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SERBIAN POLITICAL THOUGHT

POLICY, INSTITUTIONS, AND IDENTITY –
NARRATIVES AND PROCESSES

Jelena Milićević-Proroković, Vladimir Mikić, Miljan Vasić,
Veran Stančetić, Marko Mijatović, Slobodan Zečević,
Petar Milutinović, Dragan Stevanović, Srđan Starčević

FOREIGN POLICY AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

Nenad Stajković, Milan Miljković, Sandra Božić

REVIEWS

Srđan Milašinović



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THIS ISSUE'S THEME

**POLICY, INSTITUTIONS, AND IDENTITY –
NARRATIVES AND PROCESSES**

Jelena Milićević-Proroković*

Independent researcher, Aranđelovac

THE CONCEPT OF DEMOGRAPHIC WINTER AND PROPOSALS OF MEASURES TO ESTABLISH A PRONATAL POLICY IN SERBIA

Abstract

Demographic winter is a long-term process of population decline, caused by low birth rates, population aging, and continuous emigration. Its consequences directly affect the political, economic, and social capacities of the state. Serbia has been in this process for several decades, as confirmed by negative natural growth, an increase in the average age of the population, a decrease in the number of families with children, and intensive emigration of young and working-age people. This paper is based on the assumption that demographic pointers can be seen as an early indicator of future economic, social, and geopolitical changes, because the population structure affects the capacity of the state to maintain its institutions, economic productivity, and political stability in the long term. Starting from the framework of demographic transition and the concept of demographic winter, the causes of depopulation of Serbia are analyzed, with special emphasis on unplanned childlessness, decreasing maternity rates, and changing reproductive value patterns. At the same time, the limited scope of existing population policies, primarily focused on financial incentives, is pointed out. The methodological framework of the research is based on the analysis of statistical data, a case study of the Republic of Serbia, and a comparative review of contemporary demographic literature. The spatial framework of the research covers

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the territory of the Republic of Serbia, and the time frame is the last two decades. The paper contributes to the theory of public policies by showing that demographic reproduction is a prerequisite for political sustainability and the preservation of the institutional capacities of the state. The particular contribution of this study lies in distinguishing between the total fertility rate, the motherhood rate, and the number of children per mother, as well as in conceptualizing pronatalist policy through three interrelated dimensions: institutional design, value framework, and policy instruments. The study advances the thesis that the demographic winter does not represent a temporary statistical phenomenon, but a profound social challenge that requires a long-term, value-based, and institutionally coherent state policy.

Keywords: demographic winter, unplanned childlessness, maternity rate, population policy, Serbia

INTRODUCTION: THE PHENOMENON OF DEPOPULATION AND THE CONTINUOUS DECLINE OF SERBIA'S POPULATION

Contemporary demographic trends indicate that a large number of countries, particularly in Europe and East Asia, are facing a prolonged decline in fertility rates below the level of simple reproduction. This trend, which can no longer be viewed as a temporary phenomenon but rather as a new demographic norm, leads to profound transformations in the structure of the population and the functioning of societies. In this context, depopulation ceases to be solely a demographic issue and becomes one of the key challenges to the economic sustainability, social cohesion, and political stability of modern states.

Depopulation represents a process of continuous population decline, primarily driven by low birth rates and significant migratory outflows. This phenomenon affects numerous countries and regions around the world, leaving substantial economic, social, and cultural consequences. As Johnson and Lichter point out, "Depopulation represents a chronic loss of population that prevents a country from returning to its previous period of population growth" (Johnson and Lichter 2019, 3). Therefore, depopulation cannot be understood solely as a quantitative reduction in the number of inhabitants, but as a process

with deeper structural consequences for society. In this context, this process can lead to a state referred to in the literature as a demographic winter – a situation in which persistently low fertility, population aging, and weakening reproductive norms put the long-term sustainability of society at risk (Eberstadt 2010; Lutz 2006).

The gravity of this issue is further amplified by the fact that low fertility and population aging are largely self-reinforcing processes, producing mechanisms that deepen over time. A reduction in the size of younger generations leads to a smaller pool of potential parents, which further lowers the number of births, creating the so-called “low fertility trap.” Under such conditions, even significant public interventions often have limited impact, as they operate within an already altered demographic structure.

It is within this broader context that demographic trends in Serbia should be understood. These trends do not represent an isolated case but are part of a wider European pattern, albeit with specific intensity and structure. Key demographic indicators in Serbia confirm the continuity of negative trends, primarily through a long-term decline in fertility rates, a negative natural population growth, and pronounced population aging. These processes indicate that the demographic crisis in Serbia is not a short-term disruption but a structural phenomenon with long-term consequences for the economic, social, and institutional development of society. Faced with these trends, the state seeks to respond to negative demographic patterns through various measures.

Unlike most developed countries, which partially mitigate depopulation through immigration, Serbia faces the simultaneous effects of negative natural population growth and intensive emigration, further accelerating population decline and aging. This process is long-term and structural in nature, gradually constraining the biological, economic, and political capacities of the state. This is also highlighted in a United Nations report, which emphasizes that population aging and declining birth rates have long-term implications for economic development, the labor market, and the sustainability of social protection systems (United Nations [UN] 2020, 3). For this reason, depopulation can be understood as an indicator of future societal changes – a signal that policymakers should heed. As Professor Rašević notes, “A comprehensive response across all public policies is necessary to build a society in which young women and men want to live, work, start families, have children, and age” (NIN 2025).

The central research question of this study is: Is the low fertility rate in Serbia primarily a result of economic constraints, or of bigger value-based and institutional changes in contemporary society? If the latter is the case, demographic policy cannot be reduced solely to a set of individual social measures. In such a scenario, it becomes a matter of a broader value and institutional framework within which individuals make life decisions that affect not only their personal lives but also the future of the wider community.

Based on the above, the aim of this study is to theoretically and empirically examine the phenomenon of demographic winter in Serbia and to propose a systemic framework for pronatalist policy. The contribution of this study lies in its effort to approach the demographic crisis not solely through the lens of economic constraints, but as the result of a complex interaction between institutional conditions, value orientations, and public policies. In this sense, the study proceeds from the assumption that understanding low fertility requires analyzing the broader social context in which decisions about parenthood are made. The study is structured to first consider the concept of demographic winter, then analyze its specific characteristics in Serbia, and finally formulate the framework of pronatalist policy along with its strategic objectives.

DEMOGRAPHIC WINTER

In this study, demographic winter is used as an analytical framework for understanding the deep social, political, and value-based transformations in society that accompany persistently low fertility. The concept of demographic winter entered usage in the second half of the 1970s to describe a situation in which a society “enters a period of demographic cooling, in which the number of births falls long-term below replacement level, leading to population aging and biological decline” (Chaunu and Sufferet 1976, 15–16). Although the term itself is less frequently used in Serbian academic literature, domestic demographers point to the same phenomenon. For example, Vladimir Nikitović concludes that “the aspiration to achieve fertility levels necessary for long-term generational replacement has, for at least two decades, remained more in the domain of desire than of possibility” (Nikitović 2012, 40).

Demographic winter, therefore, represents a profound structural transformation of the population, reflected in changes to the age pyramid, redefinition of intergenerational relationships, and the increasing burden on public systems to respond to the new needs of society. One of the key consequences is the transformation of family structures, which are becoming increasingly vertical – more generations live simultaneously, but the number of relatives within each generation is decreasing. Such a structure leads to a weakening of traditional family support networks and an increased pressure on state institutions to develop alternative support systems in order to protect the most vulnerable groups (Jiang *et al.* 2025).

The popularization of the term demographic winter was significantly influenced by the American demographer Nicholas Eberstadt, who emphasizes that the decline in fertility rates is a global phenomenon affecting both developed and developing countries (Eberstadt 2010). In other words, low fertility has become the reproductive norm and a widely accepted societal life pattern (Eberstadt 2010). This phenomenon is theoretically linked to the second phase of the demographic transition, characterized by low birth rates and changes in value orientations, particularly the rise of individualism and the weakening of traditional family norms.

Discussing individual behavior as a determinant of natural population fertility, Mirjana Rašević highlights the importance of the role of social norms, moral codes, and legal regulations – products of social consciousness – which influence and oversee the decisions of women and men regarding family life and childbearing (Rašević 1997, 11). In contemporary societies, parenthood is losing its status as a central life value and is increasingly perceived as a limiting factor in career development and personal self-realization. As a consequence, even under conditions of economic stability, families do not grow larger, as this is no longer aligned with dominant social expectations.

The consequences of demographic winter are manifold: increased pressure on pension, healthcare, and social systems; reduction of the available labor force; decreased production; and reduced consumption. In addition, there are less visible consequences, such as a decline in youthful energy, enthusiasm, innovativeness, and creativity. Bricker and Ibbitson illustrate this vividly: “An unwritten poem, an undiscovered medicine, an unfinished technology – because there are fewer living

this year than the previous one – how can this be quantified? How can we measure the loss of creative energy due to a smaller number of young people?” (Briker i Ibitson 2019, 219). This argument points to a difficult-to-measure but real loss of future human potential, not only in the economy but also in culture, science, and public life.

Demographic winter is difficult to reverse, particularly due to changes in the age structure of the population. Even if fertility rates were to increase over a relatively short period, the reduced cohorts of women of reproductive age mean fewer potential mothers. This phenomenon, known as “demographic inertia,” represents a significant limitation for public policies, as the effects of interventions cannot be observed in the short term. Therefore, it is important to distinguish between the short-term effects of measures and long-term structural outcomes, which depend on the age pyramid, migration patterns, and social norms regarding family and parenthood, as well as the societal status attributed to family and parenting.

Gérard François Dumont emphasizes that demographic winter also has geopolitical consequences (Dumont 2019, 30). Using Europe as an example, Dumont notes that at the national level, this process changes the structure of the electorate and affects political relations; at the level of the European Union, it can lead to an uneven distribution of political power; and at the global level, it can result in the relative decline of Europe’s influence in the world (Dumont 2019, 30). According to data from the United Nations (UN World Population Prospects), the EU’s share of the world population decreased from 12% (1960) to 6% (2022), and it is expected to fall to 4% by 2070 (European Commission 2023, 9).

These indicators suggest that demographic winter has not only social but also strategic implications – a smaller and older population reduces the state’s capacity for productivity, defense, and overall geopolitical significance and potential. Accordingly, the state cannot remain a neutral observer of reproductive processes but becomes an active participant in shaping them.

The causes of demographic winter are complex and include economic insecurity, prolonged education, urbanization, the weakening role of family and religion, as well as an overall shift in life values. According to Eberstadt’s analysis, approximately half of the world’s population lives in countries where fertility rates are below the replacement level of 2.1 children per woman (Eberstadt 2010, 55),

indicating that demographic winter represents a global structural process. The intensity and consequences of this phenomenon depend on migration flows, the institutional capacities of the state, and cultural patterns that shape family life.

DEMOGRAPHIC WINTER IN SERBIA

Serbia has been experiencing a pronounced demographic winter for several decades, characterized by low fertility rates, prolonged negative natural population growth, and an unfavorable migration balance. Official statistical data provide insight into the scale of these processes, clearly indicating the intensity and structure of demographic changes in Serbia over recent decades. According to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, negative natural population growth has shown a continuous increase, from -26,134 in 2004 (Republički zavod za statistiku [RZS] 2025b), to -34,786 in 2014 (RZS 2023f), and -37,385 in 2024 (RZS 2025c). At the same time, the average age of the population has reached 43.8 years, nearly one-third of the population is over 60 years old, and the number of single-person households is rising (RZS 2023e).

The paradox of a simultaneous decline in population and growth in the number of households points to a profound transformation of social life patterns, including weakening intergenerational relationships and increasing social fragmentation. These trends suggest that the demographic crisis in Serbia is not solely a consequence of economic constraints, but also of structural changes in lifestyle and value orientations. At the same time, these processes introduce a new dimension to the problem – the issue of mental health, loneliness, and social exclusion among the elderly population (World Health Organization 2020).

Comparative data from the last two censuses, presented in Table 1, illustrate the scale of the demographic crisis in Serbia. They show not only a decline in the total population, but also changes in household and family structures, as well as a pronounced increase in population aging.

Table 1. Comparative Overview of Census Data from 2011 and 2022

	2011	2022
Population	7.186.862	6.647.003
Number of Households	2.487.886	2.589.344
Number of Families	2.125.772	1.904.314
Number of Childless Families	649.667 (44,01%)	592.602 (45,18%)
Number of Families with Children	1.476.105	1.311.712
Elderly (65+ years)	1.250.316 (17,4%)	1.468.855 (22,1%)
Average Age	42,2	43,8

Source: RZS 2011 n.d.a; RZS 2017a; RZS 2017b; RZS n.d.b;
RZS 2023c; RZS 2023d.

The data presented reflect not only a quantitative decline in population but as Vladimir Nikitović emphasizes, demographic changes in Serbia do not only mean a reduction in the number of inhabitants, but also a profound transformation of the social structure, such as population aging, a decrease in the number of younger generations, and a change in the ratio between economically active and dependent populations (Nikitović 2022a). Analysis of the data from the last two censuses reveals three important trends. First, a decline in population accompanied by a simultaneous increase in single-person households, indicating fragmentation of family structures. Second, a decrease in the number of families with children reflects a reduction in the reproductive potential of society. Third, an increase in the share of the population aged 65 and older, along with a rise in average age, confirms that Serbia is in a phase of pronounced demographic aging.

The demographic picture of Serbia is further complicated by migration processes, which lead to a selective outflow of young and educated individuals. According to demographer Vladimir Nikitović, “migration contributed between at least 15% and at most 26% to population decline during the period between the 2002 and 2011 censuses,” (Nikitović 2022b, 55) with the trend of net emigration continuing after 2011. According to data from the Organisation for

Economic Co-operation and Development, Serbia is among the countries with the most intensive emigration flows. The average age of emigrants is 28.7 years, and one in five has a higher education degree (Vlada Republike Srbije 2020). The World Bank estimates that approximately 14% of the population left Serbia over the past two decades, while data published in the Strategy on Economic Migration of the Republic of Serbia for 2021–2027 indicate a high potential for continuation of this trend, as 41.6% of respondents expressed willingness to seek employment abroad (Vlada Republike Srbije 2020).

Intensive emigration is not a transient phenomenon, but a long-term trend indicating a structural mismatch between the expectations of young people and the institutional and economic opportunities available in society. Such a pronounced outflow of human capital has multiple consequences – not only demographic and economic, but also political and security-related. As Nebojša Vuković emphasizes, depopulation processes can lead to “negative geopolitical consequences,” including changes in territorial control and the ethnic composition of the population (Vuković 2010, 43).

It can be concluded that depopulation in Serbia is not solely the result of low fertility rates, but a consequence of a complex combination of natural population decline and out-migration, which accelerates population aging and reduces the number of potential parents. An additional indicator of future demographic trends is school-age population data, which points to a reduction in younger cohorts. Over the course of just one decade, the number of primary school students in Serbia decreased by approximately 60,000 (from 558,869 in the 2014/15 school year to 500,514 in 2023/24) (RZS 2024). Concurrently, the number of primary schools declined from 3,385 in 2015/16 to 1,131 in 2024/25 (RZS 2025a). While caution is required in interpreting these data, the trend is unequivocal.

These data do not merely reflect the current situation statistically, but also serve as indicators of future demographic trends, as they suggest that in the coming decades, there will be progressively fewer young cohorts entering the education system, the labor market, and the reproductive cycle. Low fertility, population aging, and migration do not act in isolation; rather, they reinforce each other and contribute to the deepening of the demographic crisis. Therefore, the analysis of low fertility cannot be limited solely to the total fertility rate. It is also necessary to consider phenomena such as unplanned childlessness,

the motherhood rate, and the number of children per mother, as these indicators reveal how low birth rates arise, why mothers have fewer children, and why a smaller proportion of women become mothers at all (Shaw 2025b).

The childlessness rate represents the share of women who remain without children throughout their reproductive life (Shaw 2025b). Childlessness can be voluntary (the result of a conscious decision not to have children), medically conditioned, situational (resulting from certain social circumstances), or unplanned. Unplanned childlessness refers to situations in which individuals have not consciously decided to remain childless but have delayed parenthood until it is no longer biologically possible (Shaw 2025b). According to research by Steven Shaw, approximately 10% of childless women choose not to become mothers, a similar percentage remain childless for medical reasons, while in the majority of cases, it is due to unplanned childlessness (Shaw 2025a, 42, 28).

Data from the most recent census in Serbia indicate that approximately 30% of the population of reproductive age has no children (36.6% of men and 25.67% of women) (RZS 2023a). Of a total of 1,904,314 families recorded in the 2022 census, 592,602 (31,12%) are childless families (RZS 2023b). This phenomenon is associated with delayed parenthood, prolonged education, uncertain entry into the labor market, and later formation of partnership and family relationships. As Tomanović and Stanojević note, “the transition to parenthood occurs in an unsupportive institutional environment, so the resources of the family of origin become one of the main structural contexts in which family formation and parenthood take place, in which young people choose one of two strategies: a network of strong informal support for parenthood or delaying childbirth, reducing the number of children, and foregoing parenthood” (Tomanović i Stanojević 2015, 42). Additionally, contemporary narratives about the possibility of freezing eggs and reproductive material, as well as parenthood at later ages, contribute to the increase in unplanned childlessness.

Research on the biological limitations of fertility reminds us that the window for parenthood is temporally limited. According to data from the U.S. National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, the probability of conception declines particularly after the age of 35 (Dunson, Baird and Colombo 2004). In Serbia, the average age of women at childbirth is 30.5 years, while the average age at first birth

is 29.1 years (RZS 2025c), indicating a strong link between delayed parenthood and the overall decline in fertility.

Unplanned childlessness also has broader societal implications, as it influences the transformation of value patterns and the normalization of life without children. In contexts where parenthood does not hold a clear prestigious status in society, and a significant portion of the reproductive-age population has no children, it becomes common for individuals to prioritize personal goals over family formation. In this way, value patterns favoring individualism and career self-fulfillment are reproduced, leading to phenomena such as in Japan, where the number of household pets exceeds the number of children (*Japan Today* 2021).

A better understanding of contemporary fertility trends requires distinguishing the total fertility rate from indicators that focus on mothers. The total motherhood rate measures the share of women who become mothers during their reproductive life, while the number of children per mother indicates the average number of children born to women who become mothers (Shaw 2025b), excluding women who do not give birth. Research by Steven Shaw shows that the total motherhood rate can decline sharply while the number of children per mother remains relatively stable, revealing a hidden dynamic of fertility that is not apparent through the total fertility rate alone (Shaw 2025b). This has important implications for population policy, as measures aimed at supporting families to have two, three, or more children cannot achieve their full effect if the underlying question of how young people decide whether or not to become parents is not addressed first.

In Serbia, these two processes occur simultaneously – the increase in the number of people without children and the predominance of one-child families (711.826, or 53.45% of all families with children) (RZS 2023c). Families with two children account for 35.57% of families with children, or only 24.87% of all families, while families with three children represent just 7.7% of families with children, or 5.4% of all families in Serbia. Families with five or more children have become exceptional, making up only 0.29% of families in Serbia (RZS 2023c). These data point to a profound shift in reproductive patterns – delayed parenthood, a lower probability of having larger families, and smaller cohorts entering reproductive age – which further reduces the potential for changing the existing demographic situation.

These trends confirm that the demographic winter in Serbia represents a long-term structural process. Understanding its causes

requires an analysis of the broader social and institutional context in which reproductive decisions are made. Factors such as economic security, employment stability, housing availability, opportunities to reconcile work and parenthood, access to and quality of childcare services, and other social policy measures aimed at raising fertility all play a role. In conditions where these factors are not stable and predictable, the decision to have children becomes more uncertain and is more frequently postponed.

PRONATALITY POLICY IN THE CONTEXT OF DEMOGRAPHIC WINTER: SYSTEMIC FRAMEWORK AND STRATEGIC GOALS

Serbia is experiencing a prolonged demographic winter, which makes demographic policy one of the key state priorities. Demographic policy, understood as a set of deliberately designed measures through which states seek to influence demographic processes such as fertility, mortality, and migration (Demeny and McNicoll 2003), has a strongly intersectoral character, connecting various public policies and institutions. Although in its full scope demographic policy also encompasses the management of migration flows and societal adaptation to population aging, this study focuses on pronatality policy as a central dimension of demographic renewal, since stabilizing the birth rate is essential to halting further depopulation.

This study argues that effective pronatality policy requires simultaneous action on institutional conditions, value frameworks, and public policy instruments. Demographic outcomes are not solely the result of individual choices but are structurally conditioned by institutional, economic, and cultural contexts. Therefore, pronatality policy can be understood as a systemic framework encompassing three interconnected dimensions: institutional arrangements, value frameworks, and policy instruments. Their interaction shapes the conditions in which individuals make decisions about family formation and childbearing.

Institutional arrangements encompass the overall organization of the social system within which individuals' life decisions are shaped. This includes the structure and stability of the labor market, the availability and quality of childcare services, the nature of housing policy, as well as the legal and regulatory framework that affects the possibility of reconciling professional and family roles. The institutional

context determines the material, temporal, and organizational resources necessary for parenthood. Research shows that the ability to balance work and parenthood has a direct impact on reproductive behavior, as “establishing equilibrium in this area increases individual life and job satisfaction, enhances labor productivity, results in healthier and wealthier families, ensures childcare is more evenly shared between partners, and consequently raises fertility levels” (Rašević i Bjelobrk 2021, 5). Therefore, institutional design represents one of the key mechanisms through which the state indirectly influences demographic outcomes.

In parallel with institutional conditions, the value framework of society shapes the meaning of family and parenthood. The value framework determines whether childbearing is perceived as a social value of general importance or solely as a private life decision of individuals. Value orientations define the hierarchy of life priorities and behavioral patterns. Research within the theory of the second demographic transition shows that “the acceptance and spread of a post-materialist value system brings a range of changes in behavior and attitudes regarding marriage, family, and parenthood, which are reflected in fertility decisions” (Šobot 2022, 151). Without a change in the dominant social narrative recognizing parenthood as a valued social role, the effects of individual measures remain limited.

In addition to institutional conditions and the societal value framework, specific instruments of public policy influence demographic behavior – that is, the measures that the state implements to affect the reproductive behavior of the population. These include financial incentives, tax benefits, parental leave systems, support for assisted reproduction programs, housing policy measures, and the development of childcare infrastructure. The goal of these measures is to reduce the economic and organizational costs of parenthood and increase the security of family planning. However, their effects are neither automatic nor linear. As highlighted in the National Human Development Report, “it is too expensive to attempt to raise fertility rates to the level of simple reproduction solely through cash incentives” (United Nations Population Fund [UNFPA] 2022, 45). Similarly, Demeny emphasizes that “fertility declines when changes in these factors make limiting childbearing favorable for couples,” with “social and institutional conditions” being decisive in shaping reproductive behavior (Demeny 2011, 260). Therefore, policy measures should be viewed as part of

a broader, systemic framework of demographic policy, rather than as isolated instruments. Their full effect is realized only when integrated with institutional arrangements that provide stable conditions for family life and with a value framework that recognizes parenthood as a socially relevant and desirable role. Otherwise, their effects remain limited and short-term.

Within this conceptual approach, pronatalist policy measures can be systematized around three key strategic objectives: (1) increasing the number of parents, (2) reducing unplanned childlessness, and (3) increasing the likelihood that families have more children. These objectives are interdependent and interconnected.

Increasing the number of parents represents a fundamental prerequisite for a long-term demographic turnaround. In conditions of a growing share of the population without children, measures aimed solely at increasing the number of children per family have limited reach. Therefore, an effective pronatalist policy should primarily focus on reducing barriers to entering parenthood. This aspect of pronatalist policy primarily falls within the domain of institutional design, as the decision to become a parent depends on employment stability, housing availability, the possibility of reconciling work and parenthood, and the accessibility and quality of childcare services. As Professor Bobić notes, “the higher the ‘cost of children’ (both economic and psychological), the lower their supply,” and “if the level of benefits and services aimed at mothers and children is higher, the supply of children will increase, because these benefits reduce the immediate economic and opportunity costs of parenthood” (Bobić 2003, 77).

The second objective focuses on reducing unplanned childlessness, which is not the result of a conscious choice but often stems from postponement, institutional constraints, and insufficient information. Achieving this goal requires an intersectoral approach, encompassing coordinated action by the health, education, and social policy sectors, as well as creating an environment that encourages early and planned decisions about parenthood. While assisted reproduction measures are significant at the individual level, their demographic impact is limited, as “assisted reproductive procedures have a negligible effect on national fertility rates” (Präg *et al.* 2017, 46). Therefore, preventive action is necessary, through systematic education of young people about reproductive health, removal of structural and economic barriers that delay parenthood, and support for decisions that allow family planning

in line with personal and career goals. Only through integrated action across these three levels can unplanned childlessness be reduced and a more stable demographic development be promoted.

The third objective concerns increasing the likelihood that families choose to have more children. Although this aspect is often limited to financial incentives, experience shows that their effect remains constrained without broader institutional and cultural support. Decisions to expand a family are not purely economic but depend on the stability of the parental support system, availability of services such as childcare, and a flexible working environment, as well as the social recognition of parenthood as an important and valued role. Therefore, it is crucial to ensure long-term predictability and consistency of measures so that families can plan to expand in an environment that encourages and values parenthood, rather than only facilitating it in the short term.

Effective pronatalist policy implies an integrated approach, simultaneously addressing institutional conditions, the societal value framework, and concrete public policy measures. Such a comprehensive strategy is a prerequisite for sustainable demographic renewal and the preservation of the state's demographic sovereignty, ensuring that parenthood is once again recognized and valued as a key social role.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The process of demographic winter in Serbia represents a long-term structural challenge with profound economic, social, and cultural consequences. Negative demographic trends cannot be reversed without systematic and long-term measures. Therefore, demographic policy is not merely one of many public policies but a strategic issue that affects economic sustainability, institutional stability, and the future of society.

Pronatalist policy plays a central role within population policy, with three main objectives: encouraging entry into parenthood, reducing unplanned childlessness, and supporting families in having more children. Research shows that entry into parenthood is a critical point in demographic dynamics, and measures aimed at encouraging the birth of a second or third child have limited impact in contexts where the share of childless families is increasing.

Demographic trends cannot be explained or altered solely through economic instruments. Decisions about childbearing are formed within a broader institutional and value framework, which requires the integration

of economic, social, health, and educational policies, as well as clear societal affirmation of parenthood. Reliance on partial measures, without simultaneously addressing structural barriers and the social status of parenthood, cannot lead to a long-term demographic turnaround.

Effective pronatalist policy implies an integrated approach that combines institutional conditions, value orientations, and concrete public policy measures. In this way, population policy becomes a matter of state capacity to ensure its biological, political, and institutional continuity, supporting sustainable demographic renewal and a stable societal future.

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ПОЈАМ ДЕМОГРАФСКЕ ЗИМЕ И ПРЕДЛОЗИ МЕРА ЗА УТВРЂИВАЊЕ ПРОНАТАЛИТЕТНЕ ПОЛИТИКЕ У СРБИЈИ

Резиме

Демографска зима представља дуготрајан процес опадања броја становника, условљен ниском стопом рађања, старењем популације и континуалним иселјавањем становништва. Последице овог процеса директно утичу на политичке, економске и друштвене капацитете државе. Србија се већ неколико деценија налази у овом процесу, што потврђују негативан природни прираштај, раст просечне старости становништва, пад броја породица са децом и интензивна емиграција младих и радно способних лица. Овај рад полази од претпоставке да демографски показатељи представљају рани индикатор будућих економских, социјалних и геополитичких промена, будући да структура становништва дугорочно одређује институционалне, економске и политичке капацитете државе. Полазећи од оквира демографске транзиције и концепта демографске зиме, анализирају се узроци депопулације Србије, са посебним нагласком на непланирано бездетство, смањење стопе материнства и промену репродуктивних вредносних образаца. Рад указује и на ограничен домет постојећих популационих политика које су превасходно усмерене на финансијске подстицаје. Методолошки оквир истраживања заснива се на анализи статистичких података, студији случаја Републике Србије и компаративном прегледу савремене демографске литературе. Просторни оквир истраживања обухвата подручје Републике Србије у временском оквиру последње две деценије. Рад доприноси теорији јавних политика показујући да је демографска репродукција предуслов политичке одрживости и очувања институционалних капацитета државе. Посебан допринос рада огледа се у разликовању укупне стопе фертилитета, стопе материнства и броја деце по мајци, као и у концептуализацији

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пронаталитетне политике кроз три међусобно повезане димензије: институционални дизајн, вредносни оквир и инструменте јавних политика. Рад заступа тезу да демографска зима не представља пролазни статистички феномен, већ дубоки друштвени изазов који захтева дугорочну, вредносно утемељену и институционално доследну државну политику.

Кључне речи: демографска зима, непланирано бездетство, стопа материнства, популациона политика, Србија

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CONSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY OF SERBIA: WHAT DOES THE 2006 CONSTITUTION SAY?*

Abstract

The 2006 Constitution of the Republic of Serbia was adopted in an unexpectedly short period of time, in an insufficiently transparent manner, and, most likely, as a consequence of the reaction to the dissolution of the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro, at the initiative of a smaller member of the joint state, that is, Montenegro. The most important elements of the constitutional formation of the “new” state formation, which actually strengthened its independence after many decades of living in multinational states, include the components that were used by the Constitution of 2006 in order for the key components of the constitutional order to be self-identified. The mentioned include, rarely explicitly recognized in the context of comparative law, the “minority rights”, but also a high level of concern for the full preservation of territorial integrity, with the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija in a particularly important place. Although it is full of inconsistent and linguistically and stylistically, to say the least, “surpassable” solutions, the Constitution of Serbia introduces some new, unexpected elements into the world’s constitutional heritage, contained in the wording dedicated to the protection of basic rights and freedoms. The paper examines the central components of the constitutional identity

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created by the constitutional document that has been in force for almost two decades. Outlines of the constitutional identity of Serbia are also examined in the context of the content of other comparative legal sources in the field of constitutional law, as well as earlier constitutional acts in Serbian history.

Keywords: constitutional identity, constitutionalism in Serbia, the 2006 Constitution of Serbia, constitutional identity of Serbia, constitutional history of Serbia

INTRODUCTION

On the eve of the 20th anniversary of the entry into force of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia of 2006 (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006), it is necessary to determine to what extent one can speak of the existence of a separate constitutional identity, created primarily on the basis of the document's *text*. The view that constitutional identity is nothing more than the identity of the Constitution is indeed a reflection of "a very practical approach", since it is the Constitution itself that appears as "the most authentic source" of the concept of constitutional identity (Szente 2022, 7). Since, with its somewhat "dizzying" 206 articles, the 2006 Constitution is among the most extensive supreme normative acts of states on European soil, it somewhat facilitates the possibility of determining what the components of the constitutional identity of the Republic of Serbia (Serbia) would be.

The text of the 2006 Constitution is riddled with numerous terminological errors and inconsistencies, as if its authors had remarkably lost focus on many (when it comes to any constitution, without exception, *important*) points. This classifies it as a legal (constitutional) document whose reading is more confusing than it would serve to provide the desired information on the constitutional reality of Serbia or its socio-political tendencies. The process of the adoption of this document was characterized by "inertia and lack of creativity" (Simović 2019, 805). Additionally, it seems that the 2006 Constitution was adopted in the spirit of a trivial political compromise, within which the four largest political parties at the time tailored the document in a way that each of

them incorporated something into its text, which was the outcome of a petty party compromise (Samardžić 2016).¹

Based on the above-mentioned, it appears that it is not that demanding to share a conclusion about the components of the constitutional identity of Serbia, a country whose Constitution appears as a defectively integrated patchwork of various particular interests, based on the daily politics' logic of *do ut des*. In addition, Serbian constitutional scholars appropriately indicated the significant similarities of the 2006 Constitution with its predecessor, the 1990 Constitution of the Republic of Serbia (Ustav Republike Srbije 1990). The 2006 Constitution is, therefore, "a kind of 'general' (repair) [of the 1990 Constitution] in the topics in which life has surpassed it during [...] the years of its implementation" (Marković 2006, 43). However, since the category of constitutional identity was insufficiently explored during the period of validity of the 1990 Constitution (especially due to the simultaneous existence of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, which was constituted two years later), the need to establish the most reputable components of the constitutional identity of Serbia, the one created by the 2006 Constitution, remains to be emphasized.

However, despite these inherent fragilities of the 2006 Constitution, there is space for determining certain key identity points in its provisions, which have, at least formally, regulated the legal and political life of Serbia in the last two decades. The paper raises the question of what can be announced when it comes to determining the elements of the constitutional identity of Serbia according to the 2006 Constitution. After the first part of the paper, which is dedicated to a summarized consideration of the concept of constitutional identity in comparative and domestic constitutional science, the following parts of the paper present the components of which, in the opinion of the author of this paper, the constitutional identity of Serbia is comprised. This, fundamentally, refers to the particular style in which the 2006 Constitution set out the framework for the protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms, but – in a manner which is, from the comparative point of view, highly authentic – also the guarantees of minority rights. In addition, the constitutional identity of Serbia is also based on the (not

¹ This is the summary of the part of the cited author's presentation at the conference of the Serbian Association for Constitutional Law, held on the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the 2006 Constitution.

much surprising) constitutionalization of the status of its autonomous provinces, with a special concentration on the *special* status of Kosovo and Metohija within the constitutional order of Serbia. The objective of the paper is to attempt to contribute to the dialogue on the content of the constitutional identity of Serbia, as well as to establish a convincing catalogue of its constituent parts.

ON THE CONSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY

Much has been written about the issue of constitutional identity, as well as – to a lesser extent – about the constitutional identity of Serbia. Nevertheless, some authors are convinced that it is still too early for constitutional identity to be “fully” incorporated in the list of the components of the conceptual apparatus used by constitutional science. Perhaps the reason for this lies in the fact that constitutional identity is, among other things, determined by bearing significant interrelationships with the determination of the political and institutional identity of any state.

Some theorists deny the possibility of the concept of constitutional dignity being constructed at all (Boros 2023, 23). Notwithstanding, a number of authors allow only that, as an independent constitutional concept, constitutional identity “does not have a long past” (Szente 2022, 10). It is fittingly pointed out that, as a “relatively mysterious concept” (Dubout 2010, 453), only a few decades ago, constitutional identity was “an obscure concept” which attracted the attention of only a small number of researchers in the field of constitutional science (Tribl 2022, 226). As a “theoretical question that has been upsetting the world’s most famous names in the field of constitutional law and political science for decades” (Nikolić 2024), constitutional identity is “a concept that is largely undefined” (Cvetković 2021, 6), which is, “difficult to define”, but which (nonetheless) can, in the form of a *temporary* definition, be described as “the union of general and specific constitutional principles and values” (Petrov 2017, 13). Similarly, constitutional identity has become “an all-encompassing term, perhaps as broad as the constitution itself” (Doyle 2023, 728). After all, seemingly somewhat paradoxically, “constitutional identity is shaped through debates about constitutional identity itself” (Boros 2023, 28), which, from the point of view of the author of this paper, seems like a perfectly valid conclusion. It is useful to add that “constitutional identity is the identity which is set up by a

constitution, while pre-constitutional and extra-constitutional identities are those which exist in a society prior to and/or independent of a constitution” (Stojanović i Krcunović 2025, 51).

On the other hand, according to a number of scholars, the role of constitutional identity in legal science is not only unquestionable, but it also occupies a progressively remarkable position. Its importance is particularly growing with the adoption of new constitutional documents around the world. In this sense, “since constitutions must define the political community”, the drafters of the constitution “must look for elements that can serve to substantiate their common identity” (Van den Berg 2023, 36), given that constitutional identity serves the “self-identification” of that same community (Belov 2017, 83). In addition to strictly normative aspects, constitutional identity also includes certain aspects which represent philosophical, sociological, and psychological components (Allezard 2022, 59), as well as constitutional history (Kruzslisz 2018, 119), which is probably especially true in the case of Serbia as a state with a relatively long independent constitutional tradition.

Appearing as a “charter of values” (Chandra 2023, 142, 157), constitutional identity is “a set of fundamental constitutional provisions”, which form the “substantial (inviolable, essential) core of the constitution” (Kucherenko and Klochko 2019, 116), which, in turn, includes “the inalienable respect of some fundamental principles on which the very structure of that State is grounded” (Galimberti and Ninatti 2020, 416). Constitutional identity is “the ‘core’ of the Constitution, its essence, which, though not immutable, is extremely difficult to change” (Petrov 2021, 9). Based on this definition, a difference is recognized between the regular provisions of a constitution and “core, or fundamental, constitutional provisions which are given special status and regarded as unamendable”, at least according to the usual procedure for amending the Constitution (Polzin 2016, 412), and the other ones, which are not distinguished by a particularly high degree of originality, and, in general, do not contribute to the development of comparative constitutional and political science.

One of crucial ingredients of constitutional identity, inevitably, are decisions of constitutional courts, especially in Europe (Allezard 2022; Doyle 2023; Dubout 2010; Đurić 2017, 267; Galimberti and Ninatti 2020; Jovanović 2011, 10; Kruzslisz 2018, 120; Kucherenko and Klochko 2019; Petrov 2021; Petrov and Đorđević 2022; Polzin 2016;

Szente 2022; Scholtes 2020; Stanić 2021; Tribl 2022; Cvetković 2021; Chandra 2023). The same goes for other national courts (Belov 2017, 77), but also with legislators, and even other actors “in the public and private domain” (Jacobsohn 2006, 370). The professional literature also writes about a sort of misuse of the concept of constitutional identity in the European Union (EU) (Halmai 2018).

In constitutional theory, a tendency is point at the emergence of “the populists and authoritarians”, as well as of “the anti-pluralist critiques of constitutional identity”, who abuse the notion of constitutional identity, so that certain member states of the EU could avoid the implementation of their “transnational legal obligations” (Scholtes 2021, 534), thereby achieving “the authoritarian appropriations of constitutional identity” (Scholtes 2021, 536). Constitutional identity also has a protective function, recognized as “the protection of the inviolable core of national constitutionalism” (Belov 2017, 82), which has a special impact on the process of strengthening the sense of national identity. The significance of constitutional identity also lies in the fact that the provisions on which it is based represent an important factor in the process of constitutional *interpretation* (Allezard 2022, 58). This, understandably, brings us back to the undeniable importance of the activities of constitutional courts in this regard.

It is equally possible to determine the components of separate national constitutional identity by observing the arrangements that exist in individual states. This is especially true for countries with a deeply established constitutional tradition and constitutions that have a particularly important comparative influence. Thus, in France, the central element of constitutional identity is the unitary form of the state (Allezard 2022, 68), whilst in Germany it is the unquestionable division of the federal state into its constituent parts (Đurić 2015, 103). In India the function of establishing the corner-stones of the national constitutional identity is performed by secularism and equality of citizens, which aimed at abolishing the ancient caste system (Chandra 2023, 159), and in the United States of America the basic feature of constitutional identity is the immutable republican form of the country’s constitutional organization (Jacobsohn 2006, 362), which applies both to the federal state and to all its individual members.

In Serbian constitutional science, there exist certain contributions to the clarification of the constitutional identity *in general*, but to the explanations of the components of the constitutional identity of

Serbia itself. As it is known to this author, the earliest mention of the (constitutional) identity of Serbia appeared in 1988, as a result of a scientific conference held at the University of Belgrade, Faculty of Law. In the concluding part of the collection of papers presented at the conference, the organizers determined that, amongst other things, “without an appropriate organization of the most important forms of state power” in Serbia, “it is not possible to ensure the identity of the [Socialist Republic] of Serbia as a sovereign and unitary state with provinces within its boundaries”, as it was additionally pointed out that the “unsustainability of the current state organization in the Republic, from the standpoint of legal theory, comparative law, and legal practice” exists (Mitrović i Lubarda 1988, 742). Nonetheless, in accordance with one author’s view, not earlier than the 2006 Constitution was adopted should one search for a historical moment which would represent “the point from which to begin the investigation of the constitutional identity” of Serbia (Cvetković 2021, 15).

Some of the Serbian constitutional scholars have already highlighted certain elements of Serbia’s constitutional identity, which in this regard do not necessarily coincide with the conclusions of the author of this paper. Therefore, Serbia’s constitutional identity consists of: the constitutional judiciary and the relationship between international and domestic law (Cvetković 2021, 50, 61), the rule of law (Đurić 2017, 272), and, in the context of the 1990 Constitution, the somewhat melodious style in which that act was written (Petrov 2020, 31). It should be added that the 1990 Constitution “effectively introduced principal discontinuity with the communist tradition, introducing liberal democratic values such as parliamentary democracy, market-oriented economy and respect of private property” (Stojanović and Krcunović 2025, 53).

When it comes to the 2006 Constitution, it, according to one view, “failed to unite the essential features of Serbia’s constitutional identity in a relatively consistent manner” (Petrov 2017, 13), which corresponds to the conclusion that Serbia “still does not have a stable and clearly defined constitutional identity” (Simović 2019, 804). On the other hand, the esteemed Prof. Ratko Marković “proudly emphasized that Serbia is a country with its own constitutional identity [...], built over more than two centuries” and worthy of full attention and care for its cautious development (Simović 2024, 79). In addition, “it cannot be said that the Constitution of 1990 contained strong expressions of Serbia’s national and historical traditions or identities” (with the exception of the

reference contained in its Preamble, in accordance with which Serbia was defined as a “democratic State of the Serbian people”) (Stojanović and Krcunović 2025, 53–54).

Following this last conclusion, and with full awareness of the demanding nature of the researcher’s task, the author of this paper will attempt to outline certain components of the constitutional identity of the Republic of Serbia. Since establishing constitutional identity requires “distinguishing certain provisions that are particularly worthy of attention” (Dubout 2010, 459), it is important to outline *which* prominent features of the 2006 Constitution might be recognized as Serbia’s particularities in the context of comparative constitutional law. The fulfillment of this task commences with the establishment of the identity role of the constitutional framework for the protection and promotion of human and minority rights.

HUMAN AND MINORITY RIGHTS AS COMPONENTS OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

The first significant component of Serbia’s constitutional identity may be determined by reading the 2006 Constitution provisions dedicated to the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms of individuals. The object of this protection is not limited only to generally defined “human rights”, but also to particularly regulated and separately recognized “minority rights”, explicitly guaranteed by the document, with due regard for all guarantees that Serbia has assumed in this area from relevant acts of public international law.

It should be noted that in this regard the authors of the 2006 Constitution transferred a large number of related provisions from *the Charter on Human and Minority Rights and Civil Liberties* (Povelja o ljudskim i manjinskim pravima i građanskim slobodama 2003), adopted at the level of the former (and short-lived) State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (SUSM), although formally it was adopted by the former Federal Assembly, the legislative body of the – now also defunct – Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. Moreover, given its *significant* scope (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006, čl. 18–81), the section of the 2006 Constitution dedicated to the protection of human and minority rights represents an exception in comparative law, when it comes to its voluminosity. About a third of the text of the 2006 Constitution is

dedicated to human and minority rights, which places Serbia amongst the very few constitutions in Europe that, numerically speaking, devote such attention to this sensitive topic.

The most important provision on this matter imposes the prohibition of lowering the acquired level of human and minority rights (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006, čl. 20, st. 2). This solution, quite rare in comparative law, represents a true “protective clause” (Đurić 2017, 270). It is based on the provision of the Charter, according to which “attained level of human and minority rights, whether individual or collective, may not be lowered” (Povelja o ljudskim i manjinskim pravima i građanskim slobodama 2003, čl. 57, st. 1). In the context of establishing the protection of fundamental rights as the first component of the constitutional identity of Serbia, it should be noted that this (or any comparable or similar) solution is *not* contained in the Constitution of Montenegro (Ustav Crne Gore 2007), the former second member of the Yugoslav federation, i.e., the SUSM.

The special significance of the aforementioned provision of the 2006 Constitution in the field of constitutional identity lies in the consequences of its *application*. Namely, its text (albeit somewhat tacitly) orders all public authorities (including the judiciary, as the non-political branch of government) to refrain from adopting legal acts, regulations, or decisions (or from applying such documents) that could reduce the obtained level of the protection of fundamental rights, and this, it seems, is valid “in the long run”, which means that this solution should also oblige future constitution writers (who could perhaps appear in the near future). In this way, the prohibition of any regression at the level of fundamental rights and freedoms is established. Although in practice it is not undemanding to determine what *level* of acquired rights was established at the time of adoption of the Constitution, this *acquis* of the constitutional order of Serbia opens up space for the adoption of similar models on a comparative constitutional level. This is especially true for states whose basic political and legal identification is based precisely on respect for and protection of fundamental rights and freedoms of citizens and of human dignity.

In terms of constitutional identity based on the protection of individual rights, the introduction of the legal profession as a constitutional category (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006, čl. 67, st. 2) is also remarkable, making Serbia one of the few European countries in which the provision of legal assistance, at least in principle, is

regulated at the constitutional level. The intention of the drafters of the Constitution to comprehensively protect human rights *via* specific normative mechanisms is also evidenced by the constitutionalization of the constitutional complaint (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006, čl. 170), as well as of the institution of the Ombudsman, or the *Civic Defender* (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006, čl. 138).

In the 2006 Constitution, seven individual (concise and clear) articles (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006, čl. 75–81) are devoted to the protection of the rights of members of national minorities. It also contains quite authentic solutions, such as the mention of “equality of all citizens and ethnic communities in Serbia” (in the text of the Preamble), which is additionally explicitly guaranteed in terms of performing public functions and confirmed eligibility of members of minorities for election to public office (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006, čl. 77). The same applies to the decidedness of the authors of the 2006 Constitution to emphasize that “specific regulations and provisional measures which the Republic of Serbia may introduce in economic, social, cultural and political life for the purpose of achieving full equality among members of a national minority and citizens who belong to the majority” (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006, čl. 76, st. 3), as well as – which is comparatively a very rare example of constitution-drafting – to claim that in the field of education, culture and information, Serbia “shall give impetus to the spirit of tolerance and intercultural dialogue, and undertake efficient measures for enhancement of mutual respect, understanding and cooperation among all people living on its territory, regardless of their ethnic, cultural, linguistic or religious identity” (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006, čl. 81). It is correct, therefore, to underline that, unlike its predecessor, the 2006 Constitution “brings one significant difference in its Section dedicated to human rights”, and this difference is contained in providing “the guarantees of minority rights”, whereby the provisions on the protection of minority rights “represent that part of the constitution that provides elements of a multicultural constitutional identity” (Cvetković 2021, 50).

Although it abounds in inconsistent and, in terms of linguistics and style, at the very least, “surpassable” solutions, the 2006 Constitution also introduced certain new, somewhat unexpected elements into the global constitutional heritage, which are contained in formulations dedicated to the protection of fundamental rights and freedoms. The author of this paper believes that substantive and measured constitutional

protection of minority rights is a virtuous starting point for creating a collective constitutional and, more broadly, political identity of Serbia, regardless of the particular nationality of any of its individual citizens. This does not necessarily have any bearing on the correct statement that “the constitutional identity of contemporary Serbia [...] contains a noticeable acknowledgement of Serbia’s pre-constitutional and extra-constitutional identities, foremost its national (Serb ethnic) identity” (Stojanović and Krcunović 2025, 56).

AUTONOMY OF PROVINCES AS PART OF THE CONSTITUTIONAL IDENTITY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

The constitutional status of the two autonomous provinces of Serbia represents a particularly notable comparative feature of the 2006 Constitution (it was, in fact, transferred to that document from previous constitutional acts of Serbia, as a member of the former Yugoslav federations). In this regard, it is important to emphasize that this act set an exceptionally high level of responsibility for the exhausting preservation of the territorial integrity of Serbia, with the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija (APKiM) holding a particularly important place in this context.

Like the Republic of Italy or the Kingdom of Spain, Serbia is a state with an asymmetrical structure of territorial autonomy, because, unlike is usually the case in comparative constitutional law, autonomy is based on the existence of only two units of territorial autonomy. Moreover, a significant part of the state territory (the use of the term “Central Serbia” should be avoided, as it is reminiscent of unfortunate solutions adopted during the period of the existence of the former Socialist Yugoslav state) is not subject to the same constitutional status enjoyed by the aforementioned units (provinces).

Serbia is one of the few countries in Europe whose Constitution explicitly links the need for the protection of territorial integrity with a part of its territory, whether it is a federal unit, a regional unit, or, as in our case, a territorial autonomy. The 2006 Constitution accords special attention to the mutual relationship between a unit of territorial autonomy and the inviolability of the territory of Serbia as an independent and sovereign state. Namely, the status of the APKiM is explicitly regulated in a different way from the status of the Autonomous Province of

Vojvodina (APV), since the latter enjoys “substantial autonomy” (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006, st. 2 preamble i čl. 182, st. 2).

The constitutional phrase “substantial autonomy” is transplanted from the United Nations Security Council Resolution No. 1244 (UNSC, S/RES/1244), adopted on June 10, 1999 (UNSC, S/RES/1244, Preamble, Art. 10–11, pt. “a”, and Annex 2, Para. 5). The Resolution employs exactly the term substantial autonomy (*une autonomie substantielle*; *существенная автономия*; *una autonomía sustancial*) in the above-mentioned places. Elsewhere in the Resolution (UNSC, S/RES/1244, Annex 1, pt. 5, and Annex 2, Para. 8), it refers to “substantial self-government for Kosovo” (*степень самоуправления для Косово*; *un gobierno autónomo sustancial para Kosovo*), which is most likely just a synonym for the term “substantial autonomy”.² On the other hand, the 2006 Constitution does not provide any such guarantee of autonomy for the other autonomous provinces. Thus, “all provisions of the Constitution on territorial autonomy actually apply only to [APV], because the Constitution provided that [APKiM] enjoys substantial autonomy” (Cvetković 2021, 54).

It is not out of place to point out the weaknesses of the deceptive thesis that can sometimes be heard in the Serbian public, in accordance with which the constitutional guarantees of preserving the APKiM within the framework of Serbia can only be found in the Preamble of the 2006 Constitution. It is quite the opposite. Although it is indisputably mentioned in the Preamble, the APKiM also finds its place in the provision dedicated to the need to adopt a special (constitutional) law by which the essential autonomy of the APKiM within the constitutional order of Serbia would be regulated. Specifically, this model of autonomy “shall be regulated by the special law that shall be adopted in compliance with the proceedings envisaged for amending the Constitution” (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006, čl. 182, st. 2). According to the logic that arises from the procedure prescribed for its adoption, a law thus adopted must have a legal status equal to the other provisions of the 2006 Constitution itself.

The APKiM is also mentioned in the text of the oath taken by the President of the Republic upon assuming office. In it, he, *at the first place*, undertakes to protect the territorial integrity of Serbia, including,

² It is interesting that at this point in the Resolution, in its French version, the phrase “substantial autonomy” (*une autonomie substantielle*) reappears.

explicitly, the APKiM as its integral part (Ustav Republike Srbije 2006, čl. 114, st. 2). In light of the above-mentioned, one may conclude that the autonomy of the APV “is not an unquestionable component of the constitutional identity of the Republic of Serbia, and it should undoubtedly not become one, due to its proven disintegrative effect on the political system” (Simović 2019, 827). These words could lead to the formulation of the position that, *unlike the status of the APV*, the constitutional position of the APKiM indicates that the constitutional provisions dedicated *to it* contain components that would be helpful in determining the content of the constitutional identity of Serbia. Of course, this attitude is supported by the author of *this* paper, who does not wish to attribute similar conclusions to other researchers.

It is correct to conclude that the Preamble of the 2006 Constitution “represents a very important part in determining and understanding constitutional identity”, and, hence, it is not possible to “bypass the Preamble in the analysis of constitutional identity” (Cvetković 2021, 20, 21). This does not decrease the significance of the thesis that “the concept of substantial autonomy of Kosovo and Metohija was introduced where it is the least appropriate, in the ‘preface’ to the Constitution”, since it would have been better that the “solution from the 1990 Constitution was retained”; as the result, the Preamble of the 2006 Constitution became “anti-identitarian” (Petrov 2017, 22–23). Certainly, the Preamble of the 2006 Constitution indisputably “has a normative function, because it emphasizes the constitutional obligation of all state authorities to represent and protect the state interests of Serbia in Kosovo and Metohija”, especially since it (i. e., the Preamble) “is subject to a more complicated revision procedure, because it involves holding a referendum” (Simović 2020, 190).

It is imaginable that one of the main motives for the formulation of the provisions of the 2006 Constitution (and perhaps even of the whole document *as such*) was contained in the need to emphasize, in extremely sensitive international and regional circumstances, the indisputable status of the APKiM as Serbia’s integral part. Such an impulse by the authors of the Constitution would certainly have points of contact with the thesis, which appears to be quite acceptable, that “each constitution introduces a set of values and ideas which it wants to implement into reality” (Stojanović and Krcunović 2025, 52). This is notably important if one takes into account that constitutional identity also serves as one of the “legitimation strategies” (Belov 2017, 73), especially if we (probably

not, although perhaps unfoundedly) assume that drafters of the 2006 Constitution potentially sought to strategically position the issue of the foreseeable status of the APKiM in a timely manner as a topic that can be resolved exclusively within the framework of the internal organization of Serbia. In this manner, the identification of the *constitutional moment* (of 2006) with the need to emphasize the preservation of the APKiM within Serbia's legal and political framework would occur in such a way that the concern for the APKiM as a threatened (and temporarily alienated) part of Serbia would be assessed as a kind of "conscience" of the 2006 Constitution, and the primary reason for its adoption (as the first independent Constitution of a sovereign Serbian state since 1903).

Having "wandered" for a little over a century within the framework of constitutional association with other nations in the territory of the former Yugoslavia(s), it is conceivable that Serbia in 2006 attempted to emphasize the inseparability of its provinces from the state territory, as a central element of Serbia's own constitutional identification (with special reference to the APKiM in this context). This is especially verifiable due to the fact that several years before the adoption of the 2006 Constitution, Serbia lost effective mechanisms for exercising state powers in the territory of the APKiM. This hypothesis is supported by the insufficiently successful historical patterns for resolving the constitutional status of the territory of Kosovo and Metohija, precisely in the period starting from its (re)integration into the legal and political order of Serbia, a little over a century ago.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION

To write about a coherent constitutional identity of Serbia is not without difficulties. This is due to the fact that the text of the 2006 Constitution was adopted abruptly, without (sufficient or, rather, *any*) observation by the informed public within expert forums, and in a manner that resulted in a – without any doubt – *significantly improvable* final text of the document by which the life of the political community of the country has been navigated through the last 20 years. However, although constitutional identity represents a fresh, very contemporary constitutional theoretical concept, it is necessary to cautiously investigate whether – and in which ways – Serbia can be included in the society of states that form an established constitutional identity and certain

particular achievements in terms of improving the scope of constitutional regulation.

If the constitutional identity of a state is defined – quite broadly – as the constitutional self-definition of a given political community, according to the findings of the author of this paper, in terms of the constitutional order of Serbia established by its 2006 Constitution, its basic components include a particularly well-established concept of the protection of human and minority rights, as well as the autonomy of its two provinces – Vojvodina and Kosovo and Metohija – within the framework which guarantees Serbia's territorial integrity and unquestionable sovereignty. Although the issue of constitutional identity in theory has not been clarified sufficiently reliably (and in terms of contemporary constitutionality in Serbia, it represents a noticeably unexplored topic), there is a need to invest further research efforts in determining the elements of the constitutional identity of Serbia. The author of this paper has attempted to contribute to settling the collection of constituent parts of the constitutional identity created by the provisions of the 2006 Constitution.

According to the conclusions of the paper, the focal points of Serbia's constitutional identity are the manner of constitutional regulation of human and minority rights, as well as the special status recognized by the 2006 Constitution for units of territorial autonomy (Serbia's two autonomous provinces), with particular reference to the distinction between the provinces, taking into account the fundamental interest of the drafters of the Constitution in emphasizing the special constitutional position of the southern Serbian province.

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УСТАВНИ ИДЕНТИТЕТ РЕПУБЛИКЕ СРБИЈЕ ПО УСТАВУ ИЗ 2006. ГОДИНЕ**

Резиме

Устав Републике Србије из 2006. године усвојен је у неочекивано кратком року, на недовољно транспарентан начин и, највероватније, као последица реакције на дисолуцију Државне заједнице Србија и Црна Гора, изазвану иницијативом мање чланице заједничке државе. У важније елементе уставног уобличења „нове” државе, која је, заправо, оснажила своју самосталност након бројних деценија живота у многонационалним и сложеним државама, спадају компоненте које су Уставом из 2006. послужиле за самоидентификовање кључних саставница уставног поретка. У њих спада, у упоредноправном контексту ретко изричито присутан, Уставом признат корпус људских и „мањинских права”, али и изузетно висок ниво старања о пуном очувању целине територијалног интегритета, са Аутономном покрајином Косово и Метохија на нарочито важном месту. Иако обилује неконзистентним и језичко-стилски у најмању руку „надмашивим” решењима, Устав Републике Србије у упоредну уставну баштину уноси и неке нове, неочекиване елементе, садржане у формулацијама посвећеним заштитама основних права и слобода. У раду су испитани средишњи састојци уставног идентитета створени уставним документом који је на снази безмало две деценије. Обриси уставног идентитета Републике Србије испитани су и у контексту садржине других упоредноправних извора у области уставног права, али и ранијих уставних аката из српске историје.

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Кључне речи: уставни идентитет, уставност Србије, Устав Србије из 2006. године, уставни идентитет Србије, уставна историја Србије

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COMPULSORY VOTING: AN EPISTEMIC PERSPECTIVE**

Abstract

Compulsory voting is defended as the most effective institutional mechanism for ensuring high turnout in response to the problem of insufficient participation in democratic elections. Although arguments in favor of this practice implicitly rely on assumptions about knowledge, competence, or the quality of democratic decision-making, the epistemic dimension of compulsory voting has so far not been examined in a systematic way. This paper analyzes how epistemic considerations enter existing normative arguments in favor of compulsory voting: arguments based on rights and duties, arguments concerning democratic legitimacy, and consequentialist arguments. It examines both the scope and the limits of epistemic justification for compulsory voting, as well as some explicitly epistemic objections to the practice. The paper addresses the question of whether compulsory voting can be defended on purely epistemic grounds and concludes that, although the epistemic approach

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plays an important role in its defense, it is not sufficient on its own to justify compulsory voting.

Keywords: voting, compulsory voting, democracy, epistemic democracy, participation, democratic legitimacy

INTRODUCTION

High turnout is commonly regarded as a desirable feature of democratic decision-making. Virtually all democratic theories view broad participation as one of the ideals of democracy, although they justify it in different ways, linking it to political equality, democratic legitimacy, civic duties, collective rationality, or the quality of collective decisions (Katz 1997, 243–244). However, in many contemporary democracies, participation is far from universal, and it has also declined significantly compared to two decades ago (OECD 2024). For many democratic theorists, this is a cause for concern. Low turnout calls democratic legitimacy into question, gives disproportionately greater influence to social groups that vote more frequently, and signals that future generations may be even less interested in participating in the electoral process (Hill 2014; Lever 2010; Lijphart 1997). One possible solution to this problem lies in institutionalizing the practice of *compulsory voting*.

Compulsory voting can be defined as a legal obligation to appear at the polling station on election day (Birch 2008, 2). Despite the name, this practice does not impose a duty to actually cast a vote. In countries where such a law exists, voters are allowed to submit blank or invalid ballots, and in some cases, they are not even required to accept a ballot at all (Lijphart 1997, 2). What is compulsory, then, is attendance at the polling station, while con-compliance is met with more or less strict sanctions (Birch 2008, 7–10). Nevertheless, data show that in the vast majority of cases, where citizens are required to appear at polling stations, they do indeed vote, and the proportion of uncast, invalid, or blank ballots is extremely low (Hill 2014, 116). For this reason, proponents of compulsory voting emphasize that it is the most effective measure for increasing turnout, far more effective than measures based on voluntary voting.

Normative arguments for and against compulsory voting usually approach this issue from the standpoint of individual rights and duties, questions of democratic legitimacy, or the expected consequences of such a practice. In this paper, we approach the debate from a different angle, focusing on its *epistemic dimension*. By “epistemic”, this paper refers to considerations concerning political knowledge, beliefs, voter competence, and the reliability of decision-making processes. An epistemic perspective on compulsory voting, in this sense, does not denote a single, unified theory, but rather a way of evaluating democratic institutions and practices in terms of how they affect the quality of political judgment and the outcomes of collective decision-making. This includes questions about whether citizens possess sufficient knowledge to participate responsibly, whether democratic procedures tend to produce correct decisions, and whether institutional arrangements can improve or undermine these capacities.

While contemporary literature examines the epistemic dimension of democracy, focusing, for example, on the reliability of majority rule, the role of political knowledge, and the responsibilities of voters (Estlund 2008; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018; Landemore 2013), these insights have not yet been systematically integrated into debates on compulsory voting. Normative arguments concerning compulsory voting often rely, implicitly or explicitly, on assumptions about voters’ competence, the informational role of elections, and the conditions under which democratic decisions can be considered reliable. The aim of this paper is to make these epistemic assumptions explicit and to assess their role in justifying compulsory voting. Before assessing a standalone epistemic argument for compulsory voting, we examine how epistemic considerations operate within existing normative arguments and what their implications are. In doing so, we offer a more systematic account of the epistemic dimension of compulsory voting and clarify both its justificatory potential and its limits. The central claim is that, although epistemic considerations can strengthen familiar arguments in favor of compulsory voting, they cannot by themselves provide a sufficient justification for the practice.

NORMATIVE ARGUMENTS FOR COMPULSORY VOTING

The main normative debates about compulsory voting can be grouped into three broad categories (Birch 2008, 40): (1) arguments focused on questions of individual duties and rights; (2) arguments concerned with collective rationality and the legitimacy of democratic decision-making; (3) arguments that appeal to the consequences expected to follow from mandatory participation. These categories sometimes overlap, but distinguishing them clarifies the most common strategies of justifying compulsory voting. Although these debates are not usually framed in epistemic terms, they frequently rely on assumptions about knowledge, competence, and decision-making quality. Making these assumptions explicit is the central contribution of this paper. Before turning to epistemic considerations, the following section outlines the core non-epistemic versions of these arguments.

The first category concerns *individual duties and rights*. Arguments in this category address whether voting is a moral obligation of citizenship, whether such an obligation may legitimately be enforced, and how such enforcement relates to political rights. On the duty side, voting is treated as a civic obligation arising from citizens' membership in, and ongoing benefits from, democratic institutions (Katz 1997, 243). As such, it may be legitimately enforced, much like other socially necessary obligations such as taxation or military service (Birch 2008, 42; Lijphart 1997, 11).¹ By contrast, rights-based discussions focus on whether compulsory voting violates a right not to participate in a democratic process (Katz 1997, 244). Critics argue that enforced turnout violates individual autonomy and freedom of conscience, even when sanctions are minimal (Brennan 2014, 9). The debate thus often turns on whether voting is best understood as a civic obligation or a

¹ The idea that citizens are under a moral obligation to vote is widely assumed in both normative and empirical analyses of electoral participation (Feitosa and Galais 2020), and has a prominent role in rational choice models that invoke a perceived sense of duty to explain turnout that would otherwise appear irrational (Riker and Ordeshook 1968). Critics of this idea, however, claim that the mere act of voting is such an undemanding form of political engagement that it cannot plausibly be regarded as a significant form of civic virtue (Lomasky and Brennan 2000, 82–83).

personal liberty (Abraham 1955, 6), and whether its legal enforcement is compatible with liberal democratic values (Wertheimer 1975, 277).²

The second category focuses on *collective rationality and democratic legitimacy*. Where turnout is low, electoral outcomes may plausibly be said to reflect the will of only a fraction of the electorate, which raises doubts about the legitimacy of representative institutions and the laws they enact (Lijphart 1997, 2). From this perspective, compulsory voting can be viewed as a necessary (albeit insufficient) means of achieving true representation and, consequently, democratic legitimacy. This argument has two main components. First, compulsory voting is seen as a response to the collective action problem (Hill 2014, 192; Lijphart 1997, 11). Since electoral participation produces a public good, individuals have incentives to free-ride, which may justify coercion to ensure fair contribution (Katz 1997, 243; Wertheimer 1975, 278).³ Second, full participation is taken to be a necessary condition for democratic legitimacy, insofar as it ensures that collective decisions reflect the views of the electorate as a whole (Birch 2008, 47–48; Hill 2014, 126–127).⁴

² Some critics deny that there is a right not to vote, or, more precisely, argue that the right to vote should be understood as a positive political right that does not entail a correlative negative right to abstain. According to this view, the existence of a legally protected entitlement to participate in elections does not imply that citizens have a claim against the state not to be required to participate under certain conditions (Lardy 2004). Interpreted in this way, compulsory voting is taken not to infringe political liberties, especially when voters have the option of casting blank or spoilt ballots (Birch 2008, 43).

³ This problem resembles the classic problem of the rational voter (Downs 1957), but it has one important difference. Whereas the paradox of the rational voter arises from the fact that the influence of an individual voter is exceedingly small, making it irrational to incur the costs of voting, the problem emphasized here is that it is not rational for an individual voter to participate in decision-making, since they can enjoy the benefits of democratic institutions even as an abstainer.

⁴ There are multiple criticisms of this line of argument. Jason Brennan remarks that the legitimacy argument misses its target since it implies that any government that didn't emerge as a result of full participation must be illegitimate, which would in turn render illegitimate any compulsory voting law imposed by such a government (Brennan 2014, 29–30). Such a criticism can be answered with a claim that there are different levels of legitimacy, and that higher turnout makes democratic decisions *more* legitimate (Hill 2014, 126), which does not mean that decisions made without full participation lack legitimacy altogether. A more substantial challenge holds that there is no clear correlation between turnout and legitimacy, since voting is only one

The third category consists of *consequentialist*, or outcome-based, arguments. One line of reasoning holds that compulsory voting raises citizens' awareness and increases their interest in politics and public life (Birch 2008, 49; Lardy 2004, 314–316; Lijphart 1997, 10). Another emphasizes its potential to improve the quality of democratic decision-making, for example by reducing inequalities in participation or producing policies that better reflect the interests of the broader population (Hill 2014, 197; Lijphart 1997, 10). At the same time, critics point to possible negative effects, including increased administrative costs, resentment toward coercion, or a decline in decision quality if less informed citizens are compelled to vote (Abraham 1955, 8–9; Brennan 2014, 92; Katz 1997, 245).

EPISTEMIC DIMENSION OF COMPULSORY VOTING

In the previous section, we distinguished between three main normative arguments in favor of compulsory voting, without highlighting their epistemic assumptions. In this section, we make those assumptions explicit. Rather than introducing a separate and independent epistemic argument, this section explores how epistemic considerations support, and at times complicate, arguments within existing normative frameworks. This perspective is important because arguments about compulsory voting do not only concern who participates, but also how well democratic decisions are made. Existing approaches typically address this only indirectly, without systematically examining the assumptions they make about voters' knowledge and competences, and the reliability of collective decision-making. By making these epistemic assumptions explicit, we clarify the structure of existing arguments and reveal both their strengths and their limitations.

form of political participation, and not necessarily the most important one (Lever 2010, 908–909). Moreover, if there is a widespread opposition to compulsory voting, it may lead some of the otherwise abstaining citizens to vote randomly, which could in turn undermine the legitimacy of democratic decision-making (Katz 1997, 245).

Epistemic Elements in Rights-and-Duties Arguments

Even though arguments for compulsory voting grounded in individual duties and rights are usually based on the claim that citizens have a moral obligation to vote, they implicitly raise further questions about the quality of electoral participation. From an epistemic perspective, the normative issue is not exhausted by asking whether citizens should vote at all; rather, it shifts toward the question of *how* citizens should vote. This shift presupposes that voting can be evaluated as better or worse, an assumption central to an epistemic conception of democracy, according to which votes are understood as expressions of beliefs about the correctness of political decisions (Cohen 1986, 34).⁵

Within the epistemic approach, voting is not merely a matter of expressing preferences or fulfilling a formal civic requirement, but an activity that, if performed irresponsibly, could harm the entire collective. Some critics of unrestricted electoral participation argue that, in fact, citizens have a *negative duty* not to vote when doing so would foreseeably contribute to unjust outcomes, or elect bad policies or candidates. According to this position, participation in collective decision-making carries moral risks, and individuals are required to refrain from voting unless they meet certain standards of political competence (Brennan 2011b, 71–72). However, this view also holds that if citizens decide to vote despite these risks, they incur a further obligation to vote competently – that is, to make their electoral choices in an informed and responsible manner (Brennan 2011b, 69).

Other theorists reject the claim that citizens have a duty to abstain, but nevertheless endorse the idea that electoral participation is subject to constraints on knowledge and competence. On this account, citizens are understood to have a *positive duty* to vote, grounded in the idea that they have not only a civic obligation to participate in a democratic process, but also an obligation to possess sufficient political knowledge

⁵ What it means to “vote well” is itself a contested question. In the literature, epistemic standards for voting range from minimal requirements – such as basic political knowledge (Lau and Redlawsk 2006) or avoidance of demonstrably false beliefs (Brennan 2011b) – to more demanding accounts that emphasize informed deliberation (Cohen 2005), responsiveness to evidence (Goldman 1999a), or orientation toward the common good (Landemore 2013). In this paper, we take a neutral stance towards these accounts and focus instead on the shared assumption that votes can be epistemically better or worse.

that makes them vote competently, as votes cast without adequate justification can undermine democratic decision-making itself. In other words, this duty is not limited to mere turnout, but includes an obligation to vote well (Klijnman 2021, 91–92; Maskivker 2016, 15–16; Goldman 1999b, 209). Electoral participation is thus treated as morally correct only insofar as it is exercised with regard for relevant evidence and possible consequences of one's vote. This view, therefore, converges with the negative-duty argument on the informational demands that are placed on voters, but diverges sharply on whether abstinence is, in some cases, the primary requirement.⁶

When applied to the question of compulsory voting, this epistemic reframing both strengthens and complicates the case for legal enforcement of the practice. On the one hand, compulsory voting can be defended not simply as a means to increase turnout, but as a mechanism that guarantees responsible participation. If citizens have a duty not merely to vote, but to vote well, then compulsory voting may be justified as a way of institutionalizing this duty and signaling the moral seriousness of electoral decisions. On this interpretation, compulsion becomes a means of reinforcing citizens' responsibility for the collective outcomes to which their votes contribute. Versions of this claim are advanced, more or less explicitly, by several proponents of compulsory voting (Abraham 1955, 6; Hill 2014, 170–171; Lijphart 1997, 10).

On the other hand, this line of argument raises a significant difficulty. If the justification for compulsory voting rests on demanding standards of competence, it may impose obligations that many citizens are unable, even if they are willing, to satisfy. In such cases, legal compulsion risks forcing individuals to participate in an activity that they lack the capacity to perform responsibly (Brennan 2014, 89–90; Lardy 2004, 314–315). This remark reveals a problem at the heart of this version of the rights-and-duties argument: the more strongly compulsory voting is justified by appeal to the duty to vote well, the more vulnerable it becomes to objections about excessive informational burdens and unequal capacities among citizens themselves.

⁶ Epistemic accounts of voting differ not only over the content of demands placed on citizens but also over whether and to what extent failures to meet such demands generate moral blameworthiness. Some views assign degrees of responsibility to abstainers, and to voters as well, in cases of bad outcomes (Goldman 1999b), while others reject such responsibility (Lever 2010). The present argument does not depend on resolving this dispute.

Epistemic Elements in Legitimacy and Collective Rationality Arguments

Arguments in favor of compulsory voting that appeal to democratic legitimacy and collective rationality can also be formulated in epistemic terms. As we have seen, these arguments emphasize that low turnout undermines the legitimacy of democratic decisions insofar as it allows collective outcomes to depend on an insufficiently large and insufficiently representative subset of the electorate. Once epistemic considerations are added, low turnout ceases to be problematic merely from the standpoint of procedural fairness; instead, it also calls into question the presumed tendency of democratic decision-making to produce correct or reliable outcomes.

The implications of this epistemic reframing become even more pronounced when one takes into account the view sometimes referred to as correctness theories of democracy, which states that democratic decisions are legitimate because they constitute correct answers to political questions (Estlund 2008, 99).⁷ Although most proponents of the epistemic approach to democracy do not endorse the radical claim that democratic legitimacy depends *exclusively* on correctness, for most of them, legitimacy is nevertheless closely connected to the quality of collective decision-making (Cohen 1986; Goodin and Spiekermann 2018; Landemore 2013). From this perspective, high turnout matters not only because participation reflects political equality or popular sovereignty, but also because broad participation positively affects the probability of selecting correct options.

The most influential arguments in support of this claim appeal to probabilistic models of collective decision-making, the best known of which is the Condorcet Jury Theorem (Goodin and Spiekermann 2018,

⁷ Correctness theories represent the most demanding approach to the study of democracy in terms of the demands placed on citizens' knowledge and judgment (Kelly 2012). For proponents of this approach, democratic decisions are legitimate if and only if they are correct. A classical formulation of this view can be attributed to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's claim that the general will is infallible (Rousseau [1762] 1997, II.3). Although the term "correctness theories" was introduced by David Estlund, he himself rejects this position and defends a more epistemically modest theory according to which democratic procedures are legitimate only insofar as they lead to correct outcomes with a probability greater than random (Estlund 2008, 107).

17–22). Roughly speaking, these models show that if individual voters are more likely to choose the correct rather than the incorrect option, then increasing the number of voters raises the probability that the *majority* will select the correct option. When applied to democratic decision-making, such models point to the conclusion that large electorates can reliably produce correct outcomes. And if democratic legitimacy is closely tied to correctness, then the systematic absence of high turnout is problematic not only for the representativeness of the electorate, but also for its decision-making capacity.

High voter turnout is also regarded as a precondition of democratic legitimacy for an additional reason, namely, because it guarantees the *representation* of the entire population at the polls. Compulsory voting is therefore defended as a mechanism that ensures that the perspectives of all existing demographic groups are taken into account in democratic decision-making (Brennan 2014, 34). This line of argument likewise has a significant epistemic dimension. The value of participation here lies not only in the size of the group involved in decision-making, but also in the diversity of perspectives, information, and approaches to political problems (Landemore 2013, 97–98). Theorists of epistemic democracy commonly appeal to a model that demonstrates that groups with greater internal diversity consistently outperform homogeneous groups composed of individually most competent members (Hong and Page 2004). From this point of view, compulsory voting may be justified in these terms insofar as it prevents the systematic exclusion of various perspectives from the process of public discussion and democratic decision-making.

Lastly, as we have seen, compulsory voting is sometimes defended as an effective means of overcoming the collective action problem (Lijphart 1997, 11). Democratic decision-making produces public goods from which all citizens benefit, yet individual voters have little incentive to contribute, since they enjoy these benefits even when they do not participate. Compulsion is thus defended on the basis of fairness or reciprocity. When combined with epistemic considerations, however, this line of reasoning gains additional force. When citizens abstain, they do not merely benefit from a public good; they also withhold information, judgments, and perspectives that are needed to produce the said public good. This suggests that compulsory voting can be justified not only as a fair distribution of participatory burdens, but also as a means of securing the informational inputs required for reliable collective decisions.

The Epistemic Elements in Consequentialist Arguments

Rather than assessing compulsory voting only in terms of aggregate effects, such as higher turnout or improved representativeness, the epistemic approach places emphasis on the impact it has on the quality of democratic decisions and on the epistemic capacities of citizens themselves. For this reason, consequentialist arguments in favor of compulsory voting can, more naturally than other forms of argumentation, be connected to considerations about knowledge and decision quality. This approach can complement consequentialist arguments for compulsory voting, but it can also reinforce them by providing additional reasons.

We have seen that one argument in favor of compulsory voting is that this practice may improve the quality of democratically made decisions. This line of reasoning builds on epistemic approaches to democracy, both those that view democratic institutions as instruments for producing correct political decisions and those that emphasize the quality of public discussion. From this perspective, higher turnout and improved representativeness possess not only procedural but also an instrumental value. Nevertheless, as previously noted, different categories of arguments in favor of compulsory voting cannot always be clearly distinguished, and there is therefore a certain overlap here between the epistemic approach to consequentialist arguments and arguments from democratic legitimacy. For this reason, we will not further pursue the claim that compulsory voting positively affects the quality of democratic decision-making and will threaten the point of intersection between consequentialist and epistemic arguments as already addressed.

Instead, we will focus on a second consequentialist argument, namely that compulsory voting can generate epistemic benefits for *citizens themselves*. Compulsory voting may encourage citizens to acquire basic political knowledge, to participate in public discussions, and to develop the habits required for informed political reasoning (Hill 2014, 182; Lardy 2004, 315–316; Lijphart 1997, 10). The significance of these effects lies in the fact that they enhance citizens' capacities to understand political decision-making, that is, to assess reasons, evidence, and competing claims concerning political decisions. The epistemic value of participation, therefore, does not lie solely in the act

of voting itself, but also in the preparatory and accompanying processes that voting requires (Birch 2008, 47; Wertheimer 1975, 292).

The idea that participation can yield epistemic benefits finds support in John Stuart Mill's view, which in this context can be characterized as a form of epistemic liberalism (Landmore 2013, 76). According to this view, excluding citizens from the process of democratic decision-making would amount to depriving them of their intellectual and moral capacities (Mill [1861] 2001, 51–52). Although Mill advanced this argument in support of universal suffrage, and he likely would not have endorsed coercion, contemporary proponents of compulsory voting appeal precisely to the educative character of voting and regard compulsory voting as a natural extension of arguments in favor of universal suffrage (Lijphart 1997, 11).

In addition to quantitatively improving political knowledge, compulsory voting may yield further benefits insofar as it exposes citizens to perspectives that would typically be unavailable to them. When participation is sufficiently broad and not concentrated among politically motivated or socially privileged groups, citizens may encounter arguments or viewpoints to which they would otherwise remain unexposed. The benefits of compulsory voting thus lie not merely in increasing the number of voters, but also in ensuring the heterogeneity of participants in democratic decision-making. Diversity of perspectives plays a role in eliminating biases, as well as in creating favorable conditions for deliberation and for the confrontation of opposing viewpoints (Landmore 2013, 92–94).

Nevertheless, just as consequentialist arguments in favor of compulsory voting, understood broadly, may be met with the general objection that this practice can produce negative consequences, such arguments, insofar as they concern knowledge and decision quality, may be criticized on the grounds that compulsory voting could have *epistemically* detrimental effects (Brennan 2014, 92; Katz 1997, 245). These and similar objections against compulsory voting will be the subject of the following section.

EPISTEMIC LIMITS

The preceding sections have shown that the main normative arguments for compulsory voting – whether they appeal to duties, democratic legitimacy, or positive consequences – are not free of epistemic considerations. In each of these arguments, claims that participation ought to be made mandatory implicitly rely on assumptions about citizens' beliefs, their competencies, and the quality of democratic decisions. In this section, we turn to the limits of epistemic defenses of compulsory voting by examining a set of objections that can be raised against this practice, as well as by considering whether compulsory voting can be justified on purely epistemic grounds. The objections discussed here are not typically aimed at compulsory voting as such; rather, they originate in the broader literature on epistemic democracy and voting. They are presented in reconstructed form in order to assess their implications for compulsory voting.

The first counterargument targets the claim that democratic legitimacy requires mass participation. As we have seen, epistemic conceptions of democracy often appeal to probabilistic models that show that large groups of voters are highly likely to arrive at correct decisions (Goodin and Spiekermann 2018). Nevertheless, while from this perspective every additional voter may be welcome, it does not follow that full participation is necessary in order to achieve good outcomes. Formally speaking, each additional voter contributes to the probability of selecting the correct option, but not to an equal degree. In fact, as the number of voters increases, the marginal contribution of each additional voter begins to decline rapidly. Beyond a certain point, what may be called the *optimal number of voters*, the probability of selecting the correct option is so close to certainty that including additional voters contributes virtually nothing, while still imposing certain costs (Brennan 2011a, 56–57). From this point of view, compulsory voting may appear epistemically unnecessary since the correctness of a decision can be reliably achieved even at relatively modest levels of turnout. If this objection is sound, then epistemic arguments for compulsory voting that rest on the claim that correctness is necessary for legitimacy are significantly weakened, because one of their premises – that democratic decisions require mass participation in order to be on the right track – is simply false.

The second counterargument goes a step further by showing that all the epistemic benefits typically attributed to compulsory voting could be achieved through the introduction of a cheaper and non-coercive alternative, not only to compulsory voting, but to voting in general. Instead of requiring all citizens to participate, democratic decision-making could be replaced by *voting lotteries*: a system in which a certain number of voters are randomly selected from the electorate and granted the right to vote in a given electoral cycle – potentially with some form of financial compensation (Brennan 2014, 36). Such a mechanism would not, in principle, violate the values of democratic equality, since all citizens would have an equal probability of being selected, and the number of “lottery winners” could correspond to the optimal number of voters required to surpass the epistemic threshold that guarantees correctness. From an epistemic perspective, this proposal may appear attractive: if the group is sufficiently large, it satisfies the conditions posited by probabilistic models, and since it is randomly selected, it constitutes a representative sample of citizens that reflects their internal diversity. Moreover, the collective action problem is also neutralized, since participation is rewarded and no one is forced to vote against their will. If these advantages of voting lotteries are realized, compulsory voting may, on this view, appear epistemically redundant, as all of its purported benefits could be achieved without coercion.

The third counterargument challenges an assumption shared by many attempts to provide an epistemic grounding for democracy, namely that citizens are sufficiently competent to participate in political decision-making. What if, on the contrary, many citizens lack political knowledge, rely on misinformation and prejudice, and vote in systematically misguided ways (Brennan 2016, 4–6)? In that case, large electorates constitute an *epistemic obstacle* rather than an advantage. Furthermore, abstention is not thought to be random, but is often practiced precisely by those citizens who recognize their own lack of competence (Birch 2008, 48–49). If this is correct, compulsory voting carries the risk of allowing political decisions to be driven by those citizens who are least informed about their consequences.⁸ From this perspective, compulsory

⁸ Brennan illustrates this point by citing a series of studies that indicate the degree of political unawareness of the average American voter, and by drawing an analogy between compulsory voting and “forcing drunk people to drive.” Nevertheless, he treats this widespread ignorance as an expected consequence of the nature of

voting is taken to be not only epistemically unnecessary, but potentially harmful (Abraham 1955, 21).

Taken together, these objections pose a significant challenge to epistemic arguments in favor of compulsory voting. In what follows, we respond to these challenges from within the same general framework. We argue that these objections share a common assumption: that compulsory voting affects only the number of voters at the polls, while leaving the voters themselves unchanged. Yet, as we have seen, many arguments in favor of compulsory voting hold that this practice has dynamic effects on citizens' motivation and political knowledge, by actively improving them (Hill 2014, 182; Lijphart 1997, 10). If proponents of compulsory voting are correct in this respect, then its epistemic value cannot be measured solely in terms of a simple increase in turnout.

In this way, the counterargument concerning the optimal number of voters partially loses its force. Even if relatively small groups of voters (at least when compared to the size of the overall electorate in many contemporary democracies) are sufficient to guarantee the selection of correct options, compulsory voting may still be epistemically desirable if it has an educational character that positively affects the entire electorate over time. Similarly, the argument for voting lotteries assumes that the randomly selected group of citizens either already possesses, or will acquire during the electoral process, the knowledge necessary for responsible participation. If compulsory voting produces such an effect across the population as a whole, then from an epistemic perspective, it becomes preferable to lotteries, which would educate only a relatively small number of voters. Finally, the objection that many voters lack sufficient competence can also be turned in the opposite direction: if many citizens do not possess the capacities required to vote well, compulsory voting may prove to be a mechanism that encourages the development of precisely those capacities, rather than one that foregrounds incompetence.

This naturally leads us to the following question: Can compulsory voting be defended on purely epistemic grounds? Such a defense would, on this reconstruction, combine all the epistemic elements of

democratic decision-making. For most voters, acquiring political knowledge is simply not a rational course of action, since the probability that such knowledge will yield concrete benefits – namely, that their individual vote will be the one that decides an election – is negligibly small (Brennan 2014, 89–90).

the argument presented in this paper: (1) citizens have a duty to vote well; (2) a sufficiently large and representative electorate is necessary for democratic decisions to count as legitimate; and (3) compulsory participation has a positive effect on citizens' political knowledge and the epistemic environment of democratic institutions. Taken together, these claims amount to a comprehensive epistemic defense of compulsory voting.

Nevertheless, we suggest that this approach faces a serious difficulty, as it appears to rely on an implicit circularity. Namely, compulsory voting is justified on the assumption that citizens are sufficiently competent to vote well, while at the same time it is defended as a means of enabling citizens to become competent to vote well. If the epistemic justification of compulsory voting succeeds only on grounds that presuppose the existence of compulsory voting itself, such an argument cannot stand on its own. At best, it shows that epistemic considerations can support a broader range of normative arguments in favor of compulsory voting, but not that they can serve as an independent starting point.⁹

Epistemic elements thus play an important role within normative arguments for compulsory voting, insofar as they highlight the connection between participation, democratic legitimacy, voter competence, and the quality of collective decision-making. However, taken on their own, they cannot fully justify the introduction of compulsory voting. The epistemic arguments of this kind depend on assumptions about citizens' political knowledge and motivation to vote that require additional justification. For this reason, an adequate defense of compulsory voting should treat epistemic reasons as complementary to additional, non-epistemic reasons for adopting this practice.

⁹ A related skepticism is expressed by Annabelle Lever and Alexandru Volacu, who ask whether compulsory voting might be justified on epistemic grounds where moral or political justifications fail. They argue that this strategy is unlikely to succeed, not because epistemic democracy is incoherent, but because voting is neither the only nor the most reliable mechanism for aggregating politically relevant information, especially when compared to polls, surveys, protest, and other forms of political communication that function without coercion (Lever and Volacu 2019).

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ОБАВЕЗНО ГЛАСАЊЕ: ЕПИСТЕМИЧКА ПЕРСПЕКТИВА**

Резиме

Овај рад истражује обавезно гласање са становишта епистемичког приступа демократској теорији. Основни циљ рада је да се испита улога коју питања знања, компетенције и квалитета демократског одлучивања имају унутар нормативних расправа о обавезном гласању. Обавезно гласање се обично оправдава као најефикаснији институционални механизам за решавање проблема ниске излазности. У раду се показује да различити видови оправдања обавезног гласања у себи садрже епистемичке претпоставке, које до сада нису испитиване на систематски начин. Главни допринос рада лежи у експлицирању ових претпоставки и процени њиховог значаја за аргументе у прилог обавезног гласања. Рад започиње разликовањем три главне категорије аргумената у прилог обавезног гласања: аргумената заснованих на индивидуалним правима и дужностима, аргумената који се тичу демократског легитимитета и колективне рационалности, као и консеквенцијалистичких аргумената. Централни део рада састоји се у приказивању тога на који се начин епистемичка разматрања јављају унутар сваке од ових категорија аргумената. Аргументи о правима и дужностима попримају епистемичку димензију оног тренутка када се гласање разуме као активност која се може спроводити на добар или лош начин, што отвара додатна питања која се тичу компетенције

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гласача. Аргументи који се тичу демократске легитимности могу се сместити у епистемичке оквире када се висока излазност постави као предуслов демократског легитимитета. Ови аргументи се тада доводе у везу са епистемичким приступима демократији који одлуке донете од стране великих група гласача, или довољно разноликих група гласача, виде као епистемички супериорне у односу на одлуке које доносе мале или хомогене групе. Консеквенцијалистички аргументи у прилог обавезног гласања имају најјаснију епистемичку компоненту, будући да се њима брани становиште да обавезно гласање доводи до квалитетнијих демократских одлука или повећања политичког знања међу гласачима. У закључном делу рада разматрају се неке од епистемичких примедби које се могу упутити идеји обавезног гласања. Показује се да, иако ове примедбе представљају изазов за епистемичко оправдање обавезног гласања, потенцијална склоност обавезног гласања да током времена континуирано побољшава епистемичке способности гласача може бити одговор на те примедбе. Потом се поставља питање да ли се обавезно гласање може правдати на чисто епистемичким основама и закључује се да се таква одбрана суочава са тешкоћама будући да почива на циркуларном аргументу. На крају, закључује се да епистемичка разматрања могу да пруже додатне разлоге за увођење обавезног гласања, уколико су праћена неепистемичким разлозима, али да сама не могу да послуже као основа за оправдање такве праксе.

Кључне речи: гласање, обавезно гласање, демократија, епистемичка демократија, партиципација, демократски легитимитет

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LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA 2025 – CONTINUATION OF THE DOMINANCE OF THE RULING CROATIAN DEMOCRATIC UNION

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to analyze the regular local elections in the Republic of Croatia that were held on May 18, in the first round, and June 1, 2025, in the second round. In the local elections, convocations of regional, county, and local, city, and municipal assemblies were elected, along with the election of the city assembly and mayor of the capital city Zagreb, which has the status of both regional and local self-government. Along with the convocations of assemblies, mayors and presidents of municipalities (mayors), as well as their deputies from among national minorities, were also elected. These elections, like most previous local election cycles, also demonstrated the rivalry between the two leading national parties – HDZ and SDP, often in appearances with their coalition partners, and in them, HDZ won a significant advantage and achieved almost complete unity of national and local Government. Attempts by “third options” to make inroads were unsuccessful or were achieved in coalition with the aforementioned leading parties,

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with the exception of certain circles, while all parliamentary parties, whether those in the coalition in power or in the opposition (Homeland Movement, MOST, etc.), experienced electoral decline. In the elections, a certain importance was traditionally given to regional, minority parties, but also to independent candidates.

Keywords: Republic of Croatia, local elections, local democracy, political parties, local political actors

INTRODUCTION

Local self-governments and local authorities in contemporary democratic systems represent a space where participation, representation, and political autonomy of local communities are realized according to their specific characteristics and needs. Theoretical and comparative insights into local democracy (Sharpe 1970; Smith [1985] 2025; Dentersand Rose 2005; Loughlin, Hendriks and Lidstrom 2012) indicate that pluralism and diversity of political actors at the local level represent important indicators of the democratic capacity of a system.

However, in some countries, including Croatia, a pattern prevails in which local elections are strongly determined by the influence of national-level parties, specifically HDZ and SDP. Regional and local political actors in Croatia win around one tenth of the vote, which is somewhat similar to the result of local political actors in Serbia of 14.41% of the vote in the 2023/24 local elections (Republički zavod za statistiku 2024, 21). On the other hand, this is far less than the success of local movements and local groups of citizens who in neighboring Slovenia won a convincing majority in local elections compared to the leading national parties (in the 2022 local elections in Slovenia, independent candidates won the election races for mayors and municipal presidents in as many as 138 out of 232 local governments (59% of elected mayors and municipal presidents), and independent lists of councilors for local assemblies were the relative winners of the elections with 26.05% of the votes (Mijatović 2023, 46).

Based on available election data and empirical insights, a trend of further strengthening of the HDZ and, to a lesser extent, the SDP (both parties along with a circle of partner parties) and a renewed revitalization of the two-party system in the country, which in certain

periods since the restoration of the multi-party system have been interrupted by more pronounced successes of “third options” enabled primarily by the implementation of the proportional electoral system in Croatia (Homeland Movement, MOST, and previously HSLs, HSS, etc.), is observed, while alternative actors such as regional parties and independent candidates are being pushed to the political margins even at the local level.

Such a situation opens several theoretical and normative questions. First, does the concentration of political power in the hands of one or two large parties contribute to the stability of local Government, or does it discourage democratic pluralism and participation? In other words, the question is whether a centralized party structure at the local level is suitable for the development of participatory democracy. Does such a model enable local autonomy and representation of local interests or, on the contrary, does it lead to political uniformity and suppression of local pluralism? Theories of local self-government and decentralization, such as those developed by Sharpe, Smith, Denters, and Rose, as well as Heinelt, point to the importance of political pluralism and differentiation of local actors as conditions for functional democracy (Sharpe 1979; Smith [1985] 2025; Denters and Rose 2005; Heinelt 2012; Heinelt *et al.* 2018).

Based on these theoretical positions, the focus of the work is on analyzing the political configuration of Croatian local elections, not only for the purpose of presenting results, but also as a diagnostic framework for thinking about the state of local democracy in today's Croatia. This paper is based on a case study approach, combining qualitative and quantitative analysis of electoral data, as well as content analysis of relevant legal documents, media reports, and secondary sources. In addition, elements of comparative analysis are used in order to contextualize the Croatian case within broader regional trends, particularly in relation to Slovenia and Serbia.

In the continuation of the work, the current context and structure of the electoral system at the local level will first be presented. This will be followed by an analysis of political results and power relations, with special attention to the marginalization of local political actors. In conclusion, it is stated that such a configuration of power, although it can be efficient and stable, can also represent a challenge for the democratic potential of local Government.

LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA – ELECTORAL RULES

The legislative basis for local elections is the Law on Local Elections. It provides that adult citizens of Croatia in the territory of a particular municipality or city, or citizens of another European Union member state, have the right to vote in elections, which is regulated by a special law. Elections for county prefects, mayors, municipal presidents, and their deputies are called by the Government of the Republic of Croatia. The Law clearly states that elections for county prefects, mayors, municipal presidents, and local assemblies are held in the third week of May every fourth year, so the Government must call them within 30 to 60 days before they are held (Zakon o lokalnim izborima Republike Hrvatske 2021).

Political parties and voters have the right to nominate county prefects, mayors, municipal presidents, and members of local assemblies. Given the large number of local self-governments in the Republic of Croatia, the number of signatures required for submitting lists of citizen groups (most often called “independent list” followed by the name of the list bearer) is determined according to the following scale – in units up to 350 inhabitants, 25 signatures are required, in units with 350 to 500, 35 signatures are required, in units with 500 to 1000 inhabitants, 50 signatures, up to 2,500 signatures for units with over 500,000 inhabitants (which is actually only the city of Zagreb). For submitting party lists, linearly one-third to twice as many signatures are required as for citizen groups, so for a local unit with 500 to 1000 inhabitants, 80 signatures are required, and 5,000 for a local unit above 500,000 inhabitants.

Electoral lists must respect the gender quota (as stated, representation of at least 40% of each gender), and candidacy is not allowed for active military personnel and employed police officers, as well as those convicted of prison sentences longer than six months. All candidate lists must be submitted within 14 days of calling the elections, while any deficiencies can be corrected within an additional 48 hours. The electoral law provides for equality of all political actors regarding promotion in local media, and electronic media have the obligation of objective, impartial, and balanced reporting on pre-election presentation. The bodies for conducting elections are the State Electoral Commission, the Electoral Commission of the City of Zagreb, and county, city, and municipal electoral commissions.

Elections for county prefects, mayors, and municipal presidents are conducted using a majority, two-round electoral system, where the winner needs to receive over 50% of votes in the first round or a majority of votes in the second round.

Local representative bodies (county, city, and municipal assemblies) are elected using a proportional electoral model with a threshold of 5% of votes cast and the application of the D'Hondt method for calculating the number of mandates (Petak, Kasapović i Lalić 2004, 84).

According to the Constitutional Law on the Rights of National Minorities, and taking into account the results of the last population census, all national minorities have the right to proportional representation in local representative bodies (the specific share is obtained when their percentage in a particular local self-government is multiplied by the number of local councilors). Participation of a national minority in local self-government of 5% guarantees at least one representative, and at the county level, the position of deputy county prefect. Candidate lists of parties/citizen groups of national minorities are provided with facilitated conditions for candidacy. If, after the elections, it turns out that the representation of minorities is inadequate (lower) in local representative bodies, the possibility of subsequent elections is provided within 90 days from the day of holding local elections.

Regarding the positions of deputy county prefects, mayors, or municipal presidents, representatives of national minorities have rights to these positions, regardless of percentage representation, which is defined by the statutes of local self-governments. The method of their election is identical to the election of county prefects, mayors, and municipal presidents.

Representatives of political parties, citizen groups, non-governmental organizations, and international organizations accredited in the Republic of Croatia have the right to observe elections.

The costs of conducting local elections are borne by the organs of local self-governments where the elections are conducted.

Incidentally, regarding the current electoral legislation in Croatia at the local level, the biggest change occurred in 2009 when a decision was made that mayors and municipal presidents would be elected directly, and not as before in assembly convocations. This reform was carried out to introduce a dual system of power at the local level in which the executive branch of Government became somewhat independent

both in powers and in the method of election in relation to representative power (Žižić 2013, 76).

Additional legal basis for holding local elections in the Republic of Croatia for areas that are not precisely defined by this Law include the Law on the Right of Citizens of Other European Union Member States in Elections for Representative Bodies of Local and Regional Self-Government Units (Zakon o pravu državljana drugih država članica Europske unije u izborima za predstavnička tijela lokalne i područne (regionalne) samouprave 2010), the Law on Local and Regional Self-Government (Zakon o lokalnoj i područnoj (regionalnoj) samoupravi 2020), the Law on the Election of Councils and Representatives of National Minorities (Zakon o izboru vijeća i predstavnika nacionalnih manjina 2019), the Law on Financing Political Activities, Electoral Promotion and Referendums (Zakon o financiranju političkih aktivnosti, izborne promidžbe i referenduma 2019) and others.

LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA – ACTORS, SOCIO-POLITICAL CONTEXT AND CAMPAIGN

The Government of the Republic of Croatia under the dominant role of Andrej Plenković (HDZ) on April 12, 2025, made a decision to call local elections – assemblies of 20 counties, 127 cities and 428 municipalities, along with the city of Zagreb, and direct election of mayors (county prefects) and municipal presidents (mayors), which started the legally prescribed deadlines for conducting elections. 31,082 candidates ran for positions (7,800 fewer than in the previous local elections held in 2021). Men comprised 57%, and women 42%. The average age of candidates was 47 years (men 48, and women 43). The youngest candidate was 18, and the oldest was 96 years old (HRT 2025a).

Certainly, in this electoral cycle as well, the elections in the largest cities attracted the most attention, and this will be the case in our work as well. Given that Croatia according to the last census has 3,871,833 inhabitants, we will take as significant urban agglomerations those that count over 1% of the population or about 40 thousand inhabitants, and these are Zagreb (761,131), Split (149,830), Rijeka (108,622), Osijek (75,916), Zadar (67,309), Pula (52,220), Slavonski Brod (45,005) and

Karlovac (41,869) (Republika Hrvatska: Državni zavod za statistiku 2022; Bilen i Bučar Perić 2002, 76–94).

The context of the elections fits into the trends of the previous period. As local elections in Croatia have so far been a test of strength between the two leading parties – HDZ and SDP, and their partner parties of far lesser importance at the national level, but of certain influence in certain regions, with attempts to break through by new political parties and the important role of regional and non-partisan political actors, so it was this time as well. These local elections were also a symbolic rounding off of the electoral process in Croatia, which followed each other within a few months – elections for the European Parliament, elections for the Croatian Parliament, presidential and, finally, local elections.

The polarization of public opinion in recent years has been clearly visible, due to the dominance of HDZ in the Government, but also the fact that for the last six years, the President of the state comes from the ranks close to the leading opposition SDP. HDZ has been a constituent element of executive power, under the leadership of HDZ leaders (Tomislav Karamarko and then Andrej Plenković) since 2015, whose victory was repeated in parliamentary elections in 2016, 2020, and 2024, as well as in European elections in 2019 and 2024 (additionally strengthened by the success of extreme right, Eurosceptic options in European elections). On the other hand, former prime minister and SDP president Zoran Milanović was elected President in 2019 and again at the very beginning of 2025. Thus, in Croatia, more on a symbolic (and media) than on the level of real politics, given that in Croatia's political system the prime minister has a much greater scope of power than the President, some kind of cohabitation was established, that is, a situation where the President close to the leading opposition SDP with modest powers is a vocal critic of executive power in public, which was visible in his, as it turned out unsuccessful, and at the given moment unconstitutional, candidacy for prime minister in the 2024 parliamentary elections. In these local elections, the President of Croatia, Zoran Milanović, used the official campaign and his official visits to local areas to a lesser extent, although he indirectly placed them in the context of his parent party – the SDP, which was done to a far greater extent by the President of the Croatian Democratic Union and Prime Minister Andrej Plenković.

It should be emphasized that during the period of HDZ dominance in national politics, SDP, after the election of Zoran Milanović as

President of the state, went through turbulent periods and periods of constant weakening of influence in internal personnel policy (several party presidents were changed – Davor Bernardić, Peđa Grbin, Siniša Hajdaš Dončić). The difficult consolidation of circumstances in SDP is evidenced by the fact that even one of the former party presidents and former President of SDP Zagreb, Davor Bernardić, left the party and led one of the opposition lists to the ruling SDP and We Can! in Zagreb in these local elections.

We emphasize HDZ and SDP because, despite all internal fractures, especially in periods when they were in opposition – SDP from 1990 to 2000, then from 2003 to 2011, and from 2015 to today, and HDZ from 2000 to 2003 and from 2011 to 2016 – they managed to survive as leading national parties. In the meantime, the center-right party MOST (originally formed as a party of strong local leaders) built its positions, and in the meantime, also the ecological-liberal party We Can!, as well as the Homeland Movement, one of numerous extreme right factions that, after the 2024 elections, formed a ruling coalition with HDZ at the national level. At the same time, over a long period of years, numerous parties that had played a significant role in Croatia since the restoration of multi-party politics have fallen to the political margins – HSLS, HSS, HNS, and even HSP (HSP is the only party that, due to its extreme right-wing narrative, was not in a position to enter the executive branch, especially during the period of Croatia's European integration until 2013) and others.

Otherwise, during 2024, HDZ won the parliamentary elections, that is, the elections for the State Assembly, forming a right-wing coalition with the Homeland Movement party. However, the attempt to win the post of President of the Republic by HDZ ended unsuccessfully because the President of Croatia, Zoran Milanović, won the presidential elections for the second time (held on December 29, 2024, and January 12, 2025), with a convincing 74.68% compared to 25.32% of the votes won by the second-placed HDZ candidate Dragan Primorac (Državno izborno povjerenstvo Republike Hrvatske 2025).

Let us return to the peculiarities of local elections in Croatia. They are reflected, among other things, in different electoral congruences – the coincidence of votes in national and local elections. Thus, the previous local elections in 2021 in Zagreb were highly nationalized, and, for example, in the Istrian County (due to the existence of a strong regional party – the Istrian Democratic Alliance), highly regionalized

(Raos 2021, 14). Yet, this phenomenon remains emphatically linked only to Istria, that is, the territory of Istria, to which Medjimurje County can possibly be added (In the Medjimurje region, there exists a strong regional Independent List for the North of a former senior HNS official and minister Radimir Čačić).

Despite the huge differences between municipalities in terms of their size (556 or 70% of local governments have fewer than five thousand inhabitants, and are thus undoubtedly heavily dependent on state grants), level of development, and territorial consolidation reforms have not been on the agenda of any government in the past three decades, nor have they been seriously advocated by any of the leading parties. The reasons for this were: the negative memory of large, bureaucratized municipalities and the unwillingness of political elites to significantly reduce the number of local-level offices where they could employ their party staff. At the same time, inter-municipal cooperation is underdeveloped, and there is a lack of direct support for national policies. For the most part, the powers of local governments are limited to ownership of municipal enterprises and other local organizations that provide services. As a result, the complementary, supervisory, and coordinating roles of counties towards municipalities are increasing. According to the 2018 Eurobarometer survey, a low level of public trust characterizes all territorial levels of Government and institutions in Croatia. Only 23% of Croatian citizens trust their local and regional authorities, which is significantly lower than the EU average (54%), but this level of trust is still higher than trust in national institutions (18% parliament, 19% government) (Škarica and Vukojičić Tomić 2022, 397).

The lines of political divisions at the local level have been established in previous electoral cycles in local elections, according to which HDZ achieved dominance in smaller communities primarily in Dalmatia and Slavonia, and traditionally performed poorly in larger cities, primarily Zagreb or Rijeka, and regions of Međimurje, Zagorje, Kvarner and, especially, Istria, which has roots dating back to the first multi-party elections in Croatia (Kasapović 1993, 48). Regarding Istria, the illustrative fact is that Croatian President Zoran Milanović, close to SDP, received 95% of votes in the second round of presidential elections in the municipality of Labin in the 2024 presidential elections, compared to HDZ candidate Dragan Primorac, who received about 5% of votes, as a counterpoint to HDZ's dominance at the national level. However, the pool of votes that the HDZ has in Slavonia and Dalmatia (a parallel

is often drawn with the HDZ winning in areas where conflicts persisted during the 1991–1995 civil war in the country) has often proven sufficient to win elections at either the national or local level.

An interesting fact related to these elections is that 21 out of 150 parliamentary representatives (MPs) were candidates for county prefect and deputy of one of the counties, and 71 representatives for mayor or municipal President, of which 29 entered the race for re-election – 17 from HDZ, eight from SDP, one each from MOST, IDS, NPS-Independent Platform North and one independent MP (Almost half of Parliament goes to local elections, these three HDZ members have already won 2025). This fact certainly indicated the importance of local elections to national political actors, as well as to their high officials.

Some kind of continuity to the local component of Croatia's political system was contributed by the fact that some mayors and municipal presidents have been at the head of their local self-governments for three decades, and notably mostly from HDZ – Joško Roščić (HDZ) in Baška Voda and Dinko Bošnjak (HDZ) in Hrvace, who were elected back in 1993. In the positions of municipal presidents since 1993 are also Milivoj Kurtov (Pakoštane), Davor Lončar (Poličnik), Zoran Kovačević (Koška), Ivo Zelić (Petrijevci), and Zdravko Mandić (Brestovac). In the position of municipal mayor for 29 years are also Marica Jančić from HDZ (Marija Gorica), Božidar Škrinjarić (Pokupsko), and Darijo Vasilčić from the PGS-SDP coalition (Krk) (Šobak 2025). Despite the existence of party strongholds – Zadar where HDZ has held the mayoral position since the restoration of multi-party system or Rijeka where SDP has sovereignly ruled for over three decades, so far nine electoral cycles of local elections have brought various changes, especially considering that presidents of local self-governments are elected directly, and that the compositions of local representative bodies do not necessarily have to support the political option of the mayor/municipal president. Symbolically, the electoral competition in these two cities, in addition to the elections in Zagreb, most intrigued the attention of the pre-election public (HRT 2025b). In specific cases, it was actually a fight for prestige as one of the peculiarities of local elections (Mijatović 2016, 83).

Controversies in the public came to the fore also regarding the fragmentation of municipalities and cities, in which there is a large number, believed to be often overpaid officials, whose number reaches 25,000 (Orešić 2025). On the other hand, the question was raised about the purpose of the existence of a municipality that is not able to build a

kindergarten from its budget. Among other things, the fact that presidents of small (often financially unsustainable) municipalities with 500 or a thousand inhabitants receive compensation of up to 3,400 euros for their work (about 20 municipalities, including Komiža, Obrovac, and others), while only a few work voluntarily, alongside their regular job and compensation of 500 to 700 euros (Kijevo, Zadvarje, and Saborsko) was criticized (Jurasić 2025).

The large number of small local self-governments often leads to a situation where only every tenth city or municipality adheres to the given financial framework or acceptable financial deviation of 5%, which speaks of inadequate planning of revenues and expenditures. Data from 2023 show that cities and municipalities in Croatia had total budgets of 5.7 billion euros, and in 2024, 6.2 billion, which speaks of their growth. At the same time, greater exposure of smaller local units to budget deviations requires technical, advisory, and financial assistance from the state, county, and regional levels. And precisely this fact opens the question of long-term sustainability of small local self-governments, whose efficiency in operation is crucial for credible budget planning and execution of public services (Gatarić 2025b).

Incidentally, according to the results of a survey by the Croelecto agency in April 2025 at the national level, HDZ is the leading party with 27.52% support. It is followed by SDP with 23.16%, then “We Can!” with 7.90%, MOST 6.13%, and Homeland Movement with 1.93%. Among other parties, the Croatian Pensioners’ Party has 1.91%, Istrian Democratic Assembly 1.63%, Domino (Home and National Rally) 1.50%, Center 1.23%, Croatian Sovereignists 1.09%, and Croatian Peasant Party and Croatian Social Liberal Party with 0.95% each. Other political options and local lists have the support of 5.44% of respondents, while 17.44% were undecided (Betl 2025).

Current topics from the national level that overlapped with the duration of the election campaign in Croatia were the death of Pope Francis and the election of the new Pope Leo XIV, marking the anniversary of the “military-police operation Flash” in western Slavonia, the increasingly current topic of introducing mandatory two-month military service that will be mandatory from the end of this or the beginning of 2026 in which about 4,000 recruits will be trained in barracks in Knin, Slunj and Požega and receiving the first calls for seventeen-year-olds to register in military records which has already caused certain dissatisfaction in the public (with the possibility of

choosing civilian service over military service). Paradoxically, at the same time in Croatian society, there was a visible (and somewhat ritualistic, pre-election) strengthening of profascist tendencies, which was also indicated by the announcement of a major concert by the controversial singer Marko Perković Thompson in Zagreb on July 5, 2025, which was attended, according to numerous estimates, by as many as half a million guests, etc.

Among local topics, the Zagreb elections and the “Hippodrome” affair certainly stood out, in which the associate of Zagreb Mayor Tomislav Tomašević (We Can!) was arrested by state authorities on suspicion of corruption in the case of fictitious engagement of one of the companies for the physical security of facilities.

Incidentally, according to data from the State Bureau of Statistics, Croatia is characterized by high inflation but also wage growth, so Croatian Prime Minister Andrej Plenković emphasized that since he became prime minister (in 2016), the minimum personal income increased from 414 to 970 euros, the average salary from 749 to 1,416 euros, and the median from 658 to 1,175 euros (Gatarić 2025a). Inflation in 2024 compared to 2023 in Croatia was 8% (Državni zavod za statistiku n.d.).

At the same time, on the economic front, Croatia has been facing the exodus of young and qualified workers to other EU countries for many years, primarily Germany and Ireland. The above trends are linked to the strong centralization of Croatia, in which, in addition to the capital city, Zagreb, only the regions on the Adriatic coast are currently developing due to the strong tourism sector. Entry into the European Union has brought increased emigration, especially from the Slavonia region, so according to reference data, in the period from 2011 to 2020, 288,844 residents left the country, while in the previous decade, from 2001 to 2010, this number was 88,548. Considering that Croatia has since become a member of the EU, it can be concluded that the number of people who left the country has tripled (Vresnik 2025).

Naturally, the departure of the population over time opened the need for labor, so in recent years there has been an increasingly intensive influx of labor migrants from Asian countries and Western Balkan countries, which has led to a general decline in unemployment. Official data from the Croatian Employment Service show that unemployment fell by 16.8% or 18,363 in 2025 and for the first time fell below 80 thousand at the level of Croatia, while during the mandate of Andrej

Plenković's governments, employment increased by 200 thousand. In March 2025 alone, over 40,000 work permits were issued, mostly to citizens of Nepal (12,078), Bosnia and Herzegovina (9,389), Serbia (5,846), the Philippines (5,946), India (5,555), Northern Macedonia (2,949), with an increasing number of workers from Egypt (1999 work permits) (Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova Republike Hrvatske 2025b). In 2024, 206,529 residence and work permits were issued in Croatia, primarily in the fields of construction, tourism and hospitality, transport, and trade (Ministarstvo unutrašnjih poslova Republike Hrvatske 2025a). The Croatian Employers' Association predicted that with such trends, there will be 400 to 500 thousand foreign workers in Croatia in 2030, that is, every fourth person will be a foreigner (Jureško 2025).

At the same time, Croatia has high inflation, which has become particularly pronounced after the introduction of the euro as the country's national currency on January 1, 2023. The increasingly high inflation is clearly evidenced by the increase in food prices by 44.8% (8% more than the EU average), for which Croatian European MP Biljana Borzan from the opposition SDP blames cartels of domestic retail chains (Hina 2025a).

The broader social context of local elections in Croatia did not significantly change the basic characteristics of local campaigns, campaign themes, or the general chances of leading political actors. The characteristics of the local campaign were identical to previous ones; the campaign for local elections was relatively short and would intensify somewhat less than a month before the elections. Promotion of candidates was carried out on national and local media, social networks, traditional street stands, where candidates talked with voters, and other forms of electoral promotion. Campaign themes, in addition to numerous local topics, could not bypass national and even global issues that occupy the European Union as a supranational community to which Croatia belongs, and this is primarily European security (Petrušić 2025).

Given that HDZ is a party that dominates at the national level, the fact that it has not been dominant in most of Croatia's largest cities for decades, so it was almost not planned to take over in Zagreb, Rijeka, Pula, and others. At the same time, HDZ maintained its strong positions in Zadar, Osijek, Karlovac, and Slavonski Brod. HDZ tried to improve its electoral score also through local coalitions with coalition partners from the national level – Homeland Movement (in Vukovar, it supported their candidate for mayor, who eventually lost the elections), but also

with other smaller parties such as HSU, HSLS, and others. Quite the opposite, SDP could count on a favored position in coalition with We Can! in Zagreb, Rijeka (where there were sharp personnel mistakes due to changing the candidate for mayor at the last moment), or Pula, although each local community brought its own special characteristics. In Zagreb, SDP supported the coalition candidate for mayor Tomislav Tomašević (We Can!), in Rijeka, which for decades has carried the aura of “SDP electoral stronghold,” there was a division within the party, where dissidents excluded from the party appeared with their own list, while in Pula SDP tried to take over the space in which the IDS, which was their partner, had dominantly ruled and which entered a series of internal divisions. At the same time, in Osijek, Karlovac, or Slavonski Brod, as larger cities, SDP expectedly had far fewer chances for electoral success.

LOCAL ELECTIONS IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA – RESULTS AND CONSEQUENCES

The results of the local elections brought growth for HDZ, growth for SDP, and the virtual absence of so-called “third options,” which, according to expert public opinion turned into “punctual opposition” (decline of the MOST party, and almost symbolic effect of HSLS, HSS, and various extreme right factions – Homeland Movement, Domino, Croatian Conservative Party, HSP and others). The green-left party We Can! retained a certain weight as the third force in the country, from whose ranks comes Tomislav Tomašević as the new (old) mayor of Zagreb. At the same time, regional IDS of Dalibor Paus in Istria has a certain influence, although the number of their constant votes is declining – after the first round of elections, the President of IDS resigned due to internal divisions and independent appearances of yesterday’s most prominent officials, which after the first election results also brought the resignation of IDS president Dalibor Paus, as well as the Independent Platform North of former minister and HNS official Radimir Čačić, which retained influence in his native Medjimurje.

In the county assemblies, the HDZ and its coalition partners won 45% of the seats in these elections, and the SDP and its coalition won 28%, which makes up 73% of the seats in the county-regional parliaments in total. On the other hand, in the previous elections in 2021, the HDZ had 38% and the SDP 20%, so the HDZ recorded an increase

of 7% and the SDP by 8%. Nominally, the HDZ won 316 (2021, 296) seats in the county assemblies, and the SDP 182 (2021, 148) seats. In summary, in the first round of 20 counties, the HDZ and its coalitions individually achieved a majority in 15 counties, the SDP and the SDP-We Can! coalition in four (Krapina-Zagorje, Koprivnica-Križevci, Primorje-Gorski Kotar, and the city of Zagreb), and the IDS in one (Istria) and the Independent Platform North in one (Međimurje County). The HDZ also won 61 mayoral seats and 202 municipal presidents, and the SDP 25 mayoral seats and 47 municipal president seats (Turčin 2025). In short, HDZ and SDP took 67% of the mayoral seats (HDZ 48% and SDP 19%), as well as 58% of the municipal presidential seats (HDZ 44% and SDP 14%).

As part of the “fight for prestige,” the HDZ managed to retain power in Dubrovnik, Osijek, Karlovac, Zadar, and win the position of mayor of Split, while the SDP lost its “fortress” Rijeka after 32 years in power, because its candidate did not even make it to the second round of elections. However, the victory in the city of Rijeka was not recorded by the HDZ, but by the candidate of the Youth Action, the Union, the HSU, the Center, the Focus, and the Alternative non-partisan Iva Rinčić, previously an independent county deputy in the Primorje-Gorski Kotar County. The above situation was due to the decision of the SDP headquarters to replace the candidate for mayor at the last minute, so instead of the current mayor, Marko Filipović, his deputy, Sandra Krpan, was nominated. This led to a situation where Marko Filipović submitted his candidacy as a candidate of a group of citizens, and in the first round of elections, he was in second place, and Sandra Krpan (SDP, PGS, RI, SDSS, IDS, HSS) was in third place (Glavan i Cupać 2025).

Before the second round of elections, the greatest attention was attracted by the second round of elections for mayors of the largest cities – Zagreb, Rijeka, and Split, in which various and colorful political partnerships were created.

In total, in the second round, voting was held for 12 county prefects, the mayor of Zagreb, and for another 46 mayors and 62 municipal presidents. In the second round, there was a final resolution and an even more pronounced victory won by the ruling HDZ. HDZ managed to win in Split against the candidate of the Center party, who enjoyed the support of the left and liberal parties. In Rijeka, the aforementioned non-party candidate Iva Rinčić won, thus breaking the 32-year dominance of SDP in the city. HDZ also wins in Karlovac and

Slavonski Brod. In Zagreb, the candidate of the left-liberal coalition (SDP, We Can!) won, but he came from the ranks of the green-left party We Can!, not SDP. SDP only managed to win in the race for mayor of Pula (the position was won by former party president Peđa Grbin), but this victory had no ideological dimension because in the second round, he defeated a candidate who was a dissident from IDS, a natural ally of SDP (Hina 2025b).

HDZ's success was somewhat diminished by the failure in Vukovar, which has a certain symbolic value for Croatian right-wing parties, because in it the candidate of HDZ and Homeland Movement lost in the mayoral elections to a right-wing candidate of Croatian Sovereignists and the Domino party (Home and National Rally). Yet, given that the candidate came from the Homeland Movement, as a coalition partner of HDZ in the Government, this defeat was not so painful for HDZ, and on the other hand, it weakened the negotiating positions of DP in the Government, given that Vukovar and Vukovar-Srijem County are the most important stronghold of DP.

In the race for county prefects, HDZ showed absolute dominance. Thus, in Dubrovnik-Neretva, the candidate defeats the candidate of the MOST and HSP coalition. Similarly, the HDZ candidate in Vukovar-Srijem County also defeats the MOST party candidate. In Split-Dalmatia, the HDZ candidate defeats the Center party candidate, in Šibenik-Knin, Zadar, Zagreb, Požega-Slavonia, and Varaždin, HDZ candidates defeat candidates of SDP and its coalitions, and in Karlovac, the candidate of the coalition around the We Can! party.

SDP wins in Krapina-Zagorje and Primorje-Gorski Kotar County over candidates of coalitions around HDZ, while in Istria County, a dissident candidate from IDS defeats the SDP candidate.

In summary, out of 20 counties, 14 were won by HDZ and its coalitions, three by SDP (Primorje-Gorski Kotar, Krapina-Zagorje, and Bjelovar-Bilogora), one by the SDP-We Can! coalition (city of Zagreb), one by Independent Platform North (Međimurje County), and one by an independent candidate (Istria County).

The stated data clearly speak of the continuation of dominance of the ruling HDZ even in these local elections in Croatia.

CONCLUSION

The local elections in Croatia in 2025 were the fourth elections in time intervals of several months each (European elections, parliamentary, presidential, and local elections), and which effectively ended the electoral cycle for all levels of Government, in which complete unison of HDZ power in the country was achieved.

Naturally, parliamentary and presidential elections have more pronounced significance compared to local elections. Voter turnout data further illustrates how citizens perceive the relative importance of different elections. While turnout in the 2025 local elections ranged between 43.58% and 43.88% (depending on the level of local Government), almost identical to the 44.18% recorded in the presidential elections, participation was significantly lower than in the 2024 parliamentary elections, which reached 61.48%. This 17% gap clearly indicates that citizens still see parliamentary elections as the central arena of political power, reflecting the strong role of the prime minister in Croatia's political system. At the same time, European Parliament elections attracted only 21.08% of voters, showing that they are largely disregarded in comparison with national and even local contests, suggesting that primarily party loyalists and Eurosceptic voters mobilize in that arena (Državno izborno povjerenstvo 2024).

The parliamentary elections showed the dominance of HDZ, and the presidential elections showed more the personal popularity of Zoran Milanović than his connection with the party with which he was close, which he did not hide. The success of Zoran Milanović and his convincing victory in the presidential elections showed expectations for the growth of SDP, which could achieve a result in local elections that would lead to the overthrow of HDZ rule that has lasted a whole decade, since 2015. However, this did not happen, and the absence of greater participation by Zoran Milanović in pre-election activities was noticeable, even in the form of an official campaign.

The conclusions drawn from this election cycle are that it brought the dominance of the HDZ, nominally observed (in terms of the number of county, municipal and city councilors) a somewhat stronger position of the SDP at the local level (although in fact they no longer have a mayor in any of the largest cities, with the exception of Pula, but, of course, also in coalition with the We Can! party in Zagreb), but also the suppression from the party scene of numerous smaller parliamentary and

extra-parliamentary options – the Homeland Movement, MOST, IDS, HSP, Centar and others. The only exception is the green-left party We Can!, which, in coalition with the SDP, managed to retain the position of mayor of Zagreb, one of the most important positions in the country in terms of formation.

Given that HDZ managed to complete power from the national through county to local level with these local elections, in which it only has the President of the state as a sharp political critic, as well as the fact that voters went to polling stations four times in a period of one year, it is expected that three politically calm years will follow in which HDZ will be able to implement its political power unhindered.

For the opposition, primarily SDP and its partners (We Can!, IDS and others), the task remains to try to regroup and create a platform on which it could oppose HDZ in the next, by all accounts, regular parliamentary elections in 2028.

However, beyond party dynamics, such a political configuration opens important questions about the state of local democracy in Croatia. Although arguments can be found that institutional stability under one party enables coherent implementation of policies, the dilemma remains open whether strong vertical dominance of a national party at all levels of Government leaves sufficient space for political pluralism, alternative voices, and local interests.

The theories and insights pointed to in this work suggest that a diversified local scene, with space for various actors such as regional parties, civic platforms, independent lists, and the like, is an important condition for democratic legitimacy and accountability. If local elections function to affirm central power, there is a risk of losing the specificity of local policies, as well as reducing the capacity for civic participation outside the framework of large parties.

In this sense, although electoral results indicate stability and predictability of the political scene, they simultaneously initiate the question: is the democratic value of local elections reduced when the local level becomes merely a reflection of the central? Therefore, this electoral cycle also opens space for re-examining the quality of local representation and the democratic potential of local self-government itself.

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Appendix: Political Parties Mentioned in the Article

Original name (Croatian)	English translation	Acronym
Hrvatska demokratska zajednica	Croatian Democratic Union	HDZ
Socijaldemokratska partija Hrvatske	Social Democratic Party of Croatia	SDP
Možemo!	We Can! (Political Platform)	Možemo!
Nezavisna platforma Sjevera	Independent Platform North	NPS
Istarski demokratski sabor	Istrian Democratic Assembly	IDS
Most	Bridge of Independent Lists	MOST
Domovinski pokret	Homeland Movement	DP
Hrvatska stranka prava	Croatian Party of Rights	HSP
Dom i Nacionalno okupljanje	Home and National Rally	DOMINO
Hrvatska narodna stranka – liberalni demokrati	Croatian People's Party – Liberal Democrats	HNS
Hrvatska seljačka stranka	Croatian Peasant Party	HSS
Hrvatska socijalno-liberalna stranka	Croatian Social Liberal Party	HSLs

Original name (Croatian)	English translation	Acronym
Hrvatska stranka umirovljenika	Croatian Party of Pensioners	HSU
Stranka umirovljenika	Pensioners' Party	SU
Hrvatski suverenisti	Croatian Sovereignists	HS
Primorsko-goranski savez	Primorje-Gorski Kotar Alliance	PGS
Lista za Rijeku	List for Rijeka	RI
Samostalna demokratska srpska stranka	Independent Democratic Serb Party	SDSS

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ЛОКАЛНИ ИЗБОРИ У РЕПУБЛИЦИ ХРВАТСКОЈ 2025. ГОДИНЕ – НАСТАВАК ДОМИНАЦИЈЕ ХРВАТСКЕ ДЕМОКРАТСКЕ ЗАЈЕДНИЦЕ

Резиме

Циљ овог рада је анализа редовних локалних избора у Републици Хрватској који су одржани 18. маја, у првом, и 1. јуна 2025. године, у другом кругу. У локалним изборима бирани су сазиви регионалних – жупанијских и локалних–градских и општинских скупштина, уз избор градске скупштине и градоначелника главног града Загреба који има статус и регионалне и локалне самоуправе. Уз сазиве скупштина бирани су и градоначелници и председници општина (начелници), те њихови заменици из реда националних мањина. И ови избори су, као и већина претходних локалних изборних циклуса, исказали ривалитет две водеће националне странке – ХДЗ и СДП, често у наступима са својим коалиционим партнерима, и на њима је ХДЗ однео значајну превагу и остварио готово потпуно јединство националне и локалне власти. Покушаји „трећих опција” за продор били су неуспешни или је он остварен у коалицији са поменутиим водећим партијама, изузимајући поједине средине, док су све парламентарне странке било оне коалиционе на власти или пак у опозицији (Домовински покрет, МОСТ и др.) доживели су изборни пад. На изборима је традиционално исказан одређени значај регионалних, мањинских странака, али и независних кандидата.

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Кључне речи: Република Хрватска, локални избори, локална демократија, политичке странке, локални политички актери

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A DECADE OF NEGOTIATIONS: THE NEGOTIATION PROCESS OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE CHALLENGES OF STRUCTURAL REFORMS A DECADE LATER***

Abstract

The negotiation process between the Republic of Serbia and the European Union (EU), which began in January 2014, faced significant challenges during the past decade, which led to a temporary halt in the process of Serbia's accession to full membership in the EU. Despite the kick-off of implementing the revised EU enlargement methodology in February 2020, its failure to accelerate Serbia's accession process stems from the demanding nature of the structural reforms that Serbia must undertake in order to comply with EU standards and principles. These reforms cover various sectors, including the judiciary, public administration, and economic management. The paper investigates the causes of the stall in the negotiation process, such as political resistance,

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institutional resilience, lack of administrative capacity, and the need for institutional transformation, a decade after the start of negotiations in these areas. Moreover, the issue of corruption and the rule of law remains a significant social and political problem. Serbia's negotiation process with the EU has repeatedly exposed the need for the establishment of an independent and efficient judicial system, free from political influence and corruption. Reforms have been launched whilst certain benchmarks have been met, which shows the country's *de facto* commitment to the EU integration. Using the methods of document content analysis and discourse analysis, this paper critically examines the mutual interaction between Serbia's long-term negotiation process with the European Union and the delicate process of implementing structural reforms in the period from January 2014 to January 2024. The paper also critically evaluates the political dimensions of the EU enlargement process, including the asymmetric application of accession conditionality and the imposition of unprecedented political requirements on Serbia compared to other candidate countries.

Keywords: EU accession process, revised enlargement methodology, EU accession negotiations, structural reforms, Serbia, European Commission, EU Member States

INTRODUCTION

Serbia's quest for membership in the European Union (EU) has now spanned over a decade of formal negotiations, reflecting both the transformative ambitions of EU enlargement and the complex realities of domestic reform. The EU accession process is fundamentally designed as a catalyst for comprehensive political, economic, and societal change – using conditionality tied to democratic governance, rule of law, market liberalization, and harmonization with the EU *acquis* to align candidate countries closely with European norms and standards (Grabbe 2006; Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier 2005). This strategy builds on the EU's earlier successes during the Eastern enlargement waves of 2004 and 2007, where conditionality significantly influenced democratization and governance reforms in post-communist states (Vachudova 2005; Sedelmeier 2011). However, the context of the Western Balkans – and Serbia in particular – poses unique challenges, reflecting deeper structural issues and geopolitical complexities that complicate straightforward

adoption and internalization of EU norms (Bieber 2020; Richter and Wunsch 2020).

Indeed, ever since the EU's 2003 Thessaloniki Summit pledge that the "future of the Western Balkans lies in the EU," Serbia has been consistently urged to undertake deep structural reforms, especially in critical sectors such as judicial independence, anti-corruption measures, public administration efficiency, and democratic governance (Anastasakis 2005, 77–79; Bieber and Kmezić 2017). These areas have become central conditions under the EU's revised enlargement methodology adopted in 2020, emphasizing a merit-based, cluster-oriented approach intended to accelerate integration by rewarding genuine progress and sanctioning stagnation or regression (European Commission 2020; Wunsch and Richter 2022). Theoretically, such conditionality leverages what scholars describe as the EU's "transformative power" – the credible promise of EU membership acts as an external anchor, motivating candidate countries to democratize, modernize institutions, and align legislation and policies with the *acquis communautaire* (Grabbe 2006; Börzel and Risse 2012).

However, Serbia's actual experience over the past decade underscores significant challenges and limitations to this model. While formal legislative alignment and policy commitments have been considerable, the reality of implementing reforms on the ground has often lagged, reflecting what scholars term a persistent "implementation gap" or "compliance gap" (Noutcheva 2009; Dimitrova and Toshkov 2009). In particular, Serbia's progress has been hindered by entrenched domestic power structures resistant to substantive reforms, with political elites frequently accused of using EU accession processes strategically, adopting formal reforms while resisting changes that threaten established interests and patronage networks (Kmezić 2019; Bieber 2018). Moreover, Serbia's negotiation process has coincided with episodes of notable democratic backsliding, characterized by erosion in media freedom, weakening of independent institutions, and declining standards in electoral integrity, illustrating a paradoxical trend of illiberal regression occurring simultaneously with the formal pursuit of EU integration (Levitsky and Way 2010; Bieber 2020). This phenomenon, sometimes described as "stabilitocracy," points to regimes maintaining superficial compliance with EU standards to secure international legitimacy and economic benefits, while undermining democratic norms domestically (Richter and Wunsch 2020; Džankić, Keil and Kmezić 2019).

Geopolitical considerations further complicate Serbia's EU accession trajectory. Situated at the intersection of conflicting international interests, Serbia maintains a delicate balancing act between its proclaimed strategic goal of EU membership and maintaining close ties with non-Western actors, particularly Russia and China, whose influence in the Balkans has grown markedly in recent years (Bechev 2017; Dufalla and Metodieva 2024). The EU's intensified geopolitical stance following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 has elevated foreign policy alignment – including the adoption of sanctions against Russia – to a critical litmus test for accession credibility, placing Serbia under unprecedented pressure to clarify its strategic orientation (Dufalla and Metodieva 2024; European Commission 2023).

Thus, a decade since Serbia began its formal accession negotiations, the country's record reflects an uneven trajectory characterized by incremental reform achievements overshadowed by substantial governance deficits, democratic backsliding, and strategic ambiguity. Serbia's case exemplifies broader debates in the academic literature about the effectiveness of EU conditionality in contexts marked by entrenched illiberal politics, geopolitical tensions, and uncertain EU enlargement prospects (Bieber 2020; Vachudova 2019). Analyzing Serbia's experience offers critical insights into the potentials and limitations of the EU's transformative agenda in contemporary enlargement processes, highlighting the intricate interplay between external EU incentives and domestic political dynamics (Grabbe 2006; Wunsch and Richter 2022).

THE EU ACCESSION NEGOTIATION PROCESS (2014–2024)

Serbia's EU accession negotiations formally began in January 2014, following its candidacy grant in 2012 and pivotal steps such as the EU-facilitated Brussels Agreement with the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija (hereinafter: AP Kosovo and Metohija) in 2013. Over the past decade, the negotiation process has been structured around the EU's new approach that front-loads fundamental issues – notably judiciary and fundamental rights (Chapter 23) and justice, freedom, and security (Chapter 24) – to ensure early focus on the rule of law (European Commission 2023). Negotiations have been organized into 35 chapters (grouped into clusters under a revised methodology since

2020), covering the entire EU *acquis communautaire*. As of late 2023, Serbia had opened 22 out of 35 chapters of the *acquis*, with only two chapters provisionally closed (chapters 25–Science and Research, and 26–Education and Culture), reflecting the slow and painstaking nature of the process (European Commission 2023). Critical chapters remain in limbo, especially those tied to governance: for instance, Chapter 23 on judiciary reform and Chapter 24 on justice and security were opened early but cannot be closed until the end, keeping reform pressure on throughout the negotiations (Kmezić 2019). Moreover, Chapter 35 – dealing with Serbia’s external relations, notably the normalization of relations with the AP Kosovo and Metohija – has effectively become a make-or-break political criterion. Progress under this chapter has been halting, as political agreements with the AP Kosovo and Metohija see periodic crises and remain only partially implemented, highlighting how bilateral disputes can hinder overall accession progress (Vachudova 2019, 70–73). Together with the EU’s own hesitations and evolving methodology, these factors have made Serbia’s accession timeline highly uncertain. A process once optimistically projected to conclude within a decade has stretched longer, as both Brussels and Belgrade grapple with “enlargement fatigue” and the complexity of unfinished reforms in Serbia’s political and institutional landscape (Bieber 2020; Richter and Wunsch 2020).

Serbia’s EU accession negotiations, launched in January 2014, have followed a structured legal and institutional framework defined by the EU’s negotiating rules. The process began with the adoption of a Negotiating Framework by the Council of the EU, setting out the principles governing the talks, including a strong focus on the rule of law and the normalisation of relations with the AP Kosovo and Metohija as determinants of overall progress (European Commission 2022, 150–58). Under this framework, negotiations are organized into 35 chapters of the EU’s *acquis communautaire* (body of EU law) – each covering a specific policy area – plus an additional Chapter 35 addressing the normalization with the AP Kosovo and Metohija. In line with the EU’s 2012 “new approach” to enlargement, Chapters 23 and 24 (Judiciary and Fundamental Rights; Justice, Freedom and Security) were given central importance, to be opened early and closed last, making reforms in these areas pivotal for the pace of the entire accession (European Commission 2020, 31–34). This structure reflects the EU’s founding values of the rule of law and fundamental rights, and it ensures that Serbia’s progress on

judicial reform, anti-corruption, and security standards can effectively anchor broader alignment with the EU acquis.

Screening and Opening Benchmarks: A first phase of the negotiations was the screening process, an in-depth analytical examination of each acquis chapter conducted between Serbia and the European Commission. During 2014–2015, the Commission screened Serbian legislation to identify gaps relative to EU laws and standards. For each chapter, the Commission then issued a screening report with recommendations and, where necessary, opening benchmarks – specific conditions Serbia needed to meet before formal negotiations on that chapter could start. In practice, many chapters, especially those in technical areas, had no opening benchmarks and could be opened relatively smoothly. However, Chapter 23 (judiciary and fundamental rights) and Chapter 24 (justice, freedom, and security) were conditioned on comprehensive action plans. Serbia drafted detailed Action Plans for Chapters 23 and 24, outlining reforms and timelines, which were approved by the European Commission and the Council as opening benchmarks in 2016. The Action Plan for Chapter 23 focused on judicial independence, reducing political influence, anti-corruption measures, and fundamental rights protections, while the Chapter 24 plan addressed border security, migration and asylum systems, the fight against organized crime, and law enforcement cooperation (European Commission 2016, 54–60). The Council opened Chapters 23 and 24 in July 2016 after judging these plans adequate, marking a shift of the negotiations into the substantive phase (European Commission 2022, 152–56).

Structure and Evolution of the Negotiation Framework: By 2018, Serbia had opened a number of chapters beyond the rule-of-law area, gradually advancing the breadth of negotiations. Out of 35 acquis chapters, 22 chapters were opened by 2021, and two were provisionally closed (chapters on science and education, which carried few requirements) (European Commission 2022, 150–58). The negotiation framework evolved in line with EU policy improvements. In February 2020, the European Commission introduced a revised enlargement methodology aimed at reinvigorating the process and enhancing credibility (European Commission 2020). Serbia formally accepted the revised methodology in June 2021, adapting its negotiation structure to the new approach (European Commission 2022, 155–60). This revised framework groups the acquis chapters into six thematic

“clusters” and seeks to inject more high-level political engagement and predictability into the talks. Under the cluster approach, chapters are no longer opened one-by-one over many years, but rather as clusters of related chapters: for example, Cluster 1 covers the “Fundamentals” (rule of law, public administration reform, economic criteria), Cluster 2 the Internal Market, Cluster 3 Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth, Cluster 4 the Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity, Cluster 5 Resources, Agriculture and Cohesion, and Cluster 6 External Relations (European Commission 2020, 13–15). All chapters within a cluster are opened together once the opening benchmarks for that cluster are met, allowing a more comprehensive push on related reforms. Notably, Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) – which includes Chapters 23 and 24, as well as public procurement, statistics, financial control, and economic criteria – was opened at the very start of Serbia’s negotiations and remains the linchpin for overall progress. By the end of 2021, Serbia had met the conditions to open Cluster 4 (Green Agenda), which was officially opened in an Intergovernmental Conference in December 2021 (European Commission 2022, 153–54). The European Commission has confirmed that Serbia also fulfilled opening benchmarks for Cluster 3 (Competitiveness & Inclusive Growth), making it technically ready to open next (European Commission 2022, 183–86). However, despite the Commission’s positive assessment, the opening of Cluster 3 was subsequently blocked by certain EU member states for political reasons, illustrating that Serbia’s accession progress is constrained not only by its own reform performance but also by the political dynamics within the EU itself.

Role of Chapters 23 and 24 (Judiciary, Fundamental Rights, Justice, and Security): The prominence of Chapters 23 and 24 in Serbia’s accession talks cannot be overstated. These chapters are part of the “Fundamentals” first cluster and carry the strictest conditionality. The EU *acquis* under Chapter 23 covers judicial reform, anti-corruption policy, fundamental rights, and the protection of minorities, while Chapter 24 covers justice, security, migration, border control, asylum policy, police cooperation, and the fight against organized crime. The function of these chapters is to ensure Serbia establishes an independent, efficient judiciary and robust safeguards for the rule of law and security – prerequisites for EU membership. To this end, the EU has instituted a system of benchmarks and regular assessments within these chapters. Upon opening Chapters 23 and 24, the EU Council set “interim

benchmarks” that Serbia must meet to demonstrate progress (European Commission 2020, 31–34). These include measurable steps like adopting constitutional amendments to strengthen judicial independence, improving the track record of prosecutions and convictions in high-level corruption and organized crime cases, and aligning legislation with European human rights standards. No other chapters can be closed until the EU assesses that the interim rule-of-law benchmarks are sufficiently met – a rule designed to prevent Serbia from advancing in easier areas while neglecting core democratic reforms (European Commission 2020, 31–34). In practice, this means that Serbia must show a solid track record in reforming its judiciary and fighting corruption and crime before it can conclude negotiations. Progress is monitored through European Commission annual reports and ad hoc expert missions. For example, the Commission’s Serbia 2022 Report notes that Serbia is “*moderately prepared*” in the judiciary and fundamental rights area and has made *limited progress*, highlighting steps such as the February 2022 constitutional amendments on judicial appointments as an important move to reduce political influence on judges and prosecutors (European Commission 2022, 1602–05, 1613–22). At the same time, the report stresses that many recommendations remain unmet – Serbia still needs to adopt new laws to implement the constitutional changes, create a new anti-corruption strategy, and improve media freedom (European Commission 2022, 1634–42). In Chapter 24, the EU similarly found “some level of preparation” and *some progress*, for instance, due to Serbia’s efforts in managing migration flows and initial steps in aligning with Schengen border security norms, but also pointed out delays in fully reforming the police and aligning visa policies with the EU (European Commission 2022, 4377–88, 4395–404). By keeping these chapters under close scrutiny throughout the negotiation, the EU aims to ensure that reforms in justice and security are not only adopted on paper but also implemented and sustained.

Benchmarks, Action Plans, and Progress Assessments: Serbia’s experience illustrates the dense web of benchmarks and plans guiding the accession negotiations. The Action Plans for Chapters 23 and 24 serve as blueprints for reform and are themselves living documents. Serbia revised these plans in 2020 to address new recommendations and delays in implementation. For Chapter 23, a revised Action Plan was adopted in 2020 to recalibrate reform targets and timelines, especially after the initial years showed modest results. The revised plan put greater

emphasis on qualitative progress indicators and introduced an “early warning” reporting mechanism to identify implementation gaps across the dozens of institutions involved (European Commission 2022, 1602–10). Similarly, the Action Plan for Chapter 24 was updated in July 2020, with the Serbian Ministry of Interior and related agencies committing to new deadlines for meeting EU interim benchmarks (European Commission 2022, 4438–44). To measure progress against these benchmarks, the European Commission and Council use a range of assessment tools. Chief among them are the Commission’s Annual Progress Reports (now termed country reports), which evaluate Serbia’s alignment and reforms in each chapter. These reports use a qualitative scale (ranging from “early stage” to “well advanced” preparation) to describe the state of alignment and “no progress” to “good progress” to describe reform efforts year-on-year. For instance, the Commission’s 2021 and 2022 reports on Serbia both acknowledged incremental progress in judicial reforms (like reducing the influence of Parliament over judicial appointments) but urged more results in prosecuting corruption and organized crime, often noting that progress was only partial or laws were only “*partially implemented*” (European Commission 2022, 1634–42; Richter and Wunsch 2020, 740–42). In addition to these annual reports, the EU may deploy peer review missions – expert teams that evaluate on-site the functioning of institutions such as courts, prosecution services, border police, etc. Their findings feed into whether interim benchmarks are considered fulfilled. Furthermore, Intergovernmental Conferences at the ministerial level are convened to take stock of progress. Under the revised methodology, these high-level conferences allow for a “*political steer*” – essentially a forum where the EU and Serbia review cluster progress and set priorities. They occur when key milestones are reached, for example, when interim benchmarks in the Fundamentals cluster are met, or when a new cluster is ready to open (European Commission 2020, 9–11). This added political dialogue was intended to keep reforms from stalling and to maintain momentum through the lengthy negotiation process.

Institutional Coordination and Implementation in Serbia: Meeting the extensive requirements of EU accession has demanded significant coordination within Serbia’s government. Institutionally, Serbia has developed a framework to manage negotiations and harmonize its laws with the EU acquis. The Ministry of European Integration (established in 2017 by merging the former European Integration Office into a ministry)

plays a central coordinating role. A high-ranking Chief Negotiator (for much of the period 2015–2022, this role was held by then-Minister of European Integration Jadranka Joksimović) leads the Serbian negotiating team and liaises with the European Commission and EU Member States. Within Serbia, negotiating groups are organized for each chapter or cluster, typically led by the relevant ministry or agency. For example, the Ministry of Justice heads the Chapter 23 negotiating group, while the Ministry of Interior coordinates Chapter 24, each working with dozens of other institutions (judicial councils, anti-corruption agency, police directorate, etc.) to implement reforms. To oversee and synchronize these efforts, the Serbian government in 2021 established an Inter-institutional Coordination Body for the rule of law chapters, bringing together representatives from the judiciary, prosecution, ministries, and independent bodies (European Commission 2022, 1606–15). This Coordination Body meets regularly to monitor the execution of the Action Plan for Chapter 23, troubleshoot inter-agency issues, and ensure that reform measures (e.g. drafting of new judiciary laws, training of judges, setting up new institutions like an independent prosecution office) stay on schedule. The European Commission (2022, 1606–15) noted that by 2022, this body had held several meetings and helped improve the judiciary’s monitoring and reporting mechanisms. Serbia has also improved transparency by publishing periodic reports on action plan implementation – for instance, semi-annual reports on Chapter 23 reforms are made public, allowing both the EU and Serbian civil society to track progress. Civil society organizations, under frameworks like the National Convention on the EU, are consulted (to varying degrees) on chapter-related reforms, providing external monitoring and input on issues such as human rights or judicial integrity. Administrative capacity remains a challenge: the Commission’s reports frequently emphasize the need for Serbia to allocate “sufficient human and financial resources for EU accession work across all institutions” (European Commission 2022, 200–208). This includes everything from hiring and training staff who can draft EU-aligned legislation, to empowering independent bodies like the anti-corruption agency, to improving inter-ministerial coordination on complex reforms. In terms of legal harmonization, Serbia has steadily adopted EU-aligned laws in many chapters – by 2024, large parts of economic, trade, and sectoral legislation are already in line with the *acquis*. However, full harmonization in Chapters 23 and 24 is particularly demanding: it requires not just passing laws

(such as a new Law on the Prevention of Corruption or amendments to the Criminal Procedure Code) but also demonstrating their effective enforcement. The Commission's monitoring has highlighted that Serbia's legal alignment in justice and home affairs must translate into concrete results like independent judiciary appointments, convictions of corrupt officials, decreased backlog of court cases, and dismantling of criminal networks (European Commission 2022, 2495–2504). These outcomes are precisely what the interim benchmarks seek to measure.

The 2020 Revised Methodology in Practice: Serbia's adoption of the EU's revised enlargement methodology in 2021 has subtly shifted the negotiation dynamics. While the fundamental requirements remain the same, the cluster system means Serbia's progress is now evaluated in broader strokes. Rather than focusing on individual chapters in isolation, the EU assesses clusters holistically – for example, Cluster 1 (Fundamentals) will only be considered for closure when reforms in judiciary (chap. 23), security (chap. 24), public procurement (chap. 5), statistics (chap. 18), and financial control (chap. 32) *together* reach an adequate level. This encourages Serbia to advance on all these fronts in parallel. It also comes with the political *reward* that if Serbia makes a major breakthrough in one fundamental area (say, judicial reform), it can potentially accelerate movement in related chapters or receive increased EU integration benefits even before membership (European Commission 2020, 13–15). Another feature of the new methodology is the possibility of “phasing-in” to EU policies and funds before accession, for well-performing candidates – for instance, deeper integration into EU programs or the single market clusters. For Serbia, this means that strong performance on governance reforms could unlock closer ties or investments even during negotiations, adding an incentive for genuine implementation. On the flip side, the methodology also foresees corrective measures in case of serious backsliding: negotiations in certain areas can be stalled or even reopened if reforms regress (European Commission 2020, 9–11). While Serbia's negotiations have not been formally frozen in any area, the pace has effectively slowed when reform momentum faltered – as seen in 2022 when domestic elections and political distractions delayed reform laws (European Commission 2022, 173–80). Under the cluster approach, such slowdowns can hold back the opening of entire clusters. Indeed, the EU has signaled that advancement to new clusters will not happen until Serbia re-energizes reforms in the rule of law domain (European Commission 2022, 183–86). This

integrated approach underscores that Serbia's path to EU membership by 2024 and beyond is contingent on sustained political will to meet the detailed requirements of the negotiation framework.

In summary, from 2014 to 2024 Serbia's accession negotiations have been characterized by an evolving but rigorous framework of legal alignment and institutional reform, with the EU's *acquis* chapters and methodology providing the roadmap. Screening set the baseline, action plans and benchmarks have guided reforms chapter-by-chapter, and the revised 2020 methodology now frames the process in broader clusters to encourage comprehensive progress. Chapters 23 and 24 stand at the heart of this process – through these, the EU demands deep-seated changes to Serbia's judiciary and governance, monitored via interim benchmarks and annual assessments. Serbia's government has created coordinating bodies and plans to tackle these obligations, achieving certain milestones like constitutional reforms and improved administrative capacity, but still faces ongoing challenges in translating EU-inspired laws into tangible, track-record outcomes. The period up to 2024 shows an intricate dance between Serbia's implementation efforts and the EU's conditionality: while Serbia has aligned a large share of its legislation with the *acquis* and opened most negotiation chapters, the credibility of its accession process will ultimately rest on the integrity of its institutions and the durability of rule-of-law reforms. The European Commission's annual reports – and broader research on the Western Balkans – indicate that progress has been real but uneven, with reforms often fragmentary or reversible in the absence of strong domestic commitment (Richter and Wunsch 2020, 752–54). Therefore, the legal-institutional mechanisms of accession negotiations serve not only to open chapters but to continually test Serbia's readiness for membership. As negotiations advance under the cluster methodology, the focus remains on ensuring that Serbia's legal harmonization is coupled with genuine institutional change, fulfilling the EU's stringent criteria by the time accession talks conclude.

However, a critical assessment of Serbia's EU integration process must also take into account the broader political dimensions of EU enlargement that extend beyond the formal conditionality framework. Historically, EU accession has never been a purely technocratic, merit-based exercise. The accession of Bulgaria and Romania in 2007 demonstrated that the EU was willing to admit countries that had not fully met the Copenhagen criteria, particularly in the areas of judicial reform, anti-corruption, and rule of law, instead relying on post-accession

monitoring mechanisms such as the Cooperation and Verification Mechanism (CVM) to address remaining deficiencies (Kochenov 2008; Noutcheva 2009). More recently, the EU's decision to grant candidate status to Ukraine in June 2022, amid the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict, has further underscored the fundamentally political character of enlargement decisions. Ukraine was granted candidate status despite not fulfilling virtually any of the standard benchmarks regarding the rule of law, judicial independence, or anti-corruption performance – conditions that Serbia has been working to meet for over a decade (European Commission 2023). This asymmetric application of conditionality has reinforced perceptions in Serbia and across the Western Balkans that the EU applies different standards to different candidate countries depending on prevailing geopolitical interests (Bieber 2020; Vachudova 2019).

Furthermore, Serbia's negotiation process has been uniquely burdened by political conditions that have not been imposed on any other EU candidate country. The requirement to normalize relations with the AP Kosovo and Metohija under Chapter 35, which effectively conditions Serbia's accession progress on the resolution of a deeply contested sovereignty and territorial issue, represents an unprecedented form of political conditionality in the history of EU enlargement (Kmezić 2019). No other candidate country has been required to renounce claims over part of its internationally recognized territory as a precondition for EU membership. Additionally, despite the European Commission's own confirmation that Serbia had fulfilled the opening benchmarks for Cluster 3 (Competitiveness and Inclusive Growth), the opening of this cluster was blocked by certain EU member states for political reasons unrelated to Serbia's reform performance (European Commission 2022, 183–86). Such instances reveal that the pace of Serbia's accession is shaped not only by its own reform trajectory but also by the internal political dynamics and strategic calculations of EU member states themselves. A comprehensive analysis of Serbia's EU integration process must therefore account for these structural asymmetries and the inherently political nature of the enlargement process, rather than attributing the stagnation of negotiations solely to domestic reform deficiencies.

CHALLENGES IN JUDICIAL AND POLITICAL REFORMS

At the heart of Serbia's negotiation challenges lies the agenda of structural reforms, especially in the judiciary, public administration, and anti-corruption frameworks. Over the past ten years, Serbia has adopted numerous new laws, strategies, and even constitutional amendments aimed at strengthening the rule of law – often directly spurred by EU accession requirements. Notably, in 2022, the Serbian Parliament approved constitutional changes to depoliticize judicial appointments and enhance the independence of judges and prosecutors, a reform carried out in consultation with the Venice Commission to meet EU recommendations (European Commission 2023). On paper, these steps address key EU benchmarks and seemingly align with European standards. However, scholars and observers caution that many of these reforms remain superficial or incomplete – a case of institutional change without genuine behavioral change (Kmezić 2019). Despite new laws, the judiciary continues to suffer from political influence, selective justice, and inefficiency, indicating a pattern of “partial compliance” where formal alignment with EU norms does not necessarily translate into implementation (Noutcheva 2009). Endemic issues of state capture – in which political elites informally control ostensibly independent institutions – persist in Serbia's governance, undermining the spirit of the rule-of-law reforms (Richter and Wunsch 2020). For example, high-profile corruption cases and organized crime investigations often stall or avoid prosecution if they implicate government-aligned interests, revealing the limits of reform depth. The European Commission's annual reports consistently find Serbia only “moderately prepared” in the judiciary and anti-corruption chapters, noting limited progress in establishing a track record of impartial justice. Independent watchdogs likewise report that, despite an expanded legal toolkit, judicial independence is fragile and prosecutors still face pressures in politically sensitive cases (Kmezić 2019). In sum, while the EU negotiation process has prompted an unprecedented overhaul of Serbia's legal framework, the entrenched political practices and power structures in the country have slowed the transformative impact that such reforms are intended to have. This discrepancy between rule adoption and rule application is a core challenge of Serbia's accession effort a decade later, reflecting the broader difficulty of entrenching liberal-democratic governance in

a context where illiberal tendencies remain strong (Richter and Wunsch 2020).

Serbia's pursuit of European Union membership entails comprehensive judicial and political reforms, framed by legal requirements for the rule of law and democratic governance. These challenges are rooted in doctrinal debates on judicial independence, institutional design, and anti-corruption norms, all under the umbrella of EU legal conditionality. In the context of EU accession negotiations – notably Chapter 23 on Judiciary and Fundamental Rights – Serbia is expected to align its legal and constitutional framework with European standards. The following sections examine key issues in an academic and comparative perspective: the legal theory behind judicial independence in the EU accession context; Serbia's 2022 constitutional amendments viewed through comparative constitutional law; the development of anti-corruption legislation in light of EU rule of law benchmarks; institutional safeguards for the separation of powers; and the phenomenon of 'rule of law backsliding' in the EU enlargement process.

Judicial Independence in the EU Accession Context

In the context of EU accession, judicial independence is not only a democratic principle but a legal prerequisite anchored in the Copenhagen criteria for membership (European Council 1993). Legal theory frames judicial independence as a cornerstone of the rule of law, requiring that judges be free from undue influence by the executive or legislative branches. This principle has both an institutional dimension – guaranteeing the judiciary's autonomy as a branch of government – and an individual dimension – protecting judges' decisional independence in specific cases (Preshova, Damjanovski and Nechev 2017). The EU's conditionality places significant weight on this principle: candidate countries must establish structural safeguards (such as independent judicial councils, merit-based judge selection, and secure tenure) to ensure an impartial and professional judiciary (Kmezić 2017). This emphasis reflects the EU's interest in ensuring that national courts can reliably enforce the *acquis communautaire* and protect fundamental rights upon accession (Kochenov 2008). In Serbia's case, persistent concerns about political influence over courts have spurred EU-supported reforms to insulate judicial appointments and discipline from partisan politics (European Commission 2022). The legal-theoretical debates

here center on how to design institutions that uphold de facto judicial independence, not merely de jure independence, especially in post-authoritarian contexts where informal pressures can undermine formal guarantees (Mendelski 2018). Thus, judicial independence in the EU accession context is both a normative ideal and a practical benchmark: it requires aligning Serbia's judicial governance with European standards and fostering a culture of judicial professionalism immune from political interference.

Constitutional Amendments of 2022 in Comparative Perspective

In 2022, Serbia undertook significant constitutional amendments aimed at strengthening judicial independence, a move largely driven by EU reform benchmarks under Chapter 23 (European Commission 2022). From a comparative constitutional law perspective, these amendments align with broader post-communist trends to depoliticize the judiciary by limiting the influence of the legislative and executive branches in judicial appointments (Venice Commission 2021). Serbia's reforms, approved by a national referendum, reconfigured the High Judicial Council and High Prosecutorial Council to have a majority of members elected by judges and prosecutors themselves, rather than by politicians, drawing on models found in other European jurisdictions (Preshova, Damjanovski and Nechev 2017). Such changes were designed to curtail the longstanding practice of parliamentary appointment of judges, which had raised concerns about politicization and judicial subservience to ruling parties (Preshova, Damjanovski and Nechev 2017). The Venice Commission – the Council of Europe's advisory body on constitutional matters – largely endorsed the 2022 amendments as a step toward compliance with European standards, while recommending continued vigilance to ensure that the new formal safeguards translate into *actual* judicial independence in practice (Venice Commission 2021). Comparatively, Serbia's approach mirrors reforms in neighboring EU aspirants like Montenegro and North Macedonia, which similarly revised their constitutions to fortify judicial councils and insulate courts from political pressures (Džankić, Keil and Kmezić 2019). By examining Serbia's constitutional changes through a comparative lens, one observes a common doctrinal thread: the effort to balance judicial accountability (through transparent appointment and evaluation criteria) with judicial

independence (by minimizing direct political control), in line with European rule-of-law norms.

ANTI-CORRUPTION LEGISLATION AND EU RULE OF LAW BENCHMARKS

Serbia has adopted a comprehensive body of anti-corruption legislation to meet the rule of law benchmarks set out in EU accession Chapter 23 (European Commission 2022). These measures include laws on the prevention of corruption, the establishment of an independent anti-corruption agency, stricter rules on public officials' asset disclosure and conflict of interest, as well as protections for whistleblowers. From a legal standpoint, this legislative framework is intended to fulfill EU standards drawn from international conventions (such as the United Nations Convention against Corruption) and EU best practices, as well as specific criteria outlined in Serbia's Chapter 23 Action Plan (European Commission 2021). Doctrinal debates in the legal literature, however, emphasize that formal compliance through legislation is not sufficient; effective enforcement and a demonstrated "track record" of high-level corruption prosecutions are crucial indicators of genuine reform (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015; Mendelski 2018). The EU's conditionality regime explicitly requires not just the adoption of laws, but their *implementation*, evidenced by impartial investigations, indictments, and final convictions in corruption cases involving officials. Scholars note that without independent institutions – including specialized prosecutors and courts – capable of impartially applying these laws, anti-corruption reforms risk becoming mere window-dressing (Mendelski 2018; Richter and Wunsch 2020). In the Serbian context, the European Commission's progress reports have acknowledged some progress in aligning laws with the EU *acquis*, but continue to highlight limited results in dismantling patronage networks or in prosecuting high-level corruption cases (European Commission 2022). This gap between rule-of-law legislation and real-world impact illustrates a broader theoretical point: the existence of legal rules does not automatically guarantee the rule of law. The challenge, therefore, lies in translating legal changes into a culture of integrity and accountability – a common difficulty observed across Southeast European countries transitioning from clientelistic political systems (Mungiu-Pippidi 2015). Ongoing monitoring under Chapter 23 serves to keep anti-corruption efforts in Serbia under scrutiny, linking

the credibility of Serbia's EU bid to sustained performance in curbing corruption.

Institutional Safeguards for Separation of Powers

A robust separation of powers is fundamental to ensuring that judicial reforms are sustainable and insulated from political oscillations. Constitutional scholars underscore that formal guarantees of judicial independence must be coupled with broader institutional “checks and balances that prevent any one branch of government from accumulating excessive power” (Pech and Scheppele 2017). In Serbia, the constitution and related laws provide certain safeguards – such as life tenure for judges (after a probationary period), immunity for judicial decisions, and the autonomous administration of the courts – all designed to uphold the separation of powers (Venice Commission 2016). The 2022 constitutional amendments further aimed to entrench such safeguards by reducing direct political influence over the judiciary and prosecution, thereby reinforcing the classical Montesquieuan notion of three coequal and independent branches of government (Venice Commission 2021). From a doctrinal standpoint, these reforms resonate with principles of comparative constitutional design that advocate institutions like judicial councils, constitutional courts, and independent oversight bodies as intermediaries maintaining the balance of power (Kmezić 2017). For instance, Serbia's Constitutional Court plays a key role in reviewing legislation and government acts for compliance with the constitution, acting as a check on the executive and legislature. However, effective checks and balances depend not only on constitutional text but also on political culture and the commitment of officials to respect the rule of law in practice (Džankić, Keil and Kmezić 2019). Persistent challenges in many Western Balkan states, including Serbia, involve informal power structures and executive dominance that can erode the practical functioning of the separation of powers despite formally sound laws (Richter and Wunsch 2020). This has led to scholarly discussions about “institutional resilience” – the ability of judicial and other oversight bodies to withstand pressure and enforce limits on power. In sum, establishing legal safeguards is a necessary step, but their durability hinges on continued institutional vigilance and a political environment that values constitutionalism over short-term partisan interests.

Rule of Law Backsliding and Compliance under EU Enlargement Law

The phenomenon of “rule of law backsliding” – where initially enacted reforms stagnate or are reversed – has become a subject of theoretical discussion in both EU internal and enlargement contexts (Pech and Scheppele 2017). While EU candidate countries like Serbia often adopt extensive reforms on paper to meet accession conditions, maintaining those reforms over time is an ongoing challenge, particularly if domestic political will wanes or if the incentives of EU membership lose credibility (Noutcheva 2009). EU enlargement law, as reflected in accession negotiation frameworks, attempts to address this risk by instituting mechanisms such as interim benchmarks, rigorous monitoring, and the possibility of halting or reversing negotiation progress in cases of serious backsliding (Council of the European Union 2012). Notably, the EU’s revised accession methodology of 2020 places the rule of law at the heart of the process: chapters on judiciary and fundamental rights (and justice, freedom, and security) are opened early and closed last, and negative trends can impact the overall pace of negotiations (European Commission 2020). This approach is intended to create a constant incentive for compliance and to detect backsliding early. Nevertheless, academic critiques suggest that external conditionality has inherent limits: if domestic actors engage in only superficial compliance, or if entrenched elites find ways to circumvent reforms while formally ticking the EU’s boxes, the EU’s leverage may be insufficient to prevent regression (Kochenov 2008; Richter and Wunsch 2020). This has been evidenced in other post-accession contexts in East-Central Europe, where formal adoption of EU-compliant laws was followed by a re-concentration of power once external pressure diminished (Mendelski 2018). In Serbia’s case, the durability of recent judicial and political reforms will depend on both the strict enforcement of new constitutional and legal provisions and on the depth of domestic commitment to uphold the spirit of these reforms, even amid electoral changes or geopolitical uncertainties (Džankić, Keil and Kmezić 2019). The interplay between EU conditionality and national politics thus remains critical. Compliance is not a one-time checklist exercise but a prolonged process of legal and institutional transformation – one that must be internalized by domestic institutions to guard against backsliding (Noutcheva 2009). As Serbia moves forward in the EU accession process, its experience will continue

to test the effectiveness of EU legal conditionality in fostering genuine rule-of-law consolidation versus merely transient compliance.

ECONOMIC REFORMS AND GOVERNANCE

Economic transformation has been another focal point of Serbia's EU negotiations, intertwined with the political reform agenda. Over the past decade, Serbia's economy has undergone significant changes under the guidance of EU norms and international financial institutions – from tightening fiscal discipline to improving the business regulatory environment. Early in the negotiation period, Serbia embarked on austerity measures and restructuring (especially around 2014–2015, often in coordination with the IMF), which helped reduce public deficits and debt, restoring macroeconomic stability. The EU has complemented these efforts by integrating Serbia (and its Western Balkan peers) into frameworks like the annual Economic Reform Programme (ERP) exercise, which mirrors the EU's own economic governance process and sets out priority structural reforms to boost competitiveness and growth (Besimi and Monastiriotis 2019). Reforms have included modernizing tax administration, overhauling public financial management, simplifying licensing procedures, and partially privatizing or reorganizing state-owned enterprises. By conventional metrics, Serbia's economy in 2024 is more stable and open than it was a decade ago, with moderate growth, controlled inflation, and substantially increased trade with the EU (the EU accounts for around two-thirds of Serbia's trade) – outcomes in line with the expected benefits of the EU integration process. However, the depth and sustainability of economic reforms remain in question, as does the degree to which they translate into convergence with EU living standards. Analysts note that the Western Balkan region experienced a notable deceleration in structural reform momentum and economic convergence after the global financial crisis of 2008 and during periods when the EU's enlargement agenda lost priority (Besimi and Monastiriotis 2019). In Serbia's case, while headline fiscal and growth figures improved in the late 2010s, progress on underlying issues – such as strengthening the rule of law in economic governance, reducing corruption, and improving the efficiency of the public administration – was limited. These factors continue to deter higher levels of investment and innovation. Corruption and bureaucratic inefficiencies impose a hidden tax on the economy, and Serbia's governance indicators in areas

like regulatory quality and control of corruption have seen only modest improvement, if not stagnation, over the negotiation decade (European Commission 2023). The concept of “state capture,” whereby well-connected economic interests and political elites dominate key sectors, applies to Serbia’s political economy and inhibits truly fair competition (Richter and Wunsch 2020). Moreover, regional economic studies suggest that without the credible prospect of imminent EU membership, governments in the Balkans often lack the incentive to undertake politically sensitive reforms that could disrupt patronage networks (Vachudova 2019). Serbia’s reform trajectory supports this argument: reform spurts often coincided with periods of high EU engagement, while slowdowns aligned with times of EU ambivalence or domestic electoral politics. In quantitative terms, research has found a strong correlation between EU integration milestones and reform adoption in Southeast Europe (Besimi and Monastiriotis 2019), yet also warns that in the absence of consistent pressure, partial reforms can plateau. Thus, economically, Serbia stands at a crossroads a decade into negotiations – having achieved a basic level of macro-stability and integration with European markets, but still facing significant structural challenges in governance and productivity that EU-oriented reforms have not fully resolved. Completing the “second generation” reforms (e.g., judiciary effectiveness, property rights enforcement, competition policy) is essential for Serbia to genuinely catch up with EU economies (Bartlett and Prica 2017). The coming years will test whether the prospect of EU accession (potentially revitalized by new EU investment initiatives and a post-2022 geopolitical push for enlargement) can propel Serbia into addressing these remaining hurdles in its economic governance.

CONCLUSION: PROSPECTS AND REFLECTIONS AFTER A DECADE

A decade into Serbia’s EU accession negotiations, the balance sheet of progress presents a sobering picture of both achievements and shortcomings. On one hand, the negotiation process has undeniably anchored Serbia in a framework of European norms: a vast body of EU-compliant legislation has been adopted, institutions have been created or reformed on EU models, and the country’s foreign policy narrative remains tied to eventual EU membership. On the other hand, the quality of democratic governance and the rule of law in Serbia has not improved

commensurately with these formal changes, as persistent challenges in judicial reform and anti-corruption implementation continue to raise concerns (Richter and Wunsch 2020). This dichotomy underscores a central lesson of the past decade: EU conditionality can guide and catalyze reforms, but its effectiveness is heavily contingent on domestic political will and the credibility of the EU's offer (Noutcheva 2009). In Serbia's case, the interplay between domestic reform constraints and the EU's own inconsistencies in applying accession criteria has contributed to a deceleration of the transformative momentum initially expected from the integration process. At the same time, EU factors – such as the slowing pace of enlargement, mixed messages from member states, and a reluctance to confront authoritarian tendencies forcefully – have weakened the pull of Europeanization (Vachudova 2019). The result is a protracted accession journey where technical alignment has advanced, but normative change lags behind.

Looking forward, the next phase of Serbia's EU journey will require reinvigorating the reform momentum and rebuilding mutual trust. For Serbia, this means demonstrating tangible commitment to core EU values: implementing laws in good faith, safeguarding media freedom and pluralism, ensuring independent judiciary and anti-corruption bodies, and aligning its foreign policy decisively with the EU at critical moments. These steps are necessary to convince skeptical EU actors that Serbia's membership would strengthen, not dilute, the Union's political cohesion. For the EU, it may require a recalibration of its approach – possibly offering incremental rewards (such as phased integration into single market sectors or observer status in EU institutions) to sustain incentives, as well as a clearer geopolitical commitment to enlargement in the Western Balkans to outcompete alternative influences (Dufalla and Metodieva 2024). Encouragingly, the EU's renewed attention to the region (for example, the 2018 "Credible Enlargement Perspective" strategy and revived high-level engagement in 2021–2023) suggests that Brussels recognizes the strategic importance of completing the Balkans' integration. Yet, strategies and promises will only bear fruit if followed by consistent action. As academic analyses warn, "enlargement fatigue" and the rise of illiberalism both within the EU and among candidates could turn the accession process into an empty ritual if not addressed (Vachudova 2019; Bieber 2020).

In conclusion, Serbia's decade-long negotiation process vividly illustrates both the transformative reach and the inherent limits of the

EU's enlargement policy. It stands as a test case of whether the EU can still act as a democratizing force in its neighborhood when confronted with resilient illiberal politics. The coming years will be decisive: either Serbia will undertake the profound structural changes necessary to break the pattern of stalled reforms and meet the EU's entry standards, or its European integration aspirations will remain indefinitely unrealized, reinforcing a regional trend of stagnant Europeanization. The stakes of this outcome extend beyond Serbia itself – they will signal the future of EU influence and the prospects of democratic consolidation in the Western Balkans at a time when the very idea of an “ever-enlarging Union” hangs in the balance (Anastasakis 2005; Levitsky and Way 2010). As Serbia and the EU both navigate internal and external challenges, their negotiation saga enters its second decade with an acute awareness that the credibility of the EU accession process – and the promise of a Europe whole, free, and at peace – depends on recoupling formal progress with substantive democratic change. The lesson of the past ten years is clear: without genuine political transformation, integration on paper will not suffice to achieve integration in reality. The task ahead is to ensure that the next decade delivers on the fundamental reforms that the first decade has left incomplete, thereby turning Serbia's European future from a negotiated possibility into a lived reality (Vachudova 2005; Grabbe 2006).

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**ДЕЦЕНИЈА ПРЕГОВОРА:
ПРЕГОВАРАЧКИ ПРОЦЕС РЕПУБЛИКЕ
СРБИЈЕ СА ЕВРОПСКОМ УНИЈОМ И
ИЗАЗОВИ СТРУКТУРНИХ РЕФОРМИ
ДЕЦЕНИЈУ КАСНИЈЕ*****

Резиме

Процес преговора између Републике Србије и Европске уније (ЕУ), који је почео у јануару 2014. године, суочио се са значајним изазовима током протекле деценије, што је довело до привременог застоја у процесу приступања Србије пуноправном чланству ЕУ. Упркос почетку примене ревидиране методологије проширења ЕУ у фебруару 2020. године, њен неуспех да убрза процес приступања Србије произилази из захтевне природе структурних реформи које Србија мора да предузме како би се ускладила са стандардима и принципима ЕУ. Ове реформе обухватају различите секторе, укључујући правосудје, јавну управу и економско управљање. Рад истражује узроке застоја у процесу преговора, као што су политички отпор, институционална отпорност, недостатак административних капацитета и потреба за институционалном трансформацијом деценију након почетка преговора у овим областима. Штавише, питање корупције и владавине права остаје значајан друштвени и политички проблем. Процес преговора Србије са ЕУ је више пута открио потребу за успостављањем независног и ефикасног правосудног система, слободног од политичког утицаја и корупције.

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*** Налази овог рада претходно су представљени на 33. годишњој конференцији NISPAcee „Вишеструке кризе и управљање на више нивоа: утицаји, научене лекције, изазови и могућности“, одржаној у Братислави, Република Словачка, од 22. до 24. маја 2025. године, у виду усменог излагања под истим насловом.

Реформе су покренуте док су испуњени одређени критеријуми, што показује де факто посвећеност земље интеграцијама у ЕУ. Користећи методе анализе садржаја докумената и анализе дискурса, овај рад критички испитује међусобну интеракцију између дугорочног преговарачког процеса Србије са Европском унијом и деликатног процеса спровођења структурних реформи у периоду од јануара 2014. до јануара 2024. године. Рад такође критички оцењује политичке димензије процеса проширења ЕУ, укључујући асиметричну примену условљености приступања и наметање претходно неவிђених политичких захтева Србији у поређењу са другим земљама кандидатима.

Кључне речи: процес приступања ЕУ, ревидирана методологија проширења, преговори о приступању ЕУ, структурне реформе, Србија, Европска комисија, државе чланице ЕУ

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DEVELOPMENT OF THE EUROPEAN UNION STRATEGIC CULTURE: NARRATIVE, INSTITUTIONAL AND NORMATIVE ASPECTS***

Abstract

In this paper, we examine the issue of the strategic culture of the European Union as a requirement for the autonomous concept in international relations. The subject of this research focuses on narrative, institutional, and normative aspects of aligning the perception and solidarity of the member states in connection with the threats to the Union's values and interests. For the assessment of the state, current tendencies, and possible development of the joint EU strategic culture, we have used the comparative analysis of secondary sources, as well as the analysis of the contents of the EU organs' documents referring to the narratives and institutional support to the development of the autonomous collective strategic thinking and acting. Some special attention has been paid to the challenges occurring within the process, considering the fact that it is, in terms of values and interests, potentially a supranational entity having the

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capacity to influence international relations in a relatively independent way (Fabbrini 2020). The aim is to qualify the state of the Union in the current geopolitical environment and to identify the elements on which one may assess this organisation's strategic development. The acquired results show that the joint strategic culture is the requirement for the EU to become an autonomous security participant on the international stage. A specific finding is the estimate that institutional mechanisms assigned by the founding agreements do not fit the joint strategic thinking of the member states, which is currently undermining the prospects of the development of the joint strategic culture and the EU position in global affairs.

Keywords: joint identity, joint defence, tradition, sovereignty, strategic autonomy

INTRODUCTION

The concept of strategic culture implies the existence of a common perception of threats to the survival and functioning of the political community. Its significance stems from the fact that in its semantic field, the reasons for the necessity of collective actions abide, which contributes to the creation of concord and unity within the community. Thus observed, it can present the essential characteristic of a credible defence.

During the last decade, we could witness intensive aspirations to strengthen defensive and security mechanisms within the European Union. If observed from the point of political narrative aspect, it is noticeable that the EU officials and institutions step out with the thesis that the Union is facing ever greater challenges in the strategic surroundings. Neither trying to analyse the Joint Foreign and Defence EU Policies, nor the diplomatic skill often established by dictates, blackmails, and unwillingness to compromise and coexist, we ought to take into account that these political narratives imply that the EU member states are exposed to hostile undertakings tending to cause divisions among them, along with the foreign interference aiming to discredit the EU democratic systems. In that context, informative space, both media and capillary, is daily exposed to the placement of the narratives of the alleged cyber attacks and campaigns of misinformation against the EU

members, followed by the campaigns of defaming certain states, marked as unfriendly or inadequate in terms of their political systems.

Having considered the EU Strategic Compass and space defence technologies, adopted by the EU Council on March 21st, 2022, it has been pointed out as the document setting up the frame for directing the defence policy in the decades to come. The EU is proclaimed to be dedicated to the protection of its citizens, values, and interests, as well as to the contribution to global peace and security. The current confrontation between the Russian Federation and Ukraine, at the EU borders, and especially the Russian progress regarding their military capacities, primarily the missile technology, the EU views as an opportunity to reinforce its own defence position and to improve the cooperation between the member states so as to develop the capacities for efficiently dealing with the challenges (Council of the European Union 2022).

The challenges faced by the EU have been more thoroughly examined in the analytical document *European Defence – Readiness 2023*, issued by the EU Commission and defining defence threats. Two threats are prominent there. The first concerns the crises at the European borders: Russia as the central threat and the Ukraine and Belarus situation, with the proclamation that the Belarusian authorities are involved in the act of state terrorism over the European airspace. As the second threat, there are a few challenges for the global well-being: Chinese reinforcement of their military presence and wide use of misinformation and propaganda, the treatment of Hong Kong and oppression towards the Uyghurs, the worsening security situation in Sahel, disturbing the regional peace development while presenting a huge risk for the Europeans, the unclear future of Syria and Lybia, challenging matters regarding the strategic direction of Iran and Turkey, the security situation in Mozambique and Ethiopia, and another reason for additional huge concern – free access to naval, space, air and cyber space (European Commission 2023).

At the core of these definitions, there is the regional and global EU ambition, both in the sense of its further expansion and increasing the significance of its role in global issues. The EU tendency to develop a joint strategic culture right now can be seen through the evolution of security narratives, aligning the Strategic Compass and its consequences on the acquisition of political autonomy and overcoming the challenges that disturb the progress of a clear joint strategic culture.

In general, culture is everything that humans create, alter, or adjust for themselves (Bauman 1984, 7–8). A well-rounded culture can be created by a community internally connected with their shared points of view, customs, interests, beliefs, and the flows of history. Human societies also create certain patterns of behaviour and reactions in situations that demand action in international relations. Therefore, culture encompasses the conceptualisation of threats, challenges, risks, and the ways of facing them, including the notion of the use of force or abstaining from it. All of these are covered by the concept of strategic culture. Strategic culture involves a set of traditions, values, patterns of behaviour, shared achievements, history, and methods of solving issues and decision-making (Blagojević *et al.* 2025, 16–17). It can describe and clarify the differences or complementarity with other communities. Hence, the strategic cultures of the EU member states may be differentiated. For example, France is a nuclear power fully integrating the potential use of force into its strategy. On the other hand, due to their well-known 20th-century experiences of the World Wars, Germany is quite cautious in its national strategy regarding the use of force. The other member states, depending on their constitutional systems and historic experiences, may embody radically different strategic cultures, such as neutrality, as in the case of Hungary concerning the conflicts outside the EU territory (Institute for Security Studies 2021).

Therefore, it is justified to pose the question of the extent to which the contours of the joint EU strategic cultures can be formed. Strategic culture does not only refer to the institutions or defence tools, but it first and foremost concerns the exact actions and results, and is expressed via the activities. In that sense, one may wonder whether the tendency to the common acceptable narrative can be adequate to provide clarity in the practical implementation of the EU strategic culture and, within that frame, whether the narrative promoting the antagonism towards the Russian Federation can be good enough.

Strategic cultures are no unchangeable phenomena. They evolve over time, in accordance with new experiences and needs dictated by the environment and one's own capacities. When it comes to the EU, in favour of the creation of a shared feeling of strategic understanding and active solidarity of the member states, there is the joint distribution of forces in the operations or missions in the world, or for the protection of the EU. The existence of a perception of a certain threat to the common EU values and interests or at least solidarity in relation to that source

of threat in the region outside the Union, worthy of the readiness to apply force, may be proven by the contemplation of several European states to be engaged militarily in the Sahel region (European External Action 2021). The fact that the missions in Niger and Mali have been ousted does not diminish the awareness of the EU interest or at least some of its influential members for this region. The development of the EU strategic culture, not depending on being in their own, general or the USA interest, show the interest in the situation of free sailing in the Guinea Bay, as well as the initiative to deploy naval missions to the Red sea because of the Yemeni Houthi blockages. Such military efforts may support functional formats, such as European initiatives for interventions, instigated by France in September 2017 as a part of their vision for “*sovereign, united and democratic Europe*”. Although that is an attempt for the European states to enable them to take over the greater responsibility for their own security through joint European intervening forces and joint doctrine for acting independently from the European Union, in spite of many viewing this proposal as a tool to overcome the French frustration due to the EU inability to be engaged in the potential crises within the member states sphere of influence, the fact is that nine EU members signed this initiative (Mills 2019, 1). Today, not counting the help to Ukraine in the conflict with Russia, the EU participates in peace operations, prevention of conflicts and strengthening international security with approximately 3.500 military officers and 1.300 civilians distributed worldwide in 20 EU missions and operations, including eight military and one civil-military initiative (European External Action 2025).

MILITARY POWER: FROM INTERNATIONAL MILITARY COOPERATION TO JOINT MILITARY ENGAGEMENT

Our current practice has shown that the EU tends to be a global agent. In that respect, joint initiatives offer palpable and concrete contributions to raising strategic awareness and strategic dialogue among the member states. They embody the strategic culture on the EU level.

The capacity can operatively act rather rapidly when there is agreement among member states, and the European Union has demonstrated that by initiating the military operation in the Mediterranean (EUNAVFOR MED IRINI). It is primarily the implementation of the

UN embargo regarding the import of weapons, i.e. the EU contribution in terms of organising the international law implementation with the help of their member states joint air, satellite and naval forces. This operation has secondary tasks that include the prevention of illegal export of oil from Lybia, enabling and developing the Libyan coast guard and navy in order to implement the laws at sea, especially those directed against smuggling and trafficking people, and help considering the mitigation of smuggling and trafficking people via collecting the information and patrolling in the open sea (Council of the European Union 2020, 4).

Operatively observed, the EU does have the members of its armed and security forces distributed in joint missions and operations. In order to advance its operative engagement and strategic presence in the world, the Union has developed certain institutional tools. Among them, there is the capability for military planning and conducting (MPCC), the staff in charge of operational planning and carrying out the EU military missions without executive authorisation, founded in 2017 with the aim of providing faster, more efficient, and effective activities of the EU as the guarantor of security without its borders (European External Action). The staff is currently commanding the EU training missions in Somalia and the Central African Republic, the mission of military help in Mozambique and Ukraine, and the EU initiative for security and defence in the Gulf of Guinea.

Secondly, since 2022, there has been the capacity for rapid distribution, which should enable rapid distribution of the modified fighting groups with up to 5.000 troops, including land, air, and naval elements, along with strategic enablers. This capacity was introduced via the Strategic Compass for Security and Defence, which extends the Global EU Strategies by establishing actions and instruments that allow the Union to act faster and more decisively in crises, with MPCC being the preferred command element (European External Action 2023).

The next tool is the European Peace Fund (EPF), the EU instrument established in 2021 by the Council decision to reinforce the EU capability to prevent conflicts, build peace and strengthen security by financing outside of the regular budget of military mission within the Common Security and Defence Policy (CSDP) and offering military help to partner states, among which there are Ukraine, Albania and Moldova (European Commission 2025).

Finally, there is a Coordinated Maritime Presence (CMP), the tool enabling the improvement of coordinating naval and air instruments of

the member states in the regions of interest for the EU Common Security and Defence Policy. However, that is the specific instrument connected neither to the missions nor operations. The coordination is conducted on a voluntary basis, under the chains of command of member states (European External Action 2024).

This indicates that the EU strategic culture is not built only on joint perceptions of threats, but through joint project engagement as well. In that context, permanent structured cooperation as a mechanism within the Common Security and Defence Policy enables the member states to cooperate after their own initiative in the development of defence capacities through shared projects and by undertaking obligations conceived to improve the EU security and defence. Furthermore, this implies that strategic awareness, as the essential expression of strategic culture, is generated through the development of institutional capacities, too.

It is beyond doubt that the EU is geopolitically facing a more turbulent world, but there is less consensus on whether it is a more hostile world and what the EU is supposed to be able to do practically regarding the differences as perceived by the member states. This is the consequence of the states having their own strategic cultures based on history, culture and geographical position. That raises the question of whether they are an obstacle to the cultivation of the EU strategic culture, in particular if the EU is accepted as an international organisation not necessarily having a uniform strategic culture, but a shared one meant to be built up on the national ones. A dilemma stems from this: can the common EU strategic culture, with productive impact, be the result of dialogue and experience apart from the vision of individual member states?

For the member states to achieve a more coherent approach to the development of defence capacities, mutual understanding of the use of power is a must. Strategic culture involves more than just military power; it refers to security and defence as much as to the geostrategic role of the EU. Hence, that is actually the political awareness. Nevertheless, a limited attention paid to the idea proclaimed at the Conference on the Future of Europe, on the formation of the European Defence Union and introduction of voting by the qualified majority (Meijer and Klein 2024, 1), proves that there still is no constructed collective political ambition and unity to overcome more efficiently the obstacles to the evolution of a joint strategic culture.

In relation to the development of strategic culture, one ought to bear in mind the important aspect is the ideological awareness of the future generations (Meibauer 2020, 20). In order for values and interests to have a greater influence on the younger generations, their comprehension of politics, power, and conflicts can be linked with the concrete problems of their lives. This demands an active dialogue within the communities on strategic matters so as to triumph over the passive influence of movies and social networks in order to stimulate their social engagement.

As a platform for raising strategic solidarity among member states in solving the threats, there is the EU Strategic Compass (Council of the EU and EP 2024). This document follows the defence initiatives introduced in 2016. It tends to promote the collective understanding of the EU strategic culture in the sphere of security and defence. Yet, its effectiveness depends on the proactive approach of member states, so as to ensure that strategic thinking could be the priority on the political stage and help the alignment of perceptions and aims (Institute for Security Studies 2021). This is linked to the issue of whether the strategic dialogue can substitute historic experience and practice. Momentarily, the EU is not in the good place in the sense that it lacks capacities and key initiatives. Thus, a normative instrument such as the Strategic Compass can add value to the idea and development of the EU strategic culture by accentuating the importance of defence, but the economies of the member states have shown an unfavourable trend, while China, Russia and the USA are getting apart with their military capacities.

It seems that a more frequent distribution of the member states forces into the civilian and military missions and operations could be the incentive to the EU strategic culture. A true EU strategic culture cannot be created without the development of the potential EU responses originating from the clause on mutual help and the clause on solidarity, as planned by the Agreement on the EU and the Agreement on the EU Functioning. The reach of normative acts is there to cast emphasis on the need for growing interoperability between the armed forces of the member states and downsizing strategic dependence so as to advance the capacity for acting and strategic autonomy along with strengthening the role of the strategic partners of NATO and the USA.

Another significant element of institutional incentives for building up the EU strategic culture is strategic communication. The EU institutions and bodies are expected to ensure that defence and security

are prominent in the political discourse of the EU. While communicating with the public, the institutions and governments should be open in their talks on the EU position both globally and geopolitically. Considering the current lack of EU military power, strategic communication implies raising the awareness of the key issues related to geopolitics, power and peace.

STRATEGIC COMPASS AND POSITIONING OF THE EU AS A SECURITY AGENT

Joint foreign and security EU policy starts with promoting democracy, human rights, rule of law, and peace, as well as basic values in international relations and implementation of procedures such as aid, trade, cultural programmes, and diplomacy, aiming to attract and convince third countries, their governments, and populations. Such an approach assures the positioning as a *civilian power* having the possibility to shape international norms and values by offering stability and development, while on the other hand, it has the possibility to act in accordance with the principles of peace, stability, and cooperation without resorting to the means of hard power. This foreign policy strategy was fundamental in establishing the EU's position in international affairs. The lack of one's own hard power was being replaced by the membership of its members in NATO and strategic partnership with the USA as the global hegemon. Under the circumstances of new geopolitical challenges, due to the development of multipolarity and Russia becoming a power ready to protect its national interests even by force if necessary, the EU faces the temptation to be formatted as a more active security agent or to be reduced to a political wing within NATO. To accomplish its aims and become the effective global (world) geopolitical player, the EU member states should develop their joint strategic culture, i. e. the agreed understanding of threats and common approach to defence and security policy. This transformation and tendency towards the greater EU independence impose a serious problem: how to achieve joint autonomy while simultaneously maintaining full political and sovereign control of every individual member state over their own foreign and security policy?

The Ukrainian armed conflict has made bare some institutional and strategic challenges to the creation of the joint EU position; primarily, some member states are under the USA influence, while the EU has no

capacity to act outside the articulation of NATO policies, even when they do not comply with or are against the interests of some members. The result is the increase in the gap between the EU capabilities and expectations that undermines the prospects for military coordination and interoperability (Sorbino 2024, 2).

At the end of the 20th century and in the early 21st century, soft power presented the dominant method imposed by the EU in international relations. This attitude invigorated its agent role, shaping global norms and values through its policies, not by force. In that sense, the soft power dimension stood out in the first narrative on European security, the European Security Strategy from 2003, in which the EU is depicted as “*the power of good*” (Council of the European Union 2003). From this narrative comes the message that it is an agent with the ambition to improve values and stability internationally (Barbé and Morillas 2019) and that is dedicated to the construction of a more balanced world order based on the system of rules (Mälksoo 2016).

The EU’s ambition was not in agreement with the new geopolitical events (for example, the Crimea annexation by the Russian Federation, unilateral secession of the eastern parts of Ukraine in 2024), which radically changed the auto-perception of the EU. The new events have proven that the borders of the EU normative influence and reach. Therefore, in 2016, they developed a new security strategy called the EU Global Strategy, presenting a more realistic context of the European foreign and defence policy (European External Action Service 2016). The foundation for this security strategy was “*responsible engagement*”, aspiring to align strategic tendencies (state resilience, conflict resolution, regional cooperation, and citizen protection) (Biscop 2022). This strategy breathes principled pragmatism since it integrates political realism with strategic goals. That indicates the emergence of hard power with the tendency to fulfil the integration of practices and policy (Barbé and Morillas 2019). The statement that security strategies announce the EU concept as a security agent of some kind with a special identity appears to be well-grounded (Mälksoo 2016, 376).

The outbreak of the Ukrainian war brought back the policy of force in Europe. Thence the need for a more pragmatic security strategy of the Union, i. e., Strategic Compass (Council of the European Union 2022). It expresses an ambitious narrative directed to the bettering of foreign, security and defence policy of the EU until 2030, and the cultivation of the common strategic culture, and the member states

are instigated to agree on the key threats to the EU and to develop the responses together (Scazzieri 2020). This poses the potential base for the development of a more harmonised approach to the EU security and defence. The Strategic Compass has received support from the European Council owing to its pragmatic aspects in terms of integration in defence, with the focus on Russia as the enemy (Fiott 2023). Four directions of the EU defence policy have been defined: the development of capacities for rapid distribution; advancement of the capabilities for predicting threats through a larger exchange of intelligence; investment in the technological capacities and military-industrial base; and strengthening strategic partnerships (Fabbrini 2022, 12). By defining the pillars (acting, securing, investing, and partnership), the Strategic Compass sets up the plan for the EU defence in the form of a defence agent and, consequently, necessarily with the common strategic culture.

For the first time, this security frame introduces the joint estimates of threats to the member states. This estimate aids the identification of a string of shared perceived threats, including geopolitical tensions, military engagement, hybrid tactics, cyber attacks, and terrorism (Fiott 2023). It enables that on the EU level diverse scripts can be predicted, prepared, and responded to in terms of endangering the Union's security (Rodriguez 2022). We may argue that the Strategic Compass represents an attempt for the dimension of hard power to be integrated into the European rhetoric of soft power. The most disputed element of "*the EU hard power*" is the development of a joint strategic culture, as the member governments disagree about the importance of military power and the attitudes on legality and legitimacy of the use of force (Moser 2020, 12). Proposing the joint and integrated approach to defence and security, this strategy could present the initial step towards the independent EU political activities in international relations and strategic autonomy. According to Helwig, the EU is narrowly focusing on its dependence on the USA as the guarantor of security, and strategic autonomy would represent its ability to advance a range of its international policies based on its varying values and interests. In his opinion, without the advancement in political autonomy, especially when it comes to the convergence of strategic member cultures, it is difficult to realise the joint set of norms, strategic evaluations, and patterns of behaviour that could ease the joint activities in global undertakings (Helwig 2020, 11). Viewed as the promotion of common priorities, joint estimates of threats, and harmonisation of defence strategies, the Strategic Compass tends to

increase the potential of the EU action and thus stimulate the creation of the joint strategic culture, by which the frame for the joint EU defence could be strengthened.

CHALLENGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF JOINT EU STRATEGIC CULTURE

Over the years, the EU has perfected its security narratives, but in practice, there is still an array of challenges preventing it from developing its strategic culture. Some of these challenges stood out in the EU's reactions to the Ukraine conflict. Several issues have been noticed there, all stemming from the founding agreements, such as lack of appropriate supranational jurisdiction and reaching relevant decisions when unanimous voting is required (Fabbrini 2022, 11). In theory, two general challenges to the development of agreed and consistent political autonomy exist: one is institutional, the other is strategic.

Considering the institutional level, the fact is that valid founding EU agreements predict foreign, security and defence policy to be conditioned by the approval of member states, which may have different national priorities. Due to that, the decisions in these fields depend on the approval and voluntary agreement of member states, which may have different visions and therefore delay coming to a mutual consensus on the international stage. Hence, coherent EU actions have no supremacy over the right of veto and obligation of unanimity, which objectively are the source of authority of member states, even at the price of togetherness. Unanimity frequently disrupted the EU's foreign policy agility and the tendency of "the ever closer Union", which has led to the EU's inability to act as a uniform and quick global agent. Strategic autonomy cannot be separated from foreign policy strategy. In order to achieve that autonomy, the EU ought to be able to maintain unity and reach a balance between autonomous articulation of its jurisdiction in various areas of politics on the international level, its engagement with strategic partners, and duties in the context of global management arrangements (Pirozzi and Ntousas 2019, 7). Inter-government logic often complicates the development of the strong "*institutional autonomy*" (Helwig 2020), which generates important challenges in the formulation of joint strategic culture. The obstacle lies in aligning different national priorities and their filtration through institutional channels to coordinate them with the Union attitude. Institutional fragmentation, caused by the right of veto

and the need for unanimity, makes the EU less aligned when faced with situations requiring fast decisions. This was the most obvious during the Ukraine conflict, where the initiatives of the EU and some member states came across the opposition of some other members, so they were postponed (Psara 2024). The use of the right of veto disturbed the decision-making process, thus limiting the ability of the EU to respond to the conflict as an organisation, which some interpret as the demand for unanimity that is harmful for the EU's ability to act efficiently and fast. According to Koenig, Article 44 of the EU Agreement enables the Council to confer unanimously the conduct of a mission or operation to the group of willing and able member states that would consequently internally agree on the governing, but this clause has never been put to use. The Strategic Compass proclaims that the states until 2023 are "to decide on practical modalities for implementing Article 44", but the problem occurs because this clause initially requires a unanimous decision (Koenig 2022, 7).

From the strategic point of view, apart from having different strategic interests, every member state experiences the threats differently. "European defence depends on the degree to which the European strategic cultures converge, from cooperating among the Europeans in the creation of new military capabilities and the role that the Europeans are willing to play so as to preserve their own security" (Grevi 2022, 100). Strategic cacophony is especially noticeable during the Ukraine conflict, where the Union struggled to align the European collective interest with the combination of different national strategic cultures, interests, and policies. Such heterogeneity of strategic thinking complicates the adoption of the common line in the EU foreign policy and subsequently - the joint strategic culture.

The presence of institutional and strategic challenges is contributing to deepening the gap between the EU's capabilities and expectations, i.e., a profound dichotomy between what the EU is expected to do and its real operative abilities (Hill 1993). This difficulty in balancing the will and ability to act makes the entire development of joint strategic culture even harder, which also goes for strategic autonomy. The inability for the tendencies imposed by the organisation to be aligned with the EU operative realities reaches the position of a united and influential participant in international relations (Fabbrini 2022). The discrepancy between desires and possibilities is limiting the EU's ability to formulate and carry out the policies that would express

an aligned strategic vision of its member states and also to achieve autonomy on the global stage. In that sense, Josep Borrell, a former high EU representative for foreign affairs, recognised that “security and defence probably are the area in the EU integration with the largest gap between expectations and results. Between what we could be, what the citizens demand and what we are achieving” (Borrell 2022).

Under the circumstances of a non-existent appropriate joint strategic culture of the EU, one may expect the lack of interoperability of member states military capacities. This discrepancy results in the problem of coordinating defensive efforts and establishing a unified front in terms of international security. Namely, without a clear common strategic frame, the members are exposed to the difficulties in the efficient alignment of their operational doctrines, which is essential for their joint reactions to crises and operations. The EU military operations demand from the EU at least the convergence of member states national strategic cultures, just to reach “*better joint understanding of crises and conflicts, better preparations, readiness, and increase in interoperability between the armed forces and faster decision-making*”. The EU initiative for interventions is to be observed in that context, as proposed by the French president, not to create the new forces on alert, but to develop the joint strategic culture. A more detailed analysis of the differences between the EU members shows the challenges faced by this joint culture-building ambition (Zandee and Kruijver 2019, 31, 27). The development of the joint EU strategic culture still appears to be limited by the member states’ preferences. We can discern that strategic ambiguity on how the EU would intervene suffers from the fundamental lack of political will to act, particularly without the USA’s participation (Gallo *et al.* 2024, 6–7). Anyway, in spite of the differences regarding strategic aims and instruments, national strategic cultures have displayed a certain approach in their perceptions of strategic environment, so it looks like they are recognising the EU as a legitimate and favourable platform for cooperation in the field of security and defence. This demonstrates that we should not neglect the prospects for the emergence of the European strategic culture and Joint Security and Defence EU Policy (Mi 2022, 575). In relation to this, the doctrine points to the growing participation of the EU in international operations of managing crises and stabilisation, including the joint operations with NATO and the United Nations. We are not to deny the existence of the awareness of the joint strategic culture being of vital significance for the fulfilment of the EU ambition

to be the active global agent (Schmidt and Zyla 2013, 8). In case it fails, its actions will be more based on the flexibility of member states than on the unity.

CONCLUSION

The joint strategic culture is the indispensable condition for the EU to become an independent security participant on the international stage. At the moment, the differences in strategic thinking of its member states, under the circumstances of legally assigned institutional mechanisms, are undermining the prospects for its development.

As the elements that the narrative dimension of the development of the joint strategic culture is founded upon today, the theory recognises peace, multilateralism, and an all-embracing approach to security, since the identity of the Union as “*a peace project*” is based on their fulfilment.

The things that can subvert the efficient activities of the EU internationally are the differences in the national member states national strategic cultures. Because of that, some authors are rightfully skeptical concerning the possibilities of developing a truly joint EU strategic culture.

If the obstacles are overcome and this culture is developed, the EU strategic culture, just like national strategic cultures, will not be static and given once and for all, but it will develop through new experiences, political initiatives, and crises. In that sense, we may consider that within the EU there is an awareness of long-term strategic thinking and that the organisation is equipped with the means and instruments for more aligned and productive global activities.

A special step towards greater unity is represented by the Strategic Compass document, which demonstrates the ambition to strengthen the EU's security and defence abilities and to coordinate joint actions more effectively.

What can be derived as the broadest conclusion is that the narrative by which the EU attributes itself the axiological characteristics, such as “*the power of good*”, or the bastion of values internationally accepted as the civilisational standard, for example human rights, or democracy, can impede the development of the joint strategic culture as the Union is thus led to the arbiter position, which cannot present the strategic interest of the member states.

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РАЗВОЈ СТРАТЕШКЕ КУЛТУРЕ ЕВРОПСКЕ УНИЈЕ: НАРАТИВНИ, ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛНИ И НОРМАТИВНИ АСПЕКТИ***

Резиме

У овом раду испитујемо проблем развоја стратешке културе Европске уније, као услова за аутономни капацитет у међународним односима. Предмет истраживања су наративни, институционални и нормативни аспекти усклађивања перцепције и солидарности држава чланица у вези са претњама вредностима и интересима Уније. За процену стања, актуелних настојања и могућих развоја заједничке стратешке културе ЕУ коришћена је упоредна анализа секундарних извора, као и анализа садржаја докумената органа ЕУ, који се односе на наративе и институционалну потпору развоју аутономног колективног стратешког промишљања и деловања. Посебна пажња посвећена је изазовима који се јављају у том процесу, с обзиром да се ради о потенцијално вредносно и интересно наднационалном ентитету, који има капацитет да релативно самостално утиче на међународне односе. Циљ рада је квалификација стања Уније у актуелном геополитичком окружењу и идентификовање елемената на основу којих се може проценити стратешки развој ове организације. Добијени резултати говоре да је заједничка стратешка култура услов да би ЕУ постала аутономан безбедносни учесник на међународној сцени. Посебан налаз представља оцена да институционални механизми, предвиђени

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оснивачким уговорима не погодују заједничким стратешким размишљањима држава чланица, што тренутно подрива изгледе за развој заједничке стратешке културе и позицију ЕУ у глобалним односима.

Кључне речи: заједнички идентитет, заједничка одбрана, традиција, суверенитет, стратешка аутономија

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QUANTIFICATION OF GEOPOLITICAL FACTORS VIA ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Abstract

The contemporary security environment, characterized by extreme volatility and a structural transition towards a multipolar geopolitical paradigm, has exposed the severe analytical and operational limitations of traditional bureaucratic models of strategic planning. The subject of this paper is a theoretical and methodological analysis of the possibilities for integrating artificial intelligence systems into the process of continuous security risk assessment. The research goal is to present the conceptual architecture of the ARES model (AI-Driven Risk & Environment Strategy) as an innovative instrument that enables the quantification of geopolitical, geoeconomic, and demographic factors into measurable algorithmic inputs. By applying Markov Decision Processes and deep

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learning algorithms, the ARES model enables advanced simulations (AI wargaming) that filter out bureaucratic biases. Through the application of modeling, analysis, and synthesis methods, the paper indicates that the implementation of predictive analytics within the state apparatus is sustainable only through the normative synergy of the ISO 31000 and ISO/IEC 42001 standards. The results show that the intersection of classical geopolitical methodology and predictive analytics (AI wargaming) substantially shortens the state's reaction time to hybrid threats. It is concluded that the algorithmization of risk assessment does not abolish doctrinal sovereignty but rather strengthens it, with the mandatory condition of retaining the Human-in-the-Loop mechanism in strategic decision-making.

Keywords: artificial intelligence, geopolitics, ARES model, national security, predictive analytics, multipolarity, hyperwar, asymmetric deterrence

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary security environment requires a radical redefinition of state planning instruments. The problem of contemporary strategic planning lies in the fact that in the current VUCA¹ environment (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity), the speed of generating change exponentially surpasses the analytical and operational capacities of the traditional bureaucratic apparatus. With the entry into the era of artificial intelligence (AI), the nature of strategy is changing irreversibly. As Henry Kissinger warns, algorithms perceive reality and process variables with a speed and scope that surpass human cognition, thus states that do not integrate these capacities risk strategic paralysis (Kissinger, Schmidt and Huttenlocher 2021).

However, although artificial intelligence is unequivocally positioned as a key tool for accelerating the strategic decision-making process, it is necessary to point out one doctrinal fact: algorithms are essentially “blind” if they are not fed with adequate geopolitical

¹ The term VUCA itself was first used by the US Army War College to describe the chaotic post-Cold War world. VUCA is an acronym for: Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, and Ambiguity.

parameters. Starting from the postulates of the contemporary geopolitical school and Professor Milomir Stepić, space, resources, and demographics remain inexorable constants of power. Thus, an algorithm that has not integrated these key geopolitical indicators does not generate a prediction, but rather a technological illusion. Precisely in bridging this gap, between geopolitical reality and algorithmic speed, lies the need for developing new theoretical and practical instruments.

The primary research question this paper answers is: In what way can classical geopolitical, geoeconomic, and demographic factors be algorithmically quantified and integrated into artificial intelligence systems for the purpose of continuous and accelerated risk assessment? Accordingly, the subject and goal of this paper is to present the conceptual architecture of the AI-Driven Risk & Environment Strategy model (ARES) through the integration of contemporary geopolitical methodology, thereby offering the national security system an innovative instrument for predictive adaptation.

In accordance with the defined problem and objectives, the central hypothesis of the paper assumes that the intersection of classical geopolitical methodology and predictive analytics tools (AI wargaming) through the ARES model substantially shortens the state's reaction time to hybrid threats. This hypothesis is supplemented by a derived assumption claiming that the algorithmization of risk assessment is sustainable exclusively through the normative synergy of international standards (International Organization for Standardization [ISO] 2018; ISO 2023), with the mandatory retention of the Human-in-the-Loop mechanism to preserve state sovereignty.

To achieve the research objectives and test the hypotheses, an appropriate methodology has been applied in the paper. The basic research relies on the hypothetical-deductive method. Modeling was used for the conceptualization and development of the system architecture, while content analysis and synthesis methods were applied in the theoretical part of the paper, primarily in the study of relevant geopolitical literature and current ISO standards in the fields of risk management and high technologies.

The structure of the paper directly follows the logic of the presented methodological framework. The first chapter analyzes the geopolitical paradigm of multipolarity and defines key indicators (space, resources, demographics) according to contemporary geopolitical theory.

The second chapter presents the architecture of the ARES model itself and explains the normative framework necessary for its implementation. The third chapter provides the central synthesis of the paper, explaining the mechanism of quantification of spatial inputs in algorithmic simulations. The fourth chapter elaborates on the doctrinal control of the system through the Human-in-the-Loop mechanism, followed by a conclusion that sublimates the main findings and offers guidelines for further research.

THE GEOPOLITICAL PARADIGM OF MULTIPOLARITY AS A BASIS FOR THREAT ASSESSMENT

The crisis of traditional strategic planning is a direct consequence of an inadequate perception of the contemporary international order. Instead of the previous monopolar structure, contemporary international relations are in an accelerated process of transition towards multipolarity. Although a multipolar order is not yet fully shaped, the certainty of its arrival already dictates a new geopolitical reality. In this transition phase, alongside the individually strongest United States and the European Union as a whole, China and Russia are taking on an increasingly significant role, while states like India, Japan, and Brazil are also aspiring to the status of serious powers (Despotović i Glišin 2021, 90–97).

Such a transition from a unipolar system does not represent just a mere change in the number of great powers, but a fundamental structural break that generates an exponential growth of instability and uncertainty. John Mearsheimer, one of the leading theorists of offensive realism, convincingly proves that multipolar systems are inherently more prone to conflict compared to bipolar or unipolar orders. The reason for this lies in the fact that a larger number of actors in the struggle for supremacy dramatically increases the possibility of misperceiving others' intentions and capacities (Mearsheimer 2001). In an environment characterized by the return of relentless great power rivalry, national security strategy can no longer rely solely on descriptive political assessments or outdated liberal doctrines from the "end of history" era (Fukuyama 1992), but must be grounded in a strict geopolitical methodology.

Although dizzying technological development at the end of the 20th century created an illusion that geographic space had been

overcome, contemporary theory sharply refutes such a stance. Robert D. Kaplan, in his capital work *The Revenge of Geography*, warns that physical geography, relief, climate, and demographics remain permanent determinants of the fate of states, and that international crises cannot be properly understood without returning to the map and spatial laws (Kaplan 2012). Similarly, prominent British strategist Colin S. Gray notes that strategy must always be “anchored” in space, because physical reality limits or enables the projection of state power (Gray 1999). In conditions of a certain transition to a multipolar order, geopolitics has not been suppressed under the pressure of globalization; it has become more complex and dangerous. Classical territorial struggle has evolved into competition for control of critical geoeconomic corridors, technological hubs, and energy resources. This view directly corresponds to the theses of Zbigniew Brzezinski, who defines geopolitical space precisely through the necessity of controlling key geostrategic points on the global chessboard (Brzezinski 1997). Additionally, as Joseph Nye points out, the nature of power is undergoing a transformation in the information age, where technological superiority and network control become equally important existential factors as classical military force (Nye 2011).

The structural break brought about by the transition to multipolarity cannot be fully understood without reference to Kenneth Waltz’s theory of neorealism. In his seminal work *Theory of International Politics*, Waltz postulates that the international system is anarchic by nature, and that the system’s structure itself – specifically the distribution of power among actors – relentlessly dictates the behavior of states whose primary goal is solely survival (Waltz 1979). Analyzing the stability of various orders, Waltz proves with mathematical precision that multipolar systems are inherently more unstable than bipolar ones. In a configuration with more than two great powers, the flexibility of alliances paradoxically leads to the rigidity of strategies. States are constantly exposed to the risk of fatal errors in assessing the intentions of opponents and the reliability of partners. It is precisely this Waltzian “structural uncertainty” of the emerging multipolarity that represents the environment in which traditional, linear models of risk assessment collapse.

This anarchic structure is particularly merciless toward small states. Great powers, acting as active geostrategy players, possess the luxury of so-called strategic depth. Their massive spatial, economic,

and demographic weight allows them to absorb the consequences of incorrect geopolitical assessments and survive the first blow. In contrast, small states are most often found in the role of geopolitical pivots, whose delicate position arises exclusively from a sensitive geographical location that makes them objects of constant competition between great powers (Despotović i Glišin 2021, 165–166). As such, states of lesser demographic and spatial weight do not possess a margin for strategic error. Their survival in the emerging multipolar chaos directly depends on the ability for timely balancing, precise hedging (strategic insurance), and escalatory control. This thesis is confirmed by Barry Posen, whose research on state strategies in a multipolar system proves that smaller actors must develop superior mechanisms for threat prediction to compensate for the lack of strategic depth (Posen 2009). Hence, the introduction of predictive analytics systems into the state apparatus of small countries is not a mere matter of technological prestige, but a supreme existential imperative. They must compensate for their obvious lack of so-called hard power with superior decision-making speed, which can only be achieved through the algorithmization of risk assessment.

Relying on such a global theoretical framework, it is necessary to view contemporary security challenges through the prism of relevant domestic scientific thought. As Professor Milomir Stepić explains in his study, *Geopolitics: Ideas, Theories, Conceptions*, geopolitical methodology requires a synthetic examination of the interdependence of spatial, demographic, resource, and economic factors (Stepić 2016). These factors are not abstract categories but inexorable constants that determine national power and a state's capacity for survival in an environment of emerging multipolarity. This transitional phase is no longer just a theoretical perspective of transition, but a processual geopolitical reality that definitively shapes the modern world. To properly perceive this complex, contemporary geopolitics must be applied as a synthesis science that requires an eclectic approach, combining realistic observation and abstract thinking. Such a geopolitical method requires decision-makers to possess skills (*techne*), knowledge (*episteme*), and practical wisdom (*phronesis*) in the purposeful consideration of state interests (Glišin 2024, 84–87; Despotović i Glišin 2021). In this context, Stepić's methodological approach indicates that the degree of threat to a state can only be assessed through a multidimensional intersection of the aforementioned factors. For example, a bare physical-geographical

position (space) gains its real security valence only when intersected with demographic trends, infrastructural capacities, and access to vital resources. More precisely, according to contemporary geopolitical systematization, the actual status of a state is determined through a dynamic correlation of six key criteria: 1) geographical position in relation to relief and resources, 2) characteristics of the regional environment, 3) the network of transport corridors, 4) internal-political structure, 5) foreign-policy conduct, and 6) military-strategic position (Glišin 2024, 88). The final interaction of these parameters defines the geopolitical fate of a state, placing it in one of four types of geopolitical positions: buffer, frontier, surrounded position, or the most sensitive – island position (Glišin 2024, 89). This multidimensionality creates an extremely complex matrix of variables that are constantly transforming.

What further complicates the emerging multipolarity is the speed at which these variables intersect and mutate, creating a deeply non-linear environment. Nassim Nicholas Taleb, a risk theorist and author of the “Black Swan” concept, proves that such complex systems are extremely fragile and susceptible to rare, unpredictable events with extreme consequences (Taleb 2010). Traditional risk assessment mechanisms within the state apparatus are based on linear extrapolation of the past, which makes them completely blind to the “black swans” of contemporary geopolitics. In conditions where a single geoeconomic sanction, a sudden disruption of the supply chain, or the use of asymmetric weapons (such as drone swarms) can change the regional balance of power within a matter of hours, existing decision-making models become dangerously slow (Đorić i Glišin 2023; Glišin and Milašinović 2025).

The main institutional problem lies precisely in this methodological complexity and speed of change. Michael C. Horowitz analyzes this vulnerability in detail in his studies on the diffusion of military power, proving that the mere possession of technology is insufficient if the state apparatus does not possess the organizational ability to integrate it into a rapid decision-making process (Horowitz 2010). The traditional bureaucratic apparatus clearly lacks the analytical and operational capacity necessary to timely process thousands of intersecting geopolitical indicators. A human analyst, burdened by cognitive biases and biologically limited data processing power, is capable of recognizing a general political trend but cannot calculate all

its exponential consequences in real-time. This is particularly evident when those consequences are obscured by the ambiguity of moves made by other international actors.

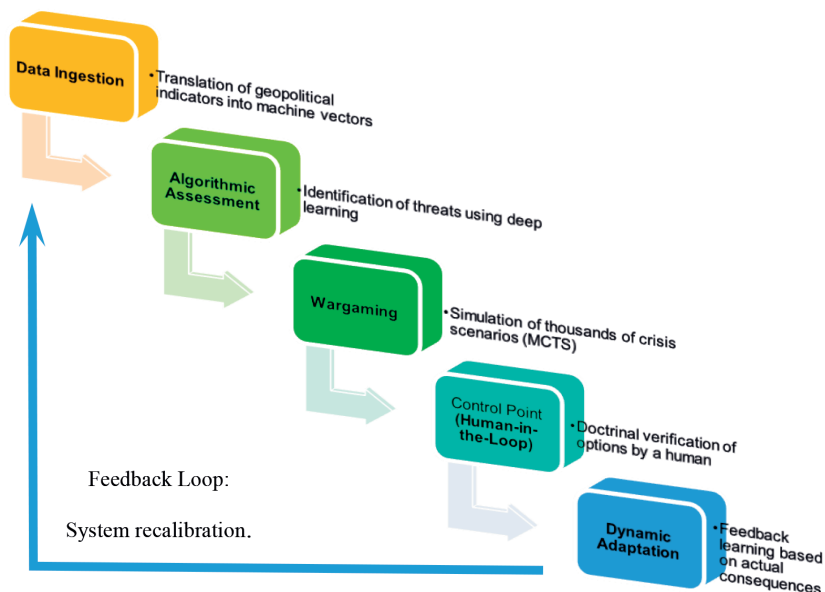
In order for classical geopolitical methodology, from Mearsheimer and Kaplan to Stepić, to achieve its full potential in the contemporary security environment, its key factors must be translated from qualitative descriptions into quantitative values. Space, resources, and demographics must become measurable indicators, converted into machine-readable inputs. Only such quantification enables the overcoming of the previously mentioned human limitations and creates a secure basis for algorithmic risk assessment. It is precisely this quantification that, through the development of the ARES model, will ensure strategic adaptability and continuity of decision-making in the era of hyper-information confrontation.

ARCHITECTURE OF THE ARES MODEL IN THE NATIONAL SECURITY SYSTEM

In order to translate the exponential complexity of the geopolitical environment into an operational system capable of predictive action, it is necessary to develop a specific algorithmic framework. In response to this requirement, the conceptual architecture of the ARES model (AI-Driven Risk & Environment Strategy) was created. This model represents a synthesis of advanced machine learning methods and classical strategic analysis, designed with the aim of eliminating the reactive delay of the state apparatus.

Viewed through the prism of military theory, the ARES model essentially represents an algorithmic accelerator of the OODA loop (Observe, Orient, Decide, Act). As postulated by military strategist John Boyd, victory in complex conflicts is won by the side that completes this cognitive cycle faster, forcing the opponent to react to already outdated information (Boyd 1986).

Graph 1. Phases of the operational architecture of the ARES model



Source: Author.

The basic architecture of the ARES model unfolds through five successive and interdependent phases:

1. **Data Ingestion:** Continuous collection and structuring of multimodal data. In this phase, geopolitical indicators (space, resources, demographics) are translated into machine-readable vectors.
2. **Algorithmic Assessment:** Application of deep learning for pattern recognition in collected data, thereby identifying anomalies that indicate early stages of hybrid or conventional threats.
3. **Wargaming (Algorithmic War Games):** A phase in which the system uses reinforcement learning (Reinforcement Learning) to generate thousands of simulated crisis scenarios. Relying on the achievements postulated in this field by Richard Sutton and Andrew Barto (Sutton and Barto 2018), the system analyzes millions of potential moves to find the optimal strategic option.
4. **Human-in-the-Loop (HITL):** A key control point where decision-makers (military and political leadership) verify algorithmically

offered options, thereby maintaining a doctrinal monopoly over the use of state power.

5. **Dynamic Adaptation:** A feedback learning phase where the system, based on the decision made and its actual consequences on the ground, recalibrates its future assessments.

The implementation of such an advanced system into the state apparatus cannot take place in a legal and ethical vacuum. Experts in autonomous systems, such as Paul Scharre, warn that unlimited reliance on autonomous algorithms in national security can lead to undesired escalation of conflict, namely, entering an uncontrolled “hyperwar” (Scharre 2018). Therefore, the ARES model must rest on a strict normative framework consisting of international standards. The ISO 31000 standard provides an umbrella methodology for risk management, defining principles that ensure the assessment is transparent and integral (ISO 2018). On the other hand, the application of the ISO/IEC 42001 standard (Information technology – Artificial intelligence – Management system) guarantees that the algorithms used in the ARES model are subject to review, ethically aligned, and protected from external manipulations (ISO 2023). This normative synergy ensures that technology remains a secure instrument of the state.

The key value of implementing predictive analytics and machine learning through the described architecture is reflected in overcoming human cognitive biases, which represent the main cause of fatal delays in strategic decision-making. This problem directly leans on the concept of “bounded rationality” (Bounded Rationality) founded by Nobel laureate Herbert Simon (Herbert Simon). Simon proves that decision-makers in administrative systems, faced with too much information and limited time, do not have the capacity to make optimal, but only “satisficing” decisions (Simon 1957). Building on that, Daniel Kahneman (Daniel Kahneman), a Nobel Prize winner and leading world authority on the psychology of decision-making, proved that the human mind under pressure of stress and uncertainty instinctively resorts to heuristics – simplified patterns of reasoning that lead to systemic errors (Kahneman 2011). A deeper analysis of these cognitive limitations within traditional bureaucratic structures reveals a fundamental weakness of the state apparatus in crisis situations. As Irving Janis (Irving Janis) proved in his classic study, crisis staffs and political leaderships are extremely susceptible to the phenomenon of “groupthink” (Groupthink), a psychological mechanism where the pursuit of internal consensus

and loyalty overrides a critical analysis of alternative and unpopular options (Janis 1982). In high-stress VUCA conditions, military and political leaders instinctively reject information that does not fit into existing, often outdated doctrinal frameworks. Additionally, according to the bureaucratic model of decision-making developed by Graham Allison, state strategies rarely represent the product of pure rational choice; they are most often the result of inertia, compromise, and rivalry between different security agencies and ministries (Allison 1971). This institutional inertia and cognitive blindness represent a fatal threat to national security, as they prevent the timely recognition of hybrid threats that do not fit into the patterns of past wars.

It is precisely in neutralizing this human factor that the “Algorithmic Assessment” phase within the ARES model demonstrates its critical doctrinal value. By utilizing deep neural network architectures (Deep Learning), the system mathematically filters out bureaucratic noise. Unlike a human, an algorithm does not suffer from the need for consensus, is not subject to the authority of rank or position, and lacks career-driven motives to ignore politically inconvenient data. Its task is solely the cold identification of hidden patterns and geopolitical anomalies. In this way, the ARES model functions as a relentlessly objective “devil’s advocate” within the strategic planning room. It compels decision-makers to step out of their comfort zones and confront exact mathematical probabilities, rather than relying on conventional bureaucratic wisdom that, in a multipolar world, guarantees strategic defeat.

In geopolitical crises, leaders and analysts often suffer from “confirmation bias” (seeking information that validates pre-existing beliefs) and an inability to intuitively comprehend the exponential growth of threats. Philip Tetlock, whose decades of research on geopolitical forecasting set new benchmarks for the intelligence community, points out that algorithms dramatically outperform human experts, specifically in their ability to synthesize vast numbers of heterogeneous variables without emotional attachment to prior assessments (Tetlock and Gardner 2015). By eliminating these biological cognitive barriers, the ARES model allows decision-makers to perceive crises with mathematical objectivity and react proactively, converting algorithmic speed into a decisive strategic advantage.

INTEGRATION OF GEOPOLITICAL METHODOLOGY INTO AI WARGAMING INPUTS

The greatest epistemological challenge in applying artificial intelligence within political and security sciences lies in the necessity of quantifying qualitative phenomena. While traditional geopolitical assessments are often narrative and descriptive in nature, machine learning algorithms require strict mathematical values. Hence, the central scientific contribution of the ARES model lies precisely in the “Data Ingestion” phase, which represents a methodological bridge between classical geopolitical theory and contemporary computational logic.

In order to translate Stepić’s paradigm of space, resources, and demographics into a language that a computer understands, these factors must be ontologically restructured. Judea Pearl, a Turing Award winner and a leading world authority on causal reasoning in artificial intelligence, proves that complex social relations can be algorithmically processed only if they are converted into precise causal models and Bayesian networks (Pearl 1988). Accordingly, the ARES model does not read geopolitical analyses as text but deconstructs them into multidimensional mathematical tensors. In the ingestion phase, geopolitical space is no longer viewed as a static map, but as a dynamic network of nodes and edges, where every geographical, demographic, or economic element receives its numerical weight based on its current strategic value within the multipolar system.

The operationalization of this concept within the ARES model relies on a mathematical framework known as the Markov Decision Process (MDP). As Stuart Russell and Peter Norvig state in their seminal work on artificial intelligence, an MDP represents a standard mathematical model for decision-making scenarios where the decision-maker consciously executes actions within their control, while the ultimate outcomes remain subject to the inherent unpredictability and probabilistic dynamics of the environment (Russell and Norvig 2021, 552–554). In the context of national security, the current geopolitical situation represents the “State” (S), while the diplomatic, economic, or military moves of the state are “Actions” (A). Translating Stepić’s factors into MDP inputs in practice looks like this:

1. **Demographic Factors:** Demographic decline is described in traditional analysis as a long-term risk. However, in the ARES model, demographics become a dynamic vector that continuously

updates data on age structure, fertility rates, and migration balance. If the system detects a decline in the conscription contingent below a critical level, the algorithm quantifies this as an exponential drop in defensive power (a *reward penalty* in the MDP), which directly affects simulations of future conventional conflicts, signaling to state leadership that the strategic focus must shift from a mass army to autonomous systems.

2. Energy Hubs and Resource Routes: Control over energy resources is quantified through graph theory. Pipelines, ports, and strategic straits are assigned values as “critical nodes.” If a geoeconomic crisis blocks a certain supply route, the system instantly recalculates the consequences of that blockade on the national economy and military combat readiness.
3. Geoeconomic Sanctions: Instead of political speculation about the consequences of sanctions, they are entered into the algorithm as mathematical “friction variables.” Sanctions alter the “Transition Probability Matrix,” limiting the set of available state actions and forcing the algorithm to seek new, asymmetric paths to achieve strategic goals.

The operationalization of the ARES model through Markov processes gains its full security and strategic weight only when geopolitical inputs are intersected with the phenomena of contemporary technological confrontation, primarily in the context of so-called hyperwar and the application of autonomous drone swarms. As defined by US General John Allen and Amir Husain, hyperwar represents a new type of conflict in which human reaction time is almost entirely eliminated from the tactical decision-making chain, as algorithms analyze targets and execute strikes in microseconds (Allen and Husain 2017). In such an extreme environment, traditional, cumbersome, and expensive military platforms – such as conventional armored divisions or massive air defense systems – become extremely vulnerable to massed, cheap, and networked drone swarms (Swarm Intelligence) centrally managed by artificial intelligence. P. W. Singer elaborates on this paradigm in detail, pointing out that the introduction of autonomous robotics to the battlefield fundamentally changes the character of war, making expensive, centralized conventional systems obsolete in the face of distributed algorithmic threats (Singer 2009).

By integrating these parameters, the ARES model does not function exclusively as an early warning system but becomes a

supreme instrument of asymmetric deterrence, which is of existential importance for the strategic positioning of small states. Instead of a small state attempting to match great powers in the quantity of conventional weaponry – which is spatially and demographically impossible – the system uses algorithmic simulations to find points of cognitive and tactical superiority. This approach directly draws on the concepts of David Kilcullen, who proves that smaller state actors can and must use commercial, readily available technologies (such as drone swarms) to develop effective asymmetric methods of countering the traditional military power of great powers (Kilcullen 2020).

The ARES algorithm simulates the interaction between an attacking conventional formation and a defensive autonomous swarm, generating thousands of scenarios in which a spatially inferior but technologically networked side can inflict mathematically unacceptable damage on an aggressor. If the model proves through wargaming that the speed of an autonomous response lowers the probability of an opponent's success below a critical threshold, the state achieves a deterrent effect not through brutal military mass, but through superior algorithmic decision-making speed and the projection of asymmetric risk. As General Mick Ryan observes, in modern competition, a state's ability to achieve a "cognitive edge" through the integration of humans and machines becomes the primary factor of deterrence, surpassing mere physical mass of troops (Ryan 2022). Through this mechanism, artificial intelligence ceases to be just an analytical tool and becomes an equal element of national power, capable of neutralizing deficiencies in traditional geopolitical constants.

The crown of this methodological synthesis is reflected in the ability of the ARES model to conduct advanced AI wargaming simulations in real-time. When quantified geopolitical data are entered into the system, the model uses reinforcement learning algorithms and Monte Carlo Tree Search (MCTS). This same architecture was used by the DeepMind team (Silver *et al.* 2016) when creating the AlphaGo system that defeated a human world champion. Although geopolitics is incomparably more complex than a board game, the essential logic of the algorithm remains the same: the computer does not analyze only the current state, but plays out millions of potential "What-If" scenarios (war games) in advance, exploring all possible moves of the opponent and its own responses to them.

In such an environment, classical conflict theories receive their final technological confirmation. Thomas Schelling, a Nobel laureate and pioneer of game theory in nuclear strategy, postulated that conflicts are won not only by force but by superior calculation of the opponent's intentions and options (Schelling 1980). The ARES model does exactly that; it simulates thousands of iterations of hybrid attacks, economic pressures, or military provocations, calculating the probability of success for each individual countermeasure.

The final advantage of such a synthesis is immeasurable: while a human crisis staff in high-stress and VUCA environments needs days to develop three to four realistic scenarios, the ARES model offers decision-makers a mathematically verified map of optimal strategic options within a few hours. The system thus does not make the final political decision but enables the leader to base their decision on an exact, algorithmically proven prediction, thereby reducing strategic surprise to an absolute minimum.

THE ROLE OF HUMANS IN THE AGE OF ALGORITHMS

Although the implementation of artificial intelligence systems dramatically accelerates the processes of risk assessment and the generation of strategic options, there is a fundamental danger in equating algorithmic superiority with political wisdom. Technological determinism, which advocates for the full autonomy of machines in the national security system, neglects the basic nature of conflicts. Drawing on the timeless thought of Carl von Clausewitz, war and strategy are not isolated mathematical phenomena but represent the continuation of state policy by other means (Clausewitz 1951). This Clausewitzian paradigm in the context of autonomous systems is actualized by Kenneth Payne, who proves that while algorithms fundamentally change the tactical dynamics of the battlefield, the political and psychological character of conflict itself remains deeply rooted in human nature (Payne 2021). An algorithm, no matter how sophisticated, does not possess the capacity to understand political context, empathy for human losses, or moral responsibility for shed blood. Therefore, leaving the final decision to a machine does not represent technological progress but an abdication of state sovereignty.

In the architecture of the ARES model, this challenge is addressed through the strict application of the Human-in-the-Loop (HITL) concept. This doctrinal mechanism requires artificial intelligence to perform the role of a cognitive partner (the so-called centaur model), while humans retain the role of the supreme strategic arbiter. The “centaur model” concept is further elaborated by General Mick Ryan, emphasizing that the modern national security architecture must rest on hybrid teams (Human-Machine Teaming), where the machine generates assessments at a speed inaccessible to humans, while humans retain the exclusive right to make contextual and value-based judgments (Ryan 2022). This is supported by Christian Brose, one of the leading American strategists for integrating new technologies into defense systems, who, in his study *The Kill Chain*, explains in detail that the goal of artificial intelligence is not to remove humans from the “decision-making chain,” but to free them from micro-analytics so that they can make macro-strategic decisions in microseconds (Brose 2020). The machine processes geopolitical data, predicts opponent moves, and offers optimal vectors of action, but the human operator – meaning the state leadership – must authorize the execution of the action.

Retaining human control is not only an ethical issue but a supreme security imperative, especially in the context of the survival strategy of smaller states in a complex multipolar world. For states of lesser demographic and spatial weight, which rely on hedging (strategic insurance) and balancing strategies within the intensified rivalry of great powers, there is no room for systemic error. If a fully autonomous system were to misinterpret an ambiguous move by an opponent and initiate escalation (a phenomenon known as a Flash War), the consequences for a small state would be existential. The human in the loop (HITL) represents that key safety mechanism capable of recognizing a bluff, a political nuance, or a psychological game that algorithms trained on historical data cannot detect.

Furthermore, the role of humans is essential for solving the “Value Alignment” problem. Stuart Russell, one of the pioneers of artificial intelligence, warns that machines relentlessly optimize the objective functions assigned to them, which can lead to catastrophic outcomes if those functions are not perfectly aligned with human intentions and international law (Russell 2019). For example, an algorithm tasked with neutralizing a security threat at any cost might suggest an option that violates proportionality or the norms of humanitarian law.

Precisely for this reason, the normative framework discussed in the second chapter – primarily the ISO/IEC 42001 standard – insists on clear accountability. The ARES model quantifies risks and illuminates the “fog of war,” but responsibility for the nation’s destiny remains inalienably tied to the political and military leadership. By integrating the HITL mechanism, the state achieves strategic adaptability and algorithmic reaction speed while retaining its moral vertical and the sovereign right to manage its own survival.

CONCLUSION

The contemporary transition of the international order toward a multipolar paradigm has definitively nullified linear forecasting models and returned geopolitics to the very center of national security. In an environment characterized by the exponential growth of volatility, the speed of change on the global chessboard surpasses the analytical and operational capacities of the traditional bureaucratic apparatus. The research conducted in this paper has shown that this institutional gap cannot be bridged merely by increasing human resources; rather, it requires radical technological and methodological innovation within the strategic planning system.

The central scientific contribution of this paper is reflected in the development of the conceptual architecture of the ARES model, which represents a theoretical and practical bridge between classical geopolitical thought and advanced machine learning algorithms. It has been proven that artificial intelligence algorithms, if operating in a strategic vacuum, cannot provide a realistic threat assessment. However, through the algorithmic ingestion phase, the ARES model successfully translates qualitative geopolitical indicators – physical space, demographic trends, and geoeconomic resources – into mathematically measurable vectors. This quantification enables computational systems to predict hundreds of possible crisis scenarios through Markov Decision Processes and real-time AI wargaming simulations, offering state leadership mathematically verified options for action.

By this, the central hypothesis of the paper is fully confirmed: the intersection of Stepić’s geopolitical methodology and predictive analytics tools fundamentally shortens a state’s reaction time to hybrid threats, eliminating cognitive biases that lead to fatal delays in decision-making. The speed of algorithmic data processing becomes a crucial component

of deterrence, especially in the context of delicately positioned states whose spatial and demographic capacities are limited. In conditions of relentless great-power rivalry, smaller actors do not have the luxury of strategic error; their survival directly depends on the ability to anticipate a crisis before it escalates into open conflict.

At the same time, the derivative hypothesis regarding the doctrinal control of such systems has also been confirmed. The implementation of artificial intelligence into the national security system is sustainable only if carried out through strict normative synergy with the international standards ISO 31000 (ISO 2018) and ISO/IEC 42001 (ISO 2023). The ARES model does not advocate for technological determinism or the creation of fully autonomous weapon systems. On the contrary, through the Human-in-the-Loop (HITL) mechanism, it reaffirms the Clausewitzian principle of the primacy of politics over war. Artificial intelligence takes on the burden of massive data processing and risk projection, but the monopoly over the final decision, as well as the moral and legal responsibility for it, remains the inalienable right of the human, namely, the state leadership.

This conceptual paper sets a solid theoretical foundation for the modernization of strategic planning. Future research in this field must be directed toward the empirical validation of the ARES model through case studies and computer simulations of specific hypothetical crises in Southeast Europe. Only through continuous testing of algorithmic outputs against real-world geopolitical events can the state apparatus build trust in predictive analytics and permanently ensure its strategic adaptability in the age of artificial intelligence.

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КВАНТИФИКАЦИЈА ГЕОПОЛИТИЧКИХ ФАКТОРА ПУТЕМ ВЕШТАЧКЕ ИНТЕЛИГЕНЦИЈЕ

Резиме

Савремена епоха, дефинисана као VUCA окружење (волатилност, неизвесност, сложеност и амбигуитет), захтева радикално редефинисање традиционалних модела стратешког планирања. Овај рад анализира еволуцију геополитичке методологије кроз призму интеграције вештачке интелигенције, са посебним фокусом на развој и концептуализацију ARES модела (*AI-Driven Risk & Environment Strategy*). Централни проблем истраживања јесте превазилажење институционалног раскорака између наративне природе геополитике и квантитативних захтева савремених алгоритама. Кључни резултати истраживања указују на то да је фаза „ингестије података” методолошки мост који омогућава квантификацију квалитативних фактора, као што су демографија, ресурси и географски простор. Коришћењем Марковљевих процеса одлучивања (MDP), ARES модел трансформише статичне мапе у динамичне мреже тензора, омогућавајући рачунарском систему да симулира хиљаде „What-If” сценарија у реалном времену. Посебан значај модела огледа се у његовој примени унутар концепта „хиперрата” (*Hyperwar*), где брзина алгоритаМСКОГ одлучивања и примена аутономних ројева дронова постају примарни инструменти асиметричног одвраћања за државе са ограниченим просторним и демографским капацитетима. Закључак рада наглашава да вештачка интелигенција не представља замену за човека, већ супериоран аналитички алат. Кроз имплементацију механизма *Human-in-the-*

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Loop (HITL) и придржавање стандарда ISO/IEC 42001, ARES модел осигурава да коначна стратешка одлука остане суверено право људског фактора. На тај начин, држава остварује „когнитивну надмоћ” и стратешку адаптабилност, чиме се ризик од стратешког изненађења у мултиполарном поретку своди на минимум.

Кључне речи: вештачка интелигенција, геополитика, ARES модел, национална безбедност, предиктивна аналитика, мултиполарност, хиперрат, асиметрично одвраћање

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GREENLAND IN THE NEW GEOPOLITICS OF THE ARCTIC: A MICRO-ARENA OF CONTEMPORARY GREAT POWER RIVALRY

Abstract

This paper analyses the geopolitical significance of Greenland in the contemporary international system, with a particular focus on its role as a micro-arena of great-power rivalry in the Arctic. Drawing on a realist theoretical approach, the study examines how contemporary geopolitical competition manifests through political, economic, and security instruments of power. The methodological framework is based on qualitative analysis and a case study of Greenland as a strategically relevant territory. The analysis shows that, despite the absence of open military confrontation, great power rivalry in the Arctic takes on complex and multidimensional forms, thereby assigning Greenland the role of a key micro-arena of contemporary geopolitical competition.

Keywords: Greenland, Arctic, geopolitics, great power rivalry, international relations

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the Arctic region has become increasingly important in contemporary international relations. Climate change, the accelerated melting of ice cover, and the development of new

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technologies have contributed to transforming this region from a relatively peripheral space of international politics into an area of growing geopolitical significance (Fernández-Montesinos 2025, 4–6). The opening of new maritime routes and the potential exploitation of natural resources have further increased the interest of major powers in the Arctic. In this context, Greenland, located within the Arctic Circle, occupies a particularly prominent place in contemporary geopolitical analyses. As the world's largest island, with an area exceeding two million square kilometres, Greenland holds an exceptionally important geostrategic position between North America and Europe (Darie and Bălăsoiu 2025, 1–9). Its location in the North Atlantic makes it a key node in the region's security architecture. Particular attention is devoted to relations between the United States, China, Denmark, Canada, and the European Union, as well as to the impact of climate change and natural resource exploitation on the transformation of regional geopolitics.

The analysis indicates that Greenland, despite its relatively small population and limited economic capacities, is gaining increasing strategic importance in contemporary international relations. Great power rivalry in the Arctic region manifests primarily through political, economic, and infrastructural instruments of power, which allows Greenland to be understood as a micro-arena of contemporary geopolitical competition. This transformation suggests that broader processes of restructuring the global order are underway, in which geographic spaces such as Greenland acquire strategic importance as power is redistributed in a new multipolar world. Its geographical position between North America, Russia, and Europe makes the island a focal point where diverse strategic interests and international rivalries intersect. At the same time, geological research indicates significant mineral reserves on the island, including rare earth elements that play a crucial role in the modern global economy (Morrison and Nuttall 2019, 2–3). These resources are of great importance for the development of high technology, the energy transition, and the production of modern electronic devices.

The contemporary geopolitical importance of Greenland is further reinforced by its specific political status. The island is an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark but enjoys a high degree of political self-government. The process of political autonomy gained a new institutional framework with the adoption of the Self-Government

Act in 2009, which significantly expanded the competencies of Greenlandic institutions (Jakobsen and Larsen 2024, 9–10). In recent years, Greenland has attracted growing interest from international actors. The United States seeks to preserve its strategic influence in the region through military presence and political cooperation with Denmark and local authorities. At the same time, China is developing a strategy of economic presence in the Arctic region through investments in mining and infrastructure projects (Darie and Bălășoiu 2025, 9–12). There is also a persistent interest in the Arctic Circle on the part of the Russian Federation and Canada, another key Arctic state. This dynamic points to increasing competition for influence in the region and raises the question of whether the Arctic is becoming a new arena of geopolitical rivalry among great powers. For this reason, Greenland is increasingly viewed as a micro-arena of contemporary geopolitical competition (Vuppada 2026).

This paper aims to analyse Greenland's geopolitical significance within the contemporary dynamics of the international system and to examine the extent to which this area is becoming an arena of great-power rivalry in the Arctic. The methodological framework is based on a qualitative approach, employing the case study method. Greenland is selected as a crucial case because it represents a territory where the security, economic, and political interests of major powers intersect. The analysis encompasses security, economic, and political dimensions. Such a multidimensional analytical structure enables a more comprehensive understanding of the complexity of contemporary geopolitical competition. The empirical basis of the research relies on the analysis of relevant academic literature, strategic and institutional documents, and selected credible media sources.

Main hypothesis: Greenland represents a micro-arena of contemporary great power rivalry in which economic, infrastructural, and political instruments of power predominate, while direct military confrontation remains secondary. *Auxiliary hypotheses:* The geostrategic position of Greenland increases its importance in the security strategies of major powers; Greenland's resource potential intensifies economic competition among international actors; climate change further accelerates the geopolitical transformation of the Arctic.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The period following the end of the Cold War was marked by relative stability in the international system, characterised by a unipolar distribution of power dominated by the United States. However, during the first decades of the twenty-first century, new centres of power have gradually strengthened, leading to a transformation of the international system that increasingly assumes a multipolar structure. China's economic rise, the revitalisation of Russian foreign policy and military power, and the strengthening of regional powers worldwide have all contributed to this transformation of the global order. In such a context, the geopolitical significance of certain regions is redistributed, with these regions once again acquiring strategic importance as arenas of geopolitical competition. The Arctic region represents one of the most striking examples of such a transformation.

One of the most significant theoretical approaches in analysing these processes is realism in international relations. According to the realist perspective, the international system is characterised by an anarchic structure in which states seek to ensure their own security and increase their power (Waltz 1979, 79–101). In such a system, control over strategic territories, resources, and transport routes represents an important element of international politics. John Mearsheimer emphasises that great powers in the international system strive to achieve regional dominance and to prevent the emergence of rival powers in strategically important regions (Mearsheimer 2001, 29–32). This logic can also be applied to contemporary Arctic geopolitics, where various international actors seek to secure long-term access to natural resources and strategic transport routes.

The application of the realist theoretical framework to the Arctic region enables the identification of patterns of great-power behaviour grounded in the logic of power, security, and control over strategic resources, thereby confirming the relevance of this approach to the analysis of contemporary international relations. The geopolitical significance of certain territories has traditionally been explained through theories of classical geopolitics. Halford Mackinder argued at the beginning of the twentieth century that control over key geographic areas could have a decisive impact on the distribution of global power (Mackinder 1904, 421–437). Although Mackinder's theory was primarily

focused on Eurasia, contemporary authors suggest that a similar logic can be applied to the Arctic region as well.

For much of the twentieth century, the Arctic had limited geopolitical significance, primarily due to extreme climatic conditions, the difficulty of exploiting natural resources, and the underdevelopment of transport routes. Climate change is one of the key factors driving the transformation of the Arctic region. The accelerated melting of ice cover facilitates easier access to natural resources and opens up the possibility of developing new maritime routes between Europe, Asia, and North America (Darie and Bălăsoiu 2025, 4–12; Abis 2026). These changes have significant implications for global trade and energy security, but they are not merely environmental phenomena; they also serve as multipliers of geopolitical processes that redefine the strategic importance of particular regions (Vuppada 2026).

Estimates from geological research indicate that the Arctic region contains a significant share of the world's undiscovered oil and gas reserves, as well as numerous mineral deposits. Of particular importance are rare earth elements, which are essential for the development of modern technologies, including the production of batteries, electronic devices, and renewable energy systems (Darie and Bălăsoiu 2025, 3). Contemporary literature on Arctic geopolitics suggests that the region is becoming an arena of increasingly intense great power rivalry. Michael Byers emphasises that the Arctic is a unique region where the security, economic, and environmental interests of states intersect (Byers 2010, 15–18). For this reason, the Arctic region is becoming an increasingly important subject of study in international relations. Within this transformation, Greenland occupies a particularly prominent position. As the world's largest island, located between North America and Europe, Greenland holds a significant strategic position in the North Atlantic. In addition to global actors such as the United States, China, and Russia, regional powers, including Canada, also play an important role, shaping Arctic dynamics through territorial control and institutional presence.

Contemporary changes in the international system contribute to the renewed strengthening of Greenland's strategic importance. Today, great power rivalry does not manifest solely through military competition but also through economic competition, infrastructure projects, and control over resources. In this context, some authors use the term “mini Cold War” to describe regions where rivalry between great powers intensifies. Unlike the global Cold War between the United States and the Soviet

Union, contemporary forms of geopolitical competition often have a regional character and manifest through various instruments of power (Freedman 2017, 234–241).

GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF GREENLAND

The geopolitical significance of Greenland stems from a combination of geographic, security, and economic factors that make this territory a key space in contemporary Arctic geopolitics. As the world's largest island, situated between North America and Europe, Greenland occupies a strategic position in the North Atlantic. It serves as an important link between the transatlantic and Arctic spaces (Fernández-Montesinos 2025, 8–10). Such a geographical position gave the island particular strategic value throughout the twentieth century in the security planning of Western countries.

During the Cold War, Greenland was an important element of the West's security architecture. The United States established the Thule Air Base in the northwestern part of the island, which constituted a key component of the ballistic missile early warning system (Morrison and Nuttall 2019, 2–3). This base enabled monitoring potential Soviet missile attacks and was an important element of the U.S. nuclear deterrence strategy. Although the end of the Cold War reduced geopolitical tensions between great powers, Greenland's strategic importance did not diminish. Contemporary United States security strategies continue to view the island as an important element of North Atlantic security infrastructure (Morrison and Nuttall 2019, 3). The growing rivalry among great powers and the Arctic's increasing importance in global strategic calculations are driving renewed interest in this territory.

In addition to its military significance, Greenland also possesses considerable economic potential. Geological research indicates substantial mineral reserves on the island, including rare earth elements used in the production of electric vehicles, electronics, military technologies, and renewable energy sources. There are also deposits of uranium, iron, zinc, lead, platinum, gold, and other strategic minerals. Research further indicates significant oil and gas reserves on the seabed to the northeast and northwest of the island (Fernández-Montesinos 2024, 9–11).

In the context of global competition for access to these resources, Greenland gains additional strategic importance. Control over rare

earth elements is becoming an important component of contemporary geopolitical strategies, as these resources play a key role in the development of high technology and military systems (Fernández-Montesinos 2024, 10–11). For this reason, various states are interested in developing Greenland's mining industry. At the same time, climate change is transforming the Arctic and further increasing Greenland's geopolitical significance. The melting of ice cover facilitates access to natural resources and enables the development of infrastructure that was previously not economically viable (Fernández-Montesinos 2024, 10–11). In addition, climate change is contributing to the opening of new maritime routes between Europe and Asia that pass through the Arctic region. These routes can significantly shorten transport distances between major global economic centres. For example, the Northern Sea Route along the Arctic coast of Russia can reduce the distance between Europe and Asia by several thousand kilometres compared to traditional routes passing through the Suez Canal (Byers 2010, 55–58).

In this context, Greenland assumes an important geostrategic role in the Arctic. Its position enables control over segments of the North Atlantic and Arctic transport routes, further increasing the interest of major powers in this area (Fernández-Montesinos 2024, 10–11). The contemporary geopolitics of Greenland cannot be understood without analysing the broader context of great-power rivalry in the Arctic. In addition to the United States and the Russian Federation, other states, including China, are increasingly interested in the Arctic. China's Arctic strategy is primarily based on economic presence and infrastructure investments. Canada has a particular interest in regulating the Northwest Passage, which further complicates the legal and geopolitical framework of the Arctic region. The combination of Greenland's geostrategic position, resource potential, and climate change makes it a unique space in contemporary geopolitics. For this reason, the island is becoming an important focal point of contemporary geopolitical competition and is increasingly viewed as a micro-arena of great power rivalry (Leclerc 2025, 2).

GREENLAND AND GREAT POWER RIVALRY

The contemporary geopolitics of the Arctic is increasingly shaped by the rivalry of great powers that seek to strengthen their political, economic, and security influence in the region. In this context, Greenland

becomes an area where the interests of different international actors intertwine. The geographical location of the island, its resource potential, and specific political status contribute to Greenland gaining increasing importance in the strategic calculations of the great powers (Fernández-Montesinos 2025, 12–13).

The United States

The United States is the most important security actor in Greenland's geopolitics. American interest in the island dates back to the Second World War. During the Cold War, the U.S. military presence in Greenland was part of a broader strategy to deter the Soviet Union and protect the North Atlantic region (Morrison and Nuttall 2019, 2). The Thule Air Base constituted a key component of the ballistic missile early warning system and enabled surveillance of Arctic airspace (Morrison and Nuttall 2019, 2–3). Today, this base continues to play an important role in the U.S. missile defence system and strategic monitoring. Contemporary U.S. security strategies still view Greenland as an important element of North Atlantic security infrastructure. The increased interest in the island in recent years can be linked to the growing rivalry among great powers and the rising importance of the Arctic in global strategic calculations (Fernández-Montesinos 2025, 13–14).

One of the most significant events that clearly demonstrated the U.S. government's primary interest in this part of the Arctic was the 2019 proposal by the American administration to purchase the island from Denmark. This proposal was met with negative reactions from Danish and Greenlandic authorities. The intention of the U.S. president, Donald Trump, following his statement that the United States "must have" Greenland, became a clearly articulated foreign policy and strategic objective of this great power (*Al Jazeera Balkans* 2025). According to Trump's statements, Greenland is strategically important to the United States, a "necessity" for its security. He argued that if the United States does not establish dominance in this region, Russia and China will do so (*Al Jazeera Balkans* 2025). Another idea considered by the U.S. administration was the purchase of Greenland, a concept that dates back to the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. According to this idea, Greenland would be purchased directly from its inhabitants, with a certain amount paid to each of approximately 60,000 residents.

In January 2026, pressure on Denmark and the European Union intensified with threats to raise tariffs on goods from European countries if Denmark did not agree to “hand over” or “sell” Greenland. Trump stated: “For years, we have subsidised Denmark, as well as all European Union countries and others, by not charging them tariffs or any other form of compensation. Now, after centuries, the time has come for Denmark to reciprocate – the world’s peace is at stake. China and Russia want Greenland, and there is nothing Denmark can do about it. Therefore, in order to protect global peace and security, strong measures must be taken to quickly and decisively resolve this potentially disastrous situation. Starting February 1, 2026, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and Finland will face a 10% tariff on all goods sent to the United States. From June 1, this tariff will increase to 25%. These tariffs will remain in place until a final agreement on Greenland is reached” (Čevriz 2026). Such initiatives can be interpreted as an expression of realist logic, maximising security and control over strategic territories, with Greenland serving as a key point in U.S. geopolitical calculations.

In the context of the war primarily on the territory of Ukraine, as well as the most recent conflicts in the Middle East, Greenland is particularly significant for the United States in security terms due to modern weapons systems such as the “Golden Dome,” which can achieve its full efficiency and maximum protective potential only if the island becomes part of the broader U.S. defence “system.” The administrations of Greenland and Denmark, as well as those of other European countries, condemned the tendencies expressed by Trump. The response included the deployment of military forces near Greenland’s approaches, while protests took place among the island’s population. A significant escalation of geopolitical tensions could also signal the end of military cooperation within NATO, whose functioning, financing, and purpose Trump has questioned since the beginning of his first term. In the absence of an agreement, it remains uncertain whether the situation will escalate through the use of the announced measures (Leclerc 2025, 2, 6).

China

In addition to the United States, China has shown increasing interest in Greenland. China’s Arctic strategy is primarily based on

economic presence and investments in infrastructure projects (Koivurova *et al.* 2020, 25–41). In recent years, China has developed the concept of the so-called “Polar Silk Road,” which represents part of the broader Belt and Road Initiative (Darie and Bălăsoiu 2025, 2). Although China does not have territorial claims against Arctic states, Chinese companies have expressed interest in mining projects in Greenland, particularly for rare earth elements. These approximately 17 chemical elements are of great importance to the modern global economy, as they are essential for the development of electronic devices, batteries, and renewable energy technologies.

Chinese companies have also shown interest in infrastructure projects on the island, including airport construction and transport development, reflecting broader Chinese interest in controlling global supply chains. These projects have the potential to influence Greenland’s economic development significantly, but they may also have wider geopolitical implications, contributing to China’s expansion of global influence. For this reason, such Chinese investments have encountered political obstacles (Berenguer, Katona Winther and Meunier 2025, 9).

One of the most prominent projects attracting Chinese interest is the mining project in the Kvanefjeld area of southern Greenland, known for its large deposits of rare minerals. Denmark has strongly opposed the intention of Chinese companies to exploit these resources, citing the significant environmental damage that such exploitation could entail (Yang 2021, 23–27). Although China’s strategy toward Greenland formally emphasises economic and scientific objectives, the presence of Chinese companies in the region enables Beijing to strengthen its political influence. This approach points to a strategy of indirect influence-building through economic and infrastructural instruments of power, confirming the hypothesis that contemporary great power rivalry in the Arctic region has a primarily geoeconomic dimension.

Denmark

Denmark plays a specific role in the contemporary geopolitics of Greenland, as Greenland is a formally autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark. Although Greenland enjoys a high degree of political autonomy, with its own parliament and government, issues of foreign policy and defence remain under the jurisdiction of the Danish state (Jakobsen and Larsen 2024).

The relationship between Denmark and Greenland represents a complex historical process, ranging from the colonial period through the strengthening of autonomy to contemporary debates over the island's independence. This relationship dates back to the era of European colonial expansion. Denmark established control over Greenland in the eighteenth century. After the Second World War, in the context of broader decolonisation, Denmark introduced reforms granting greater rights to Greenland's population. In 1979, Greenland obtained autonomy through the establishment of a system of home rule, which enabled local authorities to exercise greater control over internal affairs, including education, healthcare, and the local economy (Ackrén and Jakobsen 2014, 404–412). A particularly important step toward greater autonomy was achieved with the Self-Government Act of 2009. One of the most significant outcomes of this act is the right to future independence, should the people of Greenland decide so (Ackrén and Jakobsen 2014, 404–412).

For this reason, Greenland is of significant importance to Denmark. Through its territorial connection, Denmark can function as an Arctic state and an active participant in Arctic international institutions. The Danish government seeks to balance support for Greenland's political autonomy with the preservation of its own strategic interests in the region. As a member of NATO and part of the European security space, Denmark plays an important role in shaping Western policy toward the Arctic region.

At the same time, Danish policy toward Greenland includes support for the island's economic development. Greenland is heavily dependent on financial assistance from Denmark, making the development of the mining industry and the exploitation of natural resources crucial to potentially reducing this dependence. Although there are strong political forces in Greenland advocating for independence, economic dependence on Denmark remains a significant factor influencing political decisions. The Danish government reacted immediately after international media reported on U.S. interest in purchasing Greenland. Danish political leaders emphasised that Greenland is an autonomous territory with its own government and parliament, and that the question of its political future cannot be the subject of bilateral negotiations between other states. In this context, the Danish government stressed that "Greenland is not for sale," thereby clearly rejecting the possibility of any agreement involving the transfer of territorial sovereignty (Gronholt-Pedersen

2025). Statements by Donald Trump further intensified debate in Denmark over Greenland's strategic importance. Danish politicians and analysts emphasised that Greenland is an important element of Denmark's international position, particularly in Arctic geopolitics. As a state with territory in the Arctic region, Denmark participates in international institutions that govern the Arctic, including the Arctic Council.

In addition to political considerations, Denmark also has significant security interests in Greenland. The island represents a key point in the North Atlantic security structure and plays an important role in the transatlantic defence system. The U.S. military base Pituffik (formerly Thule Air Base) is located on Greenlandic territory and constitutes an important element of U.S. and NATO missile defence. This base operates under an agreement between Denmark and the United States, meaning that Denmark plays an important role in regulating the U.S. military presence on the island. Such an institutional arrangement further complicates the region's geopolitical dynamics, introducing an internal political sensitivity into broader international relations.

European Union

The European Union also demonstrates growing interest in the Arctic region. Although Greenland is not part of the European Union, the EU seeks to develop various forms of cooperation with the island, particularly in scientific research, environmental protection, and sustainable development (Fernández-Montesinos 2025, 3). Greenland and the European Union maintain a specific relationship that reflects the broader interaction between European integration and territories with special constitutional status. Greenland represents a unique case in the history of European integration, as it was the first territory to withdraw from the European Economic Community (European Commission 2007, 2–4). This process, often described as the first “European exit” in 1982 – prior to Brexit – significantly shaped relations between Greenland and EU institutions.

Following its withdrawal from the European Economic Community (EEC), Greenland acquired the status of an overseas territory with privileged access to the European market for certain products, as well as the possibility of financial and developmental cooperation with European institutions. One of the most important elements of

this relationship is the Fisheries Agreement between Greenland and the European Union (EP, P10_TA(2025)0143), under which European fleets are granted access to Greenlandic waters in exchange for financial support from EU institutions to Greenland's economy. In EU strategic documents, the Arctic is increasingly viewed as a region of particular geopolitical and economic importance. European institutions seek, through various cooperation programs, to contribute to the stability and sustainable development of the region (*Beyond the Horizon* 2026).

Overall, great power rivalry in Greenland does not manifest in open military conflict but primarily in political and economic competition. Investments in infrastructure, control over resource exploitation, and the development of political relations with local authorities represent key elements of contemporary geopolitical competition in the region. Statements by former U.S. President Donald Trump about the possibility of acquiring Greenland sparked strong reactions in European political circles. The European Union responded by offering political support to Denmark and emphasising the principles of territorial sovereignty and international law. For European institutions, the issue of Greenland represents not only a bilateral matter between the United States and Denmark, but also a broader question of the stability of the international order. In this sense, the European Union acts as a normative actor seeking to preserve regional stability through institutional and legal mechanisms, representing an alternative to classical geopolitical strategies of great powers (*Beyond the Horizon* 2026).

Russian Federation

Russia represents one of the most important states in the geopolitics of the Arctic region, as it possesses the longest Arctic coastline in the world. Its geopolitical, economic, and military significance is strategically important for international relations in this part of the world. The Arctic occupies a central place in Russian foreign policy and security strategy, particularly regarding energy, natural resources, and transport routes. Within this strategy, Russia closely monitors developments – economic, security, and political – across the entire Arctic region, with particular attention to Greenland (President of the Russian Federation 2020).

Russia seeks to develop this transport network through investments in infrastructure, ports, and its icebreaker fleet. Russia's nuclear icebreaker fleet is the largest of its kind in the world and enables

navigation through Arctic waters for much of the year (Bukharin 2006, 25–31). As part of this strategy, Russia is also modernising its military infrastructure in the north. Numerous Soviet-era military bases have been restored or modernised, and the Russian armed forces are developing new systems for operations in Arctic conditions. Russian analysts argue that U.S. military infrastructure in Greenland could affect the strategic balance among great powers. Particular emphasis is placed on the role of radar systems and infrastructure for tracking missile systems.

In this context, the Russian state closely monitors the development of U.S. military capabilities in Greenland. The modernisation of American military infrastructure and the development of new missile defence technologies are important factors in Russian security analyses. At the same time, Russia seeks to preserve the balance of power in the Arctic region by strengthening its own military presence. This policy is based on the idea that regional stability depends on a strategic balance among different actors (Bukharin 2006, 25–31; Mortensgaard and Barse 2026). Russia's reaction to Donald Trump's intentions regarding Greenland has been relatively cautious. However, Russian media and analytical circles have clearly emphasised that attempts to acquire territories such as Greenland could set a precedent in international relations. The Russian Federation's position is that Greenland must remain part of Denmark, with all the rights deriving from its autonomy (Antonov 2025). Such a policy reflects the realist concept of power balancing, in which Russia seeks to limit the influence of other actors and preserve its strategic position in the Arctic.

Canada

Canada is one of the key Arctic actors, whose interests in the region are based on a combination of territorial sovereignty, security priorities, and the management of natural resources (Byers 2010, 153–155). As a state with a significant portion of Arctic territory, Canada views the Arctic as an integral part of its national identity and security strategy. Canadian Arctic policy has traditionally been oriented toward preserving sovereignty over the Northwest Passage, which Canada considers internal waters, whereas the United States views it as an international strait (Byers 2010, 153–155). This difference in interpretation indicates latent tensions even among allies within the Western security framework.

In addition to the security dimension, Canada seeks to develop the Arctic region's economic potential through resource exploitation and infrastructure development, while simultaneously emphasising environmental protection and the rights of Indigenous communities (Government of Canada 2019, 18–24). In the context of contemporary great-power rivalry, Canada occupies a specific position between cooperation and competition, balancing its national interests with the broader Western strategic framework (Lackenbauer 2021, 812–815). This approach confirms that the Arctic region is not a homogeneous field of rivalry but rather a complex space where elements of cooperation and geopolitical competition intersect. In this sense, Canada's role further supports the main hypothesis of the paper, demonstrating that contemporary great power rivalry in the Arctic unfolds through a combination of security, economic, and political instruments, where even alliances do not exclude the existence of competing interests (*Beyond the Horizon* 2026).

GREENLAND AS AN ARENA OF A “MINI COLD WAR”

Changes in the international system over recent decades have led to renewed strengthening of great-power rivalry. Although the contemporary international order does not exhibit complete structural similarity with the bipolar system that dominated during the Cold War, many authors point to the emergence of new forms of geopolitical competition (Mearsheimer 2001, 29–32). This competition often manifests in regional spaces where the interests of major powers intersect, creating specific zones of geopolitical contestation. The Arctic region represents one such space. Climate change, the opening of new maritime routes, and increasing competition for access to natural resources contribute to transforming the Arctic into a region of growing geopolitical importance (Fernández-Montesinos 2025, 14–15). In this context, Greenland occupies a particularly significant position due to its strategic location between North America and Europe and its potentially substantial mineral resources.

The concept of a “mini Cold War” describes regional forms of great-power rivalry that do not reach the level of global conflict but still have significant political and strategic implications. Unlike the classical Cold War between the United States and the Soviet Union, contemporary

rivalry has a more complex structure and involves a range of instruments of power (Byers 2010, 70–72). During the Cold War, Greenland played an important role in the security system of the United States and NATO. The American military base Thule, now known as Pituffik Space Base, was part of the ballistic missile early warning system. In contemporary international relations, geopolitical competition does not manifest solely through the military dimension but also encompasses the economy, technology, infrastructure, and control over resources. It is precisely in this context that Greenland represents a specific geopolitical space where the interests of multiple international actors converge. The United States seeks to maintain its strategic position in the region through military presence and security cooperation with Denmark. At the same time, China is developing a strategy to expand its economic presence in the Arctic region. Chinese companies have shown interest in exploiting mineral resources in Greenland, particularly rare earth elements.

In addition to economic and security factors, Greenland's political status further complicates the region's geopolitical dynamics. As an autonomous territory within the Kingdom of Denmark, Greenland has significant self-government, but issues of foreign policy and defence remain under Danish jurisdiction (Jakobsen and Larsen 2024). Contemporary geopolitics of Greenland demonstrates that great power rivalry can take various forms that do not necessarily involve open conflict. Instead, competition often unfolds through political, economic, and infrastructural instruments of power. Investments in mining projects, the development of transport infrastructure, and political cooperation with local authorities represent key elements of this process. In this sense, Greenland can be understood as a micro-arena of contemporary geopolitical rivalry in the Arctic region. In this space, the interests of the United States, China, Denmark, Canada, and the European Union intersect, contributing to the perception of the Arctic as a region in which new geopolitical competition is emerging.

The case study of Greenland demonstrates that the contemporary international system is characterised by a complex interplay of different forms of power, in which control over resources, infrastructure, and political influence is as important as traditional military power. In this sense, Greenland serves as an empirical example of the transformation of the contemporary international system toward multipolarity, in which great-power rivalry manifests across various interconnected dimensions of power.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of Arctic geopolitics shows that the Arctic has become increasingly important in contemporary international relations over the past few decades. Climate change, technological development, and the growing global demand for natural resources have transformed this region from a relatively peripheral space in international politics into a key geopolitical area of the modern world. In this context, Greenland occupies a particularly prominent place in contemporary geopolitical analyses. Its geographical position between North America and Europe makes it an important strategic point in the North Atlantic and Arctic space. At the same time, the island's potential mineral resources, particularly rare earth elements, further increase the interest of various international actors in this region.

The analysis demonstrates that Greenland's geopolitical significance stems from a combination of several factors. On the one hand, military and security aspects remain an important element of the island's geopolitics, as reflected in the presence of U.S. military infrastructure in Greenland. On the other hand, the island's economic and resource potential is becoming an increasingly significant factor in contemporary geopolitical calculations. A particular dimension of Greenland's contemporary geopolitics is the presence of multiple great powers whose interests intersect in the Arctic. The United States seeks to maintain its strategic position through military presence and security cooperation with Denmark. At the same time, China is developing a strategy of economic presence in the region through investments in mining and infrastructure projects. Denmark and the European Union seek to preserve political stability in the region and ensure the island's sustainable development, while Canada contributes to the complexity of the region's geopolitical dynamics.

This dynamic indicates the existence of a specific form of contemporary geopolitical rivalry. However, there is no direct military confrontation among great powers; competition for influence in the region manifests through various political, economic, and infrastructural instruments of power. For this reason, Greenland can be viewed as a specific micro-arena of contemporary geopolitical competition. In this sense, the concept of a "mini Cold War" serves as a useful analytical framework for understanding contemporary geopolitical dynamics in the Arctic region. Unlike the global rivalry that characterised the Cold

War period, contemporary forms of geopolitical competition often have a regional character and manifest through a combination of different instruments of power.

The case study of Greenland demonstrates that contemporary geopolitics increasingly involves a complex interaction of security, economic, and political factors. Control over resources, infrastructure, and transport routes is becoming as important as traditional military power. For this reason, the Arctic region – and Greenland in particular – will remain one of the key arenas of contemporary geopolitical rivalry in the coming decades and will play a significant role in shaping the global order.

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Сандра Божић**Београд*

ГРЕНЛАНД У НОВОЈ ГЕОПОЛИТИЦИ АРКТИКА: МИКРО-АРЕНА САВРЕМЕНОГ РИВАЛСТВА ВЕЛИКИХ СИЛА

Резиме

Рад анализира геополитички значај Гренланда у савременом међународном систему са посебним фокусом на његово позиционирање као микро-арене ривалства великих сила у арктичком региону. Полазећи од реалистичког теоријског приступа, истраживање испитује на који начин се савремена геополитичка конкуренција манифестује кроз политичке, економске и безбедносне инструменте моћи. Методолошки оквир заснива се на квалитативној анализи и студији случаја Гренланда као стратешки релевантне територије. Анализа показује да, упркос одсуству отворене војне конфронтације, ривалство великих сила у Арктику поприма комплексне и вишедимензионалне облике, чиме Гренланд добија улогу кључне микро-арене савременог геополитичког надметања. У раду се анализира став сваког од појединачних великих геополитичких играча према Гренланду (САД, Данска, Русија, Канада, Европа). Објашњавају се њихови мотиви и на основу чега они „полажу право” на Гренланд. Такође, обрађена је пажња на природна богатства Гренланда која привлаче пажњу великих сила. Закључци овог рада односе се на систематизацију досадашњих истраживања на тему Гренланда, као и представљање оригиналних закључака ауторке рада. Дају се претпоставке о будућем развоју догађаја и шта можемо очекивати у овом делу света.

Кључне речи: Гренланд, Арктик, геополитика, ривалство великих сила, међународни односи

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REVIEWS

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DOI: 10.5937/spm98-66334
Book review

Српска политичка мисао
(Serbian Political Thought)
No 4/2026.
Vol. 98
pp. 193-197

Srđan Milašinović*
Matica srpska, Novi Sad

BORDER AND THE POWER OF PRESERVING IDENTITY IN AN AGE OF CHANGE



Simeunović, Dragan. 2025. *Granica i identitet: fenomen granica: identiteti i granice*. Novi Sad: Prometej: Centar za kulturne integracije. pp. 67.

The distinguished political scientist and academician Dragan Simeunović has, these days, presented us with a new work: *Border and Identity*, showing how, for outstanding creators and humanists, years pose no obstacle whatsoever. A full professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences and the Faculty of Law of the University of Belgrade, emeritus, member of the European Academy of Sciences and Arts, the Academy of Sciences and Arts of the Republic of Srpska, and the American Academy of Political and Social Science, secretary of the Committee for Philosophy and Social Theory of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, as well as the holder of numerous other academic and social functions, he has dedicated his 28th book to a topic that has never been more “heated” and actual. In an age of unpredictable global geopolitical changes and turbulent international relations,

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he has offered an academically mature, theoretically strong, and methodologically simple interpretation of essential political phenomena: borders and identity.

Already from the striking foreword by Professor Darko Tanasković, we see that this is a fundamental work that, alongside a foundational analysis of society, reveals a wealth of scientifically grounded reflections on the concept and meaning of borders in a world of Huntingtonian rifts among states and conflicts that herald wars of religion and culture. Borders and demarcations, identity and alterity, violent emergence and unlawful drawing are only part of the social migrations and divisions that daily reshape the planet's geopolitical mosaic, along with the new redrawing of borders and their permanent revisions. Emphasising the intellectual dispersion and synthetic method of Professor Simeunović, he points in the foreword to the opened epistemological gates that further explain the border mentality and the changes occurring in parallel with the planet's geopolitical turbulences.

A contemporary essay on borders and identities gradually shifts our perceptions of these concepts. By combining a readable, simple, and universally

understandable style, the author unfolds a series of dilemmas aimed at determining the significance of space, always in relation to freedom, which may also be symbolic. Drawing on Arthur Schopenhauer's interpretation of "the limits of our vision as the limits we consider the limits of the world," Simeunović delves into more conceptually demanding and complex interpretations of the line that conceals and reveals the space of the state. This "is not and can never be just a thin imagined line," the academician concludes excellently, conducting a dialogical discussion with Tibor Varady, who, a decade ago, wrote that "law too has its boundaries." The border is formally a permanent but in practice highly movable line, Simeunović notes, recognising in this fact numerous conflicts shaking the planet. The fact that actors in conflicts do not acknowledge the shifting of lines does not mean that political reality will not take them into account.

A border is generally established to separate differences, but as Martin Heidegger says, it is not merely the place "where something ceases." At the same time, it is the space where that Something begins, so the border represents an end for some, but also a beginning for

others. Philosophically lyrical, aesthetically refined, semantically rich, Professor Simeunović synthesises interspatial events in the fields of politics, culture, and conflictology, striving to weave – by an invisible hand – the interdependence of centre and periphery, especially as reflected in the environment around borders. He does all this by depicting the potential drama among individuals and collectives who, existing in this environment, seek economic ways to shape their own lives in an insecure community. “Uncertainty is that factor which, even when unacknowledged, discourages any culture of saving. The life of border guards created *bećari* (or *bekjari*) – military volunteers who spend their pay for power because they do not know whether they will still be alive tomorrow or soon... The turbulent life of the border guard is compensation for his material insecurity and the possibility of a short life. The emanation of their violence is an advance payment for the violence that will sooner or later be experienced” (Simeunović 2025, 21).

The world is in turmoil; constant tensions and fears are increasing daily, so, logically, the individual becomes a product of their spiritual environment, as Slobodan Jovanović observed long

before us. Every destabilisation of a border is a potential crisis for society, Simeunović concludes excellently, because phenomenologically it represents a space “unsupported by the element of permanent security.” In lay perception, borders are always understood “as something dangerous, unpleasant, and insecure, so everyone strives to cross them as soon as possible” (Simeunović 2025, 26). Therefore, here blood is the only currency to which all bow, bringing back onto the stage an anti-Freudian readiness for bloodshed, where it should be “those across the border.” The author conceptually immerses himself in Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel’s rapture of sacrifice, which, in practice among these people, creates a cult of death, accompanied by an epic fascination with the act of sacrifice. Hence, also the problem of identity, its fragmentation or loss, due to which the One must be distinguished from the Other.

Love for one’s people and state is particularly visible at borders, because emotions resonate more strongly there than in other spaces. Academician Simeunović possesses a measure by which he reduces heavy and mostly well-known definitions to light, understandable observations

that point to potential political dimensions. At first glance, this seems easy, but it is clear that behind it lies a rich encyclopedic education that gives every reader the impression of personal address and conversation. Similar to Eric Hobsbawm, he lucidly connects the phenomena and processes he points to with history and culture, understanding that without them – and religion – there is no national identity. “The memory of shared suffering and joy is the cement of an ethnos,” Simeunović aptly concludes, noting how warriors remain in collective memory for a long time, but not in the same way as the devotees of the Spirit. “Research, for example, shows that today’s Serbs take more pride in Nikola Tesla and Novak Đoković than in Miloš Obilić. This indicates that times of peace produce one kind of ethnic identification and role models, while times of war produce quite another” (Simeunović 2025, 35).

The problem of conflict lies in the fact that there is not enough love for everyone, which means that every love for “ours” also implies a lack of love for others. The merging of diverse ethnic groups through long coexistence led to the formation of nation-states, especially through shared experiences in wars and crises.

Professor Simeunović is an excellent connoisseur of political theory, but also a guardian of secrets that could reveal much “excess of History” from more recent confrontations. When he speaks about the specific identity of the border, we must trust him, as the French sociologist Maurice Duverger argues: “The border deepens our tastes and makes them more refined” through constant comparisons with Others. Although such identity is complex and multivalent, we strive to integrate it into the complex whole of social relations, discovering and accepting everything good in the Other. Therefore, the border does not reduce horizons but opens them, reducing the innate fear of incidents that are always realistically possible. Love for all who inhabit the same territory is one of the solutions toward which politics should strive, because closing oneself within the Self and One’s Own may increase security, but diminishes love toward Others.

Although modest in volume, this monograph will mean a great deal to the domestic academic community, especially to researchers of geopolitical processes, security and conflict studies, anthropologists, philosophers, gender studies researchers, and ordinary

citizens eager for simple, useful knowledge. The publishing house “Prometej” and the City of Novi Sad have ensured that the study is printed in English, making its benefits available to a global audience.

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Simeunović, Dragan. 2025. *Granica i identitet: fenomen granica: identiteti i granice*. Novi Sad: Prometej: Centar za kulturne integracije.

* This manuscript was submitted on April 7, 2026, and accepted by the Editorial Board for online publication and published *online first* on June 5, 2026. It was accepted by the Editorial Board for publishing on August 10, 2026.

AUTHOR GUIDELINES

The academic journal *Serbian Political Thought* publishes articles that result from the latest theoretical and empirical research in the field of political science. Authors should refer mainly to the results of scientific research published in academic journals, primarily in political science journals.

Manuscripts should be submitted in Serbian (Cyrillic script) with a mandatory English translation, or in English.

The journal is published six times a year. The deadlines for submitting the manuscripts are February 1st, April 1st, June 1st, August 1st, October 1st, and December 1st.

Two consecutive issues cannot contain articles written by the same author, whether single-authored or co-authored.

Papers are submitted to the Editorial Board by uploading them to the CEON platform using the following link: <https://aseestant.ceon.rs/index.php/spm/login>.

Authors are obliged to submit a signed and scanned declaration of authorship when submitting their works. The declaration form can be downloaded from the journal's website: https://www.ips.ac.rs/en/magazines/srpska-politicka-misao/authors_directions/

All submitted manuscripts are checked for plagiarism or auto-plagiarism. Various forms of chat boxes and other artificial intelligence software cannot be (co)authors of the papers under consideration. These tools can only be used for stylistic language editing, not for writing sections of the paper, and authors who use them are obliged to specify the purpose of using such tools at the point where they are used.

Authors are required to provide their ORCID numbers along with their (preferably) institutional email addresses, which they include in the manuscript text in a footnote alongside their names and surnames.

Research articles can have up to 40,000 characters with spaces, including footnotes. When counting the characters leave out the reference list. Exceptionally, a monographic study can be larger in scope in accordance with the provisions of *the Rulebook on procedure, method of evaluation, and quantitative presentation of scientific research results*.

Reviews can have up to 15,000 characters with spaces.

Book reviews can have up to 10,000 characters with spaces.

CITING AND REFERENCING

The journal *Serbian Political Thought* uses a partially modified Chicago style of citation (17th edition of the *Chicago Manual of Style*), which implies specifying bibliographic parentheses (brackets) according to the author-date system in the text, as well as a list of references with full bibliographic data after the text of the paper.

Data in bibliographic parentheses and the list of references should be written in Latin script.

Below are the rules and examples for citing the bibliographic information in the reference list and in the text. For each type of source, a citation rule is given first, followed by an example of citation in the reference list and bibliographic parenthesis.

The bibliographic parenthesis is usually set off at the end of the sentence, before the punctuation mark. It contains the author's surname, the year of publication, and page numbers pointing to a specifically contextual page or range of pages, as in the following example: (Mearsheimer 2001, 15–17).

Books

Books with one author

Surname, Name. Year of publication. *Title*. Place of publication: Publisher.

Mearsheimer, John J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

(Mearsheimer 2001)

Books with two or three authors

Surname, Name, and Name Surname. Year of publication. *Title*. Place of publication: Publisher.

Brady, Henry E., and David Collier. 2010. *Rethinking Social Inquiry: Diverse Tools, Shared Standards*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

(Brady and Collier 2010, 211)

Pollitt, Christopher, Johnston Birchall, and Keith Putman. 1998. *Decentralising Public Service Management*. London: Macmillan Press.

(Pollitt, Birchall and Putman 1998)

Books with four or more authors

Surname, Name, Name and Surname, Name and Surname, and Name and Surname. Year of publication. *Title*. Place of publication: Publisher.

Pollitt, Christopher, Colin Talbot, Janice Caulfield, and Amanda Smullen [Pollitt *et al.*]. 2005. *Agencies: How Governments do Things Through Semi-Autonomous Organizations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

(Pollitt *et al.* 2005)

Editor(s) or translator(s) in place of the author(s)

Surname, Name, Name and Surname, ed. Year of publication. *Title*. Place of publication: Publisher.

Kaltwasser, Cristobal Rovira, Paul Taggart, Paulina Ochoa Espejo, and Pierre Ostigoy [Kaltwasser *et al.*], eds. 2017. *The Oxford Handbook of Populism*. New York: Oxford University Press.

(Kaltwasser *et al.* 2017)

Chapter in an edited book

Surname, Name. Year of publication. "Title of the chapter." In *Title*, ed. Name Surname, pages range. Place of publication: Publisher.

Lošonc, Alpar. 2019. "Discursive dependence of politics with the confrontation between republicanism and neoliberalism." In *Discourse and Politics*, eds. Dejana M. Vukasović and Petar Matić, 23?46. Belgrade: Institute for Political Studies.

(Lošonc 2019)

Journal Articles

Regular issue

Surname, Name. Year of publication. "Title of the article." *Journal* Volume, if available (issue): page range. DOI.

Ellwood, David W. 2018. "Will Brexit Make or Break Great Britain?" *Serbian Political Thought* 18 (2): 5?14. DOI: 10.22182/spt.18212018.1.

(Ellwood 2018)

Newspapers and magazines

Signed articles

Surname, Name. Year of publication. "Title of the article." *Newspaper/Magazine* Date: page range.

Clark, Phil. 2018. "Rwanda's Recovery: When Remembrance is Official Policy." *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2018: 35–41.

(Clark 2018)

Unsigned articles

Title of the newspaper/magazine. Year of publication. "Title of the article." Date: page range.

New York Times. 2002. "In Texas, Ad Heats Up Race for Governor." July 30, 2002.

(*New York Times* 2002)

Corporate Author

Name of the corporate author [acronym if needed]. Year of publication. *Title of the publication.* Place of publication: Publisher.

International Organization for Standardization ?ISO?. 2019. *Moving from ISO 9001:2008 to ISO 9001:2015.* Geneva: International Organization for Standardization.

(International Organization for Standardization ?ISO? 2019) – *The first in-text citation*

(ISO 2019) – *Second and all subsequent citations*

Legal and Public Documents

Sections, articles, or paragraphs can be cited in the parentheses. They should be appropriately abbreviated.

Constitutions and laws

The title of the legislative act [acronym if needed], "Official Gazette of the state" and the number of the official gazette, or the webpage and the date of last access.

The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, "Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia", No. 98/06.

(The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia, Art. 33)

The Law on Foreign Affairs [LFA], “Official Gazette of the Republic of Serbia”, No. 116/2007, 126/2007, and 41/2009.

(LFA 2009, Art. 17)

Succession Act [SA], “Official Gazette of the Republic of Croatia”, No. 48/03, 163/03, 35/05, 127/13, and 33/15 and 14/19.

(SA 2019, Art. 3)

An Act to make provision for and in connection with offences relating to offensive weapons [Offensive Weapons Act], 16th May 2019, www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2019/17/pdfs/ukpga_20190017_en.pdf, last accessed 20 December 2019.

(Offensive Weapons Act 2019)

Legislative acts of the European Union

The title of the legislative act, the number of the official gazette, the publication date, and the number of the page in the same format as on the *EUR-lex* website: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/homepage.html>.

Regulation (EU) No 182/2011 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16 February 2011 laying down the rules and general principles concerning mechanisms for control by Member States of the Commission’s exercise of implementing powers, OJ L 55, 28.2.2011, p. 13–18.

(Regulation 182/2011, Art. 3)

Web sources

Surname, Name, or name of the corporate author [acronym]. Year of publication or n.d. – if the year of publication cannot be determined. “The name of the web page.” *The name of the website*. Date of creation, modification, or the last access to the web page, if the date cannot be determined from the source. URL.

Bilefsky, Dan, and Ian Austen. 2019. “Trudeau Re-election Reveals Intensified Divisions in Canada.” *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/22/world/canada/trudeau-re-elected.html>.

(Bilefsky and Austen 2019)

Institute for Political Studies [IPS]. n.d. “The 5th International Economic Forum on Reform, Transition and Growth.” *Institute for Political Studies*. Last accessed 7 December 2019. <http://www.ips.ac.rs/en/news/the-5th-international-economic-forum-on-reform-transition-and-growth/>.

(Institute for Political Studies [IPS] n.d.) – *First in-text citation*

(IPS n.d.) – *Second and every subsequent citation*

Associated Press [AP]. 2019. “AP to present VoteCast results at AAPOR pooling conference.” May 14, 2019. <https://www.ap.org/press-releases/2019/ap-to-present-votecast-results-at-aapor-polling-conference>.

(AP 2019)

Special cases of referencing

Citing editions other than the first

Surname, Name. Year of publication. *Title*, edition number. Place of publication: Publisher.

Bull, Hedley. 2012. *The Anarchical Society: A Study of Order in World Politics*, 4th edition. New York: Columbia University Press.

(Bull 2012)

Multiple sources of the same author

1) *Multiple sources by the same author* should be arranged chronologically by year of publication in ascending order.

Mearsheimer, John J. 2001. *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

Mearsheimer, John J. 2010. “The Gathering Storm: China’s Challenge to US Power in Asia.” *The Chinese Journal of International Politics* 3 (4): 381–396. DOI: 10.1093/cjip/poq016.

2) *Multiple sources by the same author from the same year* should be alphabetized by title, with lowercase letters attached to the year. Those letters should be used in parenthetical citations as well.

Walt, Stephen M. 2018a. *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

(Walt 2018a)

Walt, Stephen M. 2018b. “Rising Powers and the Risk of War: A Realist View of Sino-American Relations.” In *Will China’s Rise be Peaceful: Security, Stability and Legitimacy*, ed. Asle Toje. 13–32. New York: Oxford University Press.

(Walt 2018b)

3) *Single-authored sources precede multiauthored sources beginning with the same surname* or written by the same person.

Pollitt, Christopher. 2001. "Clarifying convergence. Striking similarities and durable differences in public management reform." *Public Management Review* 3 (4): 471–492. DOI: 10.1080/14616670110071847.

Pollitt, Christopher, Johnston Birchall, and Keith Putman. 1998. *Decentralising Public Service Management*. London: Macmillan Press.

4) *Multiauthored sources with the same name and surname* as the first author should continue to be alphabetized by the second author's surname.

Pollitt Christopher, Johnston Birchall, and Keith Putman. 1998. *Decentralising Public Service Management*. London: Macmillan Press.

Pollitt Christopher, Colin Talbot, Janice Caulfield, and Amanda Smullen. 2005. *Agencies: How Governments do Things Through Semi-Autonomous Organizations*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Special cases of parenthetical citation

Exceptions to the rule of placing the parenthetical citation at the end of a sentence

1) If the *author is mentioned in the text*, even if used in a possessive form, the year must follow in parenthesis, and page numbers should be put in the brackets at the end of the sentence.

For the assessment, see Kaltwasser *et al.* (2017) ... (112).

According to Ellwood (2018) ... (7).

2) When *quoting directly*, if the name of the author precedes the quotation, the year and page numbers must follow in parenthesis.

Mearsheimer (2001, 28) claims that: "...".

3) When *using the same source multiple times in one paragraph*, the parenthetical citation should be placed either after the last reference (or at the end of the paragraph, preceding the final period) if the same page (or page range) is cited more than once, or at the first reference, whereas the subsequent citations should only include page numbers.

Do not use *ibid* or *op. cit.* with repeated citations.

Using brief phrases such as “see”, “compare” etc.

Those phrases should be enclosed within the parenthesis.

(see: Ellwood 2018)

Using secondary source

When using a secondary source, the original source should be cited in parenthesis, followed by “quoted/cited in” and the secondary source. The reference list should only include the secondary source.

“Its authority was greatly expanded by the constitutional revision of 1988, and the Court of Arbitration can now be regarded as a ‘genuine constitutional court’” (De Winter and Dumont 2009, 109 cited in: Lijphart 2012, 39–40).

Lijphart, Arend. 2012. *Patterns of Democracy: Government Forms and Performance in Thirty-Six Countries*, 2nd edition. New Haven & London: Yale University Press.

Multiple sources within the same parentheses

1) When *multiple sources* are cited, they should be separated by semicolons.

(Mearsheimer 2001, 34; Ellwood 2018, 7)

2) When *multiple sources by the same author*, but published in different years are cited, the name of the author is cited only the first time. The different years are separated by commas or by semicolons where page numbers are cited.

(Mearsheimer 2001, 2010) or (Mearsheimer 2001, 15–17; 2010, 390)

3) When *different authors share the same surname*, include the first initial in the parenthesis.

(M. Chiti 2004, 40), (E. Chiti 2004, 223)

Chiti, Edoardo. 2004. “Administrative Proceedings Involving European Agencies.” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 68 (1): 219–236.

Chiti, Mario. 2004. “Forms of European Administrative Action.” *Law and Contemporary Problems* 68 (1): 37–57.

TEXT FORMATTING

General guidelines for writing the manuscript

The manuscript should be written in Word, in the following manner:

- Paper size: A4;
- Margins: Normal 2.54 cm;
- Use Times New Roman font (plain letters) to write the text, unless specified otherwise;
- Line spacing: 1.5;
- Footnote line spacing: 1;
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