса, Брубакерови концепти национализујуће државе и спољне националне матице за анализу односа државе и прекограничних националних заједница, док Најев концепт меке моћи и литература о управљању дијаспором омогућавају анализу начина на који се идентитетске везе институционализују и мобилишу. Истраживање је постављено као квалитативна упоредна студија случаја Србије и Хрватске и обједињује квалитативну анализу правних и институционалних докумената са интерпретативном квалитативном анализом политичких и дискурзивних извора. Поређење је организовано у

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четири димензије: правно уређење, политичка интеграција, културна и образовна инфраструктура и међународно позиционирање. Налази показују да српски модел придаје релативно већу тежину културно-симболичкој мобилизацији и мешовитој мрежи државних и недржавних верских, културних и медијских актера. „Српски свет” се у раду не посматра као кодификована државна доктрина, већ као дискурзивни, симболички и идентитетски оквир у којем се прекогранична национална кохезија преплиће са елементима политике према дијаспори, културне дипломатије и спољнополитичког позиционирања. Хрватски модел одликују виши степен правне формализације, административне координације и непосредне политичке интеграције Хрвата изван Републике Хрватске. Једанаеста изборна јединица омогућава непосредно парламентарно представљање хрватских бирача без пребивалишта у Републици Хрватској. Посебно место заузима положај Хрвата у Босни и Херцеговини, који се у анализираном хрватском политичком дискурсу повезује са питањима конститутивне равноправности, политичког представљања, европских интеграција и националног интереса. Иако је израз „Хрватски корпус” знатно мање присутан као политичка синтагма, политика коју тај појам у раду аналитички означава чвршће је уграђена у правни и институционални поредак. Упоредна анализа упућује на две различите конфигурације транснационалног, односно прекограничног национализма, а не на два међусобно искључива модела. Разлике су, дакле, пре свега разлике у институционалној конфигурацији и релативном значају појединих механизма, а не апсолутна супротност два приступа. Основни закључак рада јесте да национални идентитет у два анализирана случаја има двоструку улогу: учествује у обликовању политичке заједнице, интереса и схватања обавеза матичне државе према сународницима, а тако успостављене културне и институционалне везе могу се потом институционализовати и мобилисати у спољнополитичкој пракси. Емпиријски допринос рада огледа се у томе што правно уређење, политичку интеграцију, културну и образовну инфраструктуру и међународно позиционирање обједињује у јединственом компаративном оквиру и систематски примењује на случајеве Србије и Хрватске. Такво поређење показује да се политике према сународницима налазе на пресеку унутрашње и спољне политике

и да границу између ова два нивоа политичког деловања чине пропустљивијом.

Кључне речи: спољна политика, национални идентитет, сународници, дијаспора, транснационални национализам, мека моћ, Република Србија, Република Хрватска, „Српски свет”, „Хрватски корпус”

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