



ПОЛИТИКА НАЦИОНАЛНЕ БЕЗБЕДНОСТИ

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ПОЛИТИКА НАЦИОНАЛНЕ
БЕЗБЕДНОСТИ

THE POLICY OF
NATIONAL SECURITY

Digital Security,
Regional and International Processes

ISSN 2334-959X
UDC 351.862/.863(497.11)
No. 1/2026.



ПОЛИТИКА НАЦИОНАЛНЕ БЕЗБЕДНОСТИ
The Policy of National Security

Publisher

Institute for Political Studies
Address: Dobrinjska 11, Belgrade
www.ips.ac.rs
Tel.: 011/3349 204;
E-mail: pnb@ips.ac.rs
ISSN 2334-959X UDC 351.862/.863(497.11)
No. 1/2026 vol. 31.

JOURNAL IS PUBLISHED THREE TIMES A YEAR

For publisher

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Printing

Komazec, Indija

Circulation

50

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**THE POLICY
OF NATIONAL
SECURITY**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword..... X

**DIGITAL SECURITY, REGIONAL
AND INTERNATIONAL PROCESSES**

Goran Matic

EXCESSIVE SECRECY IN DEMOCRACIES:
BUREAUCRATIC REFLEX OR SECURITY ILLUSION?.....1-27

Dušan Proroković

RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS IN DONALD TRUMP'S
SECOND TERM: BETWEEN DESIRES AND REALITY.....29-59

Marta Nešković

MULTIDIMENSIONAL SECURITY IN
MUAY THAI PRACTICE61-86

Mitko Arnaudov, Sanja Jelisavac Trošić, Marjan Gjurovski

NATIONAL DEFENCE STRATEGY AND RESILIENCE
OF THE NORTH MACEDONIA SECURITY SECTOR
IN THE ERA OF MODERN SECURITY CHALLENGES89-108

Aleksandar Gajić

GEOPOLITICAL CONSEQUENCES
OF BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S FALL IN SYRIA..... 111-135

<i>Hatidža Beriša, Dejan Petrović</i> ACTIVITIES OF PARASECURITY STRUCTURES AND FOREIGN FACTORS IN KOSOVO AND METOHIIJA WITHIN THE HYBRID WAR AGAINST THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA	137-168
<i>Aleksandar Bogičević</i> ISRAEL-IRAN CYBER WARFARE: THE DIGITAL DIMENSION OF MIDDLE EASTERN CONFLICTS IN A POST-UNIPOLAR WORLD.....	171-194
<i>Bogdana Stjepanović, Srđana Đurašević</i> THE DIGITAL SHADOWS: NATIONAL SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF SHARENTING IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA AMIDST GLOBAL THREATS	197-217

FOREWORD

Dear readers,

Despite the dynamic nature of contemporary political developments, the scientific journal “Policy of National Security” strives to remain relevant and analyse the most important security processes. For this reason, and at this time, we have emphasised publishing topics that reflect our reality, as seen in the issue title “Digital Security, Regional and International Processes”.

Prof. Dr Goran Matić has researched the phenomenon of excessive secrecy in contemporary democracies through the prism of bureaucratic reflex and security illusion. Through comparative analysis, the author concludes that the main driver of this phenomenon is the difference between the concept of *security secrecy* (protection of real security capacities) and the concept of *political secrecy* (protection of institutions from accountability).

The issue of ever-interesting Russian-American relations was addressed by Dr Dušan Proroković, with particular reference to Donald Trump’s second term. The author set the Ukrainian crisis as a “litmus phenomenon”, which significantly shapes current Russian-American relations.

As martial arts have been incorporated into contemporary security systems, we decided to give space in our journal to the work of Dr Marta Nešković, which deals with the role of Muay Thai in identity processes. This paper analyses Muay Thai as a cultural practice, highlighting its multidimensional character and its role in human security.

There is always room in our journal for current topics from the region, and we have therefore published a paper that elaborates on North Macedonia’s national defence strategy, with particular reference to the resilience of the security sector. The authors of the aforementioned paper are Dr Mitko Arnaudov, Dr Sanja Jelisavac Trošić, and Prof. Dr Marjan Gjurovski.

This time, we have reserved space for a very significant topic in the international context: the contemporary crisis in Syria and the Middle East. Our colleague Dr Aleksandar Gajić has researched the geopolitical consequences of the collapse of the Assad regime, with a focus on the events leading up to it in Syria. Also, the paper by our colleague Aleksandar Bogićević focuses on the Israeli-Iranian conflict through the prism of the digital dimension, i.e., cyber warfare.

The topic of Kosovo and Metohija always has a special place in our journal, so we have given space to a paper dealing with this crucial issue for the Republic of Serbia. The paper by Dr Hatidža Beriša and Lieutenant Colonel Dejan Petrović analyses the activities of para-security structures in the context of the hybrid war in Kosovo and Metohija.

The paper by Dr Bogdana Stjepanović and Srđana Đurašević analyses the concept of sharenting in relation to the national security of the Republic of Serbia, which is an insufficiently explored yet significant topic in our scientific community.

As can be observed, the journal “Policy of National Security” not only covers all security phenomena, uniting (primarily) the national, regional, and international levels, but also strives to be even better than it has been. On this not at all easy (but beautiful) process, a small and diligent team of my associates (Milica Stojčić, Nenad Spasojević, and Miroslav Radovanović) is working, striving with each new issue to make a small (but important) step forward, and as the editor-in-chief, I feel the need to point this out this time as well.

Read us until the next issue, when we will be publishing many new and significant scientific analyses.

Kind regards,

*Editor-in-Chief of the journal
Policy of National Security,
Ph.D. Marija Đorić*

DIGITAL
SECURITY,
REGIONAL AND
INTERNATIONAL
PROCESSES

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**EXCESSIVE SECRECY IN DEMOCRACIES:
BUREAUCRATIC REFLEX OR
SECURITY ILLUSION?
(Translation in *Extenso*)**

Abstract

Systematic excessive classification of information within the security apparatuses of the United States, the European Union, and key NATO allies constitutes a structural anomaly within liberal democracies. Through comparative analysis, the article identifies that the principal driver of this phenomenon is the distinction between *security secrecy* (the protection of genuine security capabilities) and *political secrecy* (the protection of institutions from accountability). The research demonstrates that, despite different legal traditions, all examined systems share common structural patterns: *defensive classification* as a risk-minimization strategy, asymmetric incentives that penalize openness, and weak mechanisms of external oversight. The consequences of such practices include erosion of public trust, constrained cooperation within alliances, and reduced effectiveness in decision-making processes. The article concludes that solutions require a paradigm shift – from the logic of the *need to conceal* toward the principle of *the right to know*, grounded in the presumption of openness as the basis of democratic legitimacy. Key operational steps include the introduction of mandatory *sunset* clauses, strengthening the

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independence and competences of oversight bodies, and harmonizing standards at NATO and European Union levels to prevent misuse of secrecy for information management rather than security protection.

Keywords: overclassification, secrecy, intelligence community, democratic accountability, right to information, United States, European Union, NATO, comparative analysis.

INTRODUCTORY CONSIDERATIONS

Overclassification is not an administrative error it represents a systemic choice. In democracies founded on the principles of accountability and transparency, the mass designation of documents as “classified”, without clear and verifiable criteria, transforms secrecy from an exception into a rule. The consequence of such practice is not increased security, but weakened oversight and fragmented cooperation among allies.

This paper proceeds from the thesis that overclassification is one of the most serious, yet at the same time one of the least regulated challenges of contemporary security systems. While public and professional debates intensively focus on artificial intelligence, cyber defense, and hybrid threats, the practice of routinely restricting access to information remains largely neglected – even though it directly undermines the democratic values that these states formally uphold.

Before analyzing specific national systems, it is necessary to point to the universal frameworks of international organizations. Although the United Nations do not have a unified classification system, their bodies have, over time, articulated principles balancing security and transparency. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Guidelines on Freedom of Information and National Security (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization 2014) require that every restriction “be lawful, necessary, and proportionate in a democratic society”. The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, in the 1999 Istanbul Document (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE] 1999), emphasized that secrecy must not serve as a pretext for avoiding accountability.

These universal standards constitute the normative foundation upon which more detailed and operationalized instruments were later built including the Tshwane Principles on National Security and the Right to Information (Open Society Justice Initiative 2013), the Council of Europe Convention on Access to Official Documents (Tromsø Convention 2009), the evaluation mechanisms of the Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) (Council of Europe 2018), the normative framework of the European Union (EU) in the form of Council Decision 2013/488/EU on the security rules for protecting EU classified information (Decision 2013/488), and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions, AAP-06 edition (NATO Standardization Office 2021). The common message of all these instruments is clear: a legitimate security interest must not override democratic requirements of transparency, parliamentary oversight, and public interest. Nevertheless, comparative analysis shows that the gap between normative alignment and operational practice remains the central problem of overclassification in contemporary democracies.

Although practices differ, international and regional frameworks demonstrate coherence in defining the principles of responsible classification. The Council of Europe's Group of States against Corruption has emphasized on several occasions that excessive secrecy undermines anti-corruption mechanisms and oversight, particularly in public procurement and resource management. The NATO Glossary and the EU Security Rules insist on proportionality, justification, and temporal limitation. These standards demonstrate a consensus that secrecy must be the exception, not the rule – a consensus which, as the analysis will show, often remains at the level of theory rather than practice.

At the core of the phenomenon lies the paradox of democracy and secrecy: liberal democracy, as conceptualized by Dahl and Habermas, requires openness as a condition of the legitimacy of political will (Dahl 1989; Habermas 1996). Yet within those systems, apparatuses develop whose functionality rests on controlled closure creating tension between the right to know and the need for secrecy (Fenster 2006). Secrecy within intelligence institutions is not merely

a procedural tool, but becomes part of organizational culture a “basic assumption” shaping the identity of services and the behavior of their members (Schein 2010). In this way, secrecy transforms from a technical choice into a normative imperative, creating conditions for systemic excess.

The analysis encompasses three analytical levels: the United States of America, as a global hegemon with the most developed intelligence-security apparatus; the EU as a supranational entity with layered and fragmented secrecy regimes; and three European states – the United Kingdom, France, and Germany – characterized by different approaches to secrecy, ranging from the British “culture of service” to the German legacy of the Stasi, the principal secret intelligence service of East Germany.

The theoretical framework combines the theory of bureaucratic behavior (Wilson 1989), which emphasizes the selection of minimum-risk strategies, and the theory of democratic accountability (Fenster 2006), which insists that secrecy must constitute an exception rather than a rule in the functioning of democratic institutions. Additionally, the paper relies on critical literature on the phenomenon of the “Leaky Leviathan” (Pozen 2013) and the institutional dynamics of overclassification (Aftergood 2023).

The methodological approach is based on comparative case analysis and includes consideration of the following materials: official reports of the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO), the European Ombudsman, and the German Bundestag’s Parliamentary Oversight Panel (*Parlamentarisches Kontrollgremium – PKGr*); relevant academic literature by authors such as Steven Aftergood and David E. Pozen; research projects of the National Security Archive at George Washington University; as well as analysis of key affairs such as the Pentagon Papers, the Snowden affair, and cases concerning the German Federal Intelligence Service (*Bundesnachrichtendienst – BND*).

The structure of the paper follows the logic of systematic comparison: the second chapter is devoted to the analysis of practice in the United States, the third to the EU, the fourth presents a comparative analysis of the three selected European states, while the fifth chapter

offers a synthetic conclusion on possible paths toward establishing accountable transparency.

The research focuses exclusively on the comparative analysis of the systems of the United States, the EU, and key NATO allies. The system of classified information protection in Serbia is not the subject of this paper.

Although NATO is mentioned in the title and in the broader context of the paper as a framework for the sharing of classified information among Western democracies, the paper does not analyze its classification system (e.g., AAP-06, Cosmic Top Secret). The reason is methodological: NATO does not possess its own intelligence capacities nor does it produce original classified information, but rather acts as a mechanism for the exchange of information generated at the national level. Accordingly, overclassification in the NATO context reflects the practices of member states, primarily the United States, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany – which are covered by this analysis. Additionally, NATO standards, including the principles of *need-to-know* and *need-to-share*, have already been incorporated into national systems and the EU framework; therefore, examining them through the prism of member states provides an adequate analytical insight into the functioning of secrecy within the Transatlantic Alliance.

Within the discourse on excessive secrecy, three approaches can be distinguished. The first, critical, characteristic of civil society organizations and right-to-information actors, focuses on abuses and consequences for transparency and democratic control. The second, defensive, characteristic of governmental bodies and security structures, proceeds from the need to preserve existing practices and emphasizes the risks that reducing secrecy could pose to security, stability, or international obligations. The third, academic, adopts a neutral position: through analysis of the normative framework, comparative practice, and implementation, it seeks to identify systemic weaknesses and possibilities for improvement.

This paper belongs to the third, academic approach. Its objective is not to take sides in existing controversies, but to offer an analytical framework that enables understanding why problems in the field of

classified information protection recur, how different approaches shape practice, and in what manner a more functional balance between security, accountability, and public interest may be achieved.

The title of the paper poses a dilemma: is overclassification the consequence of a bureaucratic reflex – a rational but narrowly instrumental response to perceived risks – or a security illusion: a strategy that conceals political opacity, avoidance of accountability, and the management of public perceptions under the pretext of national security? The analysis demonstrates that these two options are often inseparable in practice: the bureaucratic reflex becomes the mechanism through which the security illusion is produced and maintained. When fear of error, career risk, and institutional inertia are systematized as a “minimum-risk strategy”, secrecy ceases to be a technical measure and becomes an instrument of information control rather than of security protection.

THEORETICAL PARADIGMS: SECRECY BETWEEN SOVEREIGNTY AND THE DEMOCRATIC EXCEPTION

Before undertaking a comparative analysis of national systems, it is necessary to clarify the theoretical dilemmas concerning the relationship between secrecy and democracy. The paradox of liberal democracy lies in the need for openness as a source of legitimacy, but also for secrecy as a condition for the functionality of security apparatuses (Dahl 1989; Habermas 1996). This relationship can be understood through two opposing theoretical traditions.

The sovereignty paradigm – from Jean Bodin to Carl Schmitt – treats secrecy as an attribute of sovereign authority. In Bodin’s view, sovereignty implies the capacity of the state to decide independently on matters of vital importance, including the right to withhold certain information from the public domain. Schmitt radicalizes this relationship with the claim that “sovereign is he who decides on the exception” (Schmitt [1922] 2005). The exception operates outside procedures of publicity and transparency, thereby making secrecy a precondition of extraordinary decision-making. In contemporary

security states, this logic is institutionalized: the executive retains control over classified information on the assumption that secrecy is a condition of effective action in crisis situations.

The democratic paradigm is grounded in Habermas's principle that the public sphere constitutes the basis of democratic legitimation of authority. Public debate and access to information enable control of political power and transform "narrative power" into "discursive accountability" (Habermas 1996). Secrecy is not the rule, but a deviation that requires strictly limited justification. Within a democratic order, it is permissible exclusively as a controlled and temporary departure for the protection of a specific and legitimate interest. The problem arises when the exception becomes the rule, and the public sphere a secondary value.

From a legal perspective, secrecy is neither a peremptory norm (*ius cogens*) nor an absolute right of the state. It is an exception to the rule of transparency, but one strictly regulated by law. Secrecy constitutes a form of administrative discretion with clearly established legal limits. Authorities must ensure that every decision on classification is: 1) reasoned, 2) based on an assessment of harm, 3) time-limited, and 4) subject to review. This framework, shared by the Tshwane Principles (Open Society Foundations 2013) and the Tromsø Convention, forms the normative foundation of responsible classification.

A key analytical distinction lies in differentiating between the protection of genuine security capacities (security secrecy) and the "protection of institutions from accountability" (political secrecy). The former refers to safeguarding actual security capabilities (sources, methods, operational plans, cyber defense), while the latter serves to shield institutions and officeholders from accountability, oversight, or public criticism. The theoretical thesis emerging from this distinction is that overclassification is often a political, rather than a security, problem. It results from the expansion of the exception and asymmetries of power within institutions, rather than from an excess of security caution.

This distinction becomes particularly relevant when analyzing patterns of overclassification. In practice, political secrecy manifests

through: 1) the mass designation of entire documents as classified even though only a portion is sensitive; 2) retroactive classification after information has already entered the public domain – as a form of ex post censorship; 3) the preservation of “obsolete secrets” without regular risk review; and 4) the expansion of the concept of “national interest” to commercial or administrative data. These patterns, though differently formalized, are recognizable across systems – from the US to Germany – indicating a structural dynamic rather than isolated institutional errors.

Contemporary security frameworks increasingly question the traditional *need-to-know* model as the exclusive guiding principle. In an era of hybrid threats, mass surveillance, and complex challenges, this restrictive approach reveals its limitations. Consequently, the *need-to-share* principle is being affirmed – the idea that information should be made available to subjects who can effectively apply it for collective defense, even if they were not directly involved in its production. This evolution does not represent opposition, but rather an upgrade: the *need-to-know* principle protects against misuse, while *need-to-share* ensures efficiency and resilience. This dichotomy is institutionalized in the EU Security Rules and in the NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions, AAP-06 edition, where both approaches are presented as complementary principles.

This theoretical framework represents an analytical “map” for examining concrete systems. It enables a distinction between legitimate security secrecy and political misuse, identification of the moment when the “exception” becomes the “rule”, and assessment of whether secrecy functions as an instrument of protection or of control. Equipped with these conceptual tools, the analysis turns to a comparative consideration of three levels: the US as a global paradigm, the EU as a supranational experiment, and key NATO allies with their differing traditions. This dichotomy is particularly relevant in the context of allied organizations such as NATO, where the principles of *need-to-know* (protection against information leakage) and *need-to-share* (ensuring collective defense) exist in constant tension. The NATO Glossary of Terms and Definitions, AAP-06 edition, explicitly recognizes this dichotomy, yet practice demonstrates that technical

standards alone are often insufficient to overcome cultural and political obstacles to information sharing.

The United States: The Paradigm of a Culture of Secrecy

The US represents the most developed, yet also the most problematic example of systemic overclassification. Although described as an “open democracy”, the US operates under a secrecy regime unprecedented in modern history. According to estimates by the Federation of American Scientists, the US security apparatus classifies over 50 million pages of documents annually – a figure that, while lower than at the peak of the Cold War, still indicates the massive application of the principle “classify everything you can” (Aftergood 2023). This practice is rooted in administrative culture, legal framework, and institutional incentives that reward caution and penalize openness.

The principal legal act regulating classification in the United States for decades was Executive Order 13526 (White House 2009). It defines three levels of classification – *Confidential*, *Secret*, and *Top Secret* – and requires classification only if unauthorized disclosure could “reasonably be expected to cause damage to national security”. On paper, the framework appears reasonable, but in practice there is no effective mechanism for verifying justification. The decision is made by an individual official, often without adequate training, oversight, or consequences in cases of excessive secrecy. The same act provides for automatic declassification after 25 years, yet permits unlimited exemptions “for enduring security interests”. As a result, more than 80% of documents older than 25 years remain classified (Public Interest Declassification Board 2022), rendering “automatic” declassification a bureaucratic fiction. In October 2022, the administration of President Joe Biden adopted Executive Order 14040 (White House 2022), intended as a “reform for a new era”. The act seeks to address chronic systemic weaknesses: it introduces standards for the “digital compatibility” of classified data, strengthens the role of the National Archives in coordinating declassification, and promotes technologies for “bulk declassification”. However, as Pozen

(Pozen 2023) emphasizes, Executive Order 14040 does not resolve the core problem: it neither limits officials' discretion in classification nor introduces sanctions for unjustified excess. The reform remains within the logic of "technocratic management" – improving processes without questioning the culture of secrecy that produces them.

Three key factors explain the persistence of overclassification in the United States:

1) Culture of secrecy – The legacy of the Cold War and the "war on terror" has created a mentality in which "it is safer to withhold than to disclose". As a former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency stated before Congress: "No one has ever lost their job for overclassifying" (US Congress 2016; Aftergood 2023; Schein 2010). Secrecy has become part of professional identity, while openness is perceived as risk.

2) Fear of accountability – Officials know they will be sanctioned if they disclose information, but almost never if they unjustifiably conceal it. The cases of Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden demonstrated that leaking information, even in the public interest, leads to imprisonment or exile. As Fenster (Fenster 2006) observes, the system creates asymmetric incentives that undermine democratic accountability.

3) Bureaucratic inertia – The declassification process is slow, costly, and technically demanding. Instead of systematic review, agencies extend classification status "just in case". This is an example of a "minimum-risk strategy" (Wilson 1989): when the costs of error in favor of openness are high, and those in favor of secrecy negligible, the choice is always – secrecy.

Two examples particularly illustrate the consequences of excessive secrecy:

1) The Iraq War (2003–2011) – While the media and Congress debated "weapons of mass destruction", key intelligence reports indicating a lack of evidence were classified. Only later did it become clear that secrecy had prevented informed democratic debate. As the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States concluded, "secrecy did not protect national security – it concealed unpreparedness and poor judgment" (The National Commission on

Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States [9/11 Commission] 2004, 417).

2) NSA (National Security Agency) mass surveillance programs – As revealed by Edward Snowden in 2013, segments of the PRISM and UPSTREAM programs were classified not due to operational sensitivity, but to conceal the scope of surveillance over citizens. The consequence was a crisis of trust between the state and society. As Connelly (Connelly 2023) notes, “when even court decisions are classified, democracy loses its reflexive capacity”.

Excessive secrecy directly undermines congressional oversight as a key mechanism of democratic control. Although Congress formally has the right to access all intelligence information, in practice such access is often delayed or incomplete materials are provided. Thus, a small number of legislators are expected to oversee tens of thousands of classified activities annually – a practically impossible task. An additional problem is historical amnesia: without access to archival records, researchers and future decision-makers are deprived of the opportunity to learn from the past. As historian Matthew Connelly observed, “when the state writes its own history, it becomes myth, not lesson” (Connelly 2023).

European Union: Challenges of Supranational Secrecy

The EU represents a special case in the analysis of over-classification, not because of the scale of its intelligence apparatus, but because the protection of sensitive information is built upon national secrecy regimes. The paradox – “European transparency” based on “national closedness” – creates a layered architecture of secrecy that often functions more as a barrier than as a filter. The consequence is a system in which information can be doubly or triply classified: at the level of the member state, as EU classified information, and sometimes also through bilateral agreements with NATO or the United States. The main legal act regulating secrecy at the level of the EU is Council Decision 2013/488/EU on security rules for protecting EU classified

information. This act defines four levels of secrecy, i.e., classification: *EU Restricted*, *EU Confidential*, *EU Secret*, and *EU Top Secret*.

At the normative level, the system enables interoperability between institutions and member states. In practice, however, each state retains sovereign control over the interpretation and application of categories. Thus, a German document marked “VS – Nur für den Dienstgebrauch” (Confidential – for official use only) may be treated in Brussels as *EU Restricted*, while a French document of the same content may be elevated to *EU Secret*, due to the institutional culture of protecting information of vital importance to the French state (*secret défense*). This fragmentation in risk perception makes joint analytical activity almost impossible.

The EU has no central body for declassification. A document marked *EU Secret* retains that status until the member state or institution (e.g., the Council of the EU) explicitly declassifies it, with the consent of all actors involved in its creation. In practice, this means that most documents never lose their classified status. Theoretical alignment with standards is often not followed by consistent implementation: EU regulations require that classification be proportional, justified, time-limited, and based on concrete harm, with the principles of *need-to-know* and *need-to-share*. Yet in practice, secrecy is often treated as the default procedure, especially in public procurement, infrastructure projects, and contracts with foreign capital or European funds. Documents are often assigned a high level of secrecy without adequate risk analysis or a clearly articulated justification.

The practice of the European Union Agency for Cybersecurity (ENISA) shows that greater openness in incident management contributes substantially to systemic resilience. On the other hand, excessive secrecy makes cross-sector cooperation more difficult – both among state institutions and between the public and private sectors. Such closedness runs counter to the principle of *need-to-share*, which, according to European cybersecurity standards, is crucial for the effective exchange of technical information and indicators of compromise.

Three factors explain over-classification at the level of the EU:

1) Protection of the negotiating position – in trade negotiations (e.g., the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership with the U.S., the Trade Agreement with Canada, the Common Foreign Policy), the European Commission and delegations often classify even technical analyses in order to limit public debate. The European Ombudsman has repeatedly criticized this practice, particularly in the context of negotiations with the U.S. in the field of the digital economy (European Ombudsman 2021).

2) Lack of parliamentary oversight – unlike national systems, the European Parliament has no direct oversight over documents marked as *EUCI* (EU Classified Information). The “Interinstitutional Agreement on Confidential Documents” restricts access to a narrow circle of Members of Parliament, without the right to public disclosure or debate.

3) Culture of diplomatic reserve – many EU officials come from national diplomatic services where secrecy is the rule. This mentality is transferred to Brussels, where a “security clearance” is often used as a status symbol rather than as an instrument of necessity.

Two cases clearly demonstrate systemic problems:

1) Negotiations on the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (2013–2016) – more than 90% of documents were classified, including impact assessments on health, the environment, and labor rights. When international NGOs Greenpeace and Corporate Europe Observatory published parts of the documentation, it became clear that many concerns were justified, but by then it was too late for meaningful public debate.

2) Operation “Irin” (2020 – present) – the EU naval mission in the Mediterranean, aimed at enforcing the arms embargo on Libya, classified even geospatial data on ship movements as *EU Secret*. This prevented independent verification of the mission’s mandate and led to accusations that the EU was concealing cooperation with Libyan militias (European Parliament 2023).

Over-classification in the EU directly undermines the principle of an open and transparent Union established by the Lisbon Treaty (Article 1 TEU). Instead of clear insight into decision-making processes in the fields of security and foreign policy, citizens face

an institutionalized wall of secrecy, justified by “efficiency” or “delicacy”. The consequence is an erosion of legitimacy: according to Eurobarometer 2024, only 28% of citizens believe that institutions act in their interest, with secrecy being one of the key sources of distrust (European Commission 2024; Transparency International 2025).

Fragmented classification practices further complicate cooperation within the Union. A German service may hold information that it internally treats as “confidential”, but once it is forwarded to Europol, it becomes *EU Confidential* and is no longer accessible to the German parliamentary oversight committee. Such jurisdictional traps create gaps in the control system and increase the risk of institutional errors.

The problem is compounded by bilateral agreements with NATO, which introduce an additional layer of classification. A document marked as *EU Secret* may be reclassified as *NATO secret* if it contains information relevant to allied defense. This creates administrative barriers and the risk of “creeping classification” – the gradual and unjustified increase in the secrecy level of documents.

Comparative Analysis of Key NATO Allies: United Kingdom, France and Germany

Although they belong to the same Transatlantic alliance and face common security challenges, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany show significant differences in their approach to secrecy – not so much in regulations, but in institutional culture, the degree of parliamentary oversight, and the willingness to reassess practices. The common pattern is that over-classification is less a consequence of law and more the result of implicit norms within intelligence communities (Moran 2022). Differences in democratic tradition and historical experience lead to variations in how secrecy is subject to public and institutional scrutiny. This variability reflects deeper differences in organizational cultures (Schein 2010): the British system interprets secrecy through official loyalty, the French as an expression of sovereignty, and the German as a potential threat to the individual that must be strictly limited. These three models represent

an ideal analytical framework for examining what Habermas calls “the tension between administrative efficiency and democratic legitimacy” (Habermas 1996).

The British secrecy system is based on the Official Secrets Acts of 1989, which do not define what is “secret”, but instead sanction any unauthorized disclosure of information “in the possession of a civil servant” (Legislation 1989; Group of States against Corruption 2023). This vagueness allows for broad interpretation: anything the state considers sensitive can become subject to criminal prosecution. The consequence is a culture in which secrecy is part of professional identity, particularly in MI6, GCHQ, and the Ministry of Defence.

The key problem is limited parliamentary oversight. Although there is an Intelligence and Security Committee, its members are appointed by the Prime Minister, and the committee has no right to initiate investigations on its own. In the inquiry into British involvement in a CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) operation that included the unlawful transfer of detainees, the Committee had limited access to documents because they were marked *US Classified*, and British agencies had no authority to declassify them (Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament 2007). Recent reform attempts – such as the Freedom of Information (Amendment) Bill of 2023 – have led to further expansion of exemptions for security services, thereby weakening the freedom of information regime even more. As investigative journalist Richard Norton-Taylor observed, “British secrecy today functions like a private club, not as part of public administration” (Norton-Taylor 2024). This metaphor illustrates a system in which secrecy is institutionalized as a means of elite self-preservation rather than as a technical security measure.

The French approach to secrecy is based on strong centralization of power and the tradition of the primacy of state interest (*raison d'État*). Law No. 91–646 on the secrecy of correspondence via electronic communications (Légifrance 1991), adopted in 1991 and amended in 2017 and 2021, gives the executive branch almost absolute control over classification. Ministers of Defense or the Interior can unilaterally declare documents “secret” without judicial or parliamentary approval, and the secrecy period can last up to 75 years.

Parliamentary oversight formally exists through the Advisory Commission on Secrecy in the Field of National Defense (*Commission consultative du secret de la défense nationale – CCSDN*), but it has no authority to order declassification, only to issue recommendations that are often ignored. An illustrative case is France’s military engagement in the Sahel, where reports on civilian casualties and targeting errors remained classified for years, preventing public debate on the effects of the intervention.

French media and researchers are subject to criminal sanctions if they publish classified information, even when obtained through third parties (e.g., WikiLeaks). Thus, in 2022, journalist *Marie-Marguerite Sablon* was criminally prosecuted under the French equivalent of the British Official Secrets Act after publishing a document on cooperation between the French foreign intelligence service – the Directorate-General for External Security (*Direction Générale de la Sécurité Extérieure*) – and Moroccan intelligence services, even though the document did not originate from the French archive. Such practices not only violate principles of freedom of speech but also undermine democratic accountability: when even already obtained information becomes a criminal offense, society loses the ability to influence security policy.

The German approach to secrecy is strongly shaped by the historical legacy of the Stasi and the regime of personal data protection. The Secrecy Act (*Geheimhaltungsgesetz*) of 2016 requires that classification be proportional, time-limited, and subject to regular review. Any document older than 30 years automatically loses its classified status unless it can be proven that its disclosure would still pose a risk.

The key difference compared to the United Kingdom and France is stronger parliamentary oversight. The German Parliament’s Committee for the Oversight of Federal Intelligence Services (*Parlamentarisches Kontrollgremium – PKGr*) has the right to demand access to any document, including those marked state secret (*Streng Geheim*), and to summon the directors of *Bundesnachrichtendienst – BND*, *Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz – BfV*, and *Amt für den*

Militärischen Abschirmdienst – MAD for public or closed hearings. In the case of cooperation between the BND and the American NSA, the committee launched a comprehensive investigation in 2014 that led to legislative reform and a ban on mass data collection on EU citizens.

Germany is also not immune to over-classification. In areas such as arms exports or the deployment of the Bundeswehr abroad, documents are often classified “as a precaution”, even when they do not contain operationally sensitive information. Critics, including Transparency International Deutschland, point out that secrecy in such cases is used to conceal politically unfavorable information, such as actual costs or civilian casualties (Transparency International Deutschland 2024). This shows that even in a system with the most developed oversight mechanisms, a culture of precaution can prevail over the principles of transparency.

Table 1. Comparative conclusion: Three Models, One Problem

Country	Legal Framework	Level of Oversight	Culture of Secrecy
United Kingdom	Vaguely defined (OSA)	Weak, under executive control	Secrecy as deontology
France	Centralized (secret défense)	Formal without executive control	Raison d’État as absolute
Germany	Proportional (Geheimhaltungsgesetz)	Strong parliamentary oversight	Secrecy as exception

Source: Author’s compilation.

What the British, French, and German systems have in common is that secrecy functions as an instrument of risk management, but primarily political rather than security risk. Overclassification in all cases prevents institutional learning from previous mistakes, undermines public trust, and complicates cooperation within NATO. It is particularly problematic when British documents cannot be shared with German partners due to differing standards in the interpretation of the concept of *secrecy*.

CONCLUDING REMARKS: TOWARDS A CULTURE OF RESPONSIBLE TRANSPARENCY

The analysis of practices in the US, the EU, the United Kingdom, France, and Germany demonstrates that overclassification is not a technical anomaly but a structural characteristic of modern democratic security apparatuses. Although the systems differ in legal form, institutional architecture, and historical context, three common causal patterns can be identified:

1) Culture of secrecy as a norm – the logic of “safer to close than to open” is internalized as a rule of behavior (Schein 2010).

2) Asymmetric incentives – officials who disclose information bear risks (career, disciplinary, legal, criminal), while those who unjustifiably expand secrecy almost never face consequences (Fenster 2006).

3) Weak external oversight mechanisms – whether the U.S. Congress, the European Parliament, the United Kingdom’s Intelligence and Security Committee, or Germany’s Parliamentary Control Panel over intelligence services, all these bodies operate with limited access to information, insufficient resources, or political silencing.

The combination of these factors produces a systemic pathology: secrecy ceases to serve the protection of national interests and becomes an instrument for shielding institutions from public and democratic accountability. The consequences are profound and multi-layered.

First, the *effectiveness of intelligence work declines*. When information is excessively fragmented and unavailable even within the same institution, the risk of duplicated activities, analytical errors, and missed critical signals increases. Such deficiencies were identified by the U.S. 9/11 Commission as one of the causes of the American systems failures (The 9/11 Commission 2004).

Second, there is an *erosion of public trust*. The legitimacy of the security apparatus is undermined when citizens see that decisions on war, mass surveillance, or international agreements are made under secrecy and later found to be based on incorrect or manipulated assumptions (e.g., the 2003 invasion of Iraq or the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan). According to Transparency International

(Transparency International 2025), even 62% of citizens in NATO member states believe that “secrecy is used to conceal political motives”.

Third, the *negative consequences affect international cooperation*. NATO and the EU rely on trust and information sharing, yet in practice a UK document may remain inaccessible to a German partner due to a UK Secret classification, or a French report due to the *secret défense* regime. Under such conditions, alliances lose operational value, and secrecy becomes an obstacle to collective security.

Overclassification is a structural problem, not the result of individual abuses. It arises from a systemic logic that rewards opacity, penalizes openness, and lacks effective mechanisms for retroactive review of the justification for secrecy. This pattern is present both in the US, the most powerful democracy, and in Germany, which has the most developed oversight mechanisms.

International legal frameworks provide a clear path toward responsible transparency. The Tshwane Principles on National Security and the Right to Information (Open Society Foundations 2013) require that every classification decision be accompanied by a risk assessment, proportionality justification, and the application of the lowest necessary level of protection. The OSCE Istanbul Document (OSCE 1999) prescribes prohibition of the misuse of national security as a justification for concealment of corruptive practices and institutional irregularities. The Council of Europe Tromsø Convention (Tromsø Convention 2009) emphasizes that secrecy must be time-limited, subject to independent review, and based on an objective risk assessment.

Table 2. International Standards on Overclassification

Instrument / Organization	Key Principle	Practical Application
GRECO (Council of Europe)	Secrecy must not undermine anti-corruption mechanisms	Specifically criticizes excessive use of secrecy in public procurement and management of public resources

EU Security Rules	Proportionality, justification, and time limitation	Often applied formally, without substantive assessment of actual security risk
NATO AAP-06	Combination of “need-to-know” and “need-to-share” principles	Encourages inter-allied cooperation but often conflicts with national secrecy cultures in practice
Tshwane Principles (2013)	Specific and probable harm; democratic necessity	Serves as a reference model for reforming national classification laws and policies
OSCE Istanbul Document	Prohibition of misuse of national security	Directly relates to preventing the concealment of corruption and institutional irregularities

Source: Author’s compilation

These standards point to two mechanisms: 1) cumulative tests – access restrictions must meet the criteria of necessity, overriding interest, and specificity (specific and probable harm), with the burden of proof resting on the authority; 2) absolute prohibition of using secrecy to conceal irregularities.

However, in practice, problems arise when technical standards are applied formally, without substantive connection to these criteria. This leads to two consequences: 1) systemic undermining of protection mechanisms – excessive use diminishes the credibility of the classification; 2) limitation of democratic oversight – parliaments, oversight bodies, and media remain without access to critical information.

The solution does not lie in further tightening controls, but in a fundamental paradigm shift – from the logic of *need to hide* to the principle of *right to know*. Key steps include: 1) Introducing a legal mechanism that automatically terminates the validity of classification laws, provisions, or measures upon expiration (*sunset* clause), implying automatic declassification of information after a predefined period (e.g.,

ten years for *Confidential*, 15 years for *Secret*, except in cases where the justification for extension is explicitly and documentedly proven); 2) Strengthening independent oversight bodies – granting initiative rights, requiring public reporting, and direct access to archives; 3) systematic training of officials in the field of ethics of transparency – not only regarding the procedural application of confidentiality regimes, but also in understanding democratic responsibility and the public interest; 4) Harmonizing minimum standards at NATO and EU levels – adopting a common framework that clearly defines which types of information must not be classified (e.g., cost analyses, civilian casualty assessments, human rights documentation), in line with contemporary discussions on security sector reform in the region (Matić 2024; Starčević 2024).

The balance between security and transparency is inherently tense. However, the current state does not represent a balance but a systemic overload in favor of secrecy, often without clear and verifiable justification. If modern democracies wish to preserve their legitimacy and institutional effectiveness, they must recognize that the public's right to information is not a threat to security but one of its key foundations. As U.S. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis long ago warned: "Sunlight is the best disinfectant".

In conclusion, overclassification is neither a purely bureaucratic reflex nor merely an intentional security illusion – it represents a structural coupling of both phenomena. The bureaucratic reflex (fear of accountability, institutional inertia) allows the security illusion (concealment of political motives) to become institutionalized as "normal practice".

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ПРЕКОМЕРНА ТАЈНОСТ У ДЕМОКРАТИЈАМА: БИРОКРАТСКИ РЕФЛЕКС ИЛИ БЕЗБЕДНОСНА ИЛУЗИЈА?

Резиме

„Прекомерна тајност у демократијама” анализира системску прекомерну класификацију информација у безбедносним апаратима САД, Европске уније и кључних НАТО савезника. Полазна теза рада јесте да прекомерна тајност није случајна административна девијација, већ структурирани избор који произлази из разлике између *security secrecy* – заштите оперативних капацитета и *political secrecy* – заштите институција од политичке и правне одговорности. Управо у том померању фокуса са безбедности на институционалну самозаштиту аутор препознаје суштину проблема. Компаративна анализа указује на заједничке обрасце у различитим системима: дефанзивну класификацију као стратегију минимизације ризика, асиметричне подстицаје који кажњавају отвореност, као и ограничену ефикасност спољашњих механизма надзора. Службеници су институционално мотивисани да информације класификују, јер евентуална штета од објављивања носи санкције, док прекомерна тајност ретко производи последице. Таква логика генерише културу превентивног затварања информација. У САД култура тајности и страх од одговорности доводе до класификације десетина милиона страна годишње, при чему аутоматска декласификација у пракси остаје формална норма без стварног домета. У Европској унији проблем се испољава кроз институционалну фрагментацију: различити национални режими тајности отежавају хоризонталну сарадњу, док се

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класификација често користи за заштиту преговарачких позиција и политичке осетљивости. Анализа Уједињеног Краљевства, Француске и Немачке показује да, упркос различитим правним традицијама, тајност функционише као инструмент политичког управљања ризиком: британски модел карактерише ограничен парламентарни надзор; француски је снажно централизован око концепта државног интереса; док немачки, иако формално снажнији у контроли, испољава бирократску инертност. Последице прекомерне тајности су вишеструке. Фрагментација информација умањује оперативну ефикасност обавештајних служби. Истовремено, еродира се јавно поверење, јер се тајност користи за прикривање политичких мотива и пропуста, што подрива демократску легитимност. Додатно, неусаглашени стандарди отежавају сарадњу унутар НАТО савеза. Закључно, рад позива на промену парадигме: од логике „потребе да се сакрије” ка принципу „права да се зна”. Предлажу се увођење обавезних *sunset* клаузула за временски ограничену класификацију, јачање независности надзорних тела и хармонизација стандарда на нивоу ЕУ и НАТО. Само системски приступ може ограничити злоупотребу тајности и обезбедити да она остане изузетак, а не правило демократског управљања.

Кључне речи: прекомерна класификација, тајност, обавештајна заједница, демократска одговорност, право на приступ информацијама, Сједињене Америчке Државе, Европска унија, НАТО, компаративна анализа.

* This paper was received on February 27, 2026, and accepted for publication at the Editorial Board meeting on February 27, 2026.

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**RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS
IN DONALD TRUMP'S SECOND TERM:
BETWEEN DESIRES AND REALITY****

(Translation in *Extenso*)

Abstract

Donald Trump's initiative to restore Russian-American relations by resolving the Ukrainian crisis with partial respect for Russia's demands seemed surprising and was described as a kind of U-turn in American foreign policy. However, the question is not only what effect such U-turns in bilateral and/or international relations can have, but also whether they can be carried out without major consequences. On the one hand, the Ukrainian crisis is complex; it decisively determines continental security, and therefore, European countries are interested in resolving it. On the other hand, after four years of confrontation, trust between Russia and the collective West has been destroyed, and time is needed to restore it. This research examines the reasons and scope of Donald Trump's initiative. There is a big difference between the publicly proclaimed desire to contribute to establishing peace and improving Russian-American relations and the realities that arise from the establishment of a balance of power through confrontation.

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** The research was conducted within the project "Serbia and Challenges in International Relations in 2025", implemented by the Institute of International Politics and Economics during 2025.

The paper consists of five parts. The introductory section explains the theoretical and methodological frameworks, presents the research question and hypothesis, and defines the concept of “controlled confrontation”. The second part describes the process by which an absolute breach of trust between Russia and the USA led to an escalation of the confrontation. The third part examines changes in the Russian Foreign Policy Concept, and the fourth part examines how the growth of distrust and changes in doctrinal documents contributed to the misunderstanding. The last part is the concluding remarks.

Keywords: Donald Trump, Ukraine, Russia, foreign policy, peaceful solution, controlled confrontation, international order.

INTRODUCTION: THE IDEA OF “CONTROLLED CONFRONTATION” IN ANARCHIC INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

In principle, bilateral relations between states can be based on two approaches: cooperation or confrontation. However, in anarchic international relations, simultaneous cooperation and confrontation are most often observed (Proroković 2018). On the one hand, states need to strengthen their positions through the creation of alliances and coalitions, the signing of agreements (to regulate relations with others), and joining international organizations, which clearly indicates a desire for cooperation. On the other hand, the very fact that international relations are anarchic actors must rely on the principle of self-help and defend their interests with all available means, which is the reason for continuous confrontations (to a certain extent and in certain ways, with “friendly states” confrontations can arise due to current issues, manifest themselves on a political level and are easier to overcome, while with “enemy states” confrontations arise due to strategic issues, can also manifest themselves in armed conflict and last a long time).

This paper examines the confrontation between Russia and the United States and the change in bilateral relations resulting from Donald Trump’s 2024 election. The time frame from 2014 is examined, and in this context, two phases of progressive deterioration of bilateral relations (until 2016 and from 2021 to 2024) and one phase of maintaining the regime of “controlled confrontation” during

Donald Trump's first term (2017–2021). The research question is: Can a regime of “controlled confrontation” be established in Donald Trump's second term? In line with this question, the research subject is the foreign policies of Donald Trump (i.e., the contours of the United States' foreign policy under the Trump administration) and Vladimir Putin (after 2022). In this regard, the definition of the term “controlled confrontation” is based on the explanation given by Joseph Biden after a telephone conversation with Chinese President Xi Jinping in November 2021, saying: “It seems to me that our responsibility as leaders of China and the United States is to ensure that the competition between our two countries does not escalate into conflict, whether intentionally or unintentionally. We should stick to just simple, direct competition” (Ruwitch 2021). Thus, in anarchic international relations, competition between key actors is normal and common, but it must be somehow “controlled” or “regulated”, either by reciprocal measures and provisions of international law, or by agreeing on some (temporary) principles of functioning (Waltz 1979). Some minimum of trust between the two parties must exist. We can see from the example of Ukraine what happens when this competition escalates into armed conflict. Waltz states that the world political system emerges from the coexistence of states, although no state intended to participate in the formation of a structure that would have a limiting effect on itself. The system is formed and maintained by the principle of self-help applied to the actors (92). By applying the principle of self-help, the relative balance of power changes. In doing so, states try to mitigate the factors that have a limiting effect on their position. The beginning of direct communication between the United States and Russia occurs because both states try to mitigate the limiting factors that appear after the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine through direct negotiations. However, despite direct negotiations, establishing a balance of power proves to be a far more complex process, and the consequences of the previous deterioration in relations are difficult to reverse. The previous deterioration of relations between the US and Russia has changed the character of international relations, so the direct negotiations that began in the spring of 2025 are taking place in new circumstances.

The hypothesis being tested is that the ambition of the two leaders (Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump) to establish a regime of

“strategic stability” will result in an extremely uncertain outcome, even if Russian-American bilateral relations are placed under a regime of “controlled confrontation”. The research was conducted based on the theory of structural realism (and the consideration of the consequences of establishing a balance of power between great powers in an anarchic international environment), and the methods of discourse analysis (analysis of statements and messages that precede political decisions), comparative analysis, case studies, and synthesis were also used. Discourse analysis is conducted by contextualizing statements, decisions, and documents (strategies and strategic concepts) that shape the characteristics of US and Russian policies since 2022. With this goal in mind, the works of American and Russian researchers who have examined and analyzed bilateral relations between these two states since the escalation of the Ukrainian crisis are cited.

The scientific justification of the research is based on the confirmation of the theoretical patterns of structural realism, which have often been challenged and rejected in previous decades, and the social justification is in presenting the methods of establishing a balance of power (which certainly has consequences for the entire international relations and foreign and security policies of all actors, especially small states that must adapt to these consequences).

THE PROGRESSIVE DETERIORATION OF RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS: HOW THE TRUST HAS BEEN DESTROYED?

The complexity of bilateral Russian-American relations (or, earlier, Soviet-American relations) has been the subject of research for several decades (in the framework of political science, international relations theory, economics, strategic studies, etc.), practically since the end of World War II. The dynamics of relations between the two superpowers determined the character of the entire world policy during the period of bipolarity, and therefore, the interest of researchers in this topic was quite high (Merilini 1990; Vanaik 1991; Welch Larson 1997; Полюнов 2008; Sogrin 2015; Батюк 2018). Logically, in the 1990s, this topic lost its relevance as the USA became the dominant actor in international relations and disintegration processes occurred in

the (post)Soviet space, burdening Russian foreign and security policy (Filitov 2011; Naumov 2006; Bodrova 2017). Due to disintegration and all its consequences, the USA views Russia only as a regional power, an actor significant for regional security dynamics in one part of the world, but not as significant for global processes. This (at that time also underestimating) approach will be confirmed by President Barack Obama in 2014 when he said that “Russia as no more than a regional power whose actions in Ukraine are an expression of weakness rather than strength, as he restated the threat from the G7 (Group Seven) western allies and Japan that they would inflict much broader sanctions if Vladimir Putin went beyond annexation of Crimea and moved troops into eastern Ukraine” (Borger 2014).

However, despite Obama’s opinion, since the second decade of the 21st century, as the multipolar structure of the world political system took shape, researchers’ interest in monitoring and analyzing Russian-American relations has again grown precisely because Russia’s influence in international relations has grown (Cox 2000; Stent 2015; Podlesny 2007; Shakleina 2022). Without a doubt, both great powers represent poles in the global arena; they are centers of power on whose decisions global processes depend. Logically, the transition from a unipolar to a multipolar order has brought an increasing number of confrontations between the USA and Russia. The USA has tried to maintain the role of the dominant actor and prevent the establishment of a balance of power in international relations (in this context, Obama’s quoted statement should also be viewed as a refusal to accept Russia as an “equal”), while Russia’s strategic goal was (and remained) diametrically opposite. The events of the second decade of the 21st century, when joint action – largely by Russia and China – established a balance of power towards the USA (actually, towards the collective West, which, in addition to the USA, also includes European countries and several American allies in other parts of the world, such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea) represent a classic example of confirming the theory of structural realism (neorealism), and therefore the increasing number of confrontations between the USA and Russia should not be surprising.

The most significant confrontation occurred in Ukraine, after the *coup d’état* in Kiev in 2014 and the overthrow of the legally elected

President of Ukraine, Viktor Yanukovich, in a colored revolution, which was supported organizationally, politically, and especially financially by the United States and European countries (there is already extensive literature on this, and numerous claims made at the time of the colored revolution were confirmed by subsequent events) (Bensaada 2014; Карамац 2023, 39–56; Крысенко 2021, 15–29). As the interests of the United States and Russia became increasingly conflicting, the “field of confrontation” expanded, and this also holds for the interpretation of the events of 2013–2014 on the Kyiv “Euromaidan” (Shevsky 2022). Several researchers who have accepted the interpretation, which has been widely disseminated in public space (and academic circles) in Ukraine and the states of the collective West, do not agree with the previous statement about the overthrow of Yanukovich and the colored revolution. The events at “Euromaidan” (Shevsky 2022) are interpreted as “the largest series of pro-European protests in history”, “peaceful civilian protests were met with state violence” (Campbell et al. 2025, 2); or as the “Ukrainian Revolution of Dignity” (Schveda and Ho Park 2016, 85–91). “Euromaidan” was and remains a psychological issue for Ukrainians themselves, and therefore influenced the shaping of national identity (Chayinska et al. 2019, 45–65). This was a reflection of the aspiration that “Ukrainians have been building Europe from below. The previous regime’s last-minute rejection of a long-awaited association agreement with the European Union prompted citizens to take matters into their own hands, and over the course of the next three months, a new Ukraine was born” (Krapfl and von Burgsdorff 2023, 325). Iaroslav Hrytsak calls these protests a “revolution of values”, and Volodymyr Viatrovich calls them an “anti-Soviet revolt” (Hundorova 2016, 163). The above disagreements, of course, do not change the facts and, therefore, do not affect the position of the author of this paper, but are stated as an objective reality that appears in today’s research on the Ukrainian crisis, European security, and international relations.

The attempt to maintain a regime of “controlled confrontation” after 2014, which seemed to be organized by the Minsk negotiations, failed ingloriously, as there was absolutely no willingness to implement the Minsk agreements, which included constitutional changes and asymmetrical decentralization of Ukraine (with a special status and

jurisdiction for two eastern regions – Donetsk and Luhansk) (Arbatova 2022). Angela Merkel and François Hollande later admitted that the Minsk negotiations actually served to “buy time” to strengthen the military potential of the Ukrainian armed forces (while the negotiations were ongoing, Ukraine was arming itself and preparing for a “military solution” to the conflict) (Thumann 2022; Politika 2022). This entire strategy was based on the constant depletion of Russian forces and the distraction of Russian attention, with the hope that at some point this would create the prerequisites for internal destabilization in Russia or even a coup in Moscow (Domanska 2023; Kowal 2023; Palve 2025). The implementation of this strategy was progressive, upgraded by attempts to destabilize Belarus (after the 2020 presidential elections, the EU refused to recognize Alexander Lukashenko as the elected president, so the member states “proclaimed” his opponent Svetlana Tikhanovskaya as the “elected president” and “national leader” even though she officially won only 10.23% of the vote in the elections) and Kazakhstan (mass protests, which included raids on state institutions and clashes with security forces in January 2022, ended with the intervention of the CSTO – Collective Security Treaty Organization forces led by Russia), and included the intensification of US, NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organization and EU activities in the South Caucasus and in Moldova (which will finally be confirmed in 2024 during the organization of parliamentary and/or presidential elections in Georgia and Moldova).

Also, the (latest) attempt to establish a regime of “strategic stability” through direct negotiations between Vladimir Putin and Joseph Biden (direct talks held in Geneva in June 2021, and a multi-hour video conference in December of the same year) failed ingloriously (Minzarari 2021; Stefanović and Kostić-Šulejić 2024, 89). Russia’s explicit demand concerned Ukraine’s non-admission to NATO, as the basis for any further talks. However, in everyday practice, completely different trends were again observed. “The NATO Secretary General announces the possibility of deploying nuclear weapons in Eastern European member states, the crisis on the Polish-Belarusian border is deliberately heading towards escalation, the Ukrainian authorities are making new preparations for the continuation of the armed conflict in the east of the country, Biden himself is

threatening a boycott, partial or complete, of the Winter Olympics in Beijing due to human rights violations, and by this he means the situation in Xinjiang, Hong Kong and Tibet, while US congressmen are proposing a resolution that would declare Vladimir Putin illegitimate in advance, already at the moment of his candidacy for a new presidential term” (Proroković 2021).

Mutual trust, already on shaky ground and constantly questioned since the end of the Cold War, completely collapsed after the inauguration of Joseph Biden in January 2021. Just a year later, this resulted in a total escalation of the armed conflict in Ukraine. There were direct talks with Vladimir Putin, but it seems that the Biden administration was not in the mood for an agreement on “strategic stability” that would imply the acceptance of Russian terms. The American (Democratic) leadership, from Obama to Biden, sees Russia as a regional power, and respecting Russian demands would practically mean legitimizing a new status – Russia would be anticipated as a great power. The Russian leadership sees itself as a great power, and therefore, the US’s unwillingness to respect it and to confirm the strategic stability agreement in direct talks is dismissed as an understatement. Trust between the two sides practically no longer existed, and the inability to reach an agreement contributed to the escalation of the armed conflict in Ukraine.

RUSSIA’S FOREIGN POLICY AFTER 2022

Russia had to define a new foreign policy, adapted to the new conditions that characterized the armed conflict on Ukrainian soil and the conduct of an uncompromising hybrid war against the collective West. Yaakov Kedmi noted that the West’s conduct practically leaves little room for maneuver for Russia: “You are now outside the law! Your country is outside the law! Your culture! Your athletes! Your history! You are not within their jurisdiction. And you are thinking: how can we live by laws that do not apply to us! How will you live in this lawlessness? By laws that are being broken to stifle you” (Proroković 2022). Russians and Russia, as far as the West is concerned, have been excluded from the international order, global trends, and decision-making processes since February 2022. “That’s

why Dostoevsky and Tchaikovsky are being removed from the repertoire, sports clubs and national teams are being expelled from international competitions, and students are being expelled from universities. A church was robbed in Oxford, a Munich clinic was banned from entry for Russian and Belarusian patients, and offensive posters are being put up in shop windows. The hysteria continues, the madness knows no bounds, and racism is also being observed in some anti-Russian actions. Long-held stereotypes about cruel, arrogant, insensitive, and haughty Russians can today be reported as undeniable and proven facts” (Proroković 2022).

Even before 2014, Russia had been striving to obtain a kind of “recognition of great power status” from the USA and thus legitimize its position in world politics (Nedić and Mandić 2021, 139–157). Since 2014, it has been intensifying its efforts in this direction, and “in this context, confrontations serve as instruments of pressure on the other side, of proving its own power and of communicating that Russia is capable of both protecting its own interests (which directly concern national security) and of influencing global security and overall international relations. The documents of the same name, the Foreign Policy Concept of Russia, from 2013 and 2015, unequivocally emphasize that the main goal is for this country to be one of the poles in the emerging multipolar system” (Proroković 2023, 50–51). The 2015 Concept states: “The state policy in the field of national security and socio-economic development of the Russian Federation contributes to the implementation of strategic national priorities and the effective protection of national interests. A stable foundation has been created for the further expansion of the economic, political, military and spiritual potential of the Russian Federation, as well as for increasing its role in the formation of a multipolar world” (Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации 2015, point 7). Two years earlier, it was declared that Russia would “work to anticipate events and lead them”, and in this regard, point 4a states that the goal is to occupy “a leading and authoritative position in the international community, as best suits the interests of the Russian Federation as one of the influential and competitive centers of the modern world” (Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации 2013, 2).

However, due to the hybrid war, which includes attempts at international (political) isolation of Russia, economic sanctions, a propaganda campaign and (mis)use of all mechanisms offered to the West by certain international organizations (UN General Assembly, Council of Europe, International Criminal Court, G7, etc.), Russia has been forced to change its Foreign Policy Concept. “For the first time, the emphasis is on the fight against neo-colonial practices, which will prevent the hegemony of Western states and strengthen Russia’s position in non-Western countries. A striking example of the logic of neocolonialism is the new hybrid war in Ukraine and its political and economic consequences. Rejecting the reality of a multipolar world, the countries of the collective West give preference to a wide range of military-political instruments, bypassing universal structures, including the UN Security Council. As Aleksandr Kramarenko rightly notes, equal international cooperation prevents the West from keeping the whole world in colonial dependence” (Lebedeva and Bobrov 2023; Крамаренко 2023). Faced with “excommunication from the Western order”, the foreign policy concept also states that “it is important to note that one of the priority areas of humanitarian policy is countering Russophobia, the initiators and conductors of which are hostile foreign states” (Lebedeva and Bobrov 2023). Also, the concept of strategic planning is being introduced, based on national interests from which all goals derive (previously, strategic goals were declared the highest priorities in such documents, and the processes that should lead to their fulfillment were adjusted accordingly, and certain “instruments” were used). However, the most visible change concerns the geopolitical vector of Russian foreign policy. The previous Concepts (adopted consecutively in 2013, 2016, and 2020) also emphasized the need to improve the work of the REC – Republic Electoral Commission. Russia, India, and China, and the BRICS formats (in addition to India and China, Brazil and South Africa were also included, and from 2023, the list of members will be further expanded), and this new one explicitly lists some additional priorities of a “global nature”. Russia is turning towards broader and more intensive cooperation with the countries of the Asia-Pacific region, the Islamic world, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean, the “Eurasian continent”, and goals related to the Arctic, the World Ocean, and space are declared as national

interests. Ivan Timofeev calls this approach “the path to the world majority” (Timofeev 2023). Relations with the USA and Western Europe are no longer a priority; on the contrary, they are now hostile Russophobic countries, and relations with them directly depend on the strategy of their actions (Концепция внешней политики Российской Федерации 2023). That is, they will be based on pure reciprocity, whatever that means in practice. Excommunicated from the “Western order”, Russia has since 2022 interpreted and established its relations with the USA differently. If the USA were waging a hybrid war against Russia, the response had to be a Russian hybrid war against the USA.

In this context, Russia’s nuclear doctrine should also be viewed. It was a response to the increasingly open and extensive supply of weapons and ammunition to Ukraine by a NATO member. The revision of the nuclear doctrine in November 2024 “lowered the threshold” for the use of this type of weapon more in a rhetorical than in a substantive sense, because it could also be used in the event of a conventional attack by an enemy that poses a “critical threat” to Russia (Kalabuhov 2024). In addition, it was defined that a “joint attack” on Russia would be considered a conventional attack by any state supported by a nuclear power. This is a strategic deterrent measure directed at the Western nuclear powers (the United States, Great Britain, and France) and a warning that proxy wars against Russia (such as the one in Ukraine) will not be tolerated in the future (Blagojević 2025, 42). Therefore, in the second half of 2024, in parallel with the implementation of the new Foreign Policy Concept and preparations for updating the “Fundamentals of the State Policy of the Russian Federation in the Field of Nuclear Deterrence”, an increasing number of analyses and articles are appearing in the public space announcing the possibility of using nuclear weapons and/or the outbreak of nuclear war (Karaganov 2024; Korotčenko 2024; Medvedev 2024). Most likely, at the beginning of its military operation in Ukraine in February 2022, the Russian leadership did not think that this development of the situation would occur only two and a half years later. Negotiations with the Ukrainian side (conducted first on the territory of Belarus, and then in Istanbul), the withdrawal of military forces from certain parts of Ukraine after those negotiations (parts of the areas around Chernigov, Sumy, Kharkov and Kiev), attempts to leave open channels of communication

with Western countries, even the initial misunderstanding that, as far as the collective West is concerned, Russia remains excluded (and for which Yaakov Kedmi warned the Russian elite and the political public with a sharp statement), indicate that at that time there was a lot of confusion, misunderstanding, indecision and inability to find their way in the newly created situation, along with the assurance that a new type of confrontation (the armed conflict in Ukraine) does not mean the cessation of all types of cooperation. Since there was no cooperation (and the confrontation also extended to the freezing of Russian foreign assets abroad, the prevention of financial transactions with Russia, the brutal seizure of Russian property state and private abroad, and the destruction of Russian strategic infrastructure such as Nord Stream), over time, Russian policy (foreign and security) is being consolidated, framed on new concepts and doctrines, and based on reciprocity in relation to the collective West (one could even conclude, observing the changes in nuclear doctrine, that these are asymmetric measures, which seem very threatening to enemy states). This undoubtedly increases the conflict potential and, six decades after the Cuban Missile Crisis, once again brings the topic of nuclear war to the forefront of political debates. In the absence of trust between Russia and the United States, anarchy manifests itself in this way. It turned out that, to a certain extent, such a manifestation of anarchy also affected the American approach, influencing the formation of Donald Trump's view of the Ukrainian crisis. Several reasons influenced Trump's view of Ukraine, but one of them is certainly the possibility of a nuclear war. He did not want to go to war with Russia over Ukraine; in fact, he was not ready to damage his relations with Moscow over the Ukrainian issue (Stent 2024).

TRUMP'S FOREIGN POLICY AND RELATIONSHIP WITH RUSSIA

Unlike his predecessors, Trump has shown in his first term that he has no intention of pursuing a policy of continuity. His foreign policy has been unpredictable, often marked by unusual or incomprehensible decisions, grounded in the principles of deterrence, containment, and coercion (Preston 2021). In international relations,

Trump gives priority to bilateral agreements, and international organizations and conventions that he assesses are not in the interests of the United States are either sharply criticized (thereby delegitimizing them, such as the World Trade Organization), or bypassed (he treats them with disdain, making it clear that the United States comes first, which can be seen in his relationship with the EU) or withdrew from them (the Paris Agreement and the Trans-Pacific Partnership) (Jervis 2023). Supporting Israel, Trump is withdrawing the US from the nuclear agreement with Iran, imposing new sanctions on this country, thus trying to create a different balance of power in the Middle East. Surprisingly, he meets twice with North Korean President Kim Jong Un (in February and June 2019) to initiate the topic of denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and demands that NATO allies increase their military spending. Trump's unpredictability may also be a consequence of frequent resignations or replacements in key positions in his administration. During the first term, two secretaries of state, two ambassadors to the UN, two CIA directors, three secretaries of defense, four assistants for national security, etc., were replaced in the Trump administration. It is noteworthy that, halfway through his first term, Trump started a trade war with China, which will continue even after Joseph Biden takes office as president. The perception of China as the most significant challenger and greatest threat to the United States in the international arena is a characteristic of Trump's policy. It is not excluded that Trump addresses Russia differently than his predecessors, precisely because of this. From Trump's perspective, it is desirable to loosen (or, in the extreme case, break up) the Russian-Chinese partnership, thereby leaving Beijing without an important ally in balancing power (Proroković 2024, 84–94).

It is noteworthy that Trump's second term in 2025 begins with a series of unexpected decisions (introducing or increasing tariffs on goods from Canada and Mexico, opening a political front towards the EU, as manifested in Vice President Vance's speech at the Munich Security Conference) and incredible statements (taking Greenland from Denmark, demanding management of the Panama Canal, demanding that Ukraine hand over its critical raw materials). The second term also begins with Trump's phone call to Russian President Vladimir Putin and the rapid organization of a bilateral meeting in Riyadh between

delegations led by the heads of diplomacy, and then a direct meeting between the two heads of state in Alaska. Now the US wants an immediate end to the armed conflict, a peace agreement, and improved relations with Russia, which is why Trump and his entourage are approaching Volodymyr Zelensky in a very undiplomatic manner (as he is otherwise inclined to do), highlighting the issue of corruption related to US donations to Ukraine in the period 2022–2025. “In a major diplomatic turnaround”, the two sides have agreed to restore their diplomatic missions in Washington and Moscow, to form a high-level team to support peace talks on Ukraine, and to explore opportunities for closer relations and economic cooperation (Lee and Litvinova 2025). If in the non-Western part of the world, Trump’s previous decisions and announcements seemed unexpected and incredible, for Americans and American allies (especially in Europe), Trump’s attitude towards Ukraine seemed absolutely shocking. Fareed Zakaria states that it represents a “stunning turn” that is “in some ways the biggest turn in American foreign policy in the last eight decades” (Zakaria 2025). Roger Köppel explains why this is happening: “The war drum against Russia, that crazy plan that defies all historical experience to defeat Russia militarily in its own backyard, is inevitably proving to be empty, historically blind and dangerous for society. Thanks to the apparent irrelevance of the Brussels Eurocrats, it is becoming clear that this conflict between Ukraine and Russia has always been, as we have written here, a proxy war between the American neoconservative war lobby and a resurgent Russia” (Köppel 2025). In addition to the assumptions made above about the causes of Trump’s attitude towards Russia, it should be added that the reasons for the change of course may also be the high costs of this proxy war (and the outcome is extremely uncertain despite the high costs), which could at one point escalate into a nuclear war, but also the fact that this war was a “geopolitical investment” of American neoconservatives (part of the Republicans gathered around the Bush family) and neoliberals (gathered around the Democratic Party), people against whom Trump launched an extensive campaign on the domestic level. It is noticeable that, unlike when he took office in 2017, Trump is starting his second term far more prepared. Even before the inauguration, he announced the appointment of key functionaries, mostly people who share his views on foreign

and security policy, and who were recruited from the first or second echelon of the Republican Party. Trump used the four years spent in opposition to select personnel and assemble a management team. Therefore, despite unexpected decisions and incredible statements (unlike his first term), there were practically no “leaks” of individuals from Trump’s environment. Not only did no one contradict him, but the newly appointed officials also wholeheartedly supported him. US Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth, at a meeting of the Ukraine Defense Contact Group (also known as the Ramstein group) in mid-February 2025, told other participants (NATO allies and other partners) that NATO membership was “no longer an option for Ukraine”, and that politicians in Kiev must prepare for the negotiation process and abandon the idea of returning the entire territory. According to him, the members of the Ramstein group “must face reality” and abandon the “illusory goal”. He also added that most of the financial obligations and military responsibilities for the situation in Ukraine would be assumed by European countries, including the potential deployment of peacekeeping forces on the ground, but that this would not imply the protection of those forces under Article 5 of the NATO Charter. This practically means that in the event of any new escalation of the conflict between Russian and European forces in Ukraine, the United States will have no obligation to intervene. Hegseth came “to communicate directly and unequivocally that the harsh strategic realities prevent the United States from being primarily focused on the security of Europe. The United States faces serious threats to our homeland. Therefore, we must, and already are, primarily focused on the security of our own borders” (Cook and Cropp 2025).

For Trump’s foreign policy, according to these explanations, Ukraine is not a priority, but a “bottomless pit” that has “eaten up” hundreds of billions of dollars (directly or indirectly) in just three years, and this crisis has given rise to a new threat in the form of nuclear war. Considering other statements and decisions from his first term, China is a key threat to US interests in foreign policy, and Trump wants to weaken the mechanisms that maintain the balance of power in international relations by intensifying cooperation with Russia. The way he did this indicates that Trump perceives Russia as a great power, that is, the impression is gained in the entire international community

(no matter how we define this term) that Russia is equal to the US and that its demands will therefore be respected (the negotiating principles announced by Pete Hegseth are that there will be no membership for Ukraine in NATO and that there will be changes to Ukraine's borders in favor of Russia).

POINTS OF (MIS)UNDERSTANDING: THE FUTURE OF RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONS

Of course, the establishment of direct communication after three years of no cooperation has been welcomed by Russian researchers and international relations commentators. Russia needs a peaceful solution for Ukraine, as the armed conflict has brought increased costs and expenditures for military purposes, large human losses, but also a change in circumstances both internally (terrorist acts, threats to security, attacks on infrastructure facilities) and externally (continuous confrontation with the collective West, the conduct of a hybrid war that also has its own "conventional dimension"). However, one also gets the impression that Russia does not need to "rush" to reach a peace settlement. Trust is relatively easy to lose, but difficult to regain. Although Donald Trump's policies, viewed from both an ideological and geopolitical perspective, are fundamentally different from the Biden administration's positions, Russian distrust of proposals coming from the US remains high, despite "open channels" of communication and direct talks between officials (visits by US President's envoy Steve Witkoff to Moscow and Russian President's special representative Kirill Dmitriev to Miami during the second half of 2025).

Sergei Karaganov suspects that "all talk of compromise and truce boils down to freezing the conflict along the line of engagement. This will give them time to rearm the remnants of the Ukrainian army, and, reinforcing it with troops from other countries, start a new round of hostilities. So, we will have to fight again, but this time from less advantageous political positions. If the worse comes to the worst, we can and should present such a compromise as a victory. However, this will be a quasi-victory, and, frankly speaking, the West's victory. This is how it will be seen around the world and by many in our country, too" (Karaganov 2025). Therefore, he advocates a new approach that

must be based on eliminating the causes of a possible renewal of armed conflict in the future: “If and when the Americans withdraw, Ukraine will be defeated quite quickly. Its eastern and southern regions will be handed over to Russia. The central and western parts of present-day Ukraine should become a neutral, demilitarized state with a no-fly zone above it, where everyone who does not want to be with Russia and obey its laws can come and live. A truce will be concluded. After the truce, we will have to join forces with our friends from the World Majority to address the problems facing humanity, even with the Americans, if they come to their senses at last. At the same time, it will be necessary to keep Europe from solving the world’s problems for a while, as it is once again becoming the main threat to itself and the world. Peace in Europe can only be established when its back is broken again, as we did in the past by defeating Napoleon (*Napoleon Bonaparte*) and Hitler (*Adolf Hitler*), and when the current generation of its elites changes” (Karaganov 2025).

Rostislav Ishchenko thinks similarly: “The United States wants this to be a victory over Kyiv, and Russia needs to fixate on its victory over the Collective West, which caused the Ukrainian crisis and, thanks to whose support, Ukraine has held on for so long. The United States is ready to cede any territory of Ukraine, and even all of it, but it is important for them to be recognized not as a participant in the conflict, but as a mediator. We can be flexible on the issues of borders, governments, inclusion, exclusion, and the division of territories (except for what is the constitutional territory of Russia), but we cannot allow the West to escape from facing its own, and not only Ukrainian, defeat in the current military crisis. So, the Russian position is that we can negotiate with Kyiv, but we can also beat it to the punch – as the cards fall. The West, more precisely the US, is the one we are necessarily waiting for at the negotiating table as the other side in the conflict, whose defeat we intend to ensure. Others can be present, if Washington is more comfortable with them in the company, but in principle their presence at the negotiations (and some of them on the political map as well) is not necessary” (Ishchenko 2025).

Andrew Korybko reminds us that “Russia’s two main goals in the special operation are the demilitarization and denazification of Ukraine”, and it is open to how this can be realized even in agreement

with Trump: “It is unrealistic to imagine that Trump will agree to allow Russia to deploy armed forces throughout Ukraine to implement this, which means that this can only be achieved through diplomatic means, with the consent of Kiev” (Korybko 2025). In practice, this means there will be neither quick solutions nor quick implementation once solutions are established. Dmitry Suslov also writes about denazification and demilitarization, warning that “the dynamics and high pace that Trump has taken in the negotiations on Ukraine are associated not with the desire to improve relations with Russia, but with the desire to achieve a ceasefire on the battlefield as soon as possible. Not a comprehensive solution with the elimination of the root causes, but precisely a ceasefire. This interest is connected, first of all, with the desire of the United States to prevent the complete defeat of Ukraine and its transformation into ‘Trump’s personal Afghanistan’. Secondly, with the US aspiration to free forces and resources from European affairs and transfer them to the fight against China, shifting further life support of Ukraine to the Europeans” (Suslov 2025). He emphasizes that “the US interest – even under Trump – is precisely the opposite: Ukraine should remain a militarily strong state in the Western orbit, even if its further militarization would be carried out at the European expense. It will be extremely difficult and hardly possible to reach an agreement on this issue” (Suslov 2025). Suslov suggests that “accordingly, it is necessary to insist not only on formal non-entry into the alliance, but also on serious restrictions on practical cooperation between Ukraine and NATO, the EU countries, Great Britain and the USA in the military sphere – to turn post-war Ukraine into a truly neutral buffer. Without the delivery of Western weapons, without joint military exercises, without training the Armed Forces of Ukraine by Western instructors, without the delivery of intelligence information and, of course, without the deployment of any Western troops on the territory of Ukraine” (Suslov 2025). The already quoted Ishchenko even believes that even resolving the Ukrainian crisis will not help stabilize international relations: “the Ukrainian crisis is only a part of the global crisis, an important one, but not the most important one. The global crisis will not end soon. Too many forces are involved. If Ukraine, which had very limited resources, with limited military-technical and financial assistance from the West, has been waging a

full-scale war against Russia for more than three years, then it is easy to understand that the resources of Russia, China, the United States and their allies will be enough not for years, but for a decade or two of confrontation (if it does not turn into a world war, but retains the nature of local military conflicts and a comprehensive economic war)” (Ishchenko 2025). When it comes to global processes and geopolitical interests, Alexander Dugin states that “Trump intends to cut off all opportunities for China to continue on its current course. Trump sees China as the main competitor to American hegemony and has already launched a new round of economic and trade war, a characteristic of the Biden administration, though not with such intensity. Russia obviously does not pose a major threat to Trump, but China does. Therefore, the focus of American foreign policy will likely shift from Russia to China”. He also notes that Trump “is annoyed by the BRICS and is even threatening it with sanctions for abandoning the dollar in world trade, warning of retaliation for attempting to introduce some other global reserve currency. But at the same time, he himself is actively introducing a cryptocurrency economy, which, in essence, separates global finance from the monopoly on emissions. Therefore, one should pay attention not to his individual statements and gestures, and not even to Trump’s specific political steps, but to the ideological and geopolitical model that he follows” (Dugin 2025).

In addition to the Russian political public’s suspicion of the initiated process, the announcement of a Russian-American agreement reached in the manner proposed by Trump has also been met with fierce opposition and/or criticism in both the United States and Western European countries. The mildest effect is the warnings that quick solutions are unattainable and therefore calls for the American president to reconsider his position (Ryan 2024). Far more severe are the warnings that his approach to the Ukrainian crisis and relations with Russia could turn into a complete disaster (Ash 2024; Baev 2025; Caryl 2025; Kramer 2025). Robert Kagan states: “If Ukraine falls, it will be hard to spin as anything but a debacle for the United States, and for its president” (Kagan 2025). Just as there is Russian distrust of American proposals, there is also a fear in the US and Western Europe that a quick deal with Russia could turn into a disaster for NATO and the EU. Immediately after the inauguration, when the US president’s approval

rating is (as a rule) very high, the Trump administration can ignore warnings and criticism and appeal to the legitimacy that the president gained in the elections. However, as time goes on and if there is no sustainable solution, that legitimacy may wear off, meaning the impact of warnings and criticism will become increasingly widespread. Simply put, in the period from 2022–2025, circumstances changed irreversibly, and the confrontation became open and complete, taking the form of a hybrid war (with a conventional dimension in the conduct of a NATO proxy war against Russia on Ukrainian soil). Despite the initiative for a peaceful solution and direct negotiations, distrust remained and persisted.

CONCLUSION: THE PATH OF ESTABLISHING A “CONTROLLED CONFRONTATION”

Trump’s “stunning U-turn” in Ukraine (as Fareed Zakaria described it), viewed from a theoretical point of view, could represent the beginning of a “controlled confrontation” between Russia and the United States. Also, in principle, the establishment of a “controlled confrontation” is the basis for creating a regime of strategic stability between the two great powers. The American president took the initiative, established direct communication with Vladimir Putin and met with him, after which a high-level meetings of delegations was organized, put forward a proposal (through the Secretary of Defense) on the principles of resolving the Ukrainian crisis that to a certain extent respect Russia’s views (these principles are absolutely unacceptable to a large number of NATO and EU members, although it is questionable how many of the leaderships of all these countries will be ready to confront the Trump administration publicly) and essentially accepted Russia as an equal interlocutor. With this approach, Trump legitimized Russia’s status as a great power in international relations, thereby eliminating the first reason for Putin’s misunderstanding with Biden. However, it is extremely uncertain to what extent the elimination of this reason, along with Trump’s accompanying initiatives, will be sufficient to achieve a regime of strategic stability in Russian-American relations. What was the most important prerequisite for the continuation of cooperation in 2021

is not a prerequisite in 2025. After all, after the adoption of the new Foreign Policy Concept, Russia was no longer interested in the US recognizing or legitimizing its status in international relations. The balance of power was established through the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine, with dramatic consequences for international relations and the positioning of key actors in world politics. Russia has defined new goals, has new allies, has identified new enemies, for it Ukraine is the most acute crisis, but it is not the only topic that is causing a confrontation with the collective West. Trust between Russia and Western actors (the USA, NATO, EU, G7) has collapsed, and little can be done about it in the short term. At the same time, Trump's initiatives are not well-received or supported in the collective West, especially among European countries. Whether and to what extent the USA will be able to participate alone in creating strategic agreements on the most important issues of international relations, without the participation of allies and the support of international organizations that the collective West has created over the past eight decades, is currently very questionable. This depends on many factors, some of which are unpredictable. In anarchic international relations, everyone looks after their own interests, relying on the principle of self-help, and therefore confrontations are possible (to a certain extent and in certain ways) even between "friendly states". By applying the principle of self-help, the relative balance of power changes. In doing so, states try to mitigate the factors that have a limiting effect on their position. The beginning of direct communication between the United States and Russia occurs because both states try to mitigate the limiting factors that appear after the escalation of the conflict in Ukraine through direct negotiations. However, despite direct negotiations, establishing a balance of power turns out to be far more complex, and the consequences of the previous deterioration in relations are difficult to correct. The previous deterioration of relations between the US and Russia has changed the character of international relations, so the direct negotiations that began in the spring of 2025 are taking place in new circumstances.

That is why the future of Russian-American relations is very uncertain, despite the American president's desire to improve them. Organizing cooperation (even with "controlled confrontation" or competition, as Biden described it) after three years of escalating

armed conflict is proving to be a very difficult task. The reason for this can be found in Rostislav Ishchenko's analysis and the new Russian demands that he is putting forward. When a new order is established through confrontation, it is expected to be established either by peace between the two conflicting parties, which, after a certain time, are unable to achieve victory, recognize each other's new status, or by the defeat of one of the parties in that confrontation. Either a new regime is established by agreement, or the winner exerts decisive influence in defining the new rules of the game, thereby determining strategic stability. In the specific situation, however, there is no peace agreement since not all countries of the collective West agree to it (European states only talk about a ceasefire or oppose Trump's initiatives), which delegitimizes the proposal to a certain extent, that is, the confrontation may continue after a period of calm or the expiration of the ceasefire, and if the confrontation continues, then some new circumstances may be created in which negotiations would take place in just a few months (situations when new circumstances on the front decisively affect reaching an agreement or when some new phases occur in international relations or the global economy that change the balance of power). The path to establishing a "controlled confrontation" is actually long (it is an ongoing process), torturous (it is fraught with many uncertainties), and unsafe (bad circumstances have arisen due to non-compliance with rules and procedures), so there is no guarantee that starting it will lead to a regime of strategic stability. Trump's initiative, seen from the perspective of reducing tensions in bilateral relations with Russia and preventing the possible outbreak of a nuclear conflict, is very significant (after all, Donald Trump was remembered as the American president who did not start a single new war in his first term), but it is not certain that it can lead to the establishment of lasting peace in Ukraine. For such a thing, it is necessary either for his idea to gain undoubted support from the US's European allies or for one of the parties to the conflict to achieve decisive progress on the front, which would actually end the confrontation with the military defeat of the other party.

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РУСКО-АМЕРИЧКИ ОДНОСИ У ДРУГОМ МАНДАТУ ДОНАЛДА ТРАМПА: ИЗМЕЂУ ЖЕЉА И РЕАЛНОСТИ**

Резиме

Иницијатива Доналда Трампа за обнављањем руско-америчких односа преко решавања Украјинске кризе уз делимично уважавање захтева Русије деловала је изненађујуће и описана је као својеврсни заокрет у америчкој спољној политици. Ипак, питање је не само какав ефекат могу произвести овакви заокрети у билатералним и/или међународним односима, него и да ли их је могуће извести без великих последица. Са једне стране Украјинска криза је комплексна, она пресудно детерминише континенталну безбедност и због тога су европске земље заинтересоване за њено решавање. Са друге стране, након четири године конфронтације уништено је поверење између Русије и колективног Запада и неопходно је време како би се оно обновило. Ово истраживање посвећено је испитивању разлога и домета иницијативе Доналда Трампа. Између јавно прокламованих жеља да се допринесе успостављању мира и поправе руско-амерички односи и реалности које настају због успостављања равнотеже снага у међународним односима кроз конфронтацију – разлика је велика. Рад се састоји из пет делова. Уводни део посвећен је објашњавању теоријског и методолошког оквира, презентовању истраживачког питања и хипотезе и дефинисању појма „контролисана конфронтација”. У другом делу описан је процес апсолутног нарушавања поверења између Русије и САД који је за последицу имао ескалацију

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** Истраживање је спроведено у оквиру пројекта „Србија и изазови у међународним односима у 2025. години”, који реализује Институт за међународну политику и привреду током 2025. године.

конфронтације. У трећем делу приказује се промена руске Концепције спољне политике, а у четвртом како су нарастање неповерења и промене доктринарних докумената утицали на неспоразумевање. Последњи део су закључна разматрања.

Кључне речи: Доналд Трамп, Украјина, Русија, спољна политика, мировно решење, контролисана конфронтација, међународни поредак.

* This paper was received on January 26, 2026, and accepted for publication at the Editorial Board meeting on February 27, 2026.

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MULTIDIMENSIONAL SECURITY IN MUAY THAI PRACTICE**

(Translation in *Extenso*)

Abstract

This article examines Muay Thai as a cultural practice that reflects the multidimensional character of human security. Once tied primarily to warfare, Muay Thai now engages multiple domains of security: physical, economic, health, and ontological. Through ethnographic accounts and historical analysis, I show how the development of Muay Thai has been shaped by the ways Thai society has understood and responded to insecurity, whether military threat, economic precarity, or existential uncertainty. Its practices provide livelihood opportunities, bodily conditioning, and ritualized forms of resilience that extend into both communal life and cosmological orientation. The analysis also considers the perspectives of foreign practitioners, revealing how national narratives meet lived realities. Ultimately, the article demonstrates that security in Muay Thai is paradoxical: the very practices that cultivate resilience and continuity simultaneously produce new vulnerabilities.

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** This research was conducted as part a postdoctoral program at the Institute of History of Natural Sciences, Chinese Academy of Sciences.

Keywords: multidimensional security, martial arts, Muay Thai, resilience and vulnerability, cultural heritage, ethnography of sport.

INTRODUCTION

A core difficulty in defining security is that it has largely been constructed from institutional perspectives while simultaneously trying to capture how people themselves experience and understand security. The challenge lies in the absence of a clear way to speak to humanity as a whole, encompassing its diversity, while also mobilizing individuals on a personal level for collective wellbeing. Over recent years, this difficulty has led to an increasingly comprehensive definition of human-centered security, one that seeks to embrace everything a person might perceive as relevant to their own sense of safety and stability.

For the purpose of this article, I have chosen to study a cultural process that, in my view, reflects this expanding definition of security particularly well: the evolving place of martial arts in society. Once tied primarily to military security, martial arts today extend far beyond the battlefield. They contribute to everyday physical security through self-defense, to economic security as global sports industries, to health security by supporting both physical and psychological well-being, and even to community resilience through cultural and educational practices. Moreover, the reach of martial arts extends to providing a deeper, spiritual form of security, serving as embodied expressions of diverse ontologies that ground people in meaning and offer a profound sense of purpose (Nešković 2024; Nešković 2025). In this sense, the ways culturally embodied practices evolve mirror a broader understanding of the human condition itself, dynamic, interconnected, and continually redefining what it means to be secure. I draw on Giddens' (1991) concept of ontological security as confidence in continuity and order. While Giddens emphasizes the role of narrative in sustaining self-identity, my analysis highlights how practice and embodied experience also contribute directly to existential grounding. In the case of martial arts, more specifically Muay Thai, ontological

security is not only reproduced through identity narratives but is cultivated through the ritualized and embodied discipline of fighting, training, and endurance.

Building on these insights, this article explores the following questions: How has Muay Thai evolved historically from battlefield practice to codified sport and national heritage? In what ways does it address multiple dimensions of security, physical, economic, health, and ontological, through practice, livelihood, and ritual? And how do these dimensions reveal the paradox of security, in which efforts to cultivate resilience simultaneously create new vulnerabilities?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Security studies have long grappled with the scope of the concept. As Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 3–5) note, Stephen Walt (Stephen Walt 1991) argued that security should remain focused on war and the use of force, warning that widening the field would destroy its intellectual coherence. This reflected the Cold War legacy, when security was largely reduced to state survival, nuclear deterrence, and geopolitical rivalry. By contrast, Ullman (Ullman 1983) proposed that severe degradations in societal well-being also constitute security concerns, while Buzan (Buzan [1983] 1991) shifted attention to multiple referent objects and sectors. Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998) summarize these early moves as the first steps in “widening” the agenda of security studies. They propose a constellation framework¹ that moves beyond military defense, emphasizing the interrelation of security sectors rather than treating them as isolated domains. They distinguish five key sectors of security: military, political, economic, societal, and environmental, and argue that threats in each domain can become securitized when framed as existential threats to a referent

¹ Constellation emphasizes that security arises not from static units but from the dynamic interplay of their actions and relations (Buzan, Wæver, and de Wilde 1998, 191).

object. In their constructivist approach, security is not an objective condition but a social practice: issues become security problems through interactions, power dynamics, and discursive framing. These authors believe that such a view enables a broader analysis without dissolving security into incoherence. A comparable expansion of the analytical field can be observed in studies of urban security, where multidimensional approaches are articulated through cultural patterns and practical frameworks of security governance in cities (Ćurčić 2024). At the level of military institutions, this expansion is reflected in educational and organizational processes through which institutional capacities for action in evolving security environments are produced, including the increasingly prominent integration of advanced technologies into military training systems (Vuletić 2025).

Anthropologists have extended this critique by situating security within longer intellectual traditions and by exposing its uneven social effects. Goldstein (Goldstein 2010, 489–493) argues that, although the post-9/11 era intensified the global “obsession” with security, concerns about safeguarding order and life have long underpinned political theory and state formation (Goldstein 2010, 490). Hobbes rooted the origin of the state in fear, arguing that individuals surrendered freedoms to a sovereign in exchange for protection from the chaotic “state of nature” (Hobbes [1651] 2003). Montesquieu, while advocating for a liberal state, similarly saw fear, but this time of tyranny, as foundational to political order (Montesquieu 1979; Robin 2004). Marx (Marx [1843] 1967), on the other hand, viewed security not as protection against nature or despotism but as a product of capitalist alienation, in which the state emerges as the guarantor of egoistic civil society (Der Derian 2009). In the twentieth century, these legacies informed doctrines of national and collective security, later challenged by the United Nations Development Programme (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] 1994), which introduced the concept of human security. Goldstein further notes that while “wideners” broadened the agenda, neoliberal states continued to emphasize threats such as terrorism while retreating from welfare, shifting the burden of “self-security”

onto individuals. The constructivist approach of the Copenhagen School underscores this shift, showing that securitization is socially constructed and self-referential. Yet Goldstein stresses that such state-centered frameworks marginalize subordinated groups and alternative voices, including indigenous peoples, women, and the poor. A critical anthropology of security, he argues, reveals how security is produced, contested, and lived across everyday domains of power, ultimately resituating it as a socially embedded experience shaped by conflicting interests, unequal power relations, and diverse social positions (Goldstein 2010).

In parallel to these critical turns, the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report articulated human security around seven “pillars”: economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community, and political. Through this approach, the referent object of security is shifted from the state to the individual, highlighting that in earlier state-centered security frameworks, the legitimate everyday security concerns of ordinary people were marginalized. Human security was defined as both freedom from chronic threats such as hunger, disease, and repression, and protection from sudden disruptions in everyday life (UNDP 1994, 22–23).

Yet, as Paris (Paris 2001) notes, this widening of scope created significant conceptual challenges. Human security, much like the concept of sustainable development, became a term that everyone supported, yet few could define clearly. Its expansive formulations, encompassing everything from physical safety to psychological well-being, left policymakers with little prioritization and scholars with little analytic clarity. Paris, therefore, critiques human security as “extraordinarily expansive and vague” (2001, 88), questioning whether it represents a genuine paradigm shift or rather a rhetorical expansion without significant analytical consequences. Still, both human security and critical security studies share the crucial move of challenging state-centrism by privileging the individual as the referent object of security analysis (Newman 2010). It seems the tension between breadth and coherence remains unresolved: a broader agenda risks vagueness, while

narrowing the concept to military threats reproduces the blind spots that human security was meant to address.

Drawing on my association with the World Academy of Art and Science, which partnered with the UN Trust Fund for Human Security in the Human Security for All campaign, I got a brief insight into how these tensions play out in practice. The campaign positioned human security as a transdisciplinary and inclusive reference framework, allowing space for diverse approaches and interpretations. Yet this very openness also meant that actors continued to speak and act primarily from their own professional and disciplinary standpoints, using the concept as a shared point of reference rather than as a vehicle for a deeper analytical convergence. From this perspective, the value of the concept of human security lies less in providing a definitive framework than in serving as a lens through which to explore how security is perceived, enacted, and expanded across diverse domains.

In this article, rather than working strictly within the human security paradigm, I place it in conversation with lived practice and other strands of security studies to propose a multidimensional security domain. For the purposes of this study, the dimensions most relevant are: military security, physical security through self-defense, health-security preventive and rehabilitative, including the psychological aspects of mental resilience and identity stability, and finally, ontological security² in terms of the deeper sense of meaning, purpose, and continuity provided by embodied practices. Through the case of martial arts, I argue that cultural practices themselves can be mechanisms through which insecurity is addressed, confronted, and negotiated across multiple levels: individual, communal, and societal.

Anthropological studies have great potential to demonstrate the multidimensional character of security and insecurity. In this paper, insecurity is not understood as the mere absence of security, but as

² Apart from Giddens's already mentioned definition of ontological security, I rely on Vékony's (Vékony 2020) stance that "ontological security is a state in which one feels secure in one's existence".

a lived condition of uncertainty, vulnerability, and exposure to risk, from which different forms of security only subsequently emerge. In the edited volume *The Insecure American* (Gusterson and Besteman 2009), the contributors argue that insecurity has become the defining condition of contemporary American life. Unlike the Cold War era, when insecurity was primarily conceived in terms of military threat, it is now experienced in multiple dimensions: economic precarity, social fragmentation, diversity-based fears, migration anxieties, and ontological vulnerability. Insecurity, as the authors show, is not a singular phenomenon but a complex condition embedded in everyday life, shaped simultaneously by neoliberal labor regimes, privatized and gated lifestyles, the global “war on terror”, and religious apocalyptic imaginaries. This multidimensional framework provides a valuable background for understanding how cultural practices evolve to cultivate resilience in the face of pervasive insecurity. Martial arts exemplify such practices. They cultivate the body as a site of resilience against physical threat, but they also extend beyond defense to offer traditions of disciplined practice, grounded in lineage and method, that secure health, economic well-being, and ontological well-being. Through ritual, they sustain cultural traditions that anchor belonging and meaning; through teaching and performance, they generate livelihoods and solidarities that counteract economic and social precarity. When situated within the broader dynamics of neoliberal globalization, militarization, and cultural alienation, martial arts can thus be understood not merely as systems of combat, sport, or self-defense, but as embodied responses to the insecurities that characterize modern life.

METHODOLOGY

In this article, I draw on anthropological studies of Muay Thai, together with my own ethnographic fieldwork, to explore the multiple dimensions through which this popular Thai martial art engages with questions of security. My fieldwork includes one and a half years

of Muay Thai training in China (2023–2025), under professional coaches from Thailand, as well as two separate two-week research stays in Thailand, during which I visited numerous renowned gyms in Bangkok, Pattaya, and Chiang Mai. Empirically, this article constitutes an analytically grounded initial step within a broader ethnographic research project. Rather than offering a comprehensive, long-term ethnography focused on a single research site, the paper provides a conceptual and interpretive mapping of multiple domains of security as they become visible through practice, narratives, and institutional frameworks. Future research aims to deepen this analysis through extended participant observation, ethnographic vignettes, and interview-based material.

The analysis is grounded in the sociocultural dynamism of Muay Thai and demonstrates how, through ethnographic accounts and selected works, its security dimensions can be understood. The discussion moves across several themes: its historical and contemporary links to national security; the ways it provides economic security through professional careers and transnational networks; its role in cultivating physical security through self-defense and bodily conditioning; its contribution to health security through fitness, endurance, therapeutic practices, and the fostering of mental resilience and self-discipline; and its capacity to secure ontological grounding through ritual, religious belief, and cultural practices that situate Muay Thai within a wider moral and cosmological order. In this framework, the psychological dimension is not treated as a separate category. Aspects such as mental resilience, self-discipline, and emotional regulation are considered part of health security, while the deeper dimensions of identity, belonging, and existential assurance are already encompassed within ontological security. I also address the perspectives of foreign practitioners, which are particularly revealing because they show how this complex social field is first encountered through the lens of Thai national narratives, and how those narratives are reinterpreted when confronted with lived reality. Finally, I turn to the paradoxes of security that emerge across these dimensions,

showing how the very mechanisms that offer protection and stability simultaneously generate new forms of vulnerability and uncertainty.

FROM WARFARE TO CODIFIED SPORT

Muay Thai has long been linked to Thailand's history of warfare and national defense. As part of the institutionalization and heritagization of the sport, official narratives describe it as the primary unarmed combat method of Thai soldiers, rooted in battlefield practice and codified in manuals such as the *Chupasat*. These manuals emphasized the use of each body part as a weapon, guided by the commitment of "mind, body, and soul" (Nation Thailand 2024), and are frequently referenced in contemporary accounts of Muay Boran, presented as the precursor of Muay Thai (Saengsawang, Siladech, and Laxanaphisuth 2015). Simon de la Loubère (La Loubère 1693), an early European visitor, recorded organized boxing and other martial displays at the Ayutthaya court among the first external accounts of Thai combat arts. Later historians, including Baker and Phongpaichit (Baker and Phongpaichit 2017), contextualize these spectacles within the broader festival culture of the court. While such sources demonstrate the existence of formalized unarmed techniques, they provide little evidence that traditional boxing constituted a codified battlefield curriculum. The International Federation of Muaythai Associations (IFMA) portrays the reign of King Prachao Sua (1697–1709) as a turning point, when boxing shifted from a battlefield art to a contest-driven practice; accounts describe the king himself as fighting incognito in village matches, helping popularize the art beyond its military setting (Nation Thailand 2024). The story of Nai Khanom Dtom, who in 1774 reputedly defeated ten Burmese boxers as a prisoner of war, further cemented Muay Thai's reputation as a practice tied to honor, endurance, and national identity.

The Thai army continued to foster Muay Thai as a system of close-combat skills, embedding it in soldier training, while its popularity spread among civilians as a sport. By the 1930s, Muay Thai

was officially codified: rope bindings were replaced by gloves, rounds and weight divisions were introduced, and refereed contests aligned the art with international boxing regulations. From that point, Muay Thai transformed into both a professional sport and a cultural practice accessible to the wider public. Today, it is practiced globally as a combat sport, self-defense method, and a fitness-lifestyle regime, while in Thailand it remains a key site of economic opportunity, cultural heritage, and national prestige (Vail 2014; Saengsawang, Siladech, and Laxanaphisuth 2015). The historical codification laid the groundwork for later reinterpretations of Muay Thai's past, especially those framing it as part of the national narrative. Vail (Vail 2014) notes that historical sources on boxing (*muay*) are exceedingly scarce, and that the history we know today is largely a modern construction shaped to establish an "authentic" tradition in service of Thai nationalism. He explains that particular events have been selectively elevated as foundational moments, especially those that link muay to royalty and the theatre-state politics of Siam, while its image as a grassroots practice has been maintained by emphasizing its regional diversity and presenting it as a performative enactment of Siamese warrior spirit. Apparently, even the categories of Muay Boran and Muay Thai are later inventions, since the original practice was simply referred to as *muay*. The narratives that have emerged retrospectively frame *muay* both as the art of warriors and national heroes and as a performance central to royal ritual. Vail states that in reality, however, the earliest records describe *muay* primarily as a form of prizefighting, accompanied by betting and staged as entertainment during ritual occasions sponsored by local elites or royalty (Vail 2014, 515).

What matters for this study is that Muay Thai continues to be framed as an art born of war (Vail 2014; Saengsawang, Siladech, and Laxanaphisuth 2015), a narrative frequently reiterated in both popular and official discourses. Contemporary promoters, such as ONE Championship, regularly highlight these martial origins when hosting events at Bangkok's Lumpinee Stadium, reinforcing processes of heritagization and branding Muay Thai as national cultural heritage

presented for international spectacle. Since the twentieth century, *Muay Thai techniques have been* gradually standardized into the modern sport of Muay Thai and adapted not for survival but for aesthetics, scoring, and safety, with restrictions introduced to protect fighters. This standardization helped ground the narrative of transition, recasting *muay* not only as a martial art of war but also as a regulated practice of self-defense and sporting competition. Furthermore, as the codification was widely accepted, Muay Thai became not only a national symbol but also a means of livelihood for many practitioners.

LIVELIHOODS, GLOBALIZATION, AND NATIONAL PRESTIGE

Today, Muay Thai stands as both a living cultural tradition rooted in grassroots practice and a professional sport that provides livelihoods for fighters and international prestige for Thailand. Many professionals begin training and competing as children, often to support families in precarious economic circumstances. While some come from established fighting lineages, others enter the sport against family wishes, driven by love for the practice itself and the hope of upward mobility. Historical sources mention boxing officials with the title of *muen*, a mid-level rank in the traditional Thai hierarchy, and show that exceptional skill in the ring could open pathways to social mobility even centuries ago (Vail 2014, 515–520).

For most Thai fighters today, however, economic security remains precarious. Fighters are usually contracted by gyms, with managers arranging matches and taking a significant share of the earnings. Competition prizes for Thai nationals in domestic venues are often modest, and bouts are not frequent enough to guarantee a steady income. Many fighters begin their careers young, but sustaining a livelihood requires enduring intense bodily strain: frequent training, weight cutting, and fighting through injury. In this way, the fighter's body becomes both the source of income and the site of its depletion, as

earning potential is tied directly to the ability to keep fighting despite long-term physical costs.

The professionalization of Muay Thai has taken place not only in the civilian domain but also within the Thai military. The Royal Thai Army (RTA) has recently recommitted to Muay Thai as both a training method and an emblem of Thai martial heritage. In February 2023, the Army Chief mandated the inclusion of Muay Thai in the curriculum of military schools, emphasizing its role in shaping soldiers' physical and moral character (Nation Thailand 2023a). By September of the same year, RTA officials were promoting Muay Thai internationally through partnerships with Lumpinee Boxing Stadium and the Ministry of Culture, aligning these efforts with Thailand's United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization – UNESCO heritage initiatives (Nation Thailand 2023b). At the same time, standardized "C license" instructor courses were introduced for soldiers, signaling the institutionalization and pedagogical expansion of the art within the ranks (Nation Thailand 2024). Conversely, Muay Thai itself has also been mobilized to promote the military, as seen in the case of Buakaw Banchamek, the Muay Thai legend associated with the RTA reserve force, who has provided training to U.S. soldiers during joint Cobra Gold military exercises in both 2023 and 2025. These events further consolidate Muay Thai's role as an instrument of soft power and as a medium through which martial heritage intersects with military diplomacy (Khaosod English 2023).

Globalization has played an important role in shaping Muay Thai's social landscape. Thailand attracts large numbers of foreign practitioners who relocate to train in the long term. Some pursue professional careers under contract with gyms that manage and promote their fights in renowned venues such as Lumpinee Stadium and Rajadamnern Stadium. Others combine training with unrelated professions such as IT or digital media, using the flexibility of remote work to sustain daily Muay Thai practice as a form of leisure. This mix of professional and lifestyle practitioners illustrates how Muay Thai provides avenues for economic mobility and enables individuals,

whether fighters or long-term enthusiasts, to construct identities rooted in Muay Thai, even outside professional competition. The global prestige of Muay Thai also extends abroad. Exceptionally successful Thai athletes often move into international circuits, such as kickboxing or mixed martial arts, before retiring around the age of 30. Many then open their own gyms or travel internationally to teach, in places such as the United States, Japan, Singapore, and China. Their authority stems not only from competitive success but also from having been immersed in the distinctive Thai ethos of training, discipline, and bodily formation since early childhood.

EXISTENTIAL GROUNDING THROUGH MUAY THAI RITUAL

Renesson's (Renesson 2012) ethnography of Muay Thai illustrates how martial arts serve as tools people mobilize to confront insecurities, negotiate marginalization, and build resilience within complex social landscapes. It provides valuable insight into how Thai boxing operates simultaneously as a bodily discipline, an economic activity, and a social practice with institutional dimensions or a social field in Bourdieu's sense, structured by struggles over economic capital, prestige, and cultural recognition (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). By adopting an immersive "apprentice boxer" methodology inspired by Loïc Wacquant, Renesson highlights how training and fighting cultivate forms of self-mastery and resilience while embedding fighters within dense networks of camp owners, sponsors, gamblers, and state officials. His analysis shows that the "fight" extends beyond the ring into a broader "science of interaction" where prestige, money, and ritual protection intertwine. Beyond combat and sport, Muay Thai also carries health and therapeutic dimensions. Its rigorous training builds physical resilience, cardiovascular endurance, and psychological discipline, making it attractive to fans of fitness and wellbeing worldwide. Traditional healing practices (*naut boran*) accompany the sport. Fighters are prepared for combat through an oil massage

that warms the muscles and stimulates circulation. Moreover, Thai traditional medicine is believed to regulate the flow of internal ‘wind’ (*lom*), helping to disperse excess gas and tension from the body. After fights, similar treatments are used to help the body recover, releasing lactic acid, reducing inflammation, and alleviating bruises and stiffness. In contemporary contexts, these practices are complemented by Western sports medicine, with medical teams conducting post-event check-ups for fighters to ensure safety and manage injuries.

What makes Muay Thai unique among martial arts is the extent to which its techniques and ethos remain embedded in Thai cultural life. Gyms are situated within lineages, but individual fighters are encouraged to develop their own style from the outset rather than conform strictly to a prescribed form. Rituals such as the (*wai khru ram muay*), pre-fight oil massages (*nuat namman*), dietary regimens, and basic fighting stances in rhythm with traditional (*pi phat muay Thai*) music embody this cultural embeddedness. Fighters display a paradoxical composure: calm minds and wide eyes contrasted with lightning-fast strikes. Punches and kicks are designed to achieve knockouts, while knees and elbows are sharp and decisive, sometimes ending bouts through cuts that force stoppages. Among the many stylistic categories, the one that stands out is the “technician style” (*muay fi mue*). This style emphasizes fluid defense and attack from improbable angles, marked by balance, timing, and tactical ingenuity. It epitomizes the creativity that Thai coaches cultivate in students, encouraging them to find their own rhythm and bodily expression rather than simply reproduce standardized forms.

The process of learning and practicing Muay Thai provides a grounding sense of belonging and continuity through ritual, lineage, and community. The (*wai khru ram muay*) ceremony is central here. Performed before every bout, it combines gestures of respect to teachers (*wai khru*) with the ritualized “boxing dance” (*ram muay*), accompanied by traditional music. The movements vary by gym, lineage, and region, allowing fighters to signal identity, creativity, and connection to their roots. The ritual also functions as a display of skill:

to the expert eye, the precision, balance, and composure shown in the (*ram muay*) can reveal much about a fighter's training and technical mastery. At the same time, the pre-fight ceremony provides spiritual protection, invokes ancestral and religious blessings, and prepares the fighter psychologically for combat. Fighters enter the ring wearing a (*mongkhon* a sacred, blessed headband and often remove it only after completing the (*wai khru ram muay*). While entering the ring, around the neck they may wear protective amulets, blessed by monks, believed to confer spiritual strength and safety. Around the arms, during the whole fight, they wear the (*prajioud*), blessed armbands. Many fighters also carry (*sak yant*) tattoos, sacred geometrical and script designs inscribed by Buddhist monks or spiritual masters, which are thought to protect the body from harm and channel spiritual power. These ritual practices can be properly contextualized within Thailand's complex religious field.

Although Thailand is religiously diverse, Theravāda Buddhism provides the predominant framework for these protective practices, which are infused with syncretic elements drawn from Brahmanic-Hindu traditions and local animist beliefs, and are best understood within what Kitiarsa (Kitiarsa 2012a) terms vernacular Buddhism hybrid religious field that also encompasses practices like Muay Thai. In this sense, Muay Thai ritual and adornment anchor fighters within this specific moral universe, reinforcing ties of lineage, community, and cosmology. Ritual dance, sacred objects, and bodily inscriptions are key sites where Muay Thai transcends a "combat sport" to become a practice of ontological grounding, situating fighters in broader cultural and religious orders (Vail 2014; Kitiarsa 2005). Foreigners who come to Thailand to train also encounter these dimensions, negotiating identity and security in diverse ways.

GLOBAL ENCOUNTERS AND THE PARADOX OF SECURITY

Looking at Muay Thai through the prism of multidimensional security reveals a series of contradictions within each security dimension and between them. These tensions come to the surface most clearly in global encounters, when foreigners arrive in Thailand to live and train, as well as when Thai society itself negotiates the role of its national sport. In this section, I consider how these contradictions can be understood as paradoxes of multidimensional security, revealing the ways in which the very practices that generate resilience also produce new vulnerabilities.

When it comes to foreigners practicing Muay Thai in Thailand, Deng (Deng 2025) provides a rich ethnographic account that traces how these practitioners negotiate their identities as fighters and position themselves in relation to local Thai boxers. His analysis reveals a complex web in which physical risk, economic precarity, health consequences, and the search for ontological security are tightly interwoven, making Muay Thai not simply a sport but a multidimensional site where different forms of security are contested and produced. Deng's recent ethnographic work on Muay Thai tourism in Thailand shows how foreigners approach the practice as a way to confront insecurity through danger. This author observes that many travelers enter gyms in Thailand expecting holistic or spiritual wellbeing, yet quickly discovered that fighting was the central communal activity. Participation in the ring generated social and cultural capital, positioning fighters as "warriors". This shift underscores the paradox of martial arts and security: the body's exposure to harm becomes the very ground on which fighters cultivate resilience, toughness, and a sense of belonging. Fear is central to this process. Deng's interlocutors described trembling before fight nights, restless and sleepless evenings, and the omnipresence of anxiety. Yet, instead of being avoided, fear was incorporated into the very identity of the fighter. Deng calls upon Mott and Roberts (Mott and Roberts 2014)

to describe how men's ritualized banter what they term "ball-talking", a form of joking and competitive talk that both asserts masculinity and builds group solidarity – can temporarily ease insecurity by producing soothing and affirming effects on the mind-body. He also draws on Green and Evers (Green and Evers 2020, 13–14) to show that masculinity functions not as an overt identity but as a style of practice at the carnal level, where it operates as a remedy to men's fear and vulnerability.

Here, security is generated not by eliminating risk, but by embracing it, with martial identity emerging precisely through fragility, endurance, and mutual care among fighters. Finally, Deng highlights the tension between Western ideals of aggressive masculinity and Thai notions of cool heart (*jai yen*), which privilege composure, endurance, and calm under stress. In contrast to interpretations offered by some foreign visitors, who view Muay Thai through dichotomies such as aggression versus self-control or dominance versus submission, Deng argues that martial arts provide existential grounding not only through superiority, but also through cultivated endurance, ritual and composure – dimensions that are often obscured in reading of fighting as mere aggression. Deng's analysis shows how injury and pain, far from being seen as weaknesses, became "forms of embodied capital" proof of resilience and evidence of a fighter's capacity to endure insecurity (Deng 2025). This points out to how martial arts cultivate bodily discipline to transform the experience of effort, as well as exposure to hardship and physical pain, into socially recognized value. Yet such practices also foreground the paradox: physical harm that compromises health security is simultaneously reframed as a pathway to psychological resilience and social recognition.

Economically, Muay Thai fighting tourism produces uneven forms of security. For some travellers, participation remains a leisure activity, subsidized by remote jobs or savings, while for others especially those seeking contracts with gyms or competing professionally it becomes a precarious livelihood. This duality reveals the layered ways martial arts mediate economic security for foreigners,

in ways that are not fundamentally different from the experiences of local practitioners: they can offer a route to income and, for a select few, opportunities for upward mobility through international competition, teaching, or opening gyms. Yet these prospects often come at a high bodily cost, as careers are short and sustained success depends on enduring injury, risk, and physical decline.

Kitiarsa's (2012b) analysis identifies the paradox of security that underlies Muay Thai. On the one hand, boxers are locally celebrated as breadwinners and community heroes, but on the other, they are embedded in exploitative systems that profit from their labor and risk. Their training regimes cultivate bodily discipline and endurance, yet simultaneously expose them to injury, precarity, and shortened careers. The very hardships of pain, fatigue, and self-discipline become culturally meaningful, transforming vulnerability into moral strength and ontological grounding. Muay Thai appeals especially to underprivileged youth because it provides immediate income and the promise of upward mobility. Yet its significance extends beyond the individual. Fighters who emerge from society's margins, participating in what remains a grassroots practice shaped by the beliefs, aspirations, and lived experiences of the underprivileged, come to embody and transmit Thai culture abroad. In doing so, they transform Muay Thai from a local practice of survival and resilience into a vehicle of national prestige and soft power.

The question of ontological grounding becomes especially compelling in Kitiarsa's comparison of Muay Thai boxing and Buddhist monasticism, two practices that might appear opposed: one centered on fighting, physical dynamism, and domination, public attention, and the pursuit of money: the other on cultivating stillness of body and mind, seclusion, and the renunciation of material gain. Yet both, in different ways, offer frameworks through which Thai grassroots society confronts vulnerability and seeks security. Kitiarsa insightfully compares the boxer's body (*nak muai*) with the monk's body (*nak buat*), and shows converging aspects in the cultivation of disciplined, resilient male bodies in contemporary Thailand. Both are

disciplined through specialized “techniques of the body” (Mauss [1977] 2009), but toward different ends. For boxers, the body is a site of physical power, endurance, and the struggle for livelihood, recognition, and honor. For monks, on one hand, the body represents desire and suffering that must be overcome; on the other, it is the necessary vehicle for meditation and Buddhist practice. In both cases, male bodies are inscribed with discipline, hierarchy, and moral purpose, and both cultivate forms of resilience that exceed the immediate domain of fighting or monastic life.

Socially, Muay Thai provides pathways for mobility and recognition, but nationally, it stands as a symbol of cultural heritage and identity. Vail (Vail 2014, 516) adds another dimension to this argument by showing that the mythology of Muay Thai serves as a narrative medium through which Thai men reimagine and rewrite their social selves, casting boxers as heroic figures capable of transcending everyday constraints, “stories that they tell themselves about themselves”. This narrative framing provides not only symbolic prestige but also a sense of existential grounding, enabling the underprivileged to see themselves as more than their precarious social conditions. The analysis of Muay Thai demonstrates how embodied practices and narrative traditions alike transform vulnerability into continuity, meaning, and value, thereby contributing to ontological security in contemporary Thailand.

What emerges from the above analysis of security as something never given, but constantly worked out through these contradictions: between earning and exploitation, toughness and injury, identity and reinvention. Muay Thai’s endurance lies in this ongoing negotiation, in the balancing of different dimensions of security that intersect, overlap, and sometimes collide, producing a form of security that is lived, processual, and dynamic rather than fixed or stable.

CONCLUSION

My overall research on martial arts shows that they are cultural practices that carry a heritage which, enlivened by practitioners, generates an encompassing cultural sphere while remaining deeply responsive to wider social dynamism. Rooted in tradition and shaped by centuries of change, these practices embody histories of resilience and ongoing struggles for survival. From battlefield techniques of close combat to methods of self-defense in everyday life, martial arts have continually been reshaped by governing structures, shifting in their techniques, lineages, and narratives. They have taken on new forms as performance, health-oriented practice, and embodied art, always retaining a complementary dimension of healing and resilience alongside fighting.

The vitality of grassroots cultural practices must be considered not only in breadth but also in depth, for they are grounded in what is existential for communities, their vernacular cosmology. In this article, I have used the concept of security to examine how a popular cultural practice responds to basic human needs. I argue that martial arts practice, such as Muay Thai, persists because it addresses physical security, livelihoods, health, and ontological grounding encompassing both community belonging and cosmological orientation.

Yet what emerges most strongly is the paradox of security, that is, the complex interrelation between different dimensions of security. Every pursuit of security arises from an experience of insecurity, and each effort to build resilience produces new vulnerabilities. Social and cultural innovations are always reinterpreted and contested within broader society, generating fresh tensions. For this reason, research on cultural practices such as martial arts gains particular momentum when they are studied in their multidimensional, lived complexity. This paper offers an introductory, analytically focused insight into the interplay of different dimensions of security. It demonstrates that martial arts can serve as a powerful analytical lens for understanding how resilience, vulnerability, and cultural continuity are interwoven

in contemporary societies – not as fixed conditions, but as dynamic, continually renegotiated processes.

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ВИШЕДИМЕНЗИОНАЛНА БЕЗБЕДНОСТ У ПРАКСИ МУАЈ ТАЈА**

Резиме

Овај чланак је посвећен питању како се борилачке вештине, односно Муај Тај (*Muay Thai*), могу разумети као културне праксе које се кроз време обликују као одговор на мултидимензионално поимање безбедности на Тајланду. Историјски везан за војску одбрану, Муај Тај је током времена прошао кроз значајне трансформације, еволуирајући у кодификовани спорт, национално-културно наслеђе, и глобалну индустрију. Данас његово значење далеко превазилази бојно поље: доприноси физичкој безбедности кроз самоодбрану, економској безбедности кроз професионално борила штиво и транснационалне мреже, здравственој безбедности кроз тренинг, издржљивости и терапеутској пракси, као и онтолошкој безбедности кроз ритуале, религијска веровања и космолошке оријентације које продужују смисао и сигурност. Анализа се ослања на етнографске приказе и одабране студије како би пратила различите улоге које Муај Тај има у сферама физичке, економске, здравствене и онтолошке безбедности. Посебан акценат ставља се на то како историјски и савремени развој Муај Таја одражава променљиве перцепције у односу на то шта безбедност представља у тајландском друштву од колонијалних претњи и ратног преживљавања до савремених питања економске несигурности, телесне издржљивости и културног признања. Психолошки аспекти попут самодисциплине

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и емоционалне контроле овде се посматрају као део здравствене безбедности, док онтолошка безбедност обухвата дубљу сигурност коју нуде ритуали, космологија и уопште отеловљен културни континуитет. Перспективе страних практиканата нуде додатну димензију, показујући како се Муај Тај најпре сусреће кроз националне наративе, а затим реинтерпретира у самом искуству праксе. Истовремено, контрадикције се јављају како унутар, тако и између различитих димензија: економске могућности наспрам експлоатације, телесна снага наспрам физичких повреда, културна укореењеност наспрам реинвенције традиције у сврси глобалног признања и престижа. Ове контрадикције најбоље се разумеју као парадоски безбедности, где сваки покушај успостављања стабилности истовремено ствар нове облике рањивости. У ширем смислу, чланак ситуира Муај Тај у дугу историју борилачких вештина као пракси културног наслеђа. Оне су обликоване вековима друштвених промена, али и даље остају осетљиве на савремене притиске, изграђујући своју отпорност кроз историју борбе за опстанак. Од ратних техника до здравствено орјентисаних пракси и глобалних перформанса, борилачке вештине настављају да се прилагођавају, задржавајући притом потенцијал да буду коришћене како у борбе тако и у виду терапеутских пракси. Посматрајући Муај Тај као мултидимензионално поље безбедности, чланак наглашава како се културне праксе развијају у преговору између отпорности, рањивости и култног континуитета у условима стално променљивих друштвених околности.

Кључне речи: мултидимензионална безбедност, борилачке вештине, муај тај, отпорност и рањивост, културно наслеђе, етнографија спорта.

* This paper was received on September 11, 2025, and accepted for publication at the Editorial Board meeting on February 27, 2026.

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NATIONAL DEFENCE STRATEGY AND RESILIENCE OF THE NORTH MACEDONIA SECURITY SECTOR IN THE ERA OF MODERN SECURITY CHALLENGES****

(Translation in *Extenso*)

Abstract

North Macedonia has become a permanent member of NATO in 2020, in the midst of the global and all-pervading Covid-19 pandemic that

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**** The paper presents findings of a study developed as a part of the research project "Serbia and challenges in international relations in 2025", financed by the Ministry of Science, Technological Development and Innovation of the Republic of Serbia, and conducted by Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade during year 2025.

did not recognize the boundaries between rich and poor, between large, medium and small countries, between strong and weak health systems. Almost all countries were faced with the catastrophic consequences of this pandemic in the field of human security, but also the sustainability of national economies and health systems. On European level, pandemic was followed by the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, but it is a challenge that did not directly threaten the security of North Macedonia or other countries on the European continent. This conflict indirectly threatened the economic and specially the energy security of Europe. Pragmatical purpose of the paper is to find an answer to the following question – to what extent the security system of North Macedonia is prepared, as well as adapted to face modern security challenges, such as these? From theoretical perspective, authors will analyse the capacities of small states using the Republic of North Macedonia as a case study in the context of the possibility of adapting and facing modern security challenges.

Keywords: National defence strategy, security system, security challenges, North Macedonia, EU, organized crime, corruption.

INTRODUCTION

The logic of security is composed of several basic elements, namely danger (what endangers us), the reference object of security (what is threatened), the subject of security and means of security (what protects us). Challenges, risks and threats can be divided into military, political, societal, economic and environmental (Gjurovski, Nikoloski, i Gerasimoski 2020, 12). But, in contemporary circumstances, “it is quite clear that due to the nature, complexity and intensity of security challenges, risks and threats, defence cannot be achieved by engaging only the military, but also other entities of the defense system” (Živanović i Radojević 2024, 179). In this context, it is important to emphasize what Arnold Wolfers said about security, that security does not refer only to the absence of a threat to adopted values, but also to the absence of fear that the values will be threatened (Gjurovski, Nikoloski, i Gerasimoski 2020, 15). When it comes to the perception of security, it is important to point out that the views of the world in

that context can be Hobbesian, Grotian and Kantian. While according to the Hobbesian concept, the world is viewed pessimistically, through the eyes of gladiators, where the rules of the jungle rule, Grotius' view is more pragmatic, because he believes that survival can be ensured through cooperation, and that relations between states can be mutually beneficial, and the Kantian model is idealistic because it assumes that all states are potentially friends which should cooperate to ensure respect for universal values (16).

Authors focus is placed to the national security. In fact, the national security strategy of the security sector of North Macedonia and its resilience in the era of new global and European regional threats. Following the mentioned context this, it is important to stress out that the strategic constant of the Republic of North Macedonia, since its independence, membership in NATO and the EU, and all of this in the function of improving and consolidating security and minimizing threats and risks (Gjurovski, Nikoloski, i Gerasimoski 2020, 20). By resolving the dispute with Greece and the Agreement on Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation with Bulgaria, North Macedonia closed bilateral disputes with its neighbours on the political level and thereby created the conditions for unblocking its Euro-Atlantic integrations in the direction of rounding off the recognition of Macedonian statehood, which a new framework for building and developing neighbourly relations and new perspectives for infrastructural, energy, economic and cultural integration has been set (21). However, according to Interpol Secretary General Jurgen Stock, although North Macedonia is considered a safe country, it should, together with the region, be more careful in dealing with new forms of security threats (Trajkovski 2023). On the same line is the position of the Minister of the Interior of North Macedonia, Oliver Spasovski, who says that current geopolitical events at the global level, supplemented with digitalization and technological development, have shown that the country is faced with sophisticated security challenges that require joint responsibility, a joint approach and united efforts (Trajkovski 2023). In the entire spectrum of contemporary security challenges, in addition to violent extremism, the phenomenon of radicalization is more present in every society, which is increasingly present in the circles of the young population, bearing in mind the fact that the young

population accepts extreme attitudes and ideas, and thus changes its behaviour starting with political activism up to the application of violent means and methods. Therefore, in order to confront and prevent the phenomenon of violent extremism and terrorism, a coordinated approach is needed at the national level through multidisciplinary teams, but also by using regional and international integrations in order to exchange information, for the sake of efficiently and effectively addressing contemporary security challenges that recognize less and less national borders.

DEFENCE STRATEGY OF NORTH MACEDONIA

In the latest Defence Strategy of the Republic of North Macedonia, from the perspective of global security environment, it is stressed out that the challenges, risks and threats within the so-called global framework are unpredictable, as well as complex, while, at the same time, rapid and dynamic social, political, economic and technological development and changes in the balance of power have a great impact on current security phenomena. On that basis, it is pointed out that no country can face these issues independently and that is reason why cooperation is necessary in facing common challenges, threats and risks in the direction of providing a collective response (Стратегија за одбрана на Република Северна Македонија [СОPCM] 2020, 3). Frequent natural disasters, technological disasters, epidemics and climate changes make it impossible for any country in the world to be immune to them because they are threats that do not recognize political borders. In the same strategic document, it is emphasized that openness and cooperation between countries contributes to accelerated technological development and increasing the volume of information exchange between security factors at the national, regional and global level, but at the same time it warns that modern technology can be misused to endanger security and stability (4).

Bearing in mind the fact that in the defence strategy of North Macedonia, international cooperation is mentioned as one of the key elements in ensuring national security, it is important to emphasize how small this country is, with limited resources and according to

economic parameters, in the status of a developing country, focused on international cooperation in order to ensure security sustainability at the national level. The Defence Strategy of North Macedonia insists on the cooperation within regional framework, including good-neighbourly relations, as instruments for creation positive impact to the regional security, including the political entities within the region which should be aware about the cooperation interstate well-based relationship placed as a prerequisite for building mutual trust, integration into European and Atlantic governmental organizations, but also in ensuring regional security, followed by stability and economic growth (COPCM 2020, 4).

In the Defence Strategy is explicitly stated that “the security environment has been significantly improved and that good relations have been established with the neighbours, most of which are members of NATO or the EU, have a Euro-Atlantic agenda, or maintain constructive ties with both organizations, and that North Macedonia will continue to continuously invest in Euro-Atlantic security and stability, to build its capacities according to the principle of solidarity, strong transatlantic ties and to adequately share obligations” (COPCM 2020, 4).

The biggest threats to national security for North Macedonia are: “1) Economic and political problems: long-standing problems of insufficient economic growth, corruption, organized crime, insufficiently built institutional capacities, unemployment, shortcomings of the judicial system and politicization of democratic institutions is the main generator of instability in the form of social challenges. Organized crime manifests itself primarily through the illegal trafficking of people and narcotics. Thus, regional security is further threatened due to the presence of illegal weapons and ammunition that are easily accessible to criminal and extremist groups. Energy security is an additional concern given North Macedonia’s dependence on external sources; 2) Foreign intelligence services: their covert activities represent a serious security threat to North Macedonia. Their goal is to delay or prevent North Macedonia’s efforts to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic community, especially for full membership in NATO and the EU. Their action is aimed at causing and weakening the political and security determinations and economic

potential of the state, and the erosion of the defence system's capacity; 3) Radicalism and violent extremism: in all its forms (national, political, religious), in certain cases originates as a consequence of historical contradictions and disagreements, and is additionally strengthened by the slow social and economic development of the regions. Non-state actors created with the help of a foreign factor can exploit these weaknesses to cause internal inter-ethnic disagreements and conflicts; 4) Terrorism: terrorism remains a current threat to national security, it is closely related to national and religious extremism in contemporary international relations, and the Republic of North Macedonia is vulnerable to terrorist attacks, but its territory is more likely to be used as a transit corridor for terrorist infiltration towards Western Europe; 5) Illegal migration: it does not represent an immediate threat to the national security of North Macedonia, but it can seriously burden a significant number of state institutions, thereby engaging significant state capacities in the medium and long term, which is in a cause-and-effect relationship with the dynamics of migration and a coordinated response to same; 6) Cyber: the serious potential consequences of a cyber-attack represent a threat to the functioning of critical infrastructure, including those in the security and defence systems of North Macedonia; 7) Natural disasters: we are talking about technical-technological disasters, epidemics and climate changes that belong to the group of indirect and difficult to predict threats, which can cause serious consequences for the national security system; 8) Endangerment and destruction of the environment: this is a security risk that will cause serious state problems in the long term, and at the same time can indirectly threaten the defence system" (COPCM 2020, 5–6).

In the context of so-called traditional threats, this strategic document pointed out that armed aggression as a direct threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of North Macedonia is minimal, but that the existing differences at the national, religious, ethnic and cultural level in the region are still a challenge which can threaten the safety and security of this country (COPCM 2020, 6).

From the perspective of our analysis, the essence of the problem, is the fact that there are no clear strategic guidelines in this strategic document that would provide an explanation of how North Macedonia

will face current and upcoming security challenges, risks and threats. In fact, the strategy itself, as a national document, does not provide an answer to the question of how to face internal problems, such as corruption, organized crime, insufficiently built institutional capacities, in order to then create a space for providing an answer to the question of how to face modern threats that threaten the national the security of this country. The essential question arising from this strategy is the following: How will the security system of North Macedonia respond and manage current security risks, threats and challenges if internal problems such as corruption, organized crime and weak institutions are phenomena that continue to question functionality of this country.

The internal problem of organized crime, is also widely represented in North Macedonia, and this strategic document does not provide an answer to the question of how to initially deal with organized crime on the internal level, in order to provide a contribution in that domain, and also in regional, European and global frameworks (Jelisavac Trošić i Arnaudov 2024, 441).

This strategic document clearly recognizes, identifies and defines contemporary security risks, threats and challenges faced by North Macedonia, the region, Europe and the world as a whole, but viewed from the perspective of strategic thinking, it is difficult to establish that it is strategy in the textbook sense of the term because this document lacks clear, precise and realistic guidelines that will provide an answer to the question of how to prevent, face and manage risks, threats and challenges. According to the latest report of the Global Peace Index made by the Institute for Economics and Peace, North Macedonia is in 38th place, and the report takes into account 23 qualitative and quantitative indicators, among which are the perception of criminality, the rate of murders, violent demonstrations, political instability, the import and export of weapons, the influence of terrorism, as well as the possibility of nuclear and heavy weapons. It is a list of 163 countries and in the region behind North Macedonia is Montenegro in 45th place, Bosnia and Herzegovina in 61st place and Serbia in 65th place (Politika 2023). After these results of the Global Peace Index for 2023, the current Minister of Interior Affairs of North Macedonia also spoke, and pointed out that his country is among the 40 safest countries in the

world, and that this is exceptional progress, considering the fact that the country was in 94th place in 2016 (Spasovski 2023).

LONG-TERM PLAN FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF DEFENCE CAPACITIES 2023–2032

Grand strategy generally describes how states see their role in the world, and through which they evaluate the activities of their governments (Dragišić 2021, 38). Long-term plan for the development of defence capacities 2023–2032 is a document that was adopted in the Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia on April 26, 2023, with the aim of creating the basis for the sustainability of the security system in the coming decade. Leading fundamental imperatives in the case of North Macedonia in the process of continuous, comprehensive and sustainable development is the existence, maintenance and strengthening of the national, defence and security system that enables progress in all spheres of social life. In that direction, towards the creation and development of continuous defence capabilities and capacities for the realization of strategic defence missions, the creation of a document that will establish methods for the development of the defence capabilities of North Macedonia in order to analyse, consider and confirm the defined goals, capabilities and capacities started (*Долгорочен план за развој на одбранбените способности 2023–2032* [ДППОС] 2023, 1). In fact, with the accession of North Macedonia to NATO, this country is included in the defence planning process, as the main process in the development of the Alliance's defence capabilities. Integration in this process implies the explicit fulfilment of assumed obligations as a full member through the fulfilment of the principles of fair and equal burden sharing (Fair Burden Share) and reasonable challenge (Reasonable Challenge) (1).

This document states that North Macedonia is located in an environment characterized by intense geopolitical competition and rivalries of major global powers, in which the Russian Federation is identified as the most direct security threat to European security (ДППОС 2023, 2). Then, that specific relations on the Balkan Peninsula have a direct impact on the overall security mosaic of North Macedonia, and that the security of this country can be directly

threatened as a result of conflicts in the immediate environment, but also regional and global security challenges and wars (2). This document mentions terrorism as a threat, then hybrid threats, and foreign intelligence and propaganda activities, while real internal problems are at the very end. Arnaudov in his recent research explains that “world crises have a strong negative effect on small countries and especially on open economies such as North Macedonia” (Jelisavac Trošić i Arnaudov 2023, 156). The consequences of the crisis caused by the Covid19 virus pandemic have shown how large and significant the impact of a global health crisis is on the security and stability of this country (ДПРОС 2023, 3). In this context, it is important to mention the part of this document that concerns North Macedonia’s membership in NATO: “By joining NATO, the Republic of North Macedonia has moved from a system of individual defence to a system of collective defence”. This represents the biggest gain from joining NATO and it will contribute to the long-term security and stability of the country. As a conscientious and responsible ally, North Macedonia will develop military capacities and capabilities designed to contribute to the collective security system, not neglecting military capabilities for national needs. Towards that goal, within the framework of real economic possibilities, North Macedonia will work maximally and dedicatedly to build mobile, sustainable and adequately equipped units, capable independently, but also in cooperation with allies, to defend the independence and territorial integrity of North Macedonia. Also, North Macedonia will contribute to the defence of allies, participate in international operations and missions and provide support to civil institutions in facing different types of challenges, risks and threats that are not of a military nature (4).

We can conclude that the biggest benefit of joining NATO is the collective defence system, as a mechanism for preserving territorial integrity and sovereignty, while ignoring internal challenges, risks and threats, on the political, economic, financial and institutional level, which may represent the most serious and biggest determinants in to the process of creating a sustainable security mosaic in North Macedonia.

The fact that the institutional sector is a serious challenge for the security system of North Macedonia is also evidenced by the statement

of the current American ambassador to that country, who states that “the citizens of North Macedonia deserve an independent judicial system in which positions are filled with merit and quality and through transparent processes” (Jakimova 2022), and that “in those proceedings there is no room for political interference” (Jakimova 2022), noting that the US has spent millions of dollars on training prosecutors in the judicial system of the Republic of North Macedonia (Jakimova 2022). In addition, the Eurothink survey showed that only eight percent of the citizens of North Macedonia trust the judicial authorities (Jakimova 2022), which is another indicator of the institutional weakness of this country, and thus the threat of the security system as a result of weak institutions.

The fact that corruption is a serious security challenge in North Macedonia is evidenced by the position of this country on the Global Corruption Index, where it is positioned at 85th place (Transparency International 2022), which is a lower position compared to ten years ago. In the context of the fight against corruption, it is important to point out that the State Commission for the Prevention of Corruption adopted the National Strategy for the Fight against Corruption 2021–2025, but also warned in the same strategy that strong political influence is actually a key challenge in the public sector, in the rule of law and in the low-rate sanctioning of corrupt behaviour (Kramarska 2022). Also, the German ambassador to North Macedonia, Anke Holstein, pointed out that North Macedonia’s progress on the road to the EU will largely depend on the successful suppression of corruption, while her American colleague pointed out that the justice system in North Macedonia needs more investigations and prosecutions in order to show that no one is above the law (Mitevaska 2022).

Viewed from the point of view of the high rate of corruption, which directly affects the effectiveness and efficiency of public institutions, it is difficult to establish that the security system of North Macedonia is sustainable and resilient in facing modern security challenges, especially those that do not belong to the group of traditional security threats. If we go back to the document that we previously analysed, which concerns the long-term plan for the development of defence capabilities in the period 2023–2032, we will find that in this document, very little attention is directed to

national civil resistance capabilities, in terms of institutional capacities and economic resources that would significantly contribute to the sustainability of the security system of North Macedonia in the modern security environment. In fact, the largest part of this document is directed towards the defence system of North Macedonia in the military sense, while ignoring the current security challenges that North Macedonia is facing, which at the same time contribute to the resilience and sustainability of the security system of this country.

REPORT OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION AND THE SECURITY OF NORTH MACEDONIA

When it comes to the Common Foreign and Security Policy, the report of the European Commission for 2022 states that North Macedonia has fully adapted to the position of the European Union (100% in February 2022, as opposed to 96% in 2021), which clearly confirms strategic orientation of this country towards the EU (European Commission [EC] 2022, 105). In the context of the war on the territory of Ukraine, the report of the European Commission states that North Macedonia has joined the restrictive measures of the EU against Russia and Belarus, and as an example of this, the decision of the Macedonian government to expel eleven Russian diplomats and not to allow the passage of Russians in at least two cases government planes through Macedonian airspace (105–106).

But the same report calls for more effective enforcement of existing laws, instead of launching ad hoc initiatives (Stojančov 2022). When it comes to modern security challenges, it is important to state that in the European Commission's report, in chapter 24, stated that this country is moderately prepared. The Macedonian authorities are required to continue the implementation of the measures taken in the process of suppressing violent extremism and the fight against terrorism, a more systematic approach is required in the management of the migrant crisis, and the state institutions are required to establish appropriate systems for managing irregular movements, but also to stop the practice of returning migrants (EC 2022, 37). More specifically, North Macedonia is required: 1) To continue the implementation of institutional reforms to combat organized crime with a focus on

increasing operational capacities; 2) To continue the implementation of the Joint Action Plan on Counterterrorism for the fight against terrorism with a focus on the prevention of extremism; 3) To improve the migrant registration system and adopt a more systematic approach in the fight against migrant smuggling (37).

On the other hand, when it comes to the fight against organized crime, “North Macedonia has reached a certain level of preparation in the fight against this type of crime” (EC 2022, 38), but that “more needs to be done to improve the efficiency of law enforcement” (38), which relate to the “fight against certain forms of crime, such as money laundering and financial crime” (38). On this occasion, the Macedonian authorities are requested: 1) “To strengthen investigative centers in the Public Prosecutor’s Office in order to increase the efficiency of investigations and improve coordination between the prosecution and the police; 2) To increase experience in investigative procedures, criminal prosecution and conviction of cases of organized crime and money laundering; 3) To prepare the necessary legislation on cyber security in the direction of creating a unified system for combating cybercrime” (38).

In this context, North Macedonia is criticized for the fact that “the measure of confiscation of property acquired through criminal acts is not sufficiently used in criminal proceedings, and the confiscation of property acquired through crime should become a strategic priority in the fight against organized crime, terrorism and corruption at a high level in the country” (EC 2022, 40).

The essence of the problem is that the degree of corruption, but also the all-pervasive role of organized crime on social, political, economic and institutional flows in North Macedonia greatly endangers the security system of this country as a whole, thus first of all making public institutions dysfunctional and inefficient and ineffective for dealing with current security challenges, risks and threats that intertwine from one domain to another in the public life of a system or society.

Probably the phenomena of corruption and organized crime in North Macedonia can best be explained through a realistic approach, bearing in mind the fact that a very little and limited work is being done to curb the above-mentioned phenomena, even though we are writing

about the security issues that greatly threaten the sustainability of the country's security mosaic. It seems, from a realistic point of view, that corruption and organized crime in North Macedonia are not sufficiently perceived as a security challenge that threatens the sustainability of that country, while, on the other hand, it seems that the fight against these phenomena will not change the speed of movement of this country in achieving key foreign policy goals.

INSTEAD OF CONCLUSION – IDEAS FOR POTENTIAL SOLUTIONS

The biggest challenges for the security and defence system of North Macedonia in modern security circumstances are primarily internal risks and threats identified in institutional inefficiency, pervasive corruption and organized crime. From the point of view of traditional threats, such as threats to territorial integrity, sovereignty and political independence, North Macedonia was not a threatened country even before its admission to NATO membership, while with its admission to the Alliance and its integration into the largest security and defence bloc established on the principles of collective security, this country additionally strengthened its defence capacities against possible external and “hard” threats. On the other hand, when we talk about modern security threats, such as hybrid threats, which include fake news, political radicalization, extreme activities of small groups, but also health, economic, financial, and natural disasters, we conclude, based on existing analysis and existing data, that the Republic of North Macedonia is a partially threatened country primarily due to internal factors that directly and indirectly affect the security system of this country, i.e. dealing with modern security challenges.

In order to have a clear picture of the vulnerability of North Macedonia due to modern security threats, we must first state the internal problems that this country is facing. The internal problems are: high rate of corruption, pervasive organized crime, political instability and corruption, high rate of poverty in society. In fact, we are talking about determinants that have a pervasive effect on the entire institutional infrastructure in North Macedonia, and thus on the security sectors. Why is this? Because the mentioned internal challenges,

primarily organized crime, corruption and political instability, threaten the functioning of the system, because corruption makes institutions weak and vulnerable; organized crime, makes institutions less independent and financially vulnerable; while, political instability and corruption make the entire institutional infrastructure of this country unstable, without concise and strategic enforceable decisions, and makes them an instrument in the hands of political elites. The high rate of poverty is a decades-long problem that has caused the phenomenon of mass emigration of the young, educated population with professional qualifications. One such negative trend additionally destroys the institutional infrastructure of North Macedonia, because in the labour market is a deficit of young, qualified and professional workforce, which in the medium and long term threatens, from this point of view, the institutional sustainability of this country, and in the short term makes it an instrument in the hands of political elite in order to satisfy business and professional ambitions and goals of party cadres. Those are internal challenges and problems faced by North Macedonia, which directly contribute to the country's vulnerability, but also indirectly due to modern security challenges that the country's system is not ready to face. In essence, it is a phenomenon of a cause-and-effect relationship of challenges, problems and risks that exists in North Macedonia, and which is currently doubly threatening this country and makes its security system vulnerable, not resilient, and therefore not sustainable.

From the point of view of membership in NATO, without diminishing the importance of this realized strategic and foreign policy goal, the Covid-19 health pandemic showed how dangerous internal institutional problems are in the process of creating a sustainable system in North Macedonia, despite the strong support that this country received during pandemic by allied countries. The pandemic has shown that no collective system of defence and security, especially when it comes to modern security challenges, such as Covid-19, can play an efficient and effective role in facing the challenges and overcoming the consequences if the national institutional system is vulnerable, not ready and susceptible to internal problems. Therefore, it is important to emphasize that the sustainability, resilience, efficiency and effectiveness of the security and defence system of North Macedonia is not achieved according to the automatic model by the act

of membership in the collective security and defence system, nor by the formal adoption of strategic and long-term documents concerning security and defence, but rather above all, by providing independent, autonomous and professional institutional capacities that continuously work on the analysis of modern security risks, challenges and threats, that continuously, according to an independent but also collective model, determine which factors directly and indirectly threaten the national security of North Macedonia and which are freed, protected and secured from any threatening internal factors, such as corruption, organized crime and political instability, which is still a negative trend in this country.

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СТРАТЕГИЈА НАЦИОНАЛНЕ ОДБРАНЕ И ОТПОРНОСТ БЕЗБЕДНОСНОГ СЕКТОРА СЕВЕРНЕ МАКЕДОНИЈЕ У ДОБА САВРЕМЕНИХ БЕЗБЕДНОСНИХ ИЗАЗОВА****

Резиме

Безбедносно-одбрамбени систем Северне Македоније у савременим безбедносним околностима се суочава са унутрашњим ризицима и претњама идентификованим у институционалној неефикасности, због слабих економских капацитета, распрострањене корупције и организованог криминала у овој земљи. Посматрано са становишта такозваних традиционалних претњи, као што су претње територијалном интегритету, суверенитету и политичкој независности, Северна Македонија није била угрожена земља ни пре пријема у чланство НАТО,

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**** Рад је настао у оквиру научноистраживачког пројекта „Србија и изазови у међународним односима 2025. године” који финансира Министарство науке, технолошког развоја и иновација Републике Србије, а реализује Институт за међународну политику и привреду током 2025. године.

док је пријемом ова земља додатно ојачала своје одбрамбене капацитете од могућих спољних и „тврдих” претњи. Што се тиче савремених безбедносних претњи, као што су хибридне претње, које укључују лажне вести, политичку радикализацију, екстремне активности малих група, али и претње као што су здравствене, економске и финансијске, као и природне катастрофе, на основу постојећих анализа и постојећих података, можемо тврдити да је Република Северна Македонија делимично угрожена држава првенствено због унутрашњих фактора који директно и индиректно утичу на безбедносни систем ове земље, односно савладавање савремених и актуелних безбедносних изазова. Унутрашњи проблеми са којима се ова држава суочава су: висока стопа корупције, распрострањени организовани криминал, политичка нестабилност и корупција, висока стопа сиромаштва у друштву. У ствари, реч је о детерминантама које имају продоран утицај на целокупну институционалну инфраструктуру у Северној Македонији, а самим тим и на сектор безбедности. Ти унутрашњи изазови, пре свега организовани криминал, корупција и политичка нестабилност угрожавају функционисање система, јер корупција чини институције slabим и рањивим, организовани криминал, с друге стране, чини институције несамосталним и финансијски рањивим, а треће, политичка нестабилност и корупција чине читаву институционалну инфраструктуру ове земље нестабилном, без концизних и стратешки спроводљивих одлука, и чине их инструментом у рукама политичких елите. Затим, висока стопа сиромаштва је вишедеценијски проблем који је проузроковао појаву масовне емиграције младог, образованог становништва са професионалним и стручним квалификацијама у Северној Македонији. Један такав тренд додатно уништава институционалну инфраструктуру Северне Македоније, јер на тржишту рада ове земље постоји дефицит младе, квалификоване и стручне радне снаге, што на средњи и дуги рок угрожава, са ове тачке гледишта, институционалну одрживост ове земље и краткорочно је чини инструментом у рукама политичке елите за задовољење пословних и професионалних амбиција и циљева партијских кадрова. Унутрашњи изазови директно доприносе рањивости земље на савремене безбедносне изазова

са којима систем земље није спреман да се суочи. Стога је важно нагласити да се одрживост, отпорност, ефикасност и ефективност безбедносно-одбрамбеног система Северне Македоније не постиже по аутоматском моделу чином чланства у систему колективне безбедности и одбране НАТО, нити формалним доношењем стратешких и дугорочних докумената из области безбедности и одбране, већ пре свега обезбеђивањем независних, самосталних и стручних институционалних капацитета који континуирано раде на анализи савремених безбедносних ризика, изазове и претњи, који континуирано, по независном али и колективном моделу, одређују који фактори директно и индиректно угрожавају националну безбедност Северне Македоније и који су ослобођени, заштићени и обезбеђени од било каквих негативних унутрашњих фактора, као што су корупција, организовани криминал и политичке нестабилности.

Кључне речи: Стратегија националне одбране, безбедносни систем, безбедносни изазови, Северна Македонија, ЕУ, организовани криминал, корупција.

* This paper was received on January 30, 2025, and accepted for publication at the Editorial Board meeting on February 27, 2026.

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GEOPOLITICAL CONSEQUENCES OF BASHAR AL-ASSAD'S FALL IN SYRIA**

(Translation in *Extenso*)

Abstract

Adhering to the theoretical framework of classical geopolitical analysis, the paper provides a geopolitical overview of the change of government in Syria at the end of the prolonged civil war, as well as the course of military operations and a description of the immediately established new situation on the ground. The introductory part of the paper explains the basic weaknesses of the Bashar al-Assad regime, as well as its main flaws that caused its collapse in a period of only eleven days. The second segment of the paper explains the geopolitical importance of Syria in a historical perspective by pointing out its constants within the Levant as an intermediate space in the Middle East located between the areas occupied by regional geopolitical powers in different historical eras. In this way, the similarity between former and the current circumstances is pointed out. The middle part of the paper observes geopolitical dimensions of the newly established state, the ideological and political background of HTS, the ruling military faction in the new, Sunni government in Damascus, as well as its relationship

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** The paper was created within the framework of the scientific and research activities of the Institute of European Studies in Belgrade, funded by the Ministry of Science and Innovation of Republic of Serbia.

with other factions and their strongholds in the certain areas within Syria. The third part of the paper analyses the influence of external great and regional powers on the situation in contemporary Syria and their interest projections which conflict each other in many ways. The final part of the paper deals with a prognostic assessment of the further geopolitical prospects of post-Assad Syria, taking into account the existing antagonisms and different interests of both Syrian military and ethnic formations and external powers.

Keywords: fall of Bashar al-Assad, Syrian civil war, Levant, geopolitics, interests of great powers in the Middle East.

CHRONOLOGY OF THE FALL OF THE REGIME AND ITS CAUSES

The Syrian civil war represents one of the focal points of the global geopolitical competition in the 21st century. After a five year (2019–2024) stalemate, the conflict has entered a new, turbulent phase that has changed the nature of the government in Syria and the regional situation, as well as the broader geopolitical environment (Lopez de Miguel 2025, 148–149). By using the model of classical geopolitical analysis, in this paper we will attempt to identify the possible consequences of the new situation in Syria both in the regional geopolitical dynamics and in the surrounding regions. Only then, we can be able to shed some light on the strategic positions of the most important international actors and on overall global security.

Within just eleven days, the regime of Bashar al-Assad (who controlled about 70% of Syrian territory) collapsed; the area it had previously controlled fell into the hands of Sunni rebels led by militants from the HTS group (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham), radical Islamists from the former Al-Nusra Front who had severed their ties with Al-Qaeda and shifted more towards Arab nationalism. The upheaval began on November 27, 2024: then HTS, together with rebels from the SNA (Syrian National Army), who had until then held a smaller part of Syrian territory (mainly in the province of Idlib), began their offensive towards Aleppo. The lightning operation, backed by Turkey, aimed to exploit the declining strength of government troops and their weak

defensive positions in northern Syria. The rebels quickly captured the remaining part of Idlib province and a significant area around Aleppo. The Syrian army – stretched across the area it controlled and divided by internal divisions – was unable to provide any effective resistance. As early as November 29, the rebels began their advance into Aleppo, a city that government forces had recaptured in 2016 after a long and arduous battle. The fall of this large city the next day signaled the unstoppable collapse of the Syrian regime's military power. At the same time, the rebels from the southern part of the country began their own offensive and captured the cities of Daraa and Suwadah.

The Assad regime launched a counteroffensive on December 1. Its goal was to regain lost territory, but it was reduced to limited airstrikes and redeployment of troops towards newly captured rebel positions. It was clear that the Syrian army lacked both the manpower and equipment to once again turn the situation in its favor. Its main allies, Russia and Iran, hesitated and assessed the new opportunities: Russian air force was engaged in very limited combat action, while the Iranians, instead of military assistance, offered only diplomatic services. Hezbollah, Assad's Shiite Lebanese ally, was preoccupied with its own troubles due to months of clashes with Israeli troops in southern Lebanon. In such circumstances, the Sunni rebels continued their offensive.

Between 2 and 4 December 2024, HTS and its allies further exploited all the weaknesses of the Syrian army continuing their advance in the south, toward the strategically important Hama, the place where the civil war began in 2011. Hama fell to the rebels on December 5. The rebels' advance was then directed towards Homs, an even more strategically important city that represents a crossroads between the coastal, Alawite part of Syria with Damascus and its desert hinterland. By December 6, Homs was completely surrounded and the garrison in the city surrendered a day later. This was a key moment in the offensive: instead of defending the capital, the Syrian army retreated and began to disintegrate; Bashar al-Assad fled the country by plane on December 7, and rebel columns marched into the capital on December 8 and declared victory. It ended half a century of Assad's family rule over Syria.

What were the causes of such a sudden collapse of the regime that had stubbornly held on power for more than 13 previous years? First of all, they can be found in the exhaustion of the Syrian state due to the more than decade-long war, but also in the Western sanctions that weakened the regime in economic, political and military terms (Borgoñoz Moya 2025). Namely, even before the civil war, Syria had huge problems with systematic corruption, chronic unemployment and the collapse of the functioning of public services. In conditions of civil war, all of this significantly worsened. Regime repression became the only approach to solve the accumulated problems, the biggest of which were those related to poor economic management and the inability to stimulate economic growth due to, among other things, the strong entrenchment of the network of privileged classes in contrast to the impoverished masses. During the civil war, Syria's GDP (Gross Domestic Product) fell by a whopping 87%, with no signs of reversing the trend (Dzulahisham 2024, 2). Another important cause of the regime's weakness was in its heavy reliance on external allies such as Russia and Iran, but, above all, in its inflexibility and inability to reach compromises with the warring factions during the peace talks in Astana, maintaining its maximalist, unrealistic positions that its allies were unwilling to support. All this was compounded by the rivals strengthening supported by neo-Ottoman Turkey, as well as the damage inflicted on Shiite allies in Lebanon by Israel. Although, in essence, mutually opposed, the strategies of the rebels' external sponsors led to a synergistic effect towards Assad's enemies strengthening; all of this, in sum, led to an unexpected turn of the tide in the war.

In order to understand the geopolitical prospects of Syria after the war and its broader consequences, it is necessary to first understand Syria's classical geopolitical position within the Levant. With this in mind, we will be able to see the interest projections of contemporary regional and global actors in the newly emerging circumstances, as well as to notice existing contradictions. Only then, will we be able to see the possible broader consequences of the change in geopolitical situation in Syria.

GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF SYRIA IN THE LEVANTE: HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY TRENDS

The Levant area forms the contact part of the Middle Eastern Rimland (Mackinder 2009) with the Mediterranean Sea, through which Asia is connected to Europe. In addition to Syria as the state that encompasses the largest part of the Levant, this area also includes Lebanon, Palestine and Jordan. The Levant is surrounded by four clearly visible geographical units that represent historical regional geopolitical centers: Asia Minor in the north, Mesopotamia in the east (and beyond it – Persia), Egypt in the south, and the Arabian Peninsula in its southeast. The Levant is, in fact, on a continental scale a small (inter)space that represents a theater for geopolitical competition between regional powers in the central part of the Rimland. At different historical moments, it becomes either the “prey” of one of the prevailing regional powers or, in the case of an established balance of power between them, a kind of “buffer zone” that delimits their influences (Tzarias 2019).

The history of the Levant is a history of great powers competition for control of this area. Most often, two or three powers fought for geostrategic dominance over Levant: the New Egyptian Empire with the Hittite Empire, the Assyrians with the Asia Minor powers of the early Iron Age, the Seleucids with the Ptolemies, the Romans with the Parthians, Byzantium with Persia (under the rule of the last Sassanids) and, later, with the Arab Caliphate, the Mamluks with the Catholic Crusaders and the Seljuk Turks. From the 16th century, the whole Levant fell under the imperial rule of the Ottoman Turks who conquered much of the Middle East and North Africa, absorbing the regional powers there and creating a kind of “Pax Osmanica” in the form of a renewed universal Caliphate. The imperial pacification of this area lasted until the end of World War I, when the victorious Entente powers, on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire, drew a new map of the entire Middle East, including the Levant (the Sykes-Picot Plan). The borders of the states that were drawn then remain largely unchanged to this day.

Modern Syria does not represent a homogeneous geopolitical entity. It is composed of several smaller geographical entities within the Levant. While in the case of the territorial positioning of surrounding regional powers, such as Egypt or Turkey, there is a clear geographical connecting element (in the first case – the Nile Valley, in the second – the Anatolian Plateau), Syria – both in a geographical and geopolitical sense – lacks a homogeneous physical-geographic connecting element around which it would be possible to prevail over internal micro-fragmentations and resist external influences. On the contrary, individual Syrian geographical micro-entities are closer (or even represent a single entity) with the spaces in surrounding, neighboring states, than they have any mutual connections. The Syrian coast in the northwest of the country, with a chain of mountains and plateaus inhabited by enclaves of Alawites, Druze and Maronites, is a complete area only with its extension – in Lebanon, while it has very few points of contact with the interior of the Syrian deserts. To the east of this area is a plateau along the Orontos River and the Beka Valley, behind which there is a new chain of mountains and plateaus (Anti-Lebanon, Jabal al-Druze and Hawran), and, then, the oasis in which Damascus is situated. “Damascus is located on the road corridor that runs from Mesopotamia, from the east, through the desert to the Lebanese coast (formerly ancient Phoenicia). It strategically controls this direction as well as the direction to the northeast, through the semi-desert and steppe via Homs and Hama to Aleppo, the northernmost extremity of the ‘fertile crescent’, the Mesopotamian curved arc” (Gajić 2015, 170). The northern part of the country, located on the upper part of the Mesopotamian arc with its center of gravity in Aleppo, is actually closer to Anatolia than to other parts of Syria. Both Aleppo and the province of Idlib form an area connecting the Levant with Asia Minor in the north and with Mesopotamia in the east, or – through Homs as a kind of corridor – with the Mediterranean. In other words, the coast of Syria is connected to Lebanon; the region around Aleppo represents the vestibule of Anatolia, while the largest, inner part of the Syrian Desert is much closer to Mesopotamia than to other parts of its country. Therefore, the space of Syria constantly turns towards its external centers of gravity (primarily in Anatolia and Mesopotamia). The only historically confirmed counterbalance to

them is Damascus as a kind of “fortified oasis”. Since ancient times, Damascus has repeatedly asserted itself as an independent core that is, often, able to form alliances and rely on other available external centers of power, thus exerting its influence on peripheral areas so that they do not merge with the surrounding, much more homogeneous and larger geographical and geopolitical areas (Wakim 2012).

Although the modern Syrian state was created by the leading powers of the Entente (France and England) after World War I, the core of its existence and maintenance was the association of the Alawites of the Levantine coast with the merchant classes in Damascus. This alliance was only confirmed for the last fifty years under the firm hand of the Assad family, father Hafez and son Bashar. Namely, as in Lebanon with the Maronites, “the French encouraged a group known as the Nizaris who lived along the harsh Syrian coast, renaming them Alawites, in order to give them religious credibility and to induct them into the Syrian army during the French mandate” (Bhalla 2014), and, then, shaped the territories within their sphere of influence according to their own colonial interests. In 1920, French created the states of Damascus, Aleppo and the Alawite State, and, a year later, the state of Jabal (ruled by the Druze) and the Sanjak of Alexandretta, which was later ceded to Turkey (where it became the modern province of Hatay). The elites in Damascus were the leaders of resistance to French colonial rule. When the French colonial mandate ended in 1943, the gradual unification of Damascus, Aleppo, and the Alawite and Druze states resulted in the formation of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Despite the unifying role of Damascus, many parts of the country remained subject to the influence of neighboring regional powers: “The northeastern part of the country (Al-Hasakah, Al-Qamishli and as far as the Euphrates in the east) is under the influence of Iraq; the Aleppo region has strong millennial ties with Turkish Anatolia. The Alawites on the coast and the inhabitants of the capital Damascus have strongly developed relations with the merchant elite in Beirut, the Druze with Jordan and, through it, further, with the Arab desert tribes” (Gajić 2015, 171). This situation lasted during the reign of the Assad family, until – in drastically changed circumstances due to the “Arab Spring” throughout the Middle East – a rebellion broke out in Syria. Aided by external interference from all historically present

geopolitical actors in the Levant, it grew into a protracted civil war. The conciliatory tone of neighboring Sunni states, with the outbreak of the conflict in Syria soon turned into open siding with the rebels. They were led by Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey. Seeing in their emergence a “Sunni conspiracy” that needed to be thwarted, Tehran immediately aligned itself with the Assad regime as its key strategic ally. The remaining neighbors (such as Lebanon and Iraq) which had similar structural (mostly ethnic-sectarian) problems, were indirectly and only to a certain extent drawn into the growing conflict against their will (Nerguizian 2014). The interest of directly involved external powers, such as Turkey and Saudi Arabia, was obvious: the overthrow of Assad’s government and its takeover by Sunni groups would collapse the Shiite-Maronite alliance and suppress the emerging Iranian hegemony in the Middle East (the so-called “Shiite arc” from Lebanon to Iraq).

The neighboring Sunni states “played” on different factions among the Syrian Sunnis: Qatar helped radical Islamist groups under the ideological influence of the “Muslim Brotherhood”; Riyadh supported both more moderate rebel groups and those close to the Salafists; Turkey initially supported more moderate, non-Islamist rebels such as the Free Syrian Army, especially wary of the autonomist aspirations of the Syrian Kurds (Chiriatti 2012). Later, this country also resorted to instrumentalizing Sunni militias such as HTS and SNA in order to achieve its vital goals and consolidate its influence in both the Islamist and secular camps.

On the other side stood the Assad regime in Damascus in a firm alliance with Tehran, and, in the background, with Russia and China, with their own strategic interests and plans. Russia sided with Assad (it has been directly militarily engaged in civil war since 2015) primarily because of the protection of Russia’s Cold War-era military bases at Syria’s that were its only access to the Mediterranean (the port of Tartus) (Trujillo 2025, 2–3), and China because of its continental plans to build a “New Silk Road” in which relations with Iran play an important segment. In Russia’s perspective, the fall of Syria could eventually lead Iran into a semi-encirclement and open the way for Western powers to influence events in the Caucasus and Central

Asia through Sunni states and their radical “proxies”, which Moscow resolutely opposes (4–5). China, which sees Iran as a long-term ally and the US and its allies as a potential threat also stood in similar strategic positions, but with a less pronounced degree of apprehension.

On the other hand, Israel and the US have identified Iran as the biggest regional threat. That is why the Syrian civil war has been welcomed by them in order to permanently eliminate Iranian threat and improve their strategic positions in this part of the world. From the very beginning of the conflict, both powers (especially the US) have supported rebel groups such as the Free Syrian Army and the Kurds from the Syrian Democratic Forces. All this was done with the aim to help power change in Syria by as moderate forces as possible and not by radical Islamist forces with an anti-Western (including anti-Israel) orientation, because, in this way, one dangerous opponent would only be replaced by another, potentially even more dangerous one. Precisely for these reasons, with intelligence support to the rebel advance towards Damascus, the Israeli Armed Forces (IDF) simultaneously intensified their military operations in Syria. The Israeli Air Force carried out over 480 combat missions that practically wiped out Assad’s remaining arsenal of weapons and warplanes deployed at airports and depots throughout Syrian territory, all with the aim of disabling all military potential before it fell into the hands of the new masters of the situation on the ground. Also, on the day of the fall of the Assad regime, Israeli troops began an invasion of the southern part of Syria which rests on the Golan Heights, creating a new occupied “buffer zone” on the slopes of Mount Hebron, within easy reach of Damascus (Al Jazeera 2024). During the advance into southern Syria, the Israelis further destroyed all local military facilities, turning the dominant Druze minority community into their local “proxies” to whom they granted the construction of the newly proclaimed autonomy. This action by Israel has drawn condemnation for violating international law and Syria’s sovereignty from both the new authorities in Damascus and the UN. The authorities in Tel Aviv have largely ignored this, justifying the incursion into the territory of a neighboring state as a necessary act aimed at protecting their own security.

GEOPOLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF THE NEWLY ESTABLISHED SITUATION

The key role in filling the Syrian “power vacuum” created by the fall of Assad was played by HTS, which, with the help of the SNA, carried out a military offensive that turned the tide of the civil war. These are only partially reformed Islamist military formations¹ that emerged in 2017 from former members of the Al Nusra Front, a local offshoot of Al Qaeda. After the outbreak of the war in Syria, the Al Nusra Front ruled most of the Idlib province with a strictly Islamist policy, completely in line with its like-minded people such as Al Zawahiri and Bin Laden. “The leaders of the ultra-radical organization saw an opportunity to exploit Sunni Muslims to continue their global jihadist revolution that had fallen into a dead end. The outbreak of the “Arab Spring” in 2011 would give Al Qaeda a new opportunity. Al Nusra established itself as one of the most organized and effective opposition groups to the government of Bashar al-Assad. Al Nusra soldiers were disciplined and skilled, and they captured important cities and villages. Al Nusra operated from its earliest days under the leadership of the current leader of HTS, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani. He built a reputation as a charismatic leader with military and ideological authority. Although the connection with Al Qaeda was initially an advantage, over the years it turned out to be the main problem why the organization could not progress” (Šerić 2025). Because of all this, in the summer of 2016, Jolani announced the severance of relations with Al Qaeda and renamed Al Nusra Front first to Jabhat Fatah Al Sham, and later, after a number of other Islamist groups joined, to Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS). The reasons for the change were primarily pragmatic, with the aim of eliminating the negative consequences of the connection with Al Qaeda that repelled wider classes of Syrian Sunnis and prevented the improvement of the international reputation of this armed formation. Also, the change of name signaled the adaptation of Sunni radicalism to the local Syrian context, i.e. its nationalization and distancing from global Islamism. The strategic goal was to create a broader Sunni military movement that

¹ On the relationship between Islam and Islamism, see more (Lišanin 2014).

would effectively control first the entire province of Idlib, and, then, the wider Syrian territories. “However, the technical break with Al Qaeda did not mean a real break with the ideology of radical Islamism. In secret, the newly branded Al Nusra would continue to maintain secret ties with Al Qaeda as well as strategic and operational cooperation. Many key leaders and operatives retained their extremist views, which they cosmetically adjusted to the reality on the ground. These were tactical, not strategic changes” (Šerić 2025). It was precisely on the basis of this knowledge that the Americans put HTS on the list of terrorist organizations in 2018 (followed by the governments of most Western countries), from which, opportunely, it was removed after the events in December 2024, after HTS had taken control of most of Syria.²

In ideological terms, HTS in addition to its tactically motivated inclusiveness for Sunnis who are not familiar with Islamism – covertly but undoubtedly remained loyal to its Salafist ideology of returning to “pure Islam” and armed struggle as a legitimate path to overthrowing non-Islamic social orders and establishing orthodox authority. In political terms, HTS was loyal to the alternative government of the Syrian opposition, the so-called “Syrian Salvation Government” on whose behalf it acted, in addition to the province of Idlib, in the provinces of Aleppo, Hama, Daraa and Damascus. During its rule in the province of Idlib, HTS adhered to the application of a rigidly interpreted Sharia law in all segments of society, especially with regard to the rights of women and religious minorities. Repression of the civilian population, confiscation of property and executions of militants of rival armed forces characterize the rule of the HTS (Šerić 2025). This was particularly pronounced after the uprising of a part of the population in the province of Idlib in early 2024, largely due to the previous high level of repression and misrule (Borgoñoz Moya 2025). Despite a high degree of internal rigidity, the HTS is externally characterized by a pronounced pragmatism, both in its proclaimed efforts to resist external influences to interfere in the Syrian civil war and in its simultaneous rapprochement with Turkey (Borgoñoz Moya

² HTS was officially removed from the list of terrorist organizations in the USA on July 7, 2025, and in the UK on October 21, 2025. The UN Security Council did the same on November 6, which was followed by EU member states at the end of 2025 (Zelina 2025).

2025) and the armed groups that are under Turkey's direct control or predominant influence.

The leading military formation of this type is the SNA. It is a coalition of opposition fighters, defectors from the Assad camp and local warlords, armed and financed by Turkey and with extensive assistance from regular Turkish troops in the Turkish-Syrian border areas. The SNA has been the main armed force in the fighting in northern Syria against both Assad loyalists and Kurdish guerrillas, Turkey's main opponents. Despite its fragmented structure and lack of ideological unity, the SNA has provided the rebels with essential support in terms of manpower and logistics.

Then, there is the Druze militia, a regional paramilitary formation that has sporadically fought against the regular Syrian army on the southern operational front. Largely neutral during most of the civil war, Druze militia protected its own ethnic areas, prevented the recruitment of its own tribesmen into Assad's troops and provided supplies to its opponents. In the crucial days of early December 2024, it made a breakthrough towards Suwadah (Reuters 2024a).

In addition to them, there are, of course, the Kurdish armed forces, better known as the SDF. They represent a coalition of Kurdish and Arab militias in the northeast of the country that not only successfully resisted Assad's reintegration of this part of Syria into a single political space, but also, simultaneously, waged fierce clashes with Turkish regular troops and the SNA. The Kurdish forces were the main ally of the US in the fight against ISIL (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) during the second decade of the 21st century. The main goal of the Kurds in Syria is to maintain autonomous rule over the areas they control in the style of the "Erbil autonomy" that has existed in Iraqi Kurdistan for a long time, and which would be recognized by the central government in Damascus. Since the Kurdish forces are strongly influenced by the PKK (Kurdish Workers' Party) as a separatist force in neighboring Turkey (where they are considered a terrorist group), Ankara and the SNA see the SDF as their main opponent in Syria.

During the opposition's final offensive on Damascus, the Kurds coordinated their war effort against Assad with HTS and its leader, Jolani al-Sharaa, they agreed to mutual tolerance, recognizing HTS authority over all of Syria, but not giving up the degree of self-

government they had achieved. On March 10, 2025, the SDF signed an agreement with the new interim government in Damascus to participate in joint state institutions. This was preceded by a series of clashes with pro-Turkish armed factions. Namely, the SNA, shortly after the fall of Assad, organized an offensive against Kurdish territories that led to the capture of Manbij (Reuters 2024b) on December 11. Through the mediation of the transitional and then the interim government led by Muhammad Al-Bashir and the new President of Syria, Jolani al-Sharaa (elected on this position on January 25, 2025), the conflicts in the northeast Syria were frozen (Reuters 2025) during 2025, only to flare up again at the turn of 2026. An offensive by government forces supported by the SNA and special units of the Turkish army followed. It ended in a heavy defeat of the Kurdish forces and the loss of a large part of the territory they had previously controlled.

Other clashes took place between the remaining players of Syria's protracted conflict: first, in late February and early April 2025, Druze militias clashed with regular Syrian military troops around the Suwada governorate. It all ended with a negotiated ceasefire between Damascus and the Druze (Campa et al. 2025). The Druze fighting with the Bedouins, however, served as a pretext for a new intervention by government troops in the Suwada area in July 2025. This resulted in the deaths of a large number of Druze civilians. Israeli troops took new "proxy" under their protection and carried out airstrikes on Syrian tanks in this area. Finally, in retaliation, the IDF bombed government buildings in Damascus itself, until the latter gave up trying anything in the Druze-controlled areas (Holmes 2025).

In the coastal belt of Syria, near Latakia and along the Syrian-Lebanese border, frequent clashes began to break out during the spring between the remnants of Assad loyalists (the Syrian Popular Resistance) and government troops. Repression against Alawites by the Sunni majority, including mass atrocities, has dramatically increased. Since the beginning of the year, the reorganisation of once elite Syrian units such as the "Tiger Forces" under the command of al-Hassan (*Suheil Salman al-Hassan*), a hardened Special Forces commander once loyal to Bashar al-Assad has been increasingly visible in the areas inhabited by Alawites. These troops, after the fall of the regime, went underground and regrouped (like the Republican Guard after the fall of

Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003). They maintain ties with their foreign war allies, Russia and Iran, waiting for favorable circumstances to intensify their actions (Lopez de Miguel 2025, 157–158).

Overall, the situation for the new authorities in Syria – although armed conflicts have become less frequent – is far from stable. Three possible directions of a new escalation of the war remain open: 1) escalation between the Sunni central government and the remaining Assad loyalists in the areas inhabited by Alawites and Christians (the coast of Syria); 2) escalation between the Sunni central government and the Druze (supported by the Israelis) in the south of the country; and 3) a new continuation of the conflict between the Sunni central government and its pro-Turkish allies and Turkey with the Kurds in the northeast of the country (ACAPS 2025).

GEOPOLITICAL POSITIONS OF EXTERNAL ACTORS IN NEWLY EMERGING CIRCUMSTANCES

The December regime change in Damascus directly caused a change in the balance of power at the Syrian geopolitical crossroads. A temporary “power vacuum” was created in which, for the time being, the opposition forces supported by external actors with different interest projections gained the upper hand. All of this will cause a whole series of consequences for the geopolitical situation in the entire Levant and the Middle East as well as in other regions of the world. What is important to note is that the situation in Syria remains very volatile and unstable, and that the competition between external and internal actors continues.

Assad’s downfall hit Iran hardest: it was a strategic defeat and the push of Iranian influence from the Levant back towards Mesopotamia (Borgoñoz Moya 2025). The “Shiite arc” connecting Lebanon (and Iran’s ally Hezbollah) with Iran via Iraq and Syria was, for the time being, severed. Hezbollah suffered significant losses in a clash with the Israeli army in 2024; Iran’s minority allies in Syria were driven from power, hidden, illegal, and subjected to repression. Iraq, with its Shiite majority, is now the last area of Iran’s external defense against a hostile coalition of Westerners, Israelis and Sunni monarchies. Although Tehran’s relations with Assad have deteriorated in recent years due

to his attempts to reach out to the Sunni Gulf states, Iran certainly did not need to lose an increasingly unreliable ally. His downfall in Syria allowed the country's airspace to serve as a staging ground for Israeli airstrikes in the short-lived Iran-Israel conflict of the Twelve-Day War (June 13–24, 2025). As a result, Iran will be forced to increasingly rely on non-state actors throughout the Middle East. This will further complicate the already bad relations between countries throughout the region.

Russia is another major power that, although to a much lesser extent than Iran, is at a loss due to the change of government in Syria. Russia has recently been dissatisfied with Assad's cooperation after the Russians prevented his fall in 2015 with its direct military influence, helped him defeat ISIS and regain control over most of the country (Trujillo 2025). However, for Russia, Syria (especially after the start of the war in Ukraine) is of lesser importance: estimates that Russia's reputation in this part of the world will not drastically decline due to the fall of Assad are not unfounded, just as the threat of Islamist spillover to Russia is significantly lower than a decade ago, especially in the context that relations between Moscow and Ankara have improved drastically in the meantime.

Russia is primarily interested in preserving its Mediterranean military bases in Tartus and Hmeimim, so it is trying to come to an agreement with the new masters of the situation in Damascus on this issue (Borgoñoz Moya 2025). For now, they are showing good will not to spoil relations with Russia because, in the long term, their prospects are uncertain enough that they do not need to have another great power against them that could, otherwise, be on good terms with Damascus. In the event that they are pushed off the Syrian coast, the Russians have an alternative in Libya (with their ally general Haftar) from where they can project their influence throughout the Mediterranean, the Middle East and, most importantly, the Sahel and Sub-Saharan Africa. However, the current situation in Syria weakens Russian plans related to supporting Iran in the face of threats from the West.

The most striking geopolitical winner from the change of power in Syria is Turkey (Borgoñoz Moya 2025). It has systematically supported the opposition military groups that took power in Damascus and overthrew Assad who was deeply hated by Ankara. However,

the Syrian situation for Turkey is far from desirable: HTS, the main faction of the current government, is not under direct Turkish control but only a tactical ally ideologically distant from Turkey and closer to Qatar and the Saudis. Turkey's real "proxies" are those from the SNA. However, members of SNA are rooted only in the north of the country and marginal among the majority Sunni population. Problems with the Kurds from the SDF in the northeast of the country, although the military operations after the thawing of the conflict bore fruit, remain because the USA and Israel are, to some extent, behind the Kurds. The fall of the Assad regime left Syria unstable and fragmented in the long term, with *de facto* Kurdish autonomy established, which the authorities in Damascus initially tolerated but which Turkey fiercely opposes.

The Gulf states, primarily Qatar and Saudi Arabia, supported the opposition forces in overthrowing Assad in order to reduce Iranian influence in the region. The power-grabbing of HTS led by Al-Sharaa Jolani as the new president of Syria was seen in these countries as a great success that opens up new opportunities for cooperation and rapprochement between Arab Sunnis (Hassan 2025, 17–18). However, the extremist traits of both the new authorities and their opponents create fears of further developments. If the newly established order collapses and the Syrian state again breaks up into several regions with many militant factions, including various Islamist groups, the Gulf States could find themselves in a situation where they lose all influence in this area. In such a development of events, these states would be forced to change their geostrategic position and foreign policy goals, probably trying to build new relationships with their main regional rivals – Turkey and Iran.

Israel is also strategic winner because of the regime change in Damascus. "The Shiite arc" has been cut; the military capabilities of the Syrian army have been crippled for many years by precision bombing; by occupying southern Syria, as far as Hebron, and especially by turning the Druze into its "proxies" (Borgoñoz Moya 2025), Damascus has been in Israeli's sight. However, the long-term prospects for Israel are not bright at all: Bashar's regime, Alawite-Shiite, was non-extremist; the new regime is made up of Islamist radicals dressed in secular clothes with Turkey behind them. In the long term, one

major hostile power, Iran, may be replaced by another, Turkey, equally hostile to Israel and sympathetic to Hamas and the Palestinians. All of this is driving Israel to work to further destabilize the situation and foster territorial fragmentation in the country, primarily by supporting minorities such as the Kurds and Druze. This, however, is increasingly turning Israelis against the Sunni majority and its Turkish patrons.

Throughout the civil war, the USA sided with opposition groups in their attempt to overthrow Bashar al-Assad, primarily with the Kurds from the SDF who were key US allies in the fight against various Islamist radicals, especially those from ISIS. Although Washington sees the fall of Assad as its success, there is also a clear awareness that the new circumstances complicate the achievement of further strategic goals in the region (Borgoñoz Moya 2025). Only rhetorically cooperative, “skillful” radicals with whom US had been at war until recently are in power; the Turkish ally from NATO is waiting for an opportunity to deal with the Kurds and is not afraid of a new, ultimate confrontation (directly or through “proxies”) with the Americans on Syrian soil; the US main ally, Israel, is pursuing an excessively belligerent policy that could easily backfire on the Americans throughout the Middle East; the problems with the “Iranian arch” cut off in Syria are far from resolved.

There is also a whole range of non-state, mostly paramilitary actors: ISIS (Bajagić 2014), although it has suffered a heavy defeat, is slowly rearing its head again in the Levant and Mesopotamia (Al Jazeera 2025). With two-three thousand active fighters and around nine thousand of them detained, ISIS re-established its cells in the newly emerging political fragmentation and began a series of activities in the areas where it was once strongest, in the regions around Raqqa, Dar al-Zor and Hasakah. During the year before the fall of the Assad regime, the terrorist attacks (around 700 of them) of this group tripled compared to the previous period. Although ISIS’s insurgent activities are still “low-intensity”, they are deadly and pose a serious threat to the new regime in Damascus, especially if they manage to free their comrades from the prison camps in Al-Hol and Roy, thereby strengthening the number of their fighting formations (Sthuni 2025).

HTS, enthroned in power in Damascus, still maintains barely concealed ties with Al Qaeda and, despite its inclusive rhetoric, has

in its leadership people who dream of restoring an Islamist Caliphate. Their main opponents until yesterday, the Kurdish militias from the SDF do not give up their ambitions to legalize the autonomy created on the ground, for which they encounter bitter resistance from both the new authorities in Damascus and Turkey itself. However, the patronage of the US and Israel has limited the continuation of hostilities and conflicts. The possibility of legalizing territorial autonomy into a kind of Kurdish “state within a state” is also of concern to neighboring Iraq, where the Kurds already have a won autonomous status, the so-called “Kurdish Regional Government” that could move towards deepening autonomy towards the creation of a Kurdish independent state with the prospect of joining Syrian and Turkish Kurds, the largest ethnic minorities in those states.

INSTEAD OF A CONCLUSION: WHAT ARE THE LONG-TERM GEOPOLITICAL TRENDS IN POST-ASAD SYRIA?

The change of power in Syria occurred primarily due to the weakening of the former regime because of a whole series of causes such as: a stalemate on the battlefield, fatigue and deep disillusionment of the population with the regime, economic collapse and corruption, Bashar al-Assad’s inflexibility in finding a compromise solution with most of the other warring factions, turning his back and betraying his key allies, and the Alawites’ unwillingness – after disproportionately high casualties – to continue dying so that the regime could conquer areas that they did not care about at all. The strengthening of the war antagonists and their alliance, on the other hand, was a consequence of the coincidence of interests of external players (Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia and the USA). This created a synergy effect only in their plans to overthrow the regime in Damascus: after Assad’s fall their interests, to a greater or lesser extent, directly contradict each other. To a certain extent, the fall of Assad is due to a change in the balance of power between external forces, that is the reduction in the power of his allies (Hezbollah in Lebanon) or a reduction of interests (of Russia, which turned its priority to Ukraine and neglected the Middle East) or both

interest and power (of Iran, which had less and less desire to decisively defend a regime that had proven unreliable and treacherous).

Therefore, the current circumstances and their prospects can hardly lead to any further significant change in the balance of power in the region, especially outside of the Levant. Although Iran has lost the most among regional powers and Turkey and Israel have gained the most, neither side has achieved such an advantage nor are the others so harmed that it would fundamentally change the regional balance of power (the conflict between Israel and Iran in June 2025 confirms that). The leading great powers – the USA, Russia and China – although they have their interests in the Levant and the Middle East, in the coming period see their main priorities in other world regions; they, at least until the end of 2025, don't want to get deeply involved in direct competition in order to bring the advantage to any of the "middle" powers in the region.

By surrendering power to "adapted" Islamists from HTS in coalition with their "proxies" does not promise that their regime will be loyal to anyone in the long run, nor more stable and long-lasting. Turkey can count only on the SNA as its real allies and not on Jolani (*Abu Mohammed al-Jolani*) and HTS. The Americans can only partially count on the Kurds, and the Israelis on the Druze. The Alawites are on the defensive, regrouping and looking at how and with whose help to preserve those areas of Syria which are important to them. Russia is ready, with extreme pragmatism, to improve relations with any actor that allows it to have a presence in the bases in the Mediterranean. Russia does not care much about its regional reputation, because, in its global scale, it is mostly gained and lost in Ukraine, and the minor decline in its prestige in the region due to a downfall of unreliable ally is, from the Kremlin's point of view, bearable and repairable.

Seen from a broader perspective, Jolani and HTS represent only a fragile coalition of radicals who made a new deal with the Damascus elite at a time when the latter, realizing Assad's exhaustion, reached out for a replacement. However, the new government's reach is even more limited than Assad's: it is unable to fully reintegrate the Kurdish part of the Syrian territories (as Turkey and its "proxy" players would like); it has completely lost control of the south of the country

occupied by the Israelis (granting its Druze “proxies” on the ground *de facto* independence while keeping Damascus in its sight); apart from reprisals, they are unable to permanently pacify the Alawite coastal areas of Syria.

In the medium term, after the situation is reconciled while maintaining the *status quo*, further destabilization of Syria is possible with the outbreak of new conflicts on the Sunni-Alawite, Sunni-Druze and Sunni-Kurdish lines. This would further drag all the previous winners of the Syrian geopolitical upheaval, with the exception of Israel (which strives for a permanent weakening and instability of the situation in Syria, according to the principle of “the worse – the better”) into a new round of violence in the territory of this country – with no prospect of anyone becoming the final winner that can significantly change the situation on the ground. Syria is now turned into country divided into more or less autonomous Kurdish region (under American patronage), a *de facto* independent Druze region (under direct Israeli occupation) and a largest but confusing, factionally divided area inhabited by Arab Sunnis. If, in such a situation, the Alawites along the coast were to find allies strong enough to raise their heads once again – Syria would *de facto* break up into its constituent micro-geographical parts: the coastal Alawite region, the Kurdish region, the Druze region, the region around Aleppo and the region around Damascus.

The regional strengthening of neo-Ottoman Turkey is only partial and is more a consequence of a combination of circumstances than a solid reality: Turkey is already deeply involved in a long-term sectarian war in the Levant from which it is difficult to get out. In the long term, it could easily lead to a conflict with the USA and Israel. Such a development would permanently weaken Turkish power and make it incapable of becoming more significantly militarily and politically involved in other geopolitical regions that are also important to Ankara (the Caucasus, Central Asia, the Balkans). This does not mean that Turkey carried away by the strengthening of its positions in the Levant cannot set off to realize its plans in other areas; but this will be possible mostly through diplomatic and economic-political activities, because its military center of gravity will be anchored along its southern borders, linked to the Kurdish issue, for a long time.

As for Iran, its regional weakening is evident, but not irreparable in the long term. In its desire to reconnect the “Shiite arc”, at least in part, Tehran will have to play a patient game, rely on non-state actors and assess whether it is better for it to support the Alawites in creating their own independent state than to try to influence the central government in Damascus which has proven to be fragile and prone to collapse. The Gulf monarchies, the weakest of the external players, can only count on the growth of their prestige among the Sunnis in the Levant and little more than that; instead of exalting themselves, they would be better off preparing for the disappointment that they will experience from their only superficially “washed” offspring who is gaining its first serious experience in international relations real-politics.

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ГЕОПОЛИТИЧКЕ ПОСЛЕДИЦЕ БАШАР АЛ АСАДОВОГ ПАДА У СИРИЈИ**

Резиме

Следећи теоријски оквир класичне геополитичке анализе, рад пружа геополитички преглед промене власти у Сирији у завршници тамошњег дугогодишњег грађанског рата, као и ток војних операције те приказ непосредно успостављеног новог стања на терену. У уводном делу рада објашњавају се основне слабости режима Башара Ал Асада, као и главни погрешни потези који су проузроковали његов крах у периоду од само једанаест дана. Други сегмент рада објашњава геополитички значај Сирије у историјској перспективи указујући на његове константе у оквиру Леванта као међупростора на Блиском истоку смештеног између области које, у различитим историјским епохама, заузимају регионалне геополитичке силе. На овај начин се указује на сличност некадашњих са садашњим приликама. Средњи део рада бави се геополитичким димензијама новоуспостављеног стања, идеолошко-политичком позадином ХТС, владајуће војне фракције у новој, сунитској влади у Дамаску, као и њеним односом са другим фракцијама и њиховим упориштима на просторима појединих регија унутар Сирије. Трећи део рада бави се утицајем спољних великих и регионалних сила на прилике у савременој Сирији и њиховим интересним пројекцијама које се међусобно у многе сукобљавају. Завршни део рада бави се прогностичком проценом даљих геополитичких преспектива пос-асадовске Сирије узимајући у обзир постојеће антагонизме и различите интересе како сиријских војних и ентитичких формација тако и спољних сила.

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** Рад је настао у оквиру научно-истраживачке делатности Института за европске студије у Београду, коју финансира Министарство за науку и иновације.

Кључне речи: пад Башар Ал Асада, сиријски грађански рат, Левант, геополитика, интереси великих сила на Блиском истоку.

* This paper was received on January 29, 2026, and accepted for publication at the Editorial Board meeting on February 27, 2026.

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**ACTIVITIES OF PARASECURITY
STRUCTURES AND FOREIGN
FACTORS IN KOSOVO AND METOHİJA
WITHIN THE HYBRID WAR AGAINST
THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA*****

(Translation in *Extenso*)

Abstract

This paper examines a broader context of the expressed interests of certain foreign factors in contemporary security circumstances, characterised by the presence of hybrid threats, aiming to observe the position and relevance of the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija (AP of Kosovo and Metohija) within the security agenda of these forces. The purpose of the analysis is the improvement of the methodological approach to a more objective perception and strategic comprehension of the activities and intentions, as well as

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the accentuation of the significance attributed by the great powers to that territory within the context of other areas and issues where their interests are confronted. The paper analyzes the interests of the United States (US) as the main foreign policy actor in KiM, as well as the interests of certain great and regional powers with a longer presence in the Balkan region, such as the Russian Federation (RF), the Federal Republic of Germany, the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland (UK), and the Republic of Turkey. In order to pursue their own interests and project influence, foreign factors have been undertaking a whole array of diverse measures and activities that are in our contemporary analyses in the field of defence and security often called hybrid warfare, therefore this paper provides a brief review of the hybrid warfare concept through the evaluation of prominent questions and responses, graded as relevant to the decision-making authorities on the strategic level, along with the description of the specific hybrid activities performed by certain para-security structures¹ and foreign factors in the case of the AP of Kosovo and Metohia.

Keywords: hybrid warfare, para-security structures, foreign factor, NATO, Kosovo and Metohija.

INTRODUCTION

Contemplating the historical prism, the crisis in the Kosovo and Metohija part of Serbia has been determined by the geopolitical interests of regional and global powers, historic events and ethnographic changes, in which constantly and with varying intensity, the Albanian and Serbian nations are confronting and denying the other party the right to the territory. The 1999 NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) aggression against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and subsequent proclamation of the “Kosovo” independence in 2008, prompted and encouraged the Albanian political elites, in line with the “Prizren League” declaration from 1878, to undertake more intensified measures to establish “Great Albania”, in which, according to the

¹ The authors use this term to refer to: By para-security structures in Kosovo and Metohija, the authors primarily mean the police forces and security forces of the so-called “Republic of Kosovo”.

Albanian strategic culture, the dominant principle of fascist ideology would be “one state, one language, one nation, one religion”. That such an ideology is being implemented in Kosovo and Metohija is indicated by a number of facts, which are reflected in the daily undertaking of various forms of violence against the Serbian and other, non-Albanian population, as well as their property, cultural and religious objects, which leads to a change in the national structure and the systematic destruction of Serbian cultural heritage.

From the point of view of the current Kosovo and Metohija crisis, within the frame of the most prevailing demonstration of force aimed at reinforcing the Albanian and minimising the Serbian factor in that territory, at the moment the Republic of Turkey and Great Britain stand out. This synergy of the acting instruments of the “Kosovo” power and international powers, both internally and internationally, indicates that in the Province, just like towards the Republic of Serbia, hybrid activities are being conducted with the purpose of creating the conditions for setting up the full independence of the so-called Kosovo. The goal of this paper is to analyse the engagement of para-security structures and foreign factors in Kosovo and Metohija in the hybrid war against the Republic of Serbia.

The main hypothesis of this work is that para-security structures and foreign factors in Kosovo and Metohija tend to take avail of the current geopolitical momentum conditioned by the security situation in the Ukraine and by bearing out the hybrid activities in the Province, to coerce the Republic of Serbia to act against its own national interests. The relevance of this paper is reflected in the sublimation of the registered activities within the hybrid war, para-security structures and foreign factors in Kosovo and Metohija, on the basis of which their methodology of execution, aims and interests could be more precisely defined. This paper presents a kind of a theoretical research, data sources are the scientific-theoretical works of national and foreign experts, statistical data, legal regulations and other documents such as doctrines, programmes, official Internet presentations, current events etc.

INTERESTS OF FOREIGN FACTORS IN THE TERRITORY OF THE AUTONOMOUS PROVINCE OF KOSOVO AND METOHİJA

Kosovo and Metohija, not Tsargrad, is the strategic key to the Balkans and the one who succeeds in attaining the dominance over those territories has also secured the supremacy over the Balkans.

Austrian general Ludwig von Beck
(Konatar 2016, 418).

It is of vital significance for the understanding the current situation in the AP of Kosovo and Metohija and for possible further predicting the course of events to analyse geopolitical interests of the foreign factors that have shaped up the events in that region of the Republic of Serbia since 1999, when the NATO committed the aggression under the excuse of carrying out a humanitarian intervention. This period was marked not only by the change of the geopolitical landscape of the Balkans, but also by the introduction of the temporary institutions in Priština, which have become the proponents of a complicated system of hybrid activities directed against the Republic of Serbia and its national interests. It took time for the political elite to speak out in a credible manner about the numerous consequences of NATO aggression, the most devastating of which is the occupation of Kosovo and Metohija as a basic identity part of our state territory (Despotović 2017).

The COVID 19 epidemic, as well as the special military operation (SMO) in the Ukraine,² discontinued the energy supply from the RF for some European countries. They also awakened the “dormant” NATO members, warning them that, in terms of security, no country can rely only on its alliance membership, but it is vital to strengthen their own national capacities of power and to undertake those

² “The war in Ukraine caused a deterioration in Serbias geopolitical position, which was exploited in the process of aggravating relations and escalating the conflict between Belgrade and Priština, in order to establish firm political and security control over the territory and the local Serbian population by the so-called ‘Republic of Kosovo’ and gradually abolishing the remaining elements of Serbian institutions in northern Kosovo and Metohija. At the same time, the ‘stabilization’ of the situation in Kosovo and Metohija significantly reduces Russias ability to use the ‘Kosovo precedent’ to justify military intervention in Ukraine” (Beriša and Barišić 2025).

geopolitical moves primarily in congruence with their national interests. Related to this, a question is imposed about what those interests are, and consequently about the activities of the foreign factors in the AP of Kosovo and Metohija, regarding their constant tendencies to be present and impactful in that territory?

Due to its geopolitical position and potential, previously prepared numerous conflict zones³ by the factors from abroad, the Republic of Serbia is for the time being in the geopolitical knot, in which, apart from the American, the conflicting interests of the other foreign policy agents are interwoven. Numerous geopolitical constraints, an unfriendly and insufficiently reliable environment, the danger of further border rearrangements, transnational threats, as well as the absence of internal consensus are only part of the strategic challenges that exert very strong limiting effects on the process of revitalizing the territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia (Stojanović and Blagojević 2017).

Considering that the USA still is the main geopolitical global agent, with the tendency to stay that way, one may conclude that the Atlantistic (Anglosaxon) geopolitical theories, promoted by Alfred Mahan, Halford Mackinder and Nicholas Spykman, still maintain to be relevant and that the American hegemony will not stop until the RF is suppressed to the inland of the Euro-Asian continent and its reaching the “warm”, Mediterranean sea is prevented. On the other hand, the activities of the USA demonstrate that they are at any cost inclined to weaken and disunite Europe, for they are afraid of its possible alliance with the RF (the union of “the mightiest – French diplomacy, German economy, Russian energy supplies and natural wealth”) (Despotović and Glišin 2023, 15–35).

The Federal Republic of Germany views the AP of Kosovo and Metohija as part of a mosaic in the pursuit of its ambition, which, in accordance with Karl Haushofer’s geopolitical theory of “Central European continentalism” (Despotović and Glišin 2023, 35–56), seeks to establish control and access to the Baltic, the Danube and the Black Sea. Control of the AP of Kosovo and Metohija would provide a connection with the Middle East and the Caucasus and open up alternative sources of supply of energy and mineral resources,

³ Apart from the AP of Kosovo and Metohija, the recognised potential crisis hotspots are: the south of Serbia, eastern parts of the Republic of Serbia inhabited by the Bulgarian national minority, Raška region and the AP of Vojvodina.

which are currently limited due to sanctions imposed by the Russian Federation. It is precisely for the above reasons that the traditional allies of the Federal Republic of Germany in the Western Balkans are the Albanian and Bosniak nationalist elites, with the Islamic factor in that area being developed through two projects, Greater Albania and the “Green Transversal”.

On the other hand, in accordance with the theories of their geopoliticians (Nikolić 2019), the RF is thought to crave to rely on the Orthodox Church and traditional friendly relations with the Balkanic states to secure its access to the “warm” seas (Adriatic, Ionian and Black Sea) as one of the chief prerequisites to spread and solidify the clout and influence in Europe and other continents. By controlling the Balkan Peninsula, the RF creates the conditions for exerting influence on individual European countries, placing them in a position of dependence on its energy resources, which positively affects the development of its economy and foreign policy position in international relations. The secondary goal, yet not less substantial is the emphasis on being the guardian of the Orthodox religion and protector of their traditional allies, which ultimately bears the importance in foreign policy and indirect role in its reputation worldwide.

In line with the statements by Ahmet Davutoglu (*Ahmet Davutoğlu*) and Rejep Tajip Erdogan (*Recep Tayyip Erdoğan*), issued containing the proclaimed aims of neo-Ottomanism (Davutoglu 2014) and islamisation, even Pan-Islamism of the Balkans, the desire of the Republic of Turkey has been expressed in the attempt to reestablish the borderlines of the Ottoman Empire in that territory, by which they would attain the epithet of the influential regional power and the protector of the Islamic believers globally, especially in Europe. The expansion of the Turkish influence in the Balkans, thus in the AP of Kosovo and Metohija too, unambiguously points out that the Republic of Turkey, for its favours of being the “loyal” NATO member and the welcome defender (ally) of the American interests. More specifically, by strengthening the Islamic factor, Turkey is trying to prevent the expansion of German and Russian influence in the Balkans.

Similar to the Republic of Turkey, Great Britain, the USA’s most faithful ally, got its role, as always prior to great world crises and wars, to activate its presence in the territory of the Western Balkans, especially in the Republic of Serbia, aiming there to sustain the strategy

of “balance of powers”.⁴ Under those circumstances, the British long to reinforce the Albanian factor via the project of the Great Albania, i.e. independent “Kosovo”, so as to shut down the realisation of not only the Serbian national interests, for example the possible uniting of the Republic of Serbia, the Republic of Montenegro and Republika Srpska, but also the interests of the FR Germany and the RF. In connection with that, we are neither to forget the aspirations of Great Britain to hinder the alliance of the Kingdom of Yugoslavia with the German Reich immediately before the Second World War nor the later initiative to form the Federal People’s Republic of Yugoslavia, whose background was to suppress the Russian influence and to prevent the expansion of the USSR into that region.

Observed from the aspect of interestedness of the foreign political agents in the territory of the AP KiM, aiming to accomplish directly or indirectly their national interests, the Republic of Turkey and Great Britain stand out as the two traditional allies in the Western Balkans. The specificity of their role in the current crisis in AP KiM, in addition to compatible geopolitical interests, is reflected in their active engagement in terms of rounding off the sovereignty of the so-called “Republic of Kosovo”, which was not the case with the European Union, which at least formally, at the beginning of the negotiations between Belgrade and Priština, opted for a neutral position regarding the future status of the southern Serbian province. In more detail, the mentioned countries, in addition to participating in the NATO international mission in AP of Kosovo and Metohija, as part of the KFOR forces, actively participated in the development of the capabilities of the para-security structures of the so-called “Republic of Kosovo” and the implementation of hybrid activities, designed and directed towards achieving the full independence and sovereignty of this entity.⁵

⁴ Strategy employed by the USSR and the USA during the Cold War period.

⁵ NATO has been leading a peace-support operation in Kosovo – the Kosovo Force (KFOR) – since June 1999, in support of broader international efforts to build peace and stability in the area. What does it do and more in the text (NATO 2026).

CONCEPTUAL DETERMINATION AND CHARACTERISTICS OF HYBRID WARFARE

Hybrid warfare⁶ is relatively a new term coined to encompass and cast stress on all the characteristics and particularities of modern warfare. Owing to its complexity and polysemic character, experts and scientists have not yet agreed on a single definition of this term. Initially, hybrid warfare referred to the combined implementation of conventional military capabilities and special forces, “irregular activities”, acts of terrorism and criminal activities. In the combined implementation of such diverse forms, a synergetic effect was expected, both in physical and psychological conflict domains. Later on, the perception of hybrid warfare was extended to all the other forms, means and ways of endangering security.⁷ A large part of the existing literature cites state bodies, primarily from the security and military sectors, but also foreign affairs, as the main carriers of hybrid warfare, while individual non-state actors may be engaged, most often in the role of “proxy” actors (Nikolić 2019, 291).

Potential objects of hybrid action can be international organizations, states, individual state bodies and institutions, critical infrastructure, significant for the security and smooth functioning of the state and society. In addition, the object of hybrid war can also be certain religious, ethnic, national and political groups within a state, as well as terrorist and rebel forces. Also, the targets of hybrid threats can be important national, social and cultural values of the state and society that can be the subject of alienation, malicious and false interpretations. The choice of target depends on the ultimate desired state that is wanted to be achieved, existing limitations, available forces, means and methods, as well as the characteristics and current state of the state or interest group that is the object of hybrid war (Nikolić 2019, 291).

⁶ Hybrid warfare presents a military strategy theory that was first proposed by Frank Hoffman (Hoffman 2007).

⁷ “The hybrid war concept includes diverse meanings, starting with cyber war, war of information, various scripts of asymmetrical conflicts of low intensity, covering global terrorism, piracy, illegal immigration, corruption, ethnic and religious confrontations, transnational organised crime and systemic economic state break-down with the intention to produce demographic changes and implement weapons of mass destruction” (Rančić and Beriša 2018, 258).

Within the wide range of methods in hybrid warfare, the most applicable methods are: “[...] disruption, prevention, obstruction, causing damage, conditioning, slowing down, deception and the like”, whereby various diplomatic, political, military, economic, energy, financial, technological, and informational instruments of power are applied. To apply the corresponding instruments, the carriers of hybrid activities engage specialists with various professional and expert skills, from scientists, experts, artists to members of terrorist groups and criminal organizations, while trying to conceal their involvement in order to avoid a direct reaction and open conflict with the enemy” (Nikolić 2019, 292–293).

In the context of all aforementioned hybrid warfare characteristics, their possible close connection to the vast diversity of military operations becomes prominent, which is through NATO doctrines mostly discerned in the operations of stabilisation and broad range of “enabling operations”⁸, so that they are often used in peace operations. Judging by the existing doctrines of the armed forces of the USA and Great Britain⁹, the operations of stabilisation imply developmental and cooperative activities during the periods of peace, or the activities of coercion as a response to some crisis, intending to promote and protect national or alliance interests. Essentially, they include various military missions, tasks and activities performed out of their own country in coordination with other instruments of national power for the sake of maintenance or reestablishment of safe and secure environment, providing vital government services, emergency infrastructure reconstruction and providing humanitarian help. Anyway, the enabling operations belong to the kind of operations from the range of NATO operations, basically of formative and sustaining character, given substantial support, services and other necessary

⁸ Intelligence operations, security operations, information operations, psychological operations, operations of the units for electronic warfare, ABC operations, engineering operations, operations of logistic support, civil-military cooperating operations etc.

⁹ Kosovo Defence Minister Armend Mehaj announced that he has left for an official three-day visit to the UK, where he will sign a memorandum of defense bilateral cooperation with Defense Minister Baroness Annabella Goldie. The visit to the UK is very important in the process of building the military and operational capacities of the KSF and strongly demonstrates the partnership with the Ministry of Defense and the Armed Forces, which will be further intensified, Mehaj said in a Facebook post (Kosovo Online 2021).

resources by the specialised forces, in order to enable the successful execution of offensive, defensive and stabilisation operations (Land Warfare Development Centre 2017).

The operations of stabilisation contain a broad selection of activities, and due to their complex nature, they primarily depend on the results of formative operations, in which the most recognisable are intelligence, psychological and information operations, whose bearers can both be international and host country forces. Their synergetic performance, with the integration of diverse other activities, occurring via more spheres of power in the host country, provide respectable possibilities of hybrid activities towards the interest group of certain social collectivity or state (Beriša, Sedlar, i Pavić 2025).

The indirectness in the hybrid activities of information, psychological and intelligence operations, whose main focus of acting is the psychological dislocation of the enemy, especially when they are carried out under the legitimacy of the stabilisation operations, cannot be depicted as the open conflict and impairing the state sovereignty or the directed attack on certain interest group within the state, but definitely it can systematically weaken them and secure that the “enemy” might use armed forces at no point in time as the only remaining solution.

A typical example of such hybrid action and covert abuse (violation) of international law, aimed at threatening the territorial sovereignty of the Republic of Serbia, is currently being carried out in the territory of the AP of Kosovo and Metohija, by the international forces of KFOR (Kosovo Force) (especially the British and Turkish members of the contingent of these international forces), EULEX (European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo) and para-security structures in that area (see Scheme 1). In the redistribution of hybrid activities, the foreign factor officially carries out a stabilization operation, through which and under whose pretext it helps the para-security structures to simultaneously carry out an intelligence, information and psychological operation, with the aim of preventing the influence and instrumentalization of the local population of the Serbian community in northern Kosovo by the Republic of Serbia (The so-called Assembly “Republic of Kosovo” 2022, 7).

Scheme 1. Hybrid warfare in AP Kosovo and Metohija



Source: Authors

FOREIGN FACTOR ACTIVITIES IN THE AUTONOMOUS PROVINCE OF KOSOVO AND METOHİJA FROM 2019 TO 2023

Foreign factors in the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija, for the time being are mostly present in the form of international KFOR forces and numerous diplomatic and economic representatives, which recognise and try to fulfil their own interests. The scope of this paper allows us only to examine the foreign factor context solely through the international KFOR forces, which are just like NATO, merely the instrument of power of the key, previously delineated alliance member states.

According to the official information available on the NATO Internet pages dedicated to KFOR, this North Atlantic organisation is guiding the peace-supporting operation in Kosovo and Metohija, within the international KFOR¹⁰ mission since June 1999, when “the

¹⁰ KFOR obligations are defined by the Military-Technical Agreement with the Governments of the FR Yugoslavia and the Republic of Serbia signed on June 9, 1999 and NATO operative plan. The SC UN Resolution 1244 from June 10, 1999 (Act 5) declared “on the assignment of civilian and security presence in Kosovo and Metohija,

78 days NATO air campaign against the Milošević regime, aimed to cease the violence in Kosovo”. The original KFOR aims were allegedly “to divert upcoming hostilities, to establish the safe environment and provide public security and order, to demilitarise ‘Kosovo Liberation Army’, to support international humanitarian efforts and to coordinate with international civilian presence”. Today, KFOR “continues to contribute to the maintenance of the safe environment in Kosovo and freedom of movement for all the citizens”. Furthermore, “NATO firmly supports the Agreement on Normalisation, signed in 2013 with the mediation of Belgrade and Priština, while KFOR is ready to support the implementation” (NATO 2026).

Nevertheless, if we analyse exclusively the period from 2021 through 2023, the time of Aljbin Kurti’s second mandate¹¹, we can find out that in Kosovo and Metohija there were 448 ethnically motivated incidents caused by the Albanians, out of which 170 incidents were in 2023. In those incidents several dozens of people were injured, wounded from the firearms or unreasonably arrested, and the Serbian properties were looted or destroyed (Kancelarija za Kosovo i Metohiju Vlada Republike Srbije n.d.). Keeping that in mind, the question arises whether it is possible to prevent such events when there are the international community representatives in the Province, having the mission and within whose functional duties the legitimacy and

under the UN supervision, with appropriate equipment and personnel, as required, approving of the FR Yugoslavia agreement with that”. Besides, the same resolution, (Act 7) “authorises the member states and respective international organisations to establish the security presence in Kosovo and Metohija”. Following the KFOR forces arrival in the AP of Kosovo and Metohija, they took hold of major Yugoslav Armed Forces and Ministry of Interior facilities and other state institutions or they set up the new bases in the vicinity of the main communication routes. The KFOR mission currently consists of 27 participating members with the total number of 4,600 troops (NATO 2026).

¹¹ Kurti is considered the ideological successor of Adem Demaći, the Albanian politician supporting the abuse of violence as the means to unite “Kosovo” with Albania, which is proudly claimed by Kurti in public and not to be disregarded when taking into account the analysis of the supposed “statesman” to carry out the hybrid war. The analysis suggests the existence of similarities of character traits and ideology propagated by Aljbin Kurti and Volodomir Zelenski, the president of the Republic of Ukraine. Furthermore, Kurti’s arrival from the Albanian political scene is very indicative as well as his marriage to Rita Augestad Knudsen, the subject of the Kingdom of Norway, who was educated in London and worked for a few British institutes researching anti-terrorism (Maksimović 2019).

capabilities to avert beforehand and provide the safe environment for all the citizens are?

It can be concluded that the frequency and intensity of the aforementioned incidents, as well as the failure to take adequate measures to prevent the constant repression of the “security” structures of Priština in Serbian areas, undoubtedly indicate that KFOR, through its deliberate inaction, indirectly contributes to the achievement of Kosovo’s independence and the exodus of the Serbian population from that area. The previous statement is supported by NATO’s relatively “lukewarm” and declarative stance that it is not time for changes in the status of the “Kosovo Security Forces” (KSF), which, in essence, has done nothing to prevent the interim institutions in Pristina from adopting a set of laws (December 14, 2018), which *de facto* enable the creation of military formations, i.e. the transition of the KSF into the “Kosovo Army”.

The tendency of the more intensified KFOR engagement in the training and schooling of KSF members, along with the tacit approval to arm that para-security formation with modern weapons, which is in disagreement with UN Security Council Resolution 1244 and with the Military-Technical Agreement from Kumanovo, unequivocally confirm the stance that the international forces put themselves into the function of political and military power of Priština (Pavić, Beriša, i Mihajlović 2024). In the context of all those “partial” (in)activities of KFOR and EULEX, one ought to slightly distance oneself from and claim that this, purposefully or accidentally, is the expression of intention of primarily some individual international organisation members in Kosovo and Metohija, out of which the most conspicuous roles belong to the Republic of Turkey and Great Britain, which probably have the tendency to fulfil their strategic national interests in the Province.¹²

The analysis of KFOR and para-security structure activities in Kosovo and Metohija, it can be inferred that in the period from the end of 2021 until now their intensive common activities have been conducted, their character and scope mostly suiting the hybrid warfare profile against the Republic of Serbia. It is evident that the moment

¹² It is important to point out that the USA is the key factor of stability in the Balkans, while the important contributions to the development of the “Kosovo” “security” structures were made by the Republic of Albania and the Republic of Croatia, but their roles are not the subject of this paper.

of increased activities was purposefully chosen at that time, with the special military operation being conducted in the Ukraine by the RF, and the international community in a hurry to resolve the issue of Kosovo independence because the status of the “occupied” Ukrainian territories depended on that solution model.

Nonetheless, all the activities of international forces¹³ show that their intention to speed up the reformation of KSF and their transformation into “Kosovo Army”, possibly even before 2026, due to fulfilling the conditions to join NATO, which would by far harden the negotiation position of Belgrade concerning the final status of the Province. The exact indicators of hybrid activities performed by the international forces in Kosovo and Metohija are in the function of accomplishing the aforementioned aims and here we will present them only through the activities of the British and Turkish KFOR contingents, which currently belong to the two most numerous contingents and have specific and most prominent roles in the accomplishment of the Great Albania aims.

Using the public excuse of acting in the interest of the European security, in 2023 Turkey increased its military presence in Europe, through the KFOR mission from around 780 to over 1,000 members of this national contingent. At the same time, it was allowed for the very first time that the head of this NATO mission be a member of the Turkish forces. To prove the Turkish neo-Ottoman aspirations and demonstrations of force in Kosovo and Metohija, in the context of conveying the message to Serbia not to even make an attempt to intervene with the military in the Province, there is the Turkish KFOR contingent intentionally positioned in Prizren, the old Serbian capital, in the barracks symbolically called “Sultan Murat” (Al Jazeera 2023).

In recent years, the so-called “Kosovo” has been being supplied with military equipment and weaponry as a part of the traditional practice between “Kosovo” and the Republic of Turkey¹⁴,

¹³ “Support for the attempt to gain ‘statehood’ of the southern Serbian province is continuously implemented under the mentorship of individual great powers (independently or within the framework of the largest military-political alliance) by using various means (armed, diplomatic, economic, media)” (Tomić 2020).

¹⁴ During 2018, the Republic of Turkey donated to “Kosovo” 20 armoured “Cobra” transportation vehicles. Three years later, in 2021, “Kosovo” allegedly bought four armoured “Vuran” and “Kirpi” vehicles from Turkey. In 2023, “Kosovo” completed the purchase of five unmanned aircraft TB2 “Baryaktar” systems from Turkey, as well

and the conclusion can be reached that the culmination of that sort of cooperation was achieved in the second half of 2023, when Turkey, against all international agreements, delivered to “Kosovo” five unmanned aircraft Baryaktar TB2 systems, which is a stark example of the Turkish demonstration of power towards Serbia, and the region of the Western Balkans, too (Danas 2023). In that context, the practice was continued last year by the Turkish donation of million dollars to the KSF for the purpose of providing “individual equipment” (Beriša, Sedlar, i Pavić 2025).

Besides, the KSF members are being educated for years at the Turkish military academies, and they are present at many professional development courses and trainings for piloting helicopters T-129 “ATAK”, as well as the unmanned aircraft systems of Turkish production. Immediately following the delivery of the unmanned aircraft systems to “Kosovo”, Sabri Tunch Angili, the “ambassador” of the Republic Turkey in Priština, stated that these “Baryaktar TB2” systems are not the donation to KSF and that Turkey, in line with the possible demands of the “Kosovo Government”, is willing to provide, i.e. sell, the other equipment, such as drones. Moreover, he also claimed that Turkey is the strategic partner of “Kosovo” and that it will participate in the development of all the areas, defence included (Kosovo Online 2023a). Thus, Turkey as a mediator, yet in the context of the diverting strategy of “Kosovo”, sent an even more menacing message to the Republic of Serbia, so that Serbia is not to engage any military forces in the Province or it would enter an armed conflict with Turkey. Soon afterwards, the KFOR commandant, whose primary duty is the control over the Kosovo and Metohija air space, agreed that KSF multiple times could be active in the region of Djakovica and use Baryaktar TB2s, which is against the UN SC 1244 Resolution and against the Military-Technical Agreement (KoSSev 2024).

From another point of view, following a similar model, since 2021 Great Britain has increased the number of their KFOR soldiers, starting with 35, then increasing to 400, under the excuse of the last conflict of the local Serbs with the “Kosovo Police” in the north of Kosovo and Metohija, only to raise the number to 600 on

as several dozens of anti-armour systems “OMTAS” 160 mm systems of 4.5 km range, “Boran” 105 mm howitzers of 17 km range and “ALKAR” 120 mm mortar launchers of 8 km range, characterised by high mobility (Kosovo online 2024).

September 24, 2023, therefore becoming one of the most numerous national contingents within KFOR. The thing that portrays the British armed forces within KFOR is that they are engaged within intelligence-reconnaissance units and the forces of “operative reserve”, while, mainly after the special plan and most often not following the requirements of the KFOR mission, they are executing intelligence-reconnaissance activities in the Serbian settlements, near the administrative line, using tactical unmanned aircraft systems and civilian vehicles without the identification marks of KFOR or their home country. By such activities, as well as by the involvement in the formation and direct training of the KSF company members for the “civilian operations”, whose tasks are of strategic significance and refer to the conducting of psychological operations and special warfare, the British show their indirect support to Priština in the activities regarding the takeover of the full control in the north of AP of Kosovo and Metohija (Beriša, Sedlar, i Pavić 2025).

For the purpose of raising the level of capacities, in the late 2019 and early 2020, some members of the company for “civilian operations” were studying the Serbian language in the Priština Centre for Foreign Languages of the Training and Doctrine Command KSF General Staff Headquarters in Uroševac, financed by the British “Embassy” in Priština. Having considered the time span of this unit’s formation and training, starting in 2019, we comprehend the period necessary for the enabling was sufficient. Hence, one must conclude that they are planned and well organised operations of para-security structures in the Province north, initiated in 2021 and most likely guided by the engagement of that unit and their British “advisors”. Their undercover engagement in civilian clothing and without visible armament of the KSF unit members in the north of Kosovo and Metohija, made it possible for them to formally avoid the breaching of the existing agreements on the KSF involvement in the territory (Beriša, Sedlar, i Pavić 2025).

However, regarding the hybrid character and specificity of conducting the operations concerning intelligence, psychology and information, actually their constant and direct presence is not required as the role of the direct executor of hybrid activities on the ground. Gradually it is being handed down to the other para-security structures and bearers of the instruments of Priština power, which mainly have no

legal nor procedural engagement restrictions in any part of the AP of Kosovo and Metohija.

Besides, previous experiences indicate that during the execution of the high-risk operations in the north of Kosovo and Metohija by “Kosovo Police”, the members of the British KFOR contingent, in most cases, deployed several of their members to the police operative centres, with the task to plan, prepare and coordinate such actions. Additionally, there were more cases of the completed training of many KSF staff members in the military centres in Great Britain. Judging by the statement by Macedonci Ejup, the “minister of Kosovo Defence”, issued on November 15, 2023, his “Ministry” is currently negotiating with the Ministry of Defence of Great Britain concerning the joint engagement in two peace missions and the preparations of the Ukrainian armed forces (Kosovo Online 2023b).

In early June 2023, the British Member of Parliament and Chair of the Foreign Affairs Select Committee Alicia Kearns, accused the Republic of Serbia of using emergency ambulance vehicles to smuggle weapons to “Kosovo” and store them in the buildings belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church (Vreme 2023). Not much afterwards, the intensified presence of the British KFOR contingent intelligence structures was registered near the administrative line in the north of Kosovo and Metohija, and on September 24, 2023 in that precise region some clashes occurred between local Serbs and “Kosovo Police” members, which served as an excuse for KFOR to increase the number of their troops and to fortify their engagement along the administrative line in the north of the Province.

Finally, bearing in mind the hybrid character of the conducted activities, we may deduce that KFOR forces, under the excuse of carrying out the stabilisation operation, assisted those Priština para-security structures to cover up and legalise the execution of their formative operations.

Within that assistance, the support of international forces has been recognised through the following activities: intelligence collection; developing the abilities of specific military-police structures (unit formation, training personnel and equipping with modern weapon systems); planning, organisation and coordination of the activities during the execution of high-risk actions of para-security structures; demonstrative activities in the function of diverting factor from

the possible military-police intervention of the Republic of Serbia; information-propaganda activities (e.g. terrifying the local population with the aim of diverting possible armed reactions against para-security structures, criminalisation of the local inhabitants in the settlements with dominant Serbian population, promotion of Priština interests both internally and externally with the immediate warfare protection of the “Kosovo Police” units during the execution of certain actions), and deceiving the state leadership of the Republic of Serbia, aiming to mislead Belgrade and to gradually make them accept some proposals, under the excuse of the compromise with Priština.¹⁵

ACTIVITIES OF TEMPORARY PRIŠTINA INSTITUTIONS AIMING TO FULFIL ALBANIAN NATIONAL INTERESTS

Only one week after the beginning of the Ukrainian conflict, “following the consultations with international partners”, initiated by Aljbin Kurti, the “war fund” or the “fund for security and defence” was established (Ćurčić 2023). That was the first time “Kosovo” got the budget of 100 million euros¹⁶ and started to invest more seriously in its “security”. Viewed from today’s perspective, it is obviously one more indicator of the Priština intention to commence the activities, modelled after the Ukrainian conflict, so as to motivate additionally international community to exert pressure on the Republic of Serbia and further be engaged in accomplishing the full “Kosovo” independence. Regarding the plan of realising the desired state, para-security forces and their foreign mentors, modelled after the Ukrainian hybrid war, they defined the aims, forces and methods, that afterwards proved to match the character of intelligence, psychological and information operation, simultaneously directed towards the local Serbian population and state organs of the Republic of Serbia.

As one of common aims of the aforementioned operations, we identify the realisation of full control in the north of Kosovo and Metohija, the only remaining territory in the Province exclusively

¹⁵ Overview of activities summarized based on data obtained from media reports from Kosovo and Metohija during 2022.

¹⁶ The budget for the “army” for 2023 is 123 million euros, while the total budget of the so-called Kosovo for this year is 3.2 billion euros (Jakupi 2022).

inhabited by the Serbian population. When it comes to the fulfilment of that goal and creation of the conditions for the acting of all instruments of Priština power in full capacity, primarily it was necessary to provide the legitimacy for the intensified engagement of the para-security structures in the north of Kosovo and Metohija, which was accomplished pretending to fight against crime and preventing the aggression of the Republic of Serbia. The same excuse served to the KFOR forces to execute simultaneous stability operations, which is in the international community narrative more and more focused on the crisis, but basically had the role of an auxiliary operation dominated by the activities of shaping up the operative environment.

Under the given excuse and continual engagement of the strong police forces in the north of Kosovo and Metohija, Priština started the implementation of a wide range of provocative activities towards the Serbian population, which step by step resulted in their displacement, delay of fulfilling the duties involving the Association of Serbian Municipalities (ASM) and drawing the attention of local public away from the extremely poor economic situation and corruption in the “country” (Avramović 2024).

In order to resume full control in the municipalities in the north of the Province, on the illegally estranged private properties of the Serbs, they erected the bases for “Border Kosovo Police”, near the administrative crossings “Brnjak” and “Jarinje”, the bases for special units in the villages of Gornji Jasenovik (Zubin Potok municipality) and Košutovo (Leposavić municipality), permanent check point with bunkers near the Bistrica bridge for controlling the road communication Kosovska Mitrovica–Raška, and the check point near the bridge in the village of Gazivode (Zubin Potok municipality) for controlling the road communications Kosovska Mitrovica–Ribariće (Čolić and Đorđević 2024). Since March 2022, within the BKP units, they formed an Intervention Unit, which included the most extreme members of the special KP forces, thus generating the conditions for the uninterrupted engagement of the trained and extremely well armed troops in the vicinity of the administrative line.

By grouping and employing the robust forces in the north of the Province, Priština continued to justify that to international community as the alleged fight against crime, and to place misinformation on the organised and armed “Serbian para-military troops” and alleged plans of the Serbian Armed Forces and Ministry of Interior of the

Republic of Serbia for the land operation in the north of Kosovo and Metohija, as it happened in the Ukrainian conflict. In the placement of misinformation, they had operative and technical support by the intelligence components and international forces, from the aspect of planning and organising actions, as well as concerning the very work coordination on the ground and training the members of certain police and “military” specialities (Avramović 2024). The largest number of those trainings were related to the training of the members of “Kosovo Police Special Intervention Units”¹⁷, comprised of sniper training, counter-terrorist training and the training for planning and execution of the “high-risk” actions.¹⁸

Parallel to the reinforcement of the capacities for the activities of special police units in the north from the Ibar, repressive measures were intensified towards the Serbian population in terms of confiscation of consumer goods and medicines, person and vehicle search, arrests, detaining for interrogations so as to identify the bearers of the self-organisation and members of Civil Defence, marked as a terrorist organisation. These actions featured the employment of extremely robust forces, unnecessary in proportion to the potential risks, by which Priština purposefully demonstrated force, often followed by excessive brutality due to the fervent engagement of their personnel. In order to further humiliate and terrify the local Serbian population, the members of special units raided schools, kindergartens and hospitals on several occasions (Beriša, Sedlar, i Pavić 2025).

Closing the alternative roads leading from Central Serbia to Kosovo and Metohija artificially caused the lack of essential food items in general stores in the Serbian communities, thus exerting deliberate pressure on the Serbs to trade with the merchandise produced in the south from the Ibar and consequently legalising the greater Albanian presence in that territory. Simultaneously, every attempt of the Serbian population to resolve the lack of indispensable products of the Serbian origin, even medicines, Priština abused for the further criminalisation of the Serbian population and health care institutions of the Republic of Serbia functioning in Kosovo and Metohija. Eventually, it turned out that the background of such propaganda activities by Priština was

¹⁷ In the media mostly appearing as “FIT” – “First Incident Team”.

¹⁸ Data obtained from non-Albanian residents of Kosovo and Metohija during conversations with the authors during 2022.

to have the second phase, planned for January 1, 2024, to integrate the health care institutions in the Serbian settlements into the “Kosovo” system.

With the formation of “Institute for War Crimes”, increase in staff numbers of the “Kosovo Police” Directorate in charge of investigating war crimes (from 19 to 41 persons), and enabling the court trials in absence, the pressures towards the Serbs grew and the arrests for the alleged war crimes, in the majority of cases turned out to be linked with the procedures that the arrested had previously initiated solely because of the demands to return the expropriated assets and possessions.¹⁹

These activities perfidiously conveyed the notification to all those who had participated on any grounds in the 1999 war events in Kosovo and Metohija, and to the professional employees of the Serbian Armed Forces and Ministry of Interior to move out and not to enter the Province territory. Because of all those repressive Priština measures, as a sign of drawing the attention of the international community and responsible international organisations, during the November of 2022, the Serbs from the north of Kosovo and Metohija were forced to abandon all their municipality functions, in particular their mayor positions in the north, along with the positions and duties related to other Priština institutions, such as “Kosovo Police”, “Kosovo Customs”, their court duties and others, all of which brought about the institutional vacuum.

Anyway, instead of taking some measures to overcome the institutional crisis in the northern Province municipalities, on April 23, 2023, Priština organised snap elections and placed their illegitimate representatives in the positions of power. Augmenting the police repression right before the elections, Priština consciously endeavoured to provoke reactions and incidents with the local Serbs, to accuse Serbia of destabilising the situation and discredit it to the international community, which at that moment had already started to criticise Kurti more prominently, but not loud enough, because of the worsening

¹⁹ The Provisional Institutions in Pristina have established the Institute for War Crimes Committed in Kosovo and Metohija from 1998 to 1999, RTK in Serbian reports. Kosovo Prime Minister Albin Kurti said at a government session that this continues “the institutional commitment to addressing all damages and crimes committed during the war” (Tanjug 2023).

security situation in the north of Kosovo and Metohija. The engagement of virtually all intelligence resources had the same purpose, along with the inclusion of “Special Kosovo Police Intervention Units”, who were employed in the civilian clothes in the north of Kosovo and Metohija.

Also, they formed specialised “teams of intelligence-investigation police officers, who detained a greater number of persons for interrogation for the alleged committed crimes, trying to collect data on the Serbian political representatives from the north of Kosovo and Metohija, and on the others who were deemed to propagate the Serbian self-organisation in the territory.

After the snap elections held without the participation of the Serbian political parties, Priština took measures towards the forceful resuming of the municipality premises in the Province north. In the context of those activities, during May 26, 2023, “Kosovo Police” blocked access to the municipality buildings, while placing check points on all the roads leading to Zvečan, Zubin Potok and Leposavić, simultaneously trying to arrest some protestants who demonstratively defended municipality buildings in order to warn the international community about the necessity to be more agile when it comes to resolving the crisis.

For the ensuing measures of repression towards the citizens of the Province north, Priština took avail of the event from May 29, 2023, when in front of the Zvečan municipality building a conflict arose between the protestants and the KFOR members, when “Kosovo Police” shot from the back Dragiša Galjak, a local Serb. The clash happened because “Kosovo Police” members, in the presence of the KFOR forces, made an attempt to use force to arrest the persons peacefully protesting in front of the Zvečan municipality building. At that event, trying to trigger the confrontation between the citizens and KFOR, the “Kosovo Police” members from the municipality building began to throw pyrotechnic materials, which inflicted injuries to dozens of KFOR members. However, local Serbs were proclaimed guilty for the alleged injuries and wounding, and the entire event served to Priština to legalise the arrests of the previously marked, respected citizens of Serbian nationality.

After the political steps and pressure from the international community, the security situation seemingly calmed down, and during July 2023, some greater KFOR engagement and presence was

registered in the Province north, which was allegedly in an attempt to prevent the impairment of the security situation and outbreak of hostilities between the citizens and “Kosovo Police”. In that period, Priština insisted on the implementation of the measures so as to “resolve” the crisis tied to the possibility of the new local elections, so on August 1, 2023, the work group was named to produce the “administrative instruction on the procedure for the removal of mayors” (via a citizen initiative). Still, on December 7, 2023, Priština denied the request from a group of the citizens from the northern part of Kosovska Mitrovica to depose their municipality mayor, despite the fact that they fulfilled all the supposed procedures of the instruction issued by the “Ministry for Local Self-government of Kosovo”. In addition to this, Priština declaratively accepted the reduction in the presence and employment of the “special police forces” in the north of KiM by the alleged relocation from the municipality buildings, but the total “Kosovo Police” engagement in the territory remained approximately on the same level with constant repression towards the Serbs, mainly in the form of arrests, maltreatment, verbal insults and so on.

Such Priština activities were meant to delay the implementation of the reached, though suitable for them, agreements with Belgrade, they went on to criminalise the Serbian political factor to the international community and they introduced to the political scene some fitting new characters of the Serbian nationality so as to legalise their steps towards the Province north. In favour of the thesis on delaying the implementation of the agreement, there is the Albanian decree on the incorporation of Leposavić, Zubin Potok and Zvečan municipalities to the so-called “Association of Kosovo Municipalities” (AKM – according to the principle if SZO can, then AKM can too). All of that was just an introduction to the even more severe confrontation with the local Serbian population, culminating on September 24, 2023, when a group of local Serbs, under the unclarified circumstances, made an attempt to stand against the “Kosovo” para-security structures and in that utterly desperate manner try to prevent the intentions of Priština to wrap up the completion of their “statehood” in the Province north.²⁰

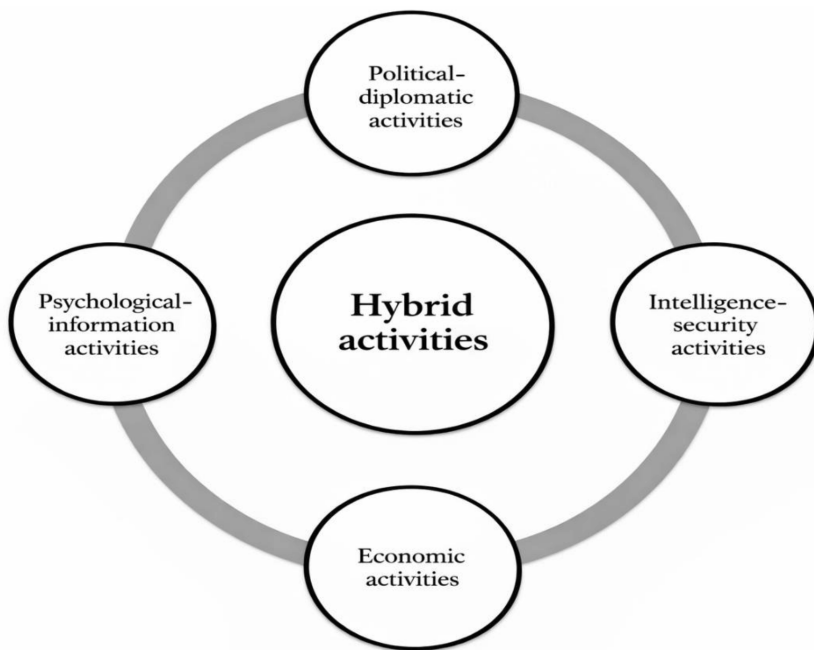
²⁰ It must be noted that at least one local Serb was murdered from point-blank range, in spite of previously being wounded and disarmed, with the so-called “counter-terrorist” operation by the “Kosovo Police” carried out without the evacuation of the

It must be emphasised that each and every of these activities performed by the para-security structures was praised and glorified in the Albanian media, resulting in additional reactions by the Albanian population displayed in the form of extremist messages and threats sent via social networks and graffiti on Serbian compatriot buildings. That furthermore prompted the scaling up of the Albanian extremist groups in multiethnic communities and their employment as the armed “guardians”. Also, simultaneously with those activities, Priština conducted an array of procedures aimed at revising the image of Serbian history and devastation or expropriation of the Serbian cultural heritage. The last in a row of such instances took place on November 28, 2023, when a group led by the self-proclaimed priest Nikola Džufka, a citizen of the Republic of Albania, broke into the Church of Saint Archangel Michael in the village of Rakitnica, from the Podujevo municipality, so as to ostensibly perform a ritual in the edifice belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church. During the November of 2023, in several places in the north of Kosovo and Metohija, the Albanians were reported to have excavated Serbian graveyards under the pretense of doing some construction work, they were also illegally removing the Monument of the Serbian Soldiers Fallen in the Balkanic Wars and the First World War in the military cemetery in Priština.

The analysis and sublimation of the registered Priština activities, which by the character match hybrid activities, one may notice that they were conducted synchronously and multi-dimensionally, so we can categorise them as: political-diplomatic, intelligence-security, economic and psychological-information activities. Their analysis clearly reveals that through these hybrid activities all the instruments of the para-state of “Kosovo” were employed and that the ultimate goal of their action was in agreement with the activities of foreign forces in Kosovo and Metohija, as well as with certain official foreign political representatives abroad (Beriša i Sedlar 2026).

local population, which is against all police procedures. It resulted in the police officer wounding two local inhabitants from the village of Banjska, from Zvečan municipality, along with the resettlement of around 11% of the Serbian population after the incident (KoSSev 2023).

Scheme 2. Hybrid activities in Kosovo and Metohija



Source: Authors

CONCLUSION

Though the West, with the constant sponsorship of the Albanian secession movement, distributed their military power within the international forces in the AP of Kosovo and Metohija, they tended to rapidly establish a new factual state and from the Republic of Serbia to extort the recognition of its forcefully detached part of territory. Therefore, we may reach the conclusion that the process failed, but it did prompt the radicalisation of insisting to eventually fulfil such a goal. Numerous facts point out that the latest crisis in Kosovo and Metohija has been a part of coordinated hybrid warfare activity of para-security structures and certain foreign representatives that under the screen of their employment with KFOR and EULEX, they have been seeking to accomplish their national strategic aims, dominantly based on preventing the spread of the RF influence, meeting their economic

interests in terms of exploiting natural resources, providing transit traffic routes and crossroads and setting up military bases.

The examination of the presented Kosovo and Metohija crisis, as the main bearers of endangering the Serbian people in the territory, the Albanian para-security structures have been identified, while there is a range of facts indicating their main creators or “logistic support providers” were the Republic of Turkey and Great Britain with the approval or following the orders issued by the United States of America.

Besides, in favour of the “frozen conflict” the fact that the world order has approached “multipolar bipolarism” speaks volumes, dividing the world into the pro-American, which almost entirely recognised “Kosovo” and in which, apart from the USA and the EU, the others are relatively feeble, while the momentum-growing axis attracting the most spacious, rich in resources and most populated countries, the most prominent being the RF, People’s Republic of China, the Republic of India, the Republic of Indonesia and quite a few of other countries from Africa, Asia, Latin America and even Vatican, as one of the most influential countries globally.²¹

In that sense, it is essential that the expert state subjects nationally conduct research through case studies examining all the apparent forms of contemporary hybrid threats, their causes, development, distinct features, principles, goals, and to register weaknesses and failures of their executors and commanders. Thus, a national data base would be created as a quality base for re-examining the existing normative and legal doctrinal documents in order to contemplate the possibilities of developing the concepts of offensive hybrid operations in the AP of Kosovo and Metohija, through which the use and effects of all the instruments of power could be more notable, even in the military and security context.

Therefore, the possibilities of the aforementioned activities in the present circumstances ought to be taken into account, just like in the case of the formation of the Association of Serbian Municipalities in the AP of Kosovo and Metohija, implying that its statute is to be adjusted in the upcoming negotiations as well. The

²¹ So-called “Kosovo independence” is not recognised by the countries that in total count for 71.5% of global population and 65.4% of the world territory (Stepić 2020, 23).

third step in opposing the perceived hybrid threats, aiming to timely model all potential instruments of power in the territory, must include the selection of specific forces and take measures to evolve their capabilities. In that respect, attention should be paid to the legality of the means and tactics employed, as well as the possibilities of exploiting favorable international and regional opportunities.

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ДЕЛОВАЊЕ ПАРАБЕЗБЕДНОСНИХ СТРУКТУРА И СТРАНОГ ФАКТОРА НА КОСОВУ И МЕТОХИЈИ У ХИБРИДНОМ РАТУ ПРОТИВ РЕПУБЛИКЕ СРБИЈЕ***

Резиме

Рад анализира шири контекст интереса страних фактора у савременим безбедносним условима, карактерисаним хибридниим претњама, како би се испитало место и значај Аутономне Покрајине Косово и Метохија (АП КиМ) у безбедносној агенди ових сила. Циљ анализе је унапређење методолошког приступа за објективније перципирање и стратешко разумевање активности и намера, као и значаја који велике силе придају овом простору у контексту других области и питања у којима се њихови интереси сударају. Рад анализира интересе Сједињених Америчких Држава (САД) као главног спољнополитичког актера на КиМ, као и интересе одређених великих и регионалних сила са дужом присутношћу на Балкану, као што су Руска Федерација (РФ), Савезна Република Немачка, Уједињено Краљевство Велике Британије и Северне Ирске (УК), и Република Турска. Да би остварили сопствене интересе и пројектовали утицај, страни актери предузимају различите мере и активности, које се често у савременим анализама одбране и безбедности означавају као хибридни рат. Стога рад пружа кратак преглед концепта хибридног

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*** Ауторска мишљења изнета у овом раду су лична и не морају одражавати званичне ставове Министарства одбране и Универзитета одбране.

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Кључне речи: хибридни рат, парабезбедносне структуре, страни фактор, НАТО, Косово и Метохија.

* This paper was received on September 26, 2025, and accepted for publication at the Editorial Board meeting on February 27, 2026.

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**ISRAEL-IRAN CYBER WARFARE:
THE DIGITAL DIMENSION
OF MIDDLE EASTERN CONFLICTS
IN A POST-UNIPOLAR WORLD****

(Translation in *Extenso*)

Abstract

The conflict between Israel and Iran represents one of the most enduring confrontations in the Middle East. Over the past decade, its dynamics have increasingly been characterised by multidimensionality, reflected in the spillover of the conflict beyond traditional military-political frameworks into other domains, including the digital sphere. Following the Israeli Stuxnet attack on Iranian nuclear infrastructure in 2010, the cyber field has become a pivotal arena of confrontation, involving not only Israel and Iran but also affiliated cyber actors, often operating from third-party states, which adds a further layer of unpredictability and complexity to the conflict. What makes this cyber confrontation particularly significant for interstate relations in the highly sensitive Middle East is the ability of states to inflict damage on one another

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** This paper was presented at the conference "Perspectives of Political Sciences in Contemporary Society IV", held on December 4–5, 2025, organized by the Institute for Political Studies, Belgrade.

without resorting to armed force. On a global scale, this conflict reflects a broader transformation of relations between major actors in the international order. The support provided to Israel by the United States, coupled with the growing cooperation of Russia and China with Iran, indicates that the Iranian-Israeli cyber war is becoming an integral part of global geopolitical competition. This research aims to analyse cyber warfare between Israel and Iran, its role in their broader conflict, and its effects on both states and the regional actors who, due to their interconnectedness and complex mutual relations, also become targets. The author highlights the growing importance of the cyber dimension as a field of competition in the Middle East, where “old conflicts” are taking on a new form by shifting the struggle into the digital space, making it an inseparable part of the region’s contemporary geopolitical reality in a post-unipolar world.

Keywords: Israel, Iran, cyber warfare, cybersecurity, Middle East.

INTRODUCTION

The widespread use of new technologies and the expansion of cyberspace have significantly influenced the transformation of global relations, providing state and non-state actors with new opportunities for action while simultaneously exposing them to entirely new risks (Rid 2013), to which states often have limited capacity to respond adequately. The very characteristics of cyberspace, such as anonymity, global connectivity, high-speed information flow, and low usage costs (Liff 2012, 422), have further encouraged states in their instrumentalisation. As a result, the cyber sphere has become a space for low-intensity conflict between states that, through the theft of sensitive data, manipulation in the information space, and disruption of the normal functioning of computer networks, attempt to inflict harm on their adversaries (Bogićević 2025, 305).

The process of global networking has been accompanied by significant changes in the distribution of power in the international order that emerged after the end of the Cold War. The gradual reduction of direct U.S. presence in the Middle East and the redirection of strategic attention toward East Asia have eroded Washington’s dominant role in the region, creating conditions for increased activity

by other global and regional actors. Among the states that have shown particular ambitions to fill the power vacuum and expand their influence is Iran, which, through establishing control over numerous armed groups in Middle Eastern countries, has gained significant regional influence. However, Iran's expansion encountered a significant obstacle in the form of an irreconcilable ideological enemy and key American ally in the region, Israel. Tel Aviv's aspiration to push the defense of its territory and population as far as possible from its own borders, on one hand, and the expansion of the network of pro-Iranian proxies in the Middle East, on the other, have brought these two states into a state of permanent friction (Netolická and Mareš 2018, 418), whereby the transfer of their rivalry into cyberspace has created a new source of insecurity for all Middle Eastern countries (Amaliya 2025, 49). The discovery of the Israeli-American cyberattack on the Natanz nuclear facility in 2010 will mark the beginning of a new phase in understanding cyberspace as a domain for state conflict.

This paper aims to analyse the genesis of the cyber conflict between Israel and Iran after 2010, with particular focus on incidents that followed October 2023. The central research question concerns the extent to which cyber instruments can compensate for power asymmetry in active regional conflict. The working hypothesis is that the effects of cyber operations remain strategically limited when the technologically and organizationally stronger actor is willing and able to integrate digital operations with kinetic actions. The scholarly contribution of this paper lies in its integrated analysis of this conflict as a case study of cyber capacity asymmetry in the post-unipolar order. Unlike the existing literature, which predominantly examines the technical aspects of incidents, this work emphasises the strategic effects and structural determinants of cyber operations.

The study of cybersecurity faces a significant methodological obstacle: the limited availability of verifiable information about cyber actors, their activities, and their effects. Unlike the mutual kinetic strikes carried out in June 2025, where it was possible to determine the physical damage inflicted more directly, establishing the consequences of cyber operations is much more complex due to the immaterial nature of digital space and the limited transparency of actors. The Israel-Iran cyber conflict is characterised by a pronounced asymmetry in

information sources: most data come from Western companies and organisations specialising in cybersecurity, while information from Iranian sources is subject to far more restrictions.

This paper covers cyber incidents in the period from 2010 to the present that meet the following criteria: 1) a clear connection to interstate relations between Israel and Iran, i.e., the existence of indicators that the incident has a political or strategically motivated character; 2) the existence of publicly available technical or institutional attribution of the attack; and 3) political-strategic significance, that is, the potential to influence the behavior of actors. Only data confirmed by at least two mutually independent sources or documented through technical indicators of compromise and official reports of relevant institutions are treated as “verified facts”. In contrast, claims by actors, media interpretations, and assessments by cybersecurity companies are analysed as analytical narratives rather than empirically established facts. In this way, an effort is made to clearly separate the descriptive level of analysis from the interpretive level.

CYBERSPACE AS THE NEW FRONT: ISRAELI RESPONSES TO THE IRANIAN THREAT

The perception of a permanent existential threat (Tabansky 2020, 46) has crucially influenced Tel Aviv to adopt a proactive and preventive approach to national defense, based on the principle of the “security triangle”, whose key components are deterrence, early warning, and the swift achievement of decisive victory on the battlefield (Freilich, Cohen, and Siboni 2023, 185). Since achieving lasting peace for Israel, as the ultimate strategic goal articulated by Ben-Gurion (Baram 2017, 3), is almost unattainable due to the impossibility of the permanent military neutralization of the Arab states, Tel Aviv has focused on achieving a more modest goal: the temporary disabling of the most prominent threat before the emergence of new threats in the region and a new cycle of conflict (Freilich, Cohen, and Siboni 2023, 185).

The end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century witnessed an evolution in the sources of threats confronting

Israel. The transformation of these threats from the regular armed forces of Arab states to non-state actors, such as terrorist groups, also altered the nature of the conflict itself. Given the asymmetric nature of conflict with non-state actors, Tel Aviv could no longer rely on swift and decisive victories on the conventional battlefield, compelling its decision-makers to reconsider the principles of the “security triangle” (Freilich 2018, 199).

Concurrently with the increased presence of terrorist organisations, the growing significance of modern digital technologies for the functioning of the economy and society exposed Israel to an entirely new set of threats. As a state whose economy depends on the application of cutting-edge technologies in both economic and administrative domains,¹ Tel Aviv is particularly vulnerable to cyber threats. A pivotal moment in the recognition of cyberspace as a new source of insecurity occurred in 2010 with the revelation of the joint US-Israeli cyberattack on Iran’s nuclear facility at Natanz.

The fear of the development of Iran’s nuclear program, combined with a belief in the efficacy of preventive strikes as a mechanism to curb regional threats, led Israel to conduct, in cooperation with the United States, a cyber operation in 2006 (Kamiński 2020, 69) code-named “Olympic Games”, to turn off the Natanz nuclear facility. Over the following four years, the virus implanted in Iran’s computer network turned off approximately 1,000 gas centrifuges, though this did not result in a significant slowdown of the nuclear program (Albright, Brannan, and Walrond 2010). Nevertheless, the consequences were of considerable regional and global significance, as this marked the first known instance of a cyber operation with direct physical effects on the critical infrastructure of a sovereign state. Globally, the “Olympic Games” operation marked the beginning of a re-examination of the vulnerabilities of critical infrastructure to an entirely new class of threats, while regionally, the discovery of the cyberattack signalled the opening of a new front in the Iran-Israel conflict, one that would soon draw in other Middle Eastern states.

¹ As much as 13% of Israel’s GDP and 31% of its exports are derived from products and services generated in the high-tech sector. For more information on the significance of this industry for the development of the Israeli economy (Razin 2018).

After 2010 and the exposure of Israeli involvement in the cyberattack, Tel Aviv radically changed its perception of Iran as a threat, both in the physical and cyber domains (Baram 2017, 1). To maintain its technological edge against regional threats and adequately respond to potential Iranian retaliation, Israel began developing cybersecurity as a new pillar of its national defence. This is evidenced by the significant efforts and resources invested by the Israeli government in building institutions and subsidising the development of new startups (Government of Israel 2011, 2; Press 2017). Relying on public-private partnerships and global economic interconnectedness, Israel has established exceptional national cyber capabilities, thereby acquiring a decisive competitive advantage over actors it perceives as regional threats.

In addition to efforts to create a national cybersecurity sector, Israel has also relied heavily on international cooperation to enhance its capacities. The United States occupies a central position in Israel's growing network of international partners, with high levels of cooperation at both the intergovernmental level (Arshad 2025, 1148) and in the economic sphere. An intensive exchange of knowledge and information, particularly regarding Iranian capabilities and intentions in the digital domain, provides Israel with significant strategic advantages, enabling the optimal utilisation of its own resources in planning cyber operations (1141).

Since 2010, cooperation with regional actors who perceive Iran as a source of regional insecurity has emerged as an increasingly important component of Israel's cyber defence. The disabling of Saudi Aramco's computer network in 2012 served as a clear indicator of Iran's progress in the cyber domain, alerting Middle Eastern states to the growing intensity of this threat. To bridge the widening gap with Iran, countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates have turned to Israel as a provider of cybersecurity (Al-Halawany 2021; Khorrami 2021). Beyond raising the level of regional resilience to Iranian threats in the digital sphere, Tel Aviv's cyber diplomacy has also significantly influenced the process of normalising relations with regional states (Freilich, Cohen, and Siboni 2023, 275), thereby representing an important step towards achieving one of

Israel's key strategic goals – the establishment of a more stable security environment.

The outcome of efforts at both the domestic and international levels has been the development of an exceptionally sophisticated cyber defence system, founded on a large number of successful companies,² a high degree of cooperation between the private sector and institutions, and the exchange of knowledge and information with leading international actors. The organic development of cyber capabilities through economic growth has enabled Tel Aviv to rank among the top countries in its ability to respond to cyber threats (Digital Watch Observatory 2025), a proclaimed objective at the beginning of the twenty-first century. In this regard, the Israeli approach to cybersecurity does not represent a discontinuity from earlier security doctrines, but rather their functional adaptation to new technological and geopolitical conditions.

IRAN AND CYBERSPACE: ASYMMETRIC STRATEGY, PROXY WARFARE, AND THE DIGITAL PROJECTION OF POWER

Iran's approach to cyberspace, as is the case with other authoritarian powers, is marked by ambivalence: on the one hand, it serves as a mechanism for controlling the population and propagating its own values through digital media; on the other, it represents a constant source of danger in the form of Western media influence. The presence of these media as alternatives to state-run outlets poses a particular challenge for the authorities in Tehran, who frequently face mass protests (Freilich, Cohen, and Siboni 2023, 140). Additionally, the opportunities that cyberspace offers as a medium for projecting influence in the region and conducting malicious operations have led Tehran to recognise cybersecurity as a key aspect of future national security. Notably, the mass protests of 2009 and the discovery of the US-Israeli Stuxnet virus in 2010 acted as catalysts for intensified

² An illustrative indicator of Tel Aviv's success after 2010 is the remarkable growth of its cybersecurity industry. Israel is now considered the world's second-largest centre for cybersecurity software development. For a more detailed discussion (Eisenstadt and Pollock 2021).

Iranian efforts to develop cyber capabilities (Anderson and Sadjadpour 2018, 10–11). For the survival of the ayatollah regime, cybersecurity has become as important as the development of nuclear weapons (Bucala and Pendleton 2015).

Iran's international activity in cyberspace plays a multifaceted role in its strategy to strengthen its regional position. Primarily, Tehran relies heavily on cyber means in its asymmetric actions in the Middle East, seeking to avoid escalations that could lead to armed conflict (Haroon 2024, 146) or to the depletion of resources among local proxies. At the same time, cyber instruments represent a relatively cost-effective and less visible means of gathering intelligence and targeting the institutions and businesses of other states. These activities frequently constitute the first step in information operations, which manifest through the publication of sensitive data or the articulation of specific political messages, intending to demonstrate capabilities and exploit perceived weaknesses of adversaries.

Drawing on lessons from the Stuxnet case, Iran significantly intensified its financial investments in this domain after 2010. Although precise data are not publicly available, estimates by the US Army War College indicate that Iran's cyber operations budget rose from \$76 million to \$1 billion over a four-year period, a clear indication of the importance Iran attaches to cyberspace (Shafa 2014). Particular emphasis has been placed on enhancing educational standards in information technology and on selecting personnel who have begun to fill positions in the cyber units of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Ministry of Intelligence (Netolická and Mareš 2018, 420; Keshavarz 2023, 122). Continuous investment has begun to yield results, as evidenced by the growing number of sophisticated attacks on critical infrastructure in other countries (such as the aforementioned 2012 attack on Saudi Aramco), which have led regional states to perceive Iran as an escalating cyber threat.

Attacks by Iranian cyber groups and their affiliated proxies on the computer networks of the Gulf states have continued in subsequent years, revealing several trends in Tehran's behaviour in cyberspace. Consistent with its strategy of relying on a network of proxy actors across the Middle East to conduct asymmetric operations and enhance its position, Iran has initiated a process of diffusing knowledge and

malicious tools from state cyber actors to affiliated non-state entities. This practice has increased Tehran's overall capacity to conduct offensive cyber operations, while simultaneously making it much more difficult to reliably identify the immediate perpetrators of attacks, thereby rendering responsibility for cyber actions diffuse and hard to attribute to a specific actor.

The low level of risk awareness and limited investment in cyber defence by Gulf states during the 2010s left them particularly vulnerable to operations by Iranian and pro-Iranian cyber actors. A telling indicator of the exposure of Middle Eastern actors to cyber threats is a study by Tenable, which found that as many as 95% of Saudi companies faced cyber threats that negatively affected their operations in 2019 (Tashkandi 2020), with Iran identified as the main source of attacks (Guzansky and Deutch 2019). In addition to targeting regional adversaries, Iranian-affiliated cyber actors have also conducted offensive operations against the United States, the main ally of Iran's regional opponents. These activities have included targeting critical infrastructure, such as the attack on the Bowman Dam in 2013 (United States Department of Justice 2016), as well as attacks on private companies and individuals, with particular focus on prominent opponents of the Tehran regime (Elgin and Riley 2014).

Like Israel, Iran has relied heavily on its network of allies as a source of technological innovation, empirical experience, and operational support in conducting cyber operations. Its primary partner in these efforts is Russia, with which Iran signed a cyber cooperation agreement in 2015 (Agence France-Presse 2015), further upgraded in 2021 with a Cyber Security Cooperation Agreement encompassing greater technology and information exchange, training, and assistance in international cyber incidents (El-Masry 2021). The Strategic Cooperation Agreement between Beijing and Tehran, concluded the same year, is also aimed at technology and information sharing, with significant Chinese investment in telecommunications infrastructure and software, enabling Iran to establish even tighter control and surveillance over its own cyberspace (Reuters 2021). Cooperation among these states is not limited to state actors in cyberspace, but also extends to non-state actors, including the exchange of stolen data and coordinated attacks on the critical infrastructure of other states. An

example of this informal cooperation was identified in joint operations by pro-Russian and pro-Iranian cyber actors during attacks on Western Balkan states in 2022 and 2023 (Oghanna 2023).

The efforts Tehran has made since 2010 in developing national cyber capabilities have made this instrument a critical component of its hybrid strategy. Alongside its reliance on proxy actors in the form of armed groups throughout the Middle East, one of the key instruments of Iran's regional activity, engagement of both state and non-state cyber actors has enabled Tehran to inflict additional damage on its adversaries with relatively limited resource expenditure. Nevertheless, unlike in Israel, where there is a broad consensus regarding cyber capabilities, this is not the case in Iran, highlighting significant differences in the capacities of the two states.

The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) classifies Iran as a second-tier cyber power (International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS] 2021b, 1), while Israel is ranked among the most advanced (International Institute for Strategic Studies [IISS] 2021a). The United States Department of Defence reached similar conclusions in its 2023 Cyber Strategy, which found that Tehran has not yet demonstrated the capability to conduct continuous, sophisticated cyber operations (U.S. Department of Defence 2023, 5). On the other hand, Siboni, Abramski, and Sapir assess that Iran's cyber capabilities have already reached the level of the most advanced countries (Siboni, Abramski, and Sapir 2020, 39–40), a view shared by Yigal Unna, former Director General of the Israel National Cyber Directorate (Israel National Cyber Directorate 2019).

Despite significant obstacles to development caused by international economic sanctions (Faris 2025, 10), brain drain, and a poorly developed private sector in cybersecurity (Freilich, Cohen, and Siboni 2023, 137), Iran has developed significant national cyber capabilities. These have provided it with an alternative mechanism of action in situations where the use of proxy armed groups is economically prohibitive, politically risky, or operationally unfeasible, a dynamic that has become particularly evident following the outbreak of conflict in Gaza in October 2023.

THE CYBER DIMENSION OF THE IRAN-ISRAEL CONFLICT AFTER OCTOBER 2023

Iran's position in the Middle East remained relatively stable until October 2023. Relying on an extensive network of allies and proxy actors, Tehran exercised influence over the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in the Gaza Strip, while simultaneously projecting its power in Syria, providing crucial support to the Bashar al-Assad regime, and in Iraq, where it maintained control over numerous Shiite militias. However, following the incursion by Hamas militants into Israeli territory on October 7 and the outbreak of war in the Gaza Strip 20 days later, the Iran-Israel conflict entered a new phase, characterised by active hostilities between Israel and pro-Iranian militias and by reciprocal attacks during the Twelve-Day War of June 2025. In parallel, the cyber domain also witnessed an escalation involving both state and numerous non-state actors.

The trend of intensifying cyber operations during periods of heightened tensions between Israel and Iran was already evident in previous conflicts (2009, 2012, and 2014) in which these actors were engaged (Freilich, Cohen, and Siboni 2023, 120). The primary objectives of cyber actors included disabling or defacing government websites, targeting major financial institutions, and stealing data useful for military or further cyber operations (Brenner 2012); however, the outcomes of such operations were neither lasting nor particularly consequential for the overall course of the conflict. The outbreak of hostilities in Gaza in October 2023, however, marked the beginning of a transformation in the Iran-Israel cyber conflict, reflected in the increased sophistication of certain attacks, the expansion of the number of actors involved, and an overall intensification of cyber activity (The Economist 2024; ThreatMon 2026, 5–14).

Differences in the cyber warfare capabilities of Iran and Israel are clearly evident in an analysis of the types of operations that dominate each side, as well as the scope and nature of the damage they can inflict. Analysis of reports from cybersecurity firms (Watts 2024; Radware 2025; Reddy 2025) and government agencies (Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency 2025) reveals certain tendencies in the actions of Iranian and pro-Iranian cyber groups. The most common

is the conduct of information operations aimed at destabilising Israel by deepening social divisions, disturbing public morale, and eroding international support for Tel Aviv (Watts 2024). Iran also uses its cyber resources for intelligence purposes, primarily to collect sensitive information, such as data on members of the Israel Defence Forces, and to access surveillance camera footage for damage assessment (The Economist 2024; Newman 2025). On the other hand, despite numerous claims of successful operations (SOCRadar Cyber Intelligence 2025), there has yet to be any identified significant attack on Israeli critical infrastructure with lasting effects, an indicator of the limited reach of Iran's offensive cyber capabilities.

Israel, meanwhile, has conducted offensive operations in the Iranian cyber domain, primarily for intelligence purposes, gathering data relevant to the identification of military targets and key individuals, including nuclear scientists and senior officers of the Revolutionary Guard and Iran's regular armed forces (Zendata Cyber Security 2025), as confirmed by officials from both sides (Fassihi, Bergman, and Mazzetti 2025). Supporting this assessment is the decision by Iran's leadership, following an initial Israeli Air Force strike, to suspend internet access nationwide and instruct senior officials to set aside their mobile devices for fear they could be used for targeting and tracking (Politico 2025; Fassihi, Bergman, and Mazzetti 2025). Such measures indicate a pronounced perception of vulnerability within Iran's cyber domain and underscore the significant asymmetry in cyber capabilities between the two actors, an asymmetry Israel has leveraged as an additional instrument of its military and intelligence power.

Non-state cyber actors play a particularly distinct role in the conflict. Due to limited resources and expertise, they most often operate in the information domain (Pijpers 2023, 7). Nevertheless, both Iran and Israel employ cooperation with non-state cyber actors as a mechanism to obscure state involvement in specific activities. While examples of cooperation between Iranian state authorities and cyber actors are better documented (Sabin 2025; New Jersey Cybersecurity and Communications Integration Cell 2024), the case of the Israeli group Predatory Sparrow highlights the complexities of identifying the origins of attackers and their connections to state actors. Presenting

itself as a hacker collective opposed to the ayatollah regime, Predatory Sparrow has been responsible for highly sophisticated attacks on Iran's critical infrastructure, targeting steel plants, railways, and energy transportation systems (Miller 2025; Vicens 2023).

During the twelve-day conflict between Iran and Israel, this hacker group conducted several confirmed operations, primarily targeting the financial sector (Picus Security 2025). Particularly notable was an attack on Sepah Bank, known for its ties to the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and for financing Iran's missile program and various pro-Iranian proxies (U.S. Department of the Treasury 2007). Iranian sources confirmed that banking transactions were disrupted (The Times of Israel 2025), though there is no independent confirmation of the data destruction claimed by the hacker group (Vicens and Pearson 2025). Significant damage was also inflicted on the Iranian cryptocurrency exchange, a key institution in Tehran's efforts to circumvent sanctions-imposed trade restrictions (Zendata Cyber Security 2025). The unusual sophistication of these cyber operations has led many cybersecurity firms to categorise Predatory Sparrow as a non-state hacker group with very close ties to Israeli cyber units (Radware 2025; Miller 2025). This illustrative example underscores the growing challenge of cooperation between non-state and state actors in the cyber domain, making attribution and, subsequently, accountability significantly more difficult.

The Iran-Israel conflict since October 2023 demonstrates that cyberspace has become an integral part of contemporary armed conflict, not merely as an auxiliary tool but as an autonomous domain for projecting power. Whereas Iran has primarily used its cyber capacities for limited objectives such as intelligence gathering and information operations, Israel has succeeded in integrating its cyber operations into a broader intelligence-military apparatus, combining state and non-state actors to achieve concrete strategic effects. This practice highlights the growing role of the cyber domain in demonstrating power in asymmetric conflicts, where pronounced imbalances in cyber capabilities can have extremely detrimental consequences for states in a subordinate position, especially amid rising tensions and deepening instability in contemporary global affairs.

CONCLUSION

An analysis of the development of Israel's and Iran's cyber capabilities after 2010, as well as their subsequent use during the conflict in the Gaza Strip in October 2023, demonstrates that the digital realm has become an indispensable and structurally integrated component of contemporary national security strategies, and consequently, of armed conflicts, particularly evident in complex and politically sensitive security environments such as the Middle East. In parallel with the escalation of kinetic operations and the expansion of conflict between Israel and pro-Iranian actors (eventually including Iran itself), cyberspace has functioned as an additional, though not secondary, front, one that revealed profound differences in strategies and, especially, in the available capacities for waging cyber warfare.

Israel's approach to cybersecurity, deeply rooted in the "security triangle" concept, has successfully adapted to the new technological reality. Through strategic investment of substantial financial and administrative resources, Israel has stimulated the development of a high-tech industry, exemplified by numerous successful startups, thereby consolidating its position as a global leader in the field. Further impetus for the development of national cyber capabilities has come from the expanding network of international partners, particularly in its immediate neighbourhood, who view Israel as a key provider of digital security. This synergistic effect of state incentives and private entrepreneurship has not only strengthened national resilience but has also transformed cyber capabilities into an instrument of Israeli soft power and foreign policy engagement in the region.

For Tehran, by contrast, cybersecurity has become as important as the development of its nuclear program, not only for its ability to project national power externally, but also for controlling the internal information environment, which is directly linked to the survival of a regime challenged by frequent protests. Despite systemic obstacles to the development of cyber capabilities, foremost among them international sanctions, Iran has nevertheless achieved significant results. This progress is based on strategic cooperation with Russia and China, targeted domestic investments, and a careful personnel selection process. Although, according to available data, Iran has not yet reached

the level of technical sophistication demonstrated by Israeli actors, the progress achieved has been sufficient to position Tehran as a highly potent threat to regional cybersecurity.

The empirical examples examined in this study confirm the initial hypothesis that cyber instruments cannot fundamentally compensate for power asymmetries when the stronger actor can integrate them into a broader military-intelligence apparatus. Iran primarily employed cyber means as part of an asymmetric, limited-scope strategy. Iranian and pro-Iranian cyber activities focused on information operations aimed at generating social divisions and eroding international support for Tel Aviv, as well as on intelligence gathering, without clearly observable, lasting, or systemic effects on the critical infrastructure of Israel and its allies. In contrast, the Israeli approach is characterised by a higher degree of integration of digital operations into the broader state intelligence-military apparatus, where cyber activities function as an auxiliary mechanism enabling more precise planning and execution of kinetic strikes and increasing the overall effectiveness of military operations. The reactions of the Iranian leadership, including the suspension of internet access and the restriction of mobile device use among high officials, further confirm the perception of significant vulnerability in the cyber domain and point to a pronounced asymmetry in the capabilities of the two states.

The Iran-Israel conflict after October 2023 serves as an illustrative example of the security risks produced by pronounced asymmetry in cyber capabilities in contemporary conflicts. While technologically and organizationally superior actors can integrate cyber tools into military and intelligence operations, thus achieving tangible operational and strategic effects, states in a subordinate position are limited to lower-intensity actions, whose effects are often temporary or symbolic. Such imbalances not only deepen the vulnerability of weaker actors in the context of armed conflict but also encourage the broader use of cyber tools as a component of hybrid operations below the threshold of open warfare. In an environment of increasing regional and global tensions and intensified competition among states, such forms of activity are becoming more common, further heightening the risk of instability, uncontrolled escalation, and the long-term undermining of existing security arrangements.

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САЈБЕР РАТ ИЗРАЕЛА И ИРАНА: ДИГИТАЛНА ДИМЕНЗИЈА БЛИСКОИСТОЧНИХ СУКОБА У ПОСТ-УНИПОЛАРНОМ СВЕТУ**

Резиме

Овај рад анализира еволуцију сајбер сукоба између Израела и Ирана од 2010. године, са посебним освртом на период након избијања сукоба у Гази у октобру 2023. године, у контексту транзиције од америчке униполарности ка мултиполарном међународном поретку. Централно истраживачко питање односи се на то у којој мери сајбер инструменти могу компензовати асиметрију моћи у условима активног регионалног сукоба. Рад заступа став да ефекти сајбер операција остају стратешки ограничени када је технолошки надмоћнији актер способан да интегрише дигиталне операције са кинетичким дејствима. Иранско-израелски сајбер сукоб започео је откривањем вируса *Stuxnet* (рачунарски црв) 2010. године, у оквиру заједничке израелско-америчке операције усмерене против нуклеарног постројења у Натанзу, која је означила први познати пример сајбер напада са директним физичким ефектима на критичну инфраструктуру. Овај догађај навео је обе државе да суштински преусмере своје политике сајбер безбедности и офанзивне сајбер стратегије. Израел је, ослањајући се на доктрину „безбедносног троугла” која наглашава одвраћање, рано упозорење и одсудну победу, развио софистициран национални сајбер екосистем кроз стратешка јавно-приватна улагања и ширење мреже међународних

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** Овај рад представљен је у оквиру конференције „Перспективе политичких наука у савременом друштву IV”, одржане 4–5. децембра 2025. године у организацији Института за политичке студије, Београд.

партнера, учврстивши тако своју позицију глобалног лидера у области сајбер безбедности. За Иран је сајбер безбедност постала подједнако важна као и нуклеарни програм, служећи како пројекцији моћи према споља, тако и контроли унутрашњег информационог простора. Упркос системским препрекама, укључујући међународне санкције, ограничена финансијска средства и одлив мозгова, Техеран је остварио значајан напредак кроз стратешку сарадњу са Русијом и Кином и пажљиву селекцију кадрова унутар сајбер јединица повезаних са Револуционарном гардом. Емпиријска анализа потврђује централну претпоставку рада: Иран је сајбер инструменте превасходно користио у оквиру асиметричне стратегије ограниченог домета, усмерене на операције у информационом простору са циљем генерисања друштвених подела и ерозије међународне подршке Израелу, као и на прикупљање обавештајних података, без јасно уочљивих, трајних или системских ефеката по критичну инфраструктуру. Израел је, насупрот томе, интегрисао сајбер операције у шири војно-обавештајни апарат као допунски механизам који омогућава прецизније планирање и извођење кинетичких удара. Иранско-израелски сукоб након октобра 2023. године тако представља илустративну студију случаја безбедносних ризика које производи изражена асиметрија сајбер способности, у којој технолошки надмоћнији актери остварују конкретне стратешке ефекте, док су слабије државе ограничене на облике деловања нижег интензитета, чији су домети неретко привремени или симболични.

Кључне речи: Израел, Иран, сајбер ратовање, сајбер безбедност, Блиски исток.

* This paper was received on January 21, 2026, and accepted for publication at the Editorial Board meeting on February 27, 2026.

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**INDIRECT IMPLICATIONS
OF SHARENTING ON THE NATIONAL
SECURITY OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA
(Translation in *Extenso*)**

Abstract

The global phenomenon of “sharenting”, defined as the extensive online sharing of minors’ personal data by parents, represents a complex and indirect threat to national security. Although the motives behind this practice are predominantly uncritical, it results in the construction of permanent digital identities for future generations without their prior consent. In the Republic of Serbia, digital risks are further exacerbated by the disparity between youth’s high digital engagement and parents’ limited knowledge of information security. While direct consequences, such as identity theft, are well-documented, this paper argues that aggregated data derived from sharenting serves as a strategic intelligence resource for both state and non-state actors. The systemic accumulation of this information facilitates sophisticated psychological

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profiling, extensive surveillance, and targeted influence operations, potentially compromising key state personnel and undermining social cohesion. Current vulnerabilities in the national cybersecurity system, coupled with legislative implementation challenges, create an environment that is highly conducive to such data exploitation. Addressing these threats requires a coordinated strategic approach that integrates strengthening legal frameworks, technical protection of critical infrastructure, and systemic digital education. Mitigating the risks arising from sharenting is not merely a child protection measure but an essential step in safeguarding national security.

Keywords: sharenting, national security, information warfare, personal data protection, strategic resilience.

INTRODUCTION

The term “sharenting” (a portmanteau of “sharing” and “parenting”) refers to the widespread practice of parents sharing online information, photographs, stories, and videos of their children, often to an excessive degree (Stephenson et al. 2024). This phenomenon has reached global proportions, becoming a normalized social practice. Research indicates that the vast majority of parents active on social media engage in sharenting (82% of parents surveyed in 2020 confirmed such behavior) (Auxier et al. 2020). In the modern era, an individual’s digital presence often begins in the prenatal period through the sharing of ultrasound images, resulting in the average five-year-old child having as many as one thousand publicly accessible images online (Gatto, Corsello, and Ferrara 2024).

The motivations behind this parent behavior are complex and rooted in multiple factors, including personal needs and external pressures. Internal drivers are primarily linked to emotional satisfaction, the desire to preserve memories, and the public celebration of a child’s achievements. On the other hand, external incentives stem from a need for social validation within online communities, peer pressure, and “impression management” – the effort to project a specific image of parenthood. Additionally, economic benefits associated with creating commercial “influencer” content represent a significant factor (Motevalli et al. 2025, 3).

Social media platforms actively encourage sharenting through their design, utilizing economic models to maximize growth. The algorithmic prioritization of content featuring children results in higher engagement rates (likes and comments), which some parents utilize for financial gain (Serna 2024, 396). Sharenting creates a feedback loop that drives parents to share more personal content, increasing their online engagement and creating a continuous incentive to post more vulnerable information. In this way, content demand outpaces parental safety considerations, resulting in an endless stream of sensitive child information entering the public domain. Algorithmic amplification systems generate enormous volumes of data that transcend individual decisions. This increased accessibility of information regarding children expands the datasets available for exploitation by foreign actors, thereby indirectly threatening national security.

The Republic of Serbia faces a specific challenge: a high adoption rate of digital technologies among youth, coupled with low levels of awareness of protection and preventive measures. Children and adolescents in Serbia demonstrate exceptional digital activity, with 86% of the population aged nine to 17 using smartphones daily. Of particular concern is that a significant proportion of younger children (41% aged nine to ten and 72% aged eleven to twelve) maintain profiles on social media or gaming platforms, despite the minimum age requirement of 13 for most services (Kuzmanović et al. 2019, 11). This intensive digital presence is not matched by parental awareness, as many parents lack the skills needed to manage their children's online activities securely. Technical tools, such as "parental controls", are utilized far less frequently than in other countries, with fewer than one-fifth of students confirming their application (Kuzmanović et al. 2019, 13).

Although Serbia possesses a legal framework primarily consisting of the Law on Personal Data Protection (*Zakon o zaštiti podataka o ličnosti* [ZZPL] 2018), which is aligned with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), and state mechanisms such as the National Contact Center for Safety of Children on the Internet (European Union 2025), a clear gap remains between regulation and implementation. Low parental awareness suggests that institutional measures have yet to result in a fundamental behavioral shift at the

family level. The issue lies not only in the legislation but also in enforcement challenges, insufficient public understanding, and a degree of cultural resistance to digital security. This disparity renders the data of children in Serbia vulnerable. Unregulated information flows allow various entities, including foreign adversaries, to aggregate and misuse such data, ultimately posing an indirect threat to state security.

THE MECHANICS OF DIGITAL PROFILING AND SURVEILLANCE

The advertising technology (*adtech*) industry and data brokers maintain a complex network that accumulates extensive quantities of personal data through tracking technologies, including digital cookies (Archbold et al. 2021, 857). The data collection includes sensitive information such as demographics (e.g., religion, race), political preferences, health information, and precise geolocation data (Sherman 2024). In almost every area, children face a higher risk of being affected because they do not fully understand the digital environment and lack the capability to make informed decisions (Archbold et al. 2021, 858).

The practice of sharenting adds extensive data to the commercial data pool without parents' knowledge while providing detailed information about children from their earliest years. The database contains Personally Identifiable Information (PII), location data, daily routines, family relationships, and sensitive biometric information, including fingerprints and palm photos (Stephenson et al. 2024). A large collection of child data is essential for developing more effective artificial intelligence (AI) capabilities and algorithms. Facial recognition software, for instance, can be trained on the extensive collection of children's images, enabling long-term identification and tracking as individuals age. Furthermore, AI tools themselves are being weaponized for various forms of exploitation, including the creation or alteration of images and the simulation of explicit chats with children (Missingkids 2024).

The commercial aggregation of children's data, catalyzed by sharenting, creates an accessible, strategically relevant intelligence resource for foreign adversaries. Hostile state actors can access

these collections through market transactions or legal collection methods, thereby eliminating the need for complex cyber intrusions (Office of Public Affairs 2025). This weaponization of data enables the construction of evolving individual profiles from childhood to adulthood, offering opportunities for long-term data exploitation in espionage, blackmail, or influence operations. For the Republic of Serbia, this implies that a significant portion of the future workforce, military personnel, and state leaders could be pre-emptively profiled by external entities, directly eroding national resilience and complicating counterintelligence protection.

This intelligence capital serves as an operational foundation for Open Source Intelligence (OSINT) and Social Media Intelligence (SOCMINT) strategies. By integrating diverse data threads from social media, foreign actors construct sophisticated psychological dossiers that reveal an individual's most intimate vulnerabilities (Stephenson et al. 2024). SOCMINT, a subfield of OSINT, facilitates the collection and analysis of information from platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok (OSINT 2025). The data generated contribute to the development of comprehensive psychological profiles that reveal personal beliefs, emotional reactions, and information-processing models (Stegen 2025, 248). These profiles have strategic applications in human source recruitment, diplomatic negotiations, and targeted influence operations (248). Detailed knowledge of a psychological profile enables manipulation techniques that expose hidden vulnerabilities rooted in childhood digital exposure. By examining sharenting data, adversaries can identify specific weaknesses, such as family dynamics, health issues, or psychological traumas (Stephenson et al. 2024). Such information facilitates the development of personalized social engineering tactics, representing a threat to democratic processes and national cohesion. Foreign services build dossiers tracking an individual's emotions and relationships from birth, utilizing emotional triggers for the recruitment or blackmail of future sensitive-position holders before they even enter office.

Beyond immediate manipulation, digital footprints enable a form of "persistent surveillance" that can last for decades. With advancements in predictive analytics, initial parental posts evolve into tools for social sorting and the monitoring of future generations

(Stephenson et al. 2024). The ecosystem of dataveillance firms creates profiles distributed to recruitment agencies and educational institutions, using algorithms to predict future behavior and loyalty (Haley 2020, 1010). Concerns are also rising about state surveillance that integrates data from social networks, smart devices, and medical records, often supported by laws requiring local data storage to facilitate access by security services (Feldstein 2020, 2). The comprehensive digital cataloging of national human resources enables adversaries to “cultivate” individuals years before they become strategically relevant, thereby compromising the entire institutional system and human interaction as a constant point of potential exploitation.

GEOPOLITICAL LEVERAGE AND INFORMATION WARFARE

Sensitive personal data, including precise geolocation information (e.g., from military installations) or intimate details, may be weaponized by foreign adversaries to coerce or blackmail individuals with access to classified national information (Sherman 2024). Sharenting inadvertently reveals extensive details about family relationships, daily routines, and children’s personal vulnerabilities, thereby transforming family members into potential intelligence-gathering targets. The abundance of data on children’s preferences, behavioral patterns, and emotional states enables foreign actors to build psychological profiles, which serve as a critical foundation for launching sophisticated influence operations (Stegen 2025, 248). This information is utilized to construct highly credible phishing attempts¹ and other digital deception tactics targeting parents in government, military, or critical infrastructure positions.

The extensive disclosure of family details creates an optimal environment for human intelligence (*HUMINT*) operations. Such data facilitates the identification of individuals with family vulnerabilities (such as health issues or the disclosure of personal secrets) that can

¹ Phishing is a form of online scam where attackers pose as a trustworthy entity or individual, such as a bank, social media platform, or service provider, to trick people into revealing sensitive information like passwords and credit card details, or to install malicious software (Microsoft 2026).

be exploited for blackmail, recruitment, or unauthorized access to sensitive state information. The risk of “insider threats” escalates when military personnel, state officials, and intelligence operatives are targeted, as their private lives become vulnerable points of pressure for foreign adversaries. Informal online sharing of family content directly undermines state security by compromising the integrity and loyalty of key personnel, ultimately weakening national defense and intelligence capacities.

Psychological data harvested through sharenting serves as a foundation for developing effective propaganda and disinformation campaigns (Stegen 2025, 252). This phenomenon aligns with the synthetic propaganda phase, characterized by the use of artificial intelligence to construct compelling yet fraudulent content (Kazić 2025, 108). In a broader security context, such activities become an integral part of hybrid warfare, where the synergy of kinetic and non-kinetic methods aims to destabilize the cultural and value-based foundations of the targeted state (Đorđević and Miljković 2025, 169). By understanding the psychological biases and fears within a population, foreign opponents can shape narratives that erode public trust in institutions. The psychological and social damage identified as a consequence of sharenting (e.g., the erosion of family trust, mental health issues, and the generational privacy gap) can be further weaponized in foreign influence operations (Stephenson et al. 2024).

The psychological information, social patterns, and internal conflicts of a population (including its youth) contained in sharenting data provide foreign adversaries with sophisticated tools to execute successful information warfare operations. This can involve micro-targeting propaganda to specific demographics, amplifying existing societal divisions (e.g., intergenerational conflicts over privacy, parental rights vs. child rights), or systematically eroding public trust in government, media, and democratic processes. For a country like Serbia, which is undergoing democratic reforms and pursuing EU accession, such external manipulation, fueled by readily available personal data, poses a significant threat to its democratic stability, social cohesion, and national security (Eurochild 2025). Foreign actors can use this method to quietly shape public attitudes and intensify social conflicts while damaging trust in national institutions

without conducting direct cyberattacks on infrastructure. The gradual breakdown of social unity, combined with weakened democratic institutions and increased susceptibility to foreign influence, creates a major indirect threat to national security. In a geopolitically sensitive region like the Balkans, where historical tensions can be easily reignited, this data-driven information warfare poses a particularly acute risk to Serbia's future stability and security.

CONTEXTUAL VULNERABILITIES AND DATA GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES IN THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA

While these risks are global in scope, they take on a specific urgency within the Republic of Serbia. Here, a unique intersection of high digital engagement among youth and a lack of "digital hygiene" among parents creates a fertile ground for exploitation. As citizens navigate these external threats, the domestic legal and security infrastructure continues to wrestle with significant protective gaps.

The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia provides for the protection of privacy (Art. 41) and personal data (Art. 42) (Ustav Republike Srbije, Art. 41 i 42, 2006). These provisions constitute data collection boundaries that protect personal information from misuse, except when necessary for criminal investigations or national security. Since 2019, Serbia has implemented the Personal Data Protection Act (PDPA), which is largely aligned with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) (Đerić, Radović, and Petrović 2025). The Personal Data Protection Act requires users to obtain consent before processing data, but imposes additional consent requirements and grants data subjects the right to request the complete removal of their data ("right to be forgotten"). For minors under 14, parental or guardian consent is generally required for data processing (Letslaw 2024).

The Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Protection of Personal Data – DPA is the primary regulator for data protection in Serbia, with investigative, corrective, and advisory powers similar to those of GDPR supervisory bodies. However, while the DPA conducts inspections (731 in 2023) and issues warnings (51 in 2023), the number of initiated misdemeanour proceedings (ten in 2023)

appears limited given the scale of potential violations. The DPA also faces legal challenges, including lawsuits from the Ministry of Internal Affairs regarding data deletion orders (Đerić, Radović, and Petrović 2025).

Despite international human rights instruments like the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (Art. 16 and 19) that protect children's right to privacy, Convention for the Protection of Individuals about Automatic Processing of Personal Data which ensures respect for human rights in personal data processing (Zakon o potvrđivanju konvencije o zaštiti lica u odnosu na automatsku obradu ličnih podataka [ZPKZL] 2010), Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (Lanzarote Convention) that criminalizes online child pornography and "grooming",² Serbia currently lacks a comprehensive Law on Child Rights. Instead, child-related legal provisions are part of various national laws (education, health, social welfare, etc.). Besides that, the main oversight body, the Council for the Rights of a Child, remains inactive despite its re-establishment in March 2023 (Eurochild 2023).

The current legal system provides extensive general data protection but fails to establish specific, robust standards to protect children's digital privacy in situations involving parental data sharing. Also, the enforcement mechanism lacks sufficient scale to handle the widespread nature of sharenting practices. This creates a permissive environment for sharenting, creating a huge amount of opportunities for foreign adversaries to exploit the collected sensitive child data.

The Republic of Serbia possesses an evolving cybersecurity ecosystem that faces challenges arising from both external threats and systemic complexities in data governance. Official national data reveals a structural vulnerability: a dramatic surge in mobile data consumption and digital connectivity, with mobile internet traffic continuing to grow exponentially (RATEL 2024, 22). While Serbian legislation provides a framework for combating cybercrime, the

² Grooming is the term used for the process that typically precedes the sexual abuse of children, often translated as "recruitment" or "luring". It involves a potential predator befriending a child and gaining their trust in an attempt to involve them in abusive sexual activities (Nacionalni kontakt centar za bezbednost dece na internetu 2023).

effectiveness of its implementation remains a subject of academic debate. Concerns have been raised about the operational capacity of the National Computer Emergency Response Team (*CERT*) to manage the scale of data exploitation facilitated by sharenting (Dennis 2024). This gap between legislative intent and operational reality creates a strategic opening for foreign actors to harvest psychological data and conduct sophisticated influence operations (Stegen 2025, 248). The discourse on digital privacy in Serbia is significantly shaped by the presence of advanced forensic and surveillance technologies. Scholarly analyses and civil society reports have raised questions regarding the oversight mechanisms governing the use of tools such as sophisticated spyware and mobile forensics (Ristić 2023, 17–19; Amnesty 2024). From a national security perspective, the central issue is not merely the existence of these capabilities, but the “trust deficit” they may generate within the population. A lack of transparency in data processing by state institutions can erode public confidence, leading to lower compliance with essential “digital hygiene” and cybersecurity protocols (Ristić 2023, 15). Further complications in this field stem from documented vulnerabilities in large-scale public databases, underscoring the technical and systemic risks within the national digital infrastructure. For instance, the centralisation of sensitive citizen data in facilities like the State Data Centre, while aimed at protection, simultaneously creates a significant target for potential exploitation and unauthorised access (10). In this context, the erosion of public trust becomes a strategic vulnerability. A population skeptical of domestic data governance is more susceptible to external influence and to sophisticated data exploitation by foreign adversaries. Therefore, the resilience of Serbia’s national security is inextricably linked to the transparency of its digital oversight and the robustness of its data protection mechanisms.

Through multiple domestic and international initiatives, Serbia demonstrates its dedication to protecting children online and enhancing public awareness of digital risks. The National Contact Centre for Child Safety on the Internet has served as the key national initiative since 2017, delivering advisory support, referring abuse cases to relevant institutions, and conducting preventive educational activities at the school and community levels (European Union 2025).

Organization UNICEF Serbia also actively works with government entities and private sector companies to build protected digital spaces for children (UNICEF Serbia 2017). These initiatives include extensive educational programs that build children's digital literacy skills alongside their parents and teachers through the use of "Smart and Safe" platforms. For example, in 2023, the National Contact Centre performed 120 educational sessions throughout Serbia 2023 which brought benefits to 7,800 students, 1,000 parents, and 300 teachers (European Union 2025). Serbia also participates in global programs aimed at protecting users' online privacy. It is a party to the Council of Europe's Convention on Cybercrime (Budapest Convention) and the Lanzarote Convention, which address cybercrime and child sexual exploitation. Furthermore, Serbia collaborates with Interpol on projects like "Disrupting Harm", aimed at combating online child sexual exploitation and abuse through evidence-based research and response strategies (OSINT 2025). Despite these commendable efforts, persistent gaps remain. Public awareness of cybersecurity in Serbia is improving, but needs further improvement (Dennis 2024). Many parents still lack sufficient knowledge regarding online threats and rarely use technical parental controls. Research indicates that children often help parents with digital tasks, thus revealing a knowledge deficit among adults that current educational initiatives may not effectively resolve (Kuzmanović et al. 2019).

While Serbia's sharenting prevention initiatives demonstrate strong intent and broad reach, ongoing parent education challenges and weak implementation of technical safeguards indicate these programs have not achieved sufficient scale to change widespread sharenting behaviors and minimize associated data exposure risks. The program's focus on internet safety might not fully tackle the complex methods that sophisticated actors use to gather and weaponize data. This indicates that the current approach shows positive signs but appears inadequate to address both widespread sharenting practices and sophisticated foreign-adversary data-exploitation methods. It is a race against time where the data collection is outpacing public awareness. This means that a significant portion of Serbian society remains exposed to the indirect national security risks of sharenting, as their data flows into open-source platforms where it becomes vulnerable to exploitation.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ENHANCING NATIONAL SECURITY RESILIENCE

To adequately address the indirect implications of sharenting for the Republic of Serbia's national security, a comprehensive, coordinated strategic approach is essential. These strategic recommendations focus on reinforcing legal frameworks, upgrading cyber protection, promoting digital literacy, and fostering international cooperation.

The enactment of a dedicated Law on the Rights of the Child should be a primary priority for Serbia in the domain of child rights protection. It is necessary for this new legislative act to address digital privacy, sharenting, and child consent through unified, comprehensive legal provisions rather than fragmented solutions. The law should include clear regulations regarding the "right to be forgotten", which children could exercise upon reaching maturity, enabling them to request the deletion of content posted by parents or third parties. Furthermore, the Commissioner for Information of Public Importance and Personal Data Protection – DPA must receive increased funding, advanced technical tools, and specific authority to conduct investigations and sanction violations related to sharenting and the exploitation of children's data (Đerić, Radović, and Petrović 2025). This body must precisely define its jurisdiction regarding parental data sharing and ensure effective processing of all received complaints.

The legal system requires continuous education programs focused on digital privacy, sharenting, and data aggregation and exploitation within the context of children's rights and national security, specifically designed for members of the police, judges, and prosecutors (Gatto, Corsello, and Ferrara 2024). This will facilitate a more subtle and effective legal response to modern digital threats. Additionally, the Government of Serbia must intensify efforts to align data protection and digital service standards with European Union frameworks, particularly the Digital Services Act (DSA). Through this measure, Serbia would achieve better oversight of online platforms operating within its territory, as well as more effective mechanisms for suppressing harmful content and data misuse.

Alongside legal reforms, it is essential to secure critical technical infrastructure. National security authorities should implement rigorous cybersecurity measures to protect vital state databases and essential services as part of a critical infrastructure defense initiative. Protecting these systems is fundamental, as hackers could cross-reference stolen data with information gathered through sharenting to create complex individual profiles (Dennis 2024). The application of “data protection by design” and “data protection by default” principles must become mandatory for every digital service and state system. This involves encouraging data minimization (collecting only necessary information) while utilizing strong encryption and other security measures. Furthermore, operational plans must be developed to prevent data brokers from selling information about Serbian citizens to foreign adversaries. These brokers should be regulated through legislation or intelligence operations to block such data transfers (Sherman 2024). The state must establish strict procedures to protect public databases containing citizen information from unauthorized access. Any data leak from state registries that coincides with sharenting information enables the creation of detailed profiles that hostile entities can easily exploit.

Long-term societal immunity depends on a systemic shift in digital literacy and education. It is imperative to launch advanced public awareness campaigns that explicitly demonstrate how sharenting compromises national security. By utilizing a narrative-driven approach, educational frameworks should illustrate how routine content sharing facilitates the “weaponization of data”, transforming private family moments into permanent security vulnerabilities. Emphasis should be placed on the nation’s collective security and the long-term consequences for children’s futures. Additionally, mandatory digital literacy should be introduced into the educational system, from early childhood through adolescence. The curriculum should train students in critical thinking regarding online content, privacy management, and understanding the permanent digital footprint.

In parallel with systemic measures, it is essential to empower parents with practical, culturally tailored resources that enable the immediate application of privacy protection strategies, such as face-blurring techniques or rigorous control over metadata and

PII. In this context, public figures and influencers in Serbia bear a specific social responsibility to lead by example in promoting ethical sharenting and digital discretion (European Union 2025). At the macro level, Serbia's national security must be bolstered through intensive cross-border cooperation. This entails strengthening partnerships with institutions such as the European Union, UNICEF, Interpol, and Europol, primarily through the exchange of operational intelligence regarding sophisticated forms of digital child exploitation. For these efforts to materialize, sustained support for the capacity building of domestic law enforcement and intelligence agencies is mandatory, with a particular focus on advancing digital forensics and expertise in OSINT and SOCMINT analytics (Conti et al. 2024). Finally, the Government of Serbia should position itself on the international stage as a champion of global standards for protecting children's digital rights. Such strategic action aims not only to protect individuals but also to systemically curb the unchecked exploitation of data by commercial and state actors, thereby essentially safeguarding information sovereignty and the nation's future in the information age.

CONCLUSION

Sharenting today transcends the boundaries of private family practice and has become a key factor within the national security domain of the Republic of Serbia. The inadvertent creation of permanent digital identities for children, coupled with the systemic aggregation of sensitive data by commercial entities, transforms personal information into strategic intelligence resources. External actors can exploit these sources for psychological profiling, long-term surveillance, and influence operations, thereby potentially compromising the integrity of key personnel and eroding social cohesion.

The specific nature of the digital environment in Serbia is reflected in the disproportion between high internet engagement among the youth and a deficit in digital literacy among parents. Although the domestic legal framework is largely aligned with international standards, mitigating the negative effects of sharenting is hindered

by the absence of specific legislation on children's rights and by challenges in implementing existing regulations. In this context, transparency in state surveillance mechanisms is crucial for building public trust. A deficit in this trust is not merely an internal social issue, but a systemic vulnerability that weakens national resilience, rendering the population more susceptible to sophisticated external pressures and data manipulation.

Addressing this phenomenon is not exclusively a matter of individual privacy protection but constitutes a national security imperative. Building resilience requires a proactive approach that integrates strengthening legal mechanisms, improving state data governance, and large-scale digital education. Protecting the digital future of the youngest citizens is a fundamental prerequisite for preserving the long-term stability and integrity of the Republic of Serbia within a global, data-driven order.

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ИНДИРЕКТНЕ ИМПЛИКАЦИЈЕ ШЕРЕНТИНГА НА НАЦИОНАЛНУ БЕЗБЕДНОСТ РЕПУБЛИКЕ СРБИЈЕ

Резиме

Глобални феномен „шерентинга”, дефинисан као екстензивно дељење личних података малолетних лица на интернету од стране родитеља, представља комплексну индиректну претњу по националну безбедност. Иако су мотиви за шерентинг доминантно некритички и вођени тренутним друштвеним трендовима, крајњи исход је креирање дигиталног отиска за будуће генерације, чиме се дугорочно компромитује њихов информациони суверенитет. У Републици Србији дигитални ризици су додатно наглашени услед неусклађености између високе стопе дигиталне ангажованости младих и дефицита знања родитеља о аспектима информационе безбедности. Док су директне последице, попут крађе идентитета, детаљно документоване, овај рад аргументује да кумулативни подаци проистекли из шерентинга служе као стратешки обавештајни ресурс за државне и недржавне актере. Системско прикупљање ових информација омогућава софистицирано психолошко профилисање, екстензиван надзор и циљане операције утицаја, које могу компромитовати кључно државно особље и нарушити друштвену кохезију. Постојеће рањивости националног сајбер-безбедносног система, праћене изазовима у имплементацији легислативе, стварају амбијент погодан за експлоатацију података.

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Сузбијање ових претњи захтева координисан стратешки приступ који интегрише унапређење правних оквира, техничку заштиту критичне инфраструктуре и системску дигиталну едукацију. Ублажавање ризика проистеклих из шерентинга није само мера заштите деце, већ и неопходан корак у очувању националне безбедности.

Кључне речи: шерентинг, национална безбедност, информациони рат, заштита података о личности, стратешка отпорност.

* This paper was received on August 6, 2025, and accepted for publication at the Editorial Board meeting on February 27, 2026.

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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

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(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.

Pollit, 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;
- Title font size: 14 pt;
- Subtitles font size: 12 pt;
- Text font size: 12 pt;
- Footnote font size: 10 pt;
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- Text alignment: Justify;
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- Page numbering: Arabian numerals in lower right corner;
- Do not break the words manually by inserting hyphens to continue the word in the next line;
- Save the manuscript in the .doc format.

Research article manuscript preparation

The manuscript should be prepared in the following manner:

Name and surname of the first author*

* Footnote: E-mail address: The institutional e-mail address is strongly recommended. ORCID:

Affiliation

Name and surname of the second author**

** Footnote: E-mail address: The institutional e-mail address is strongly recommended. ORCID:

Affiliation

TITLE OF THE PAPER***

*** Footnote: if necessary, specify one of the following (or similar) data: 1) the name and number of the project; 2) the proceeding where the manuscript was presented under the same or similar title; 3) statements of gratitude.

Abstract

Abstract, within 100–250 words range, contains the subject, aim, theoretical and methodological approach, results and conclusions of the paper.

Keywords: Below the abstract, five to ten **key words** should be written. Key words should be written in roman font and separated by commas.

The manuscript can have maximally three levels of subtitles. **Subtitles** should not be numbered. They should be used in the following manner:

FIRST LEVEL SUBTITLE

Second level subtitle

Third level subtitle

Tables, charts, and figures should be inserted in the following manner:

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- Below the table/chart/figure, the source should be cited in the following manner: 1) if the table/chart/figure is taken from another source, write down *Source:* and include the parenthetical citation information of the source; or 2) if the table/chart/figure is not taken from another source, write down *Source: Author.*

Use in-text references according to *Citing and referencing*.

Use the footnotes solely to provide remarks or broader explanations.

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References should be listed after the text of the paper, before the Resume in the following manner:

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- all the references should be listed together, without separating legal acts of archives;
- the references should not be numbered;
- list only the references used in the text.

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A review should be prepared in the same manner as the research article, but leaving out the abstract, keywords, resume, or book cover.

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When writing book reviews, split the text into **two columns**. Book reviews should be prepared in the following manner:

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Requests for peer review are submitted through the SCIndeks Assistant system. The deadline for accepting or declining the review request is seven days from receipt, while the review itself must be completed within two weeks of receiving the request. The content of the review is confidential and must not be disclosed to individuals outside the journal's Editorial board. If, at any point, a reviewer becomes aware of any conflict of interest related to the manuscript under review, they are required to inform the Editorial Board as soon as possible.

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National Security / главни и одговорни уредник Марија Ђорић.
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ISSN 2334-959X = Политика националне безбедности

COBISS.SR-ID 203583500



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2026

THE POLICY
OF NATIONAL
SECURITY

ISSN 2334-959X UDC 351.862/.863(497.11) Year XVII vol. 31 No. 1/2026.

ISSN 2334959X



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