

THE GEOPOLITICAL FRAMEWORK OF THE SERBIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE

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Starting with the definition of the concept of strategic culture and its substantive extension and improvement, the paper considers the relations between the geopolitical framework, i.e. the geopolitical definition of state and its strategic culture, in this case - the Serbian state and the Serbian nation. By considering the establishment of the Serbian identity and the Serbian strategic culture from a historical perspective through the prism of the key geopolitical processes of the “long duration” in the Balkans, we further study the specifics of the Serbian identity and the Serbian strategic culture, i.e. its contemporary main variants. The second part of the paper then studies contemporary geopolitical processes in the Balkans and the position in which the Serbian countries and the Serbian nation are placed, as well as perspectives to which they can lead. The final part of the paper, bearing all of this in mind, considers possibilities in contemporary geopolitical circumstances to achieve vital general strategic goals that are in line with the main features of the historically dominant Serbian strategic culture.

Key words: *strategic culture, geopolitics, Serbian identity, Balkans, Rimland, great powers*

Introduction

For decades, the concept of strategic culture has been a widely accepted analytical approach for the comprehensive study of both security and the overall policy of states in contemporary international relations. In its essence, it represents an attempt to integrate into general strategic behaviour their cultural and collective preconditions, and the accumulated historical behaviour and temperament that political decision-makers share with their cultural surroundings. Strategic culture

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is therefore a part of political and overall culture that “exerts a strong influence on the perception and character of the relationship of a society with its strategic environment, as well as on the content and direction of strategic choices and defence orientation of a society. The fact that states and other political communities have their way of perceiving, interpreting and reacting to events in the surroundings that is more or less influenced by local culture greatly conditions certain specificities in considering security and models of the use of force. Such a point of view implies the belief that national interests and ways of their protection are always defined by actors who are necessarily influenced by various contents of strategic culture.”¹ In this sense, both military and general strategic behaviour are not only restricted by resource, material limitations and geographical data in which each country is located, but are also (to a greater or lesser extent) conditioned by cultural, value and identity content.

A more serious study of strategic culture (in the narrower, military-strategic sense) begins much earlier than when Jack Snyder, studying different approaches to the Cold War US-Soviet nuclear confrontation, defined it as “the total sum of ideas, conditioned emotional responses and patterns of usual behaviour that members of a national strategic community have adopted by learning or imitating and which are common to them (in terms of nuclear strategy).”² It can be easily seen in the consideration of national “methods of warfare”, which was studied by Liddell Hart³ in the 1930s, and later by the US military historian Russell Weigley, and Victor Davis Hanson.⁴ After Snyder, the concept of strategic culture is deepened, so Colin Gray considers it as a context in which states develop and implement their security policy in a direct relation with foreign policy behaviour,⁵ and Asle Toje as a sum of dominant attitudes and behaviour that is studied transdisciplinary, at the crossroads of history, possibilities, geopolitics and values.⁶ The expansion of the concept of strategic culture as an analytical approach to the study of the (foreign policy) behaviour of states has gone through three phases: the first, which referred to the definition of

¹ Stanislav Stojanović, “Posebnost odnosa strateške kulture i strategije”, *Vojno delo*, no. 8/2019, year LXXI, Ministry of Defence, Institute for Scientific Information, Belgrade, 2019, p. 33.

² Jack Snyder, *Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Nuclear Option*, RAND Cooperation, Santa Monica, 1977, p. 8.

³ Sir Basil Henry Liddell Hart, *The British Way in Warfare*, Faber & Faber limited, London, 1932.

⁴ Russell Weigley, *The American Way of War: A History of United States Military Strategy and Policy*, Macmillan Publishers Ltd, New York, 1973; Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War: Infantry Battle in Classical Greece*. Alfred A. Knopf, 1989. 2nd. ed. 2000

⁵ Colin Gray, „Strategic Culture as Context: The First Generation Strikes Back,“ *Review of International Studies*, vol. 25, no. 1, January 1999, p. 5

⁶ Asle Toje, „Strateška kultura kao analitički alat – istorija, mogućnosti, geopolitika i vrednosti: primer EU“, *Bezbednost Zapadnog Balkana*, Centar za civilno-vojne odnose, god. 4, br. 14, jul-septembar 2009, Beograd, 2009, p. 4.

the concept itself in relation to the study of the influence of wider political culture on security (primarily nuclear) strategy; the second, which referred to the deepening of the study of the cultural and sociological contents of the studied political cultures that influence strategic decision-makers and, the third, which dealt with the analytical range of the concept of strategic culture within the most widely understood international relations, that is, the influence of cultural values and patterns on the most widely understood strategic actions.

The theorists of strategic culture have different approaches when considering sources, i.e. what influences its development: how much each strategic culture is conditioned by its geographical position, how much by accumulated historical experiences and commitments, and how much by religious and cultural contents and exposure to external influences of the widest cultural and political spectrum - there is no clear agreement on this. It is most often believed that sources (factors) of strategic culture are physical factors (geographic position and borders, climatic conditions, territorial depth and natural resources), political factors (historical experience, political system and belief of elites), socio-cultural factors (myths, symbols, norms and written sources as the basis for further interpretative action). "Geography as a source of strategic culture is not a new idea. At the base of this idea, the geographical context is the mother of history, and therefore the stage for the cultural development of political communities. Throughout their entire history, people have developed different styles of organization, in order to match their needs to the local environment. By inhabiting certain areas with different geographical characteristics, people form different patterns of living in such a territory in order to ensure their survival. These patterns are passed down from generation to generation, which leads them to develop a special point of view on individual and social life, and thus become a part of their cultural identity."⁷ Contrary to emphasizing the geographical influence of the environment on the mentality and establishment of the culture of political communities, the second approach to the establishment of strategic culture views primacy in historical influences and memories of key historical and political events, believing that geographical data provide the basis, and history provides the content of strategic culture of each political subject. The third approach, on the other hand, views this key influence in socio-cultural factors, that is, in the normative and mythical characteristics of dominant cultural narratives that (self)define every cultural creation. Of course, all three factors - spatial, political and identity one, greatly coincide with what geopolitics studies as a synthetic scientific discipline - with the spatial aspects of policy making, i.e. with the relations between socio-political (including identity) processes and the natural and geographical environment.

⁷ Stanislav Stojanović, "Posebnost odnosa strateške kulture i strategije", Vojno delo, no. 8/2019, year LXXI, Ministry of Defence, Institute for Scientific Information, Belgrade, 2019, p. 36.

If, therefore, the broadest strategic framework for foreign policy actions of state is accepted as the starting point for the study of the specifics of a strategic culture, and at the same time it is taken into account that every foreign policy action and positioning is conditioned by geopolitical determinants, the question arises: what are relations between the geopolitical framework, that is, geopolitical conditioning, and definition of state and its strategic culture?

The geopolitical courses in the Balkans and their influence on the identity formation of Serbs and their strategic culture

The very physical and geographical characteristics of the Balkans unequivocally indicate its geopolitical and geostrategic importance: "The Balkan Peninsula is a geographical area in the southeast of Europe, with an area of about 520,000 square kilometers or about 6% of the surface of the European land area, through which the roads lead from Central and Western Europe to the rich oil sources in the Middle East, to Africa, India; the Far East and other parts of the world (...) In the Balkans there is a network of roads that come from the north of Europe and then fork in three main directions: to Trieste, Thessaloniki and Istanbul. The Danube, the longest European river (after the Volga), which connects Central Europe with the Black Sea via a waterway that is over 2,350 kilometers long, flows through the Balkans (...) The southern and western parts of the Balkan Peninsula are awash by the waters of the Mediterranean Sea, so the Balkans is also a part of the Mediterranean (..) In addition to the main longitudinal communication routes in the Balkans, there are also traditional transfer routes, and the most famous is the one connecting Durres-Thessaloniki-Constantinople (historically famous 'Via Egnatia'). This also includes the 2,350-kilometre-long Danube waterway, which connects Central Europe and the Black Sea and represents an important strategic route for advancing to the Black Sea Basin and farther to the Caucasus and Asia. In addition, it is worth mentioning the relations between Posavina and Vojvodina with longitudinal operational and strategic communications along two valleys, such as the Morava-Vardar and Morava-Marič valleys, which form a geographical area in the central part of the Balkan Peninsula."⁸ Serbs have settled exactly in the central part of the Balkans, at almost all key communications and strategic points. They have established their states there, defended them and survived their destruction under the attacks of foreign invaders.

From the perspective of classical geopolitics, the Balkan Peninsula represents a segment of the southern "Mediterranean keyhole" (Brzezinski) between the western and central part of Rimland, the rim of the Eurasian continent that separates its core

⁸ Slavoljub Šušić, *Balkanski geopolitički košmar*, Vojnoizdavački zavod, Beograd, 2004, pp. 28-29.

("Heartland") from the access to the world seas.⁹ The Balkans is a part of the traditional shatter belt due to the contact of different cultural and historical types and their civilization leaders. At the same time, it is a bridge between civilizations, and also an arena for their mutual competition. "As witnessed by the Eurasian historical map, from the time of the Indo-European migrations, it is an area where two main roads of the dynamics of tensions and conflicts, migrations and conquests, hegemonic aspirations and wars intersect, that is, along the meridian (north-south, and south-north) in along the parallels (east-west, and west-east). The dynamics of tensions and conflicts along the routes north-south, i.e. south-north, was revived during the previous two centuries within the Western strategy of hostility against Russia."¹⁰ "The position *between the hammer and anvil* was acquired by the Serbian countries owing to its peripherality and geographical distance in relation to the foci of the world power... Such a contact geopolitical position 'in the gap between worlds'¹¹ made the establishment and functioning of independent Serbian political and territorial structures difficult, interrupted their continuity and disturbed their spatial compactness."¹²

A look at the political history of the Balkans inevitably leads to the knowledge that there are three cultural and civilizational types mutually competing: the Western, which advanced from Central Europe to the Mediterranean and farther to the Orient; the oriental, which spread its influence from the southeast to the northwest, to Podunavlje, and the continental, which came from Heartland to the south, through Podunavlje, to the Mediterranean and farther to the oriental areas of Rimland. In the background, through the manipulation of their mutual conflicts during the past almost 250 years, the main thalassocratic force - Atlanticism, "the master of the world seas", as an expression of extreme modernism in the West is also present in these areas. Atlanticism tends to control and redirect the existing conflicts between its competitors in order to successfully protect its interests in the peripheral area - Rimland, i.e. the Mediterranean as "a gulf of the world sea" with its "bays" (the Adriatic, Ionian and Aegean Sea). "The transgression-regression territorial phases of the great Balkan and non-Balkan empires, whose internal characteristics and projected goals were exclusively incompatible, oscillated across the Serbian lands and their countries as "a frontier".¹³ The constant competition between representatives of the four "great areas"

⁹ On the main geopolitical theories about the importance of Rimland and Heartland, see: Halford Makinder, *Demokratski ideali i stvarnost*, Metafizika, Beograd, 2009; Nicholas Spykman, *The Geography of Peace*, Harcourt, Brace&Co, New York, 1944; Nicholas Spykman, *America's Strategy in World Politics: The US and the Balance of Power*, Harcourt, Brace&Co, New York, 1942; Aleksandar Dugin, *Osnovi geopolitike*, KNJIGA 1, Ekopres, Zrenjanin, 2004 and in the collection of papers *Tajna Balkana*, SKC, Beograd, 1995.

¹⁰ Dragoš Kalajić, "Velike sile protiv srpskog naroda", *Geopolitička stvarnost Srba*, Institut za geopolitičke studije, Beograd, 1997, p. 62.

¹¹ Andreja Miletić, "Iskušnja geopolitičkog zemljotresa", *Zbornik radova Tajna Balkana* (ed. B. Matić), SKC, Beograd, 1995, p. 85.

¹² Milomir Stepić, *U vrtlogu balkanizacije*, Službeni list SRJ, Beograd, 2001, pp. 98-99.

¹³ *Ibid*, p. 98.

in the Balkans, which alternately becomes a barrier/obstacle and a bridge for the fulfillment of their interests, can be noticed throughout many eras: "The division of the Roman Empire into the eastern and western part; the conflicts between Byzantine and Roman-German rulers throughout the Middle Ages; the Schism of Christianity into the Orthodox and Catholic church; the conflict between Islam and Christianity during the rise of the Ottoman Empire; all those struggles and complicated tangled relationships between the great powers regarding their pretensions to the territories of the Ottoman Empire in the phase of their irreversible weakening..."¹⁴

The geopolitical processes in this area are full of competition, both between the great powers and state institutions in this area, which, considering their size and resource capacities, represent, to varying degrees, either mere exponents of the great powers or, on the other hand, international subjects of limited independence that try to fulfill their interests in a cross section, in overlapping interests of several great powers. Only the Serbian state, in some stages of its development, has shown full independence in pursuing its foreign policy, and due to that, it represented a thorn in the side of both its environment and the policies of "the great powers."

As a highly unstable and insufficiently compact area constantly exposed to external influences, the Balkans therefore represented an area for strategic positioning and competing of "the great players". Due to specific cultural and historical circumstances, it was particularly suitable for this since the time when the influence of the former regional hegemon, the one from the southeast, from the Orient - the Ottoman Empire, began to drastically weaken. During the previous few centuries, the influence of other great powers in the Balkans was manifested in "hundreds of plans for the division of the Ottoman Empire between the great powers, and it resulted from three important components of the Balkan history that represent three essential characteristics: several radical upheavals in the course of the millennium and strong historical life of this area, the diversity resulting from the millennia and a half long division into East and West of the Euro-Mediterranean history, and the historical formation of several small nations, of ethnically different origins and divided by three different religions."¹⁵

Historically speaking, both the origin and development, the dissolution and resurrection, and restoration of the Serbian state are related to major geopolitical processes and changes in the influence of the great powers in the Balkan area. The Slavic tribes flooded the Balkan Peninsula as a part of the wave from the Eurasian continental core, from the northeast, to the areas where in the late antique crisis periods the Western influences (of the western part of the Roman Empire) completely failed, and those from the Southeast (the Eastern Roman Empire) weakened dramatically, including internal disorder and many external wars (the Nika riots, wars on the Persian border, Justinian's "Pyrrhic" reconquest of North Africa, and parts of Spain and Italy). The first medieval Serbian states, which emerged from

¹⁴ Momir Stojković, "Geopolitički faktori balkanizacije", Zbornik (ed. Branislav Matić) *Tajna Balkana*, SKC, Beograd, 1995, p. 160.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 160.

numerous “Sclaveni”, coincide with repeated pressures on the Balkans from the renewed forces of the geopolitical actors of the time in the West (Frankish Kingdom) and Southeast (the restored Byzantium at the peak of its power), and the last tremors of the Avar Eurasian proto-state in Pannonia that completely emancipated the Balkan Slavs. With the collapse of the Carolingian imperial project, the influence of the West weakens, but new steppe attacks of the nomadic continentalist powers come from the northeast, establishing the medieval states of Bulgaria (later Slavicized and Christianized) and Hungary (later Christianized, but not Slavicized). The Serbian early medieval states grow and survive in a new milieu, in the area where the Byzantine conflict with these powers takes place. When at the end of the 10th and the beginning of the 11th century, the southeastern Byzantine influence won a complete victory over all rivals in the Balkan areas at the end of the first millennium (the reign of Basil II), the Serbian countries, until then in vassalage to Bulgarians and Hungarians, became the subordinates of the Eastern Roman Empire. With the repeated strengthening of the powers in the West (Hungary, Venice, the Normans in Sicily), the Serbian countries were again trying to free themselves from “the Roman yoke” and achieve full independence. They managed to do this only in the time of the Nemanjić dynasty, when in a complex environment, and due to the weakening of Byzantium under the last Komnenos, constantly changing external allies, a completely independent Serbian medieval state with clear cultural characteristics and religious commitment emerged from Raška. This would become rather pronounced after the Western powers, in the Fourth Crusade, captured Constantinople and established the Latin Empire on its ruins. Although after half a century Byzantium regained its historical capital and a small part of the Balkan territories, the Serbian state was strengthening and expanding in an area where the influence of all the great powers suddenly weakened, especially after the Tatars - Genghis Khanists from the Eurasian steppes crushed practically all Eastern and Central European feudal states in front of them in their crusade to the West. At the beginning of the 14th century, the Serbian independent state even grew into the Balkan hegemon, but for a short time: a new, Ottoman power in the Southeast, tearing off the Byzantine properties part by part, became its geopolitical successor, whose desire for the complete subjugation of the entire peninsula was insatiable. Until its disappearance, the medieval Serbian state had to “balance” between the forces from the south-east and north-west in order to survive, changing its limited independence for full vassalage. In vain. With the fall of Smederevo in 1459, the Serbian state disappeared as a geopolitical subject; the Serbian countries were swallowed up and divided between two great powers - Hungary (later the Habsburg Empire) and Ottomans, and Serbs were transformed into a border nation that both competing powers used as an important border force for interimperial confrontation. All attempts to liberate Serbs and regain their statehood for several centuries were doomed to failure: moving the “frontier” at best meant replacing one type of enslavement with another, often crueller and more hostile, regardless of the contribution they made in war efforts (“the Great Turkish War” (1683–1699), 1716–1718, 1737–1739, 1788–1781 wars (“Koča’s frontier”).

Only at the beginning of the 19th century, in the conditions of the weakening of both empires competing for supremacy in the Balkans (mostly due to consequences of the Napoleonic wars that engulfed the whole of Europe and the Middle East), in the First Serbian Uprising Serbs freed themselves and reestablished their statehood. For a short time, Turks took a step back (1813), but due to the change in the relationship between “the great powers” after Napoleon’s definitive defeat (1815) and the strengthening of the Russian Empire in the European and Middle Eastern politics, the Second Serbian Uprising restarted the process of the definitive Serbian national liberation. It took place in stages, in accordance with mutual relations of the European great powers (continental and thalassocratic) related to the crisis of the Ottoman Empire and the resolution of “the Eastern issue”. The Russian victories over Turks in 1878 led to the full state independence of Serbia and Montenegro, two modern Serbian states, but also to their subsequent de facto fall under the influence of Austria-Hungary. Only at the beginning of the 20th century, with the establishment of two antagonistic camps between the European powers and the liquidation of the Ottoman Empire (“a patient on the Bosphorus”), the situation changed, but the Serbian states would have to pay a terrible price in blood for their independence and unification with their compatriots during the Great War. However, instead of establishing a single, enlarged Serbian ethnic state - both Serbian political elites and Western powers favoured the establishment of a common state of South Slavs (the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, Yugoslavia) in the conditions of the disappearance of the Russian continental influence after the October Revolution. The first South Slavic state thus becomes a part of “a cordon sanitaire” from the Baltic to the Mediterranean, which prevents the influence of Germany and Soviets to the Mediterranean.¹⁶ After the second half of the world conflict, in the changed geopolitical circumstances of the bipolar Cold War world, Yugoslavia survives as a quasi-neutral, intra-bloc entity, whose fate is sealed until geopolitical circumstances change. When this happened in the last decade of the 20th century, with the fall of communism and the disintegration of the Eastern Bloc, the country dissolved into a bloody civil war, and the processes in the Balkans returned to a state that reminds of the one at the end of the 19th century and which is dominant in historical sense: into the state of fragmentation and subjugation of local subjects by the influences of the mutually competing “great powers” that represent four dominant cultural, civilizational and geopolitical influences in these areas through the ages.

The identity foundations of the Serbian strategic culture

The described geopolitical conditions in which the Serbian states were established, developed and disappeared in the contact area of civilizational influences and their geopolitical aspirations (firstly in the contact of the Western and Eastern Christian civilization, and later Islamic, Oriental civilization), have made Serbs “a border nation”,

¹⁶ We wrote about it in: Aleksandar Gajić “Srbija i geostrateški interesi velikih sila 1914. i 2014. godine”, Zbornik “*Srbija i politika velikih sila 1914-2014*” (ed. Đurić Ž. and Knežević M.), Institut za političke studije, Beograd, 2014.

open to different cultural influences. This has been visible since the time of the establishment process of the Serbian nation, which was constituted by mixing the Slavic tribal communities and the earlier Romanized Balkan population. In this process, which apparently lasted several centuries (6th–11th century), the young Serbian nation was rather open to different influences, creating a unique nation from different ethnic groups – the Slavic tribes and the Balkan natives at different levels of civilization.

The Serbian nation, although being “border”, is not a nation “between East and West”, neither here nor there, but clearly defined by its identity as the most western nation of Eastern Christianity. Its culture, since the time of the Serbian ethnogenesis in the early Middle Ages, belongs to the Eastern Orthodox cultural and historical type, i.e. the area of the civilization of the so-called “Byzantine Commonwealth” (D. Obolenski).¹⁷ Despite this, primarily owing to geopolitical influences from all sides, the Serbian cultural identity has behaved elastically and openly since its establishment and throughout its entire development and was receptive to various influences to a considerable extent.

In the Serbian identity core, the Christian spiritual and value vertical and its ethos represent the source that has selectively overvalued the pre-Christian cultural heritage of the natives and Slavic settlers, who have established a new “border” nation, on the border between East and West. The basis of the Serbian identity lies in Saint Sava’s teaching which, with the establishment of the autocephalous church, the crowning of the Serbian national dynasty and the shaping of the Serbian medieval state, was completed by the first Serbian Archbishop Saint Sava Nemanjić. “Saint Sava founded the Serbian Covenant with God on Orthodoxy, true faith and autocephalous ecclesiasticism as the basis of the Serbian covenantal identity. He did not identify nation with faith, but he founded nation on faith, establishing the Serbian history in a sanctifying, eschatological, heavenly Serbian way.”¹⁸ Žarko Vidović, a prominent Orthodox philosopher of our time, agrees with this position: “The secret of the Serbian history, the life of the national community in the Church, is the secret of Christ, of Saint Sava, the Saint Sava’s Covenant given at the Žiča Council and confirmed by the Kosovo Covenant. If Serbs are covenantal people, then it can only be because Serbs as a historical community were not established and historically maintained by the state, but by the Church.”¹⁹ Bishop Nikolaj Velimirović (St. Nikolaj Žički) describes Saint Sava’s teaching as the core of the Serbian identity. He presents it as a form of Christianization and legitimization of the Serbian people with all its specifics in historical circumstances. It is the oldest form of pre-modern, spiritual and broad-minded patriotism, whose national basis is the Orthodox Church.²⁰ “What does national church mean? It is an independent church

¹⁷ Dimitrije Obolenski, *Vizantijski komonvelt*, Prosveta, Beograd, 1996.

¹⁸ Matej Arsenijević, “Zavet – put srbskog bogoslovlja”, foreword to: Vidović Žarko, *Suočenje pravoslavlja sa Evropom*, Svetigora, Cetinje, 1997, p. 12.

¹⁹ Žarko Vidović, *Istorija i vera*, Svetigora, Cetinje, 2008, p. 43.

²⁰ More details: Nikolaj Velimirović, *Nacionalizam Svetog Save*, lecture at the Kolarac People’s University, 1935, <https://www.scribd.com/doc/30345462/Vladika-Nikolaj-Velimirovic-Nacionalizam-Svetog-Sava>

organization, with its central authority from the people and in the people; with national clergy, national language and national customary expression of their faith. In contrast to such a national church there is a non-national or international church, with headquarters out of the people, with clergy from everywhere, with a foreign language and with a single, uniform expression of its faith. What is more natural and beneficial? Undoubtedly national church. It has its justification in the Gospel. The Savior Himself ordered His apostles: go and teach all nations. With those words, He recognized nations as natural units of His universal church... National church requires a national dynasty in state. When people from the nation itself are spiritual leaders, then state leaders should also be people from the nation itself. The parallel here is both logical and inevitable in practice. Having united the national church, Saint Sava began to organize a national state. His most important act in the state organization was the establishment of a national dynasty. He crowned Stevan as king not because Stevan was his brother, but because he was an Orthodox Serb and, in addition, the legitimate holder of the state power."²¹ Saint Sava's teaching was never conquering, expansionist or narrow-minded nationalistic: "A nation state for Saint Sava meant the fatherland, the land of our fathers, where one and the same people live. A nation state does not go as far as a sword can go, but the sword can only go as far as the borders of a nation state, that is, the fatherland. If a state is allowed to spread as far as the sword can reach, then the state ceases to be the nation state, ceases to be the fatherland and becomes an empire. In such a case, a state gains territorially, but loses morally; gains in material dimensions, but loses in the intensity of spiritual and moral strength; because it becomes a mixture of blood, language and mood, and such a mixture produces fear, restlessness, selfishness, rapacity and a feeling of constant insecurity. From Saint Sava to Dušan, the Serbian people had a nation state. Dušan moved away from Saint Sava's ideal, he created an empire, and thereby prepared the ruin of the fatherland, that is, the nation state."²² Sava's evangelical nationalism and the national identity built on it is specific, spiritually oriented and universal: "According to Saint Sava's understanding, national life is an indivisible whole, both physically, spiritually and morally. Hence all the branches of national life and institutions are indivisible, joined not mechanically to each other, but fused with each other so that life juices flow from one to the other."²³ From this perspective, Saint Sava established the Serbian education and the Serbian culture: "The father of our national education Saint Sava understood education as knowledge and practice. First of all, as knowledge of virtues and practice in virtues. Hence, national education is in an organic and unbreakable relationship with the national church. Because the Church is the richest treasure of knowledge about virtues and methods of practicing virtues. The school is not meant to give a lot of knowledge, but rather to teach young people how to stop misusing

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

knowledge. Because it is not so difficult to acquire knowledge as to misuse it. Knowledge can be acquired out of school. However, school is a training room in the virtues of a strong character, a training room in the use of acquired knowledge, for the good of oneself and the people... Culture is the external artistic expression of the national mind and feelings. Saint Sava was tireless in training and creating. And everything he built and created represents a perfect artistic expression: whether it is a building, such as Hilandar and Žiča or a folk custom such as the celebration of Saint Patron's Day or the choice of the language he spoke and wrote. Following his example and inspiration, the Serbian people managed to create their perfect national culture, that is, to give the perfect expression of their mind and heart in masonry, in embroidery and fabric, in song and story, in carving and colour, in inexhaustible wisdom, in the beauty of customs and in the elegance of behaviour."²⁴

Although definitely committed to the Byzantine-Orthodox cultural and civilizational circle from the time of the Nemanjić dynasty, the Serbian Saint Sava's culture was constantly exposed to great external influences. It treated all of them openly, and also flexibly, always with a touch of reserve, critically checking them through its main beliefs and experience. This is indicated by the broadest forms of creativity in the Nemanjić period. "Everything that withstood this test, whether it were technological (mining brought by the Saxons, Venetian banking achievements) or intellectual and cultural influences, was accepted and practiced without great problems. This is best evidenced by the medieval Serbian creativity in its three most pronounced forms - painting, literature and architecture. Thus, for example, the development of architecture tells us about alternating influences that contributed to changes in construction styles in Serbia. Raška's style e.g. has noticeable influences from the Romanesque West, which fits into the Byzantine plan of single-nave churches and the liturgical purpose of the space, while the following, Serbian-Byzantine style gives special national marks to the influences of the so-called "Byzantine Renaissance" of Palaiologos. The third architectural phase - the Morava's style gives a special national mark to architecture, accepting the ornate, oriental influences brought by Islam, with Renaissance art, which was at its peak in the West at that time. Similar influences can be noticed in other arts, as well."²⁵ On the other hand, what appeared to be controversial in relation to the Christian core of the Serbian culture was either overvalued, modified in this way and partly adopted, or was rejected if it proved to be unsuccessful.

A specific concept of national defence and its strategic culture emerged from Saint Sava's national tradition - nation state and national church, in specific historical and geopolitical circumstances. It is characterized by an exceptional sense of self-awareness, freedom and willingness to sacrifice for the ideals of freedom when opposing injustice and the sheer force of foreigners and all those who serve it. Self-importance and freedom are highly valued in the Serbian strategic culture, but within

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Aleksandar Gajić, "Problem srpskog kulturnog identiteta", *Kulturna politika u Srbiji*, NSPM – posebno izdanje, Beograd, 2008, p. 138.

the framework of the Christian morality, which subordinates earthly, transitory and material goods to spiritual, "heavenly" values. Political and military alliances, state interests and possible gains (as well as opposite phenomena - opposition to a superior enemy and potential losses) are never considered separately and profanely, beyond moral and spiritual dimensions, but the entire reality is measured integrally: by the Christian, "heavenly yardsticks", since there is the prevailing conviction in the final triumph of justice based on sacrifice, and the temporary character of every worldly success that is not morally supported ("The Earthly is for a small kingdom, and Heavenly always and forever"). When realpolitik interests coincide with moral feelings and the justice of motives, the fighting spirit of the Serbian war leadership is extremely high and assumes sacrificial and heroic proportions, regardless of the balance of forces and the chances of success of liberating and libertarian goals of the given strategies. This is evidenced by the epics from two Serbian uprisings, World War I and the defence of Kosovo and Metohija in 1999. When, however, realpolitik reasons diverge from moral feelings, Serbs lack enthusiasm to follow policies that provide realpolitik benefit on a lack of morals (defeat in the Serbo-Bulgarian War, popular opposition to the Pact with the Axis Powers on March 27, 1941, which the Anglo-Saxon thalassocrats skilfully used for coup d'état, etc.). Even when the "spiritual" ideals of justice and freedom experience their secularization and are used for different, profane ideological goals - they remain for some time a powerful "driving" means of great militancy (for example, in the case of the partisan movement in the Second World War).

Alliances out of necessity or interest from the perspective of the traditional Serbian strategic culture are justified only if they are not made at the expense of justice and the core of freedom, that is, the survival of basic moral values or the previously won degree of freedom/autonomy; they are always viewed contextually in relation to worldly circumstances and moral feeling (righteousness). In this sense, the views of the Serbian traditional strategic culture look with approval on vassal alliances of Serbs with foreign conquerors as "a necessary evil" that preserves identity, national customs and morals (e.g. the alternate service of despot Stefan Lazarević and Đurađ Branković to the Turks and Ugrians, the service of "border guards" on both sides of the Turkish border to conflicting emperors), in order to preserve religious and national privileges and autonomy. Still, Serbs are averse to long-term, formal alliances and commitments that lead to classification into groups that neglect uniqueness and moral frameworks of actions for the sake of real or alleged interests.

In terms of geopolitical self-identification and identification of others, friends and enemies, the traditional Serbian strategic culture has a pronounced, but insufficiently clearly profiled feeling, whose basis offers these definitions: Serbs perceive themselves as a rather continental/tellurocratically defined people due to historical and geographical circumstances, which by origin, language and spiritually identifies with the areas of Slavic ancestry, i.e. with the Russian/Eurasian Northeast. The Serbian strategic culture has an inexorable premonition with it; it has the same friends and

enemies, the same aspirations to preserve the core of its territories and the aspiration to access the seas, it has the same fate and development stages of civilization. In this key Serbs identify both their immediate environment and its geopolitical and civilizational determinations (it is not a coincidence that it considers Croats/South Slavic Catholics as Latins/Westerners, and identifies Slavic Muslims/Bosniaks with Turks), while it considers German continentalists and Anglo-Saxon thalassocrats as mutually confrontational, but equally hostile conquerors who support all Serbian historical enemies for the sake of their goals, to the immediate geopolitical detriment of Serbs and the Serbian countries. This intuitive identification, at first glance, often seems like an overly plain simplification, but when you consider it in greater details - it turns out (with minor deviations and exceptions) to be quite adequate.

It is particularly interesting that other major geopolitical factors identify Serbs as tellurocrats, "little Russians" in the Balkans, etc. in an identical way (only with a different value sign). "The 'great' have an idea about Serbs and the Serbian countries that is summarized in a simplified and stereotypical, but still basically correct way by the Russian historian Konstantin Nikiforov: 'Serbs are a small nation with the mentality of a great nation'. Therefore, there is the intention to 'reduce them to the right measure', i.e. to make them harmless. Through the prism of global and regional 'players', this treatment of the Serbian actor does not reach more than the level of a geopolitical object, which depends on their global conceptual settings and current Balkan interests. Thus, the Roman Catholic world loads the Serbian area as terra missionis, the great Western Atlanticist powers - as a part of the buffer zone from the Baltic to the Mediterranean and the Russian exponent in the Balkans, Russia - as an integral part of the Slavic-Orthodox community and the outcome of the (neo)Eurasian vector, the Germanic factor - as an obstacle to the completion of Mitteleuropean domination and 'penetration into the Southeast', the Turkish-Islamic bloc - as an interruption in the Trans-Balkan 'Green Transversal' and a barrage to neo-Ottoman expansion, the coming China - as an important intermediary on the 'Belt and Road', i.e. the link connecting the European sectors of the (land) 'Silk Road Economic Belt' and the 'Maritime Silk Road' for the 21st century."²⁶

The issue of modern identity fragmentation and its consequences for the Serbian strategic culture

In order to make the complex character of the Serbian geopolitical position and the Serbian identity in modern age even more complicated, the classical identity and, consequently, the strategic culture of Serbs during the previous two centuries experienced a great change, i.e. a partial departure from its traditional identity positions. These are, first of all, consequences of major historical ruptures due to the

²⁶ Milomir Stepić, "Geopolitički temelji srpske strateške kulture", Vojno delo, no. 8/2019, year LXXI, Ministry of Defence, Institute for Scientific Information, Belgrade, 2019, p. 171.

geopolitical collision of the great players over the Serbian back, which led not only to great sacrifices and identity conversions of parts of the Serbian people into identities suitable for the instrumentalization of these cultural, civilizational and geopolitical aspirations, but also to a partial change in the identity of the remaining Serbs due to a series of emerging weaknesses and shortcomings.

Namely, at the end of the Middle Ages, when it fell under the Ottoman slavery, the culture of Saint Sava with its main characteristics was prevented from growing and developing in its full expression, and it was already cut in the period when it started to develop. After that, due to the imposed circumstances, the reverse process of cultural regression to lower levels began. "Particularization, localisms, various pagan legacies and ethno-psychological regional differences did not see their full, high-quality transformation because it was interrupted by the arrival of foreign conquerors, so that in the centuries-long interregnum of the Islamic domination in the Balkans, the reverse process took place... The return to tribal communities, the extended family - cooperative, the conversion of liturgical religiosity into a common practice and the withdrawal of written and oral tradition in favour of mythical, vague representations - all of these are manifestations of general social regression caused by reactions to the subjugation of the Balkan population and its culture, that is, by the imposition of the authority and cultural pattern of the Islamic conquerors."²⁷ State institutions, law, economic potential, social elites and civil classes disappeared during the centuries of slavery, while spirituality/religiosity, literacy and general culture declined greatly in broad layers due to the forced withdrawal of the Orthodox Church as the holder of the fundamental spiritual vertical of the Serbian cultural pattern. This represented a great difficulty in implementing the approach of a reserved openness and creating the counterweight to dangerous influences in order to preserve identity uniqueness.

The main Serbian problem was the lack of social and cultural elites, especially since the time when the Serbian state was re-established south of the Sava and the Danube. "The attempts to create it were hindered by various causes, such as constant wars and mass deaths of the best layers of society (just formed to take on the role of full social construction), poverty and backwardness, and also due to the centuries-long occupation inherited resistance to every form of government for the sake of local, familiar and personal interests."²⁸ In this period, modernizing influences were stronger, dissolving the strict patriarchal customs that took on more and more formal, even hypocritical forms. This led the immature Serbian middle class, which wanted to escape from poverty and backwardness, to the other extreme: to the formal, uncritical adoption of external influences, whose patterns of efficiency and striving for personal success merged with the worst that was presented as mentally "ours" – with a personal complex, burdened by vanity and self-interest that took on farcical dimensions (the phenomenon of snob).

²⁷ Aleksandar Gajić, "Problem srpskog kulturnog identiteta", *Kulturna politika u Srbiji*, NSPM – posebno izdanje, Beograd, 2008, p. 140.

²⁸ Ibid, p. 141.

Aspirations towards establishing the modern Serbian national state and its culture, as a result of everything considered, have largely turned into a mere imitation of the Western patterns that have not been profoundly experienced and adapted, but immaturely imitated. Without a clear awareness of the internal antinomy of the entire Western modernity, its direction and dynamics, especially its essential separation from pre-modern traditions and metaphysical orientations in order to centre on certain individual spheres of “this” existence - the Serbian state has hastened to establish under these dominant influences, in addition to the state one, its cultural edifice, as well.

In the reactive and conservative phases, i.e. periods when the project of the Western modernity did not take on its radical ideological expressions of intolerance for traditional cultural values, the institutional reach of the uncritical adoption of these in Serbia had a partial success. In such periods, the nation state was established according to imported models and progressed moderately. However, even in the background of these rather successful fruitful phases, negative phenomena occurred: the alienation of members of upper classes from popular masses, cultural splits and contempt for their cultural identity, flourishing bureaucracy, faddiness... On the other hand, in the opposite, radical and progressive phases, contradictions led - through a combination of internal and external, international influences - to the schizophrenic state of the Serbian identity and culture. This repeatedly escalated into ideological experiments of partial or full reconstitution of identity through state and political measures, all through the establishment and imposition of a new identity model that openly or covertly destroyed the previous heritage and cultural pattern, interpreting it in a new political and ideological key.²⁹ It was an interwar, artificial and in every sense unsuccessful “Yugoslav” identity experiment. Starting from the Western models of “nation building” in a mostly unique speaking area, it tried to create a “three-name”, “three-tribe” nation from members of various cultural and civilizational institutions, sacrificing most of the previous Serbian achievements and its identity to that idea. It was followed by the next, based on it, Yugoslav communist model, on which, after the collapse of the Yugoslav state project, the newly composed post-Yugoslav Westernism was created. In its essence, it is about the aspiration towards an anti-identity, anti-national orientation of the oppressed civil elites. Since they do not have the morals and courage for the extremely difficult geopolitical position in which the people that they reluctantly belong to have once again found themselves, they believe that by moving away from it, and by its fundamental identity change (“a change of consciousness” through the previous derogation and rejection of everything that this identity essentially represents) they will encourage dominant foreign powers to “spare” them and leave them their personal privileges

²⁹ More details: Aleksandar Gajić, “Globalizacija kulture i identitet – o jednoj lokalnoj zabludi”, Srpska politička misao, year 16, vol. 23, no. 1/2009, Institut za političke studije, Beograd, 2009, pp. 117-130.

to live “like other people”, on the condition that they unquestioningly serve other people’s geopolitical goals and obey their normative order. All of this is presented as a rational choice or necessity, or both. The alternative forms of the Serbian strategic culture which, through the propagation of normalization and unquestioned accession to great Western supranational political and military integration come from this matrix and at the beginning of the 21st century started to dominate the political and public discourse, regardless of the fact that their echo among the people is marginal and, mostly despised.³⁰

Instead of conclusion: the contemporary Balkan geopolitical courses and room for strategic actions

The dissolution of the socialist Yugoslavia after the end of the Cold War led to a geopolitical reorganization of the Balkans, whereby Serbs were ethnically cleansed from almost a third of their traditional ethnic space. “The suppression of Serbs from the Serbian countries is most intense in the south, southwest and west; this process is continuous, and depending on the early or peacetime conditions, it has different forms of execution.... The reduction and fragmentation of the Serbian countries is carried out in order to take over the geopolitical key zones in which Serbs originally participated and to prevent them from becoming a part of the unified Serbian state, which would be the most significant factor in the Balkans within its historically and nationally adequate borders.”³¹ Pushing from the west and southwest, the Serbian ethnic masses move away from access to the Adriatic Sea and are concentrated in the direction of the core of the establishment of their modern state. The secession of Montenegro from the state union with Serbia, as well as the forcible secession of Kosovo and Metohija from Serbia are conducted following the same logic. The outcome is clearly visible: at the transition from the 20th to the 21st century Serbia and Serbs became “compressed” and placed in a kind of “geopolitical ghetto”, in a controlled environment. Namely, since the last decade of the 20th century, the entire area of the Balkans has been transformed into what it used to be for centuries, until the period of the world wars - into an area of geopolitical “recompositions and competition between the Middle Eastern powers, Central Europe as a strategic part of the West and the Eastern influence that was in constant retreat at that moment”³².

³⁰ On the alternative model of the Serbian strategic culture, see: Igrutinović Milan, “Blumfildov model potkultura i moguća primena u razumevanju strateške kulture Srbije”, *Vojno delo*, no. 8/2019, year LXXI, Ministry of Defence, Institute for Scientific Information, Belgrade, 2019, p. 274.

³¹ Milomir Stepić, “Srbi i etno-demografsko okruženje – međuzavisnost populacionih i geopolitičkih procesa na Balkanu”, *Srpsko pitanje – geopolitičko pitanje*, Jantar grupa, Beograd, 2004, p. 253.

³² Aleksandar Gajić, *SAD i raspad Jugoslavije – pogled iz dvadesetogodišnje perspektive*, Nacionalni interes 2/2011, VII, vol. 11, p. 65.

In the new form, many dimensions of the traditional “Eastern issue” are partially revived: all the “classic” geopolitical actors, the great powers of different cultural and civilizational signs are there, as well as the directions of their actions; in the same political, cultural and civilizational way, the domicile nations and their states are subject to them, which are instrumentalized through mutual antagonism.

The influence of the Anglo-American Atlanticists in the Balkans is still predominant today, although there is a noticeable increase in the influence of all other geopolitical players: the “Central European people”, the Eurasian continentalists and the Orient (Neo-Ottomanism). All of this reflects on the Balkan countries and nations. Some of them are integrated into the EU and NATO, while the rest are in the process of accession. The Atlanticists show clear intentions to maintain their dominant position in the Balkans through “crisis management”, to thwart and reduce the influence of other geopolitical options. Three other strong geopolitical actors are currently trying to increase their “participation” in the events on the Balkan Peninsula and project their various strategic interests onto it. The continentalists strive to increase their cultural, political and economic presence through this area and establish energy corridors in order to relax relations in the area of the western part of “Rimland” with regional centres of power, connect and get closer to them, thus occupying a long-term position of “central balancer” in emerging multicentric international system. The “Central European people” would like to increase their economic and political influence in the “non-integrated” southeast of Europe, provide the passability of the main communication routes (land routes, the Danube river course) towards the Orient and the Black Sea Basin, as well as, as much as possible, to pacify or at least prevent destabilizing waves from spilling over to the borders of their economic “pan-area”, the central part of the European Union which, as a whole, is in fateful turmoil and transformation. Through the increased economic and political activities Asia Minor/“Neo-Ottoman” influence tries to achieve at least the initial goals of the “deep” strategy of returning to the Balkans (in which taking over the territory of Macedonia is the key one). A novelty in the Balkan geopolitical situation is, for the first time, greater presence of the fifth major player from the Far East - China, which in its global economic and political expansion has reached this important part of Rimland. “For Beijing, the Balkans represent an important part of the project of strengthening political, infrastructural, economic and monetary ties between China, Central Asia and Europe. China would like to accelerate the establishment of a network of ports, logistic centres, roads and railways through investment in infrastructure in order to create favourable conditions for the diversification of Chinese freight and energy transport, expand the market, distribute products and improve East-West trade”.³³

³³ Sanja Arežina, “Kineski ‘Novi put svile’ i Balkan”, Kultura polisa, year 12, Special edition, Novi Sad, 2015, p. 177.

The given circumstances “represent much more favourable prospects for the Serbian strategic interests than the previous one: the causes of the Serbian strategic defensiveness, territorial retreat and ‘compression’ laid primarily in the absence of strategic assistance from forces fond of it, and the coincidence of the strategies of even three out of four dominant ‘great powers’ that achieved their goals in this area primarily to the detriment of Serbia. The implementation of geo-economic strategic projects helps to partially reverse the previously established geopolitical relations: the entry of China as the fifth strategic player, along with the return of Russia that is traditionally friendly to Serbs, not only means the presence of two allies fond of the Serbian interests, but, consequently, also a partial reversal of attitudes of two other important regional players - Central European (Germany) and Oriental (Turkey). In the final outcome, this means that, over time, the hitherto undisputed regional hegemon (Atlanticists, i.e. the US) could be left alone in its attempts to maintain its geostrategic supremacy, which will undeniably weaken.”³⁴ The long-term tendencies, directions and strength of actions of all geopolitical “great players”, internal circumstances in the area of the “non-integrated Balkans”, and above all the processes within the EU itself (primarily the EU systemic crisis), thus speak in favour of further slowing down the Euro-Atlantic integration courses with the increased degree of instability of the entire region.

The current courses of this complex geopolitical competition require an energetic response of Serbia and shaping of strategic behaviour in accordance with the extremely difficult circumstances that the Balkans will face in the following decades. The Serbian traditional identity and the resulting cultural pattern, as well as classic strategic culture that is shown at every possible occasion, undoubtedly represent the basis of the survival of Serbs in the territories where they live, since some of their parts remained out of the borders of Serbia, in the surrounding states often hostile to Serbs and their survival. Without “anchoring” in classic identity frameworks and in accordance to strategic and integrative behaviour, Serbs in the post-Yugoslav space (first out of Serbia, and then in their home country) are doomed to long-term, gradual weakening and disappearance, which no supranational integration or accession to military alliances will stop, on the contrary. Relying on it, Serbs gain an identity base not only to endure and survive, but also to, gradually, logically accomplish their general strategic interests, mainly in the area where they have the majority or where they live in the areas where the majority Orthodox population prevails (Montenegro, Republic of Srpska, Macedonia) with an open possibility that, when there are more favourable circumstances due to a change in the balance of power, they will achieve a historical rapprochement with Muslims of Slavic origin (primarily Bosniaks) on the basis of traditional values and their life parameters.

³⁴ Aleksandar Gajić “Aktuelna geopolitička pozicija Srbije: između atlantizma, evroazijstva i kineskog uticaja”, *Politika nacionalne bezbednosti* 2/2018, year IX, vol. 15, Institut za političke studije, Beograd, 2018, pp. 25-26.

With each year, contemporary circumstances become more suitable for a gradual transition from a defensive approach to an open, semi-offensive one, through the wholehearted use of newly created manoeuvring space for balancing between different geopolitical options and their often partially conflicting interests, which is the main feature of the traditionally Serbian reserved-open approach (while jealously preserving its uniqueness and freedom) and strategic culture throughout centuries. The greatest problem with redirecting to these traditional identity, strategic and cultural coordinates is represented by a part of the alienated pseudo-elites here. Due to negative preconceptions and postmodern identity deviation from traditional identity definitions, they persistently impose on reality inadequate notions about the necessity of bandwagoning the Western political and military option (not realizing that these are two different geopolitical and military security concepts that are mutually opposed), with a complete misunderstanding of opportunities opened up by cooperation with other geopolitical “players” and balancing between them. However, this is already an internal identity and socio-political problem of Serbia, mainly of its greater urban centres.

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Геополитички оквир српске стратешке културе

Полазећи од одређења концепта стратешке културе, те његовог садржинског проширивања и продубљивања, рад проучава везе између геополитичког оквира, тј. геополитичког одређења државе и њене стратешке културе, у овом случају српске државе и српског народа. Посматрајући стварање српског идентитета и српске стратешке културе у историјској перспективи кроз призму кључних геополитичких процеса „дугог трајања“ на Балкану, проучавају се и специфичности српског идентитета и српске стратешке културе, односно њених савремених главних варијанти. У другом делу рада посматрају се савремени геополитички процеси на Балкану и позиција у коју су српске земље и српски народ стављени, као и перспективе ка којима их они могу одвести. У завршном делу рада се, имајући све то у виду, разматра колике су могућности да се у савременим геополитичким приликама остваре витални општи стратешки циљеви који су у равни са основним одликама историјски преовлађујуће српске стратешке културе.

Кључне речи: *стратешка култура, геополитика, српски идентитет, Балкан, Римланд, велике силе*