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How Serbia's National Identity Shapes Its International Positioning Amidst the War in Ukraine: Hollow Neutrality as a Poor Imitation of Yugoslavia's Non-Alignment

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Abstract
Serbia is one of the few European countries that did not impose sanctions on the Russian Federation following the invasion of Ukraine. The primary objective of my paper is to explore and explain this distinct position through a substantial analysis of the roots and logic underpinning Serbia's foreign policy. By adopting a critical social constructivist approach, this study seeks to understand the way in which national identity shapes Serbia's unique foreign policy decisions - not only in relation to Russia and Ukraine but also in terms of its broader international orientation. The basic claim of the article is that Serbia's international positioning should be assessed through two key factors: first, the notion of 'Serbian exceptionalism,' rooted in the country's self-perception of its unique historical and geopolitical role; and second, its attempt to emulate Yugoslavia's non-aligned stance during the Cold War, aiming to preserve strategic autonomy amidst global power dynamics.

Keywords: Serbian neutrality; non-aligned movement; Russian-Ukrainian war; exceptionalism; national identity

Introduction

Serbia officially adheres to a foreign policy based on several principles, including membership in the European Union and military neutrality. It maintains neutrality, practically equating it with its refusal to join NATO. This position is often attributed to the conservative and Eurosceptic right, which has adopted a 'sovereigntist' stance. However, in reality, such orientation transcends ideological divisions, with only marginal liberal political and social groups advocating for abandoning neutrality and joining NATO. The majority of the country supports military

neutrality,[1] though the rationale behind it varies significantly depending on whether one is speaking from a leftist, centrist, or conservative perspective. While the phenomenon had already been worth noticing and researching in the past, it has become especially relevant in light of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which escalated with the Russian invasion in 2022. Most of the Serbian population, namely, believes that Serbia needs to maintain neutrality in the Russia-Ukraine war, as well.[2]

Does this imply that Serbia supports aggression? Definitely not, as Serbia supports UN resolutions condemning the invasion and does not recognize the self-declared independence of the East Ukrainian regions. Does this mean that Serbia's EU orientation is insincere? Absolutely not. Even a significant number of right-wing Eurosceptics, who support the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), favor EU membership. None of them ever thought of leaving the EU, just like Serbia never thought of withdrawing its EU accession application. Does it indicate that Serbia is receiving benefits from Russia in return for its stance? Partially, yes. Serbia still receives Russian support for its Kosovo-related international policy, including as a veto player in the UN Security Council. The Kosovo issue indeed complicates Serbia's foreign policy by requiring a delicate balance between major powers that support Kosovo's independence and those backing Serbia's claims to territorial integrity and sovereignty. Alongside China, Russia remains a key ally for Serbia in the UN Security Council and other international institutions, not only refusing to recognize Kosovo's independence but also supporting Serbia in its diplomatic efforts to contest Kosovo's separation. Partially, thus, Serbian refusal to impose sanctions on Russia can be explained through the lens of Kosovo. However, this issue represents only one facet of a broader, more complex set of factors influencing Serbia's international orientation, particularly its stance on Russia in light of the ongoing war. While Russia's veto power in the UN Security Council is significant, it cannot be viewed as the sole – or even primary – reason for Serbia's reluctance to impose sanctions on Russia. What, then, is truly at stake here?

My main argument is that Serbia's foreign policy, based on military neutrality and de facto neutrality regarding the Russian invasion, despite complying with most UN resolutions supported by the West, is influenced by Serbia's national interest rooted in its national identity. In this sense, the assumption that Serbia's reluctance to impose sanctions on the Russian Federation stems solely from Russian influence within the country represents just one piece of a much more complex puzzle. While this influence is evident – just as it is in other countries, including Germany[3] – this influence does not appear to directly determine any specific international stance. Similarly, some European leaders, such as Hungarian Prime Minister Orbán, have publicly shown far more overt goodwill toward Putin than President Vučić has since the invasion began. Yet, both Hungary and Italy still chose to impose sanctions on Russia. This means that Russian influence, which results in favorable attitudes toward Russia – clearly

[1] Bjeloš, Maja / Luka Šterić, and Vuk Vuksanović. 2022. *Public perception of Serbian foreign policy in the midst of the war in Ukraine.* Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2.
[2] Bjeloš / Sterić, and Vuksanović, *Public perception*, 1.
[3] Certain social actors and prominent political parties in the West either openly support President Putin or publicly oppose military aid to Ukraine. For instance, when Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy appealed to the German Bundestag in June 2024 for more support for his country, a large number of the far right AfD (Alternative for Germany) lawmakers left the building—as did the members of the newly-formed BSW party (Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance), founded by the former leader of Die Linke (The Left). See: Pfeifer, Hans. 2024, *Russia's best friends in Germany: AfD and BSW*. Deutsche Welle. 9 January 2024.

present to varying degrees in many Western European countries – is not directly linked to decisions regarding sanctions due to aggression.

In Serbia's case, neutrality thus signifies more than merely 'yielding to Russian influence' – both before and after the aggression. It also means more than simply seeking security by abstaining from participating in armed conflicts with other states.[4] Some authors claim that Serbia's military neutrality is driven by the trauma of the 1999 NATO bombing[5] – an event that indeed fostered closer ties with Russia. This is another important part of the puzzle – but not the only one. I argue that Serbia, as the only country in the Balkans without official aspirations to join NATO, seeks a form of exceptionalism of which the traumatic experience of NATO bombing constitutes only one integral part. The key factor, instead, is Serbia's overall self-perception of its unique historical and geopolitical role, seeking special recognition from both the East and the West.[6]

Nonetheless, such a stance has not gained substantial international recognition. Instead, the notion of exceptionalism primarily serves as a tool for internal legitimization by the ruling Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), which masks Serbia's ongoing neocolonization through rhetoric about the country's supposed 'independence from global powers and its sovereign, autonomous position. In this context, the SNS operates much like other comprador elites, profiting by facilitating external influence and benefiting from 'commissions' tied to Serbia's political and economic subordination. What Serbia is thus attempting – albeit unsuccessfully – is to emulate Yugoslavia's non-aligned stance from the Cold War era, aiming to project an image of strategic autonomy within contemporary global power dynamics.

To address these claims, I draw on literature from (national) identity studies and utilize a constructivist International Relations (IR) approach. Specifically, I introduce a comparative historical perspective, comparing the Yugoslav non-aligned era with the present time. Despite the substantial differences mentioned earlier, it is important to highlight that the two seemingly similar positions – Yugoslav non-alignment and Serbian neutrality – have very little in common in practical terms. My argument is that nominal continuity in foreign policy, within different historical contexts, can have different, even opposite, meanings and outcomes.

Critical Social Constructivism: The Role of National Identity in Constructing National Interest

The emergence of critical social constructivism within international relations has significantly reshaped understandings of state behavior, particularly in how national interest is conceptualized and operationalized. Unlike rationalist or materialist paradigms, which emphasize objective realities and strategic calculations, critical social constructivism foregrounds the inter-subjective, ideational, and discursive dimensions of international politics. Central to this perspective is the claim that national interest is not pre-given or fixed, but rather

[4] Radoman, Jelena. 2021. *Military neutrality of small states in the twenty-first century: The security strategies of Serbia and Sweden*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 3.
[5] Ejdus, Filip. 2014. Serbia's military neutrality: Origins, effects and challenges. *Croatian International Relations Review* 20(71), 43–71, 45.
[6] This should not be confused with the "Serbian exceptionalism thesis", which pertains to discussions on Serbia's role in the dissolution of Yugoslavia. See: Vujačić, Veljko. 2015. *Nationalism, myth, and the state in Russia and Serbia: Antecedents of the dissolution of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 35.

is socially constructed through collective identity, historical narratives, and socio-political discourse.[7] In short, the approach offers a social perspective of international relations.[8]

A key concept in this tradition is national identity, which serves as a foundational lens through which states interpret their interests, threats, and opportunities. Even the neo-realist scholars, such as Alexander Wendt, laid some groundwork to the constructivist approach by asserting that "anarchy is what states make of it,"[9] and highlighting how identities and interests are co-constituted. Critical constructivists, however, delve deeper into the power-laden processes by which identities are formed and contested, often shaped by domestic political struggles, historical memory, and normative frameworks.[10] National identity is thus understood as both fluid and contingent, constructed through discourse, institutions, and cultural representations. Some authors emphasize that the articulation of threats and 'others' is crucial for shaping what states come to perceive as their national interest.[11] Similarly, national security discourse is perceived as a performative act that helps produce and sustain a coherent sense of the nation.[12]

In analyzing the role of national identity in constructing national interest, scholars also draw attention to the importance of language, symbolism, and historical memory. This aligns with broader critical constructivist themes that stress discursive practices, power asymmetries, and the non-neutrality of knowledge in international relations.[13] The literature suggests that interests are not merely chosen based on strategic cost-benefit analyses but are instead embedded within, and reflective of, deeper identity-based narratives and social meanings.

More concretely, one of the most prominent scholars in this field, Jutta Weldes, used critical social constructivism to analyze U.S. behavior in various historical contexts, including the Cuban Missile Crisis and the Vietnam War. To explain the historically contingent and culturally specific meaning of the national interest, she argues, is to show how concrete elements of the security imaginary come together to produce representations of the state, the international system, the particular situation or threat faced by the state, and plausible courses of state action.[14] For instance, given its self-perception as a leader in the global fight against communism, it was reasonable and appropriate for the United States to commit its troops to prevent the communist takeover of the independent state of South Vietnam.[15]

On the other hand, state behavior on the international stage – shaped by national interest, identity, and associated values – is not a one-way process. Just as national identity shapes perceptions of national interest in international politics, […] the self-identity of the sovereign

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[7] Adler, Emanuel. 1997. Seizing the middle ground: Constructivism in world politics. *European Journal of International Relations* 3(3), 319–363; Fierke, Karin M. 2015. *Critical approaches to international security*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Polity.
[8] Das, Runa. 2009. Critical social constructivism: "Culturing" identity, (in)security, and the state in international relations theory. *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 70(4), 961–982.
[9] Wendt, Alexander. 1992. Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics. *International Organization* 46(2), 391–425.
[10] Fierke, *Critical approaches*; Weldes, Jutta. 1999. *Constructing national interests: The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press.
[11] Hansen, Lene. 2006. *Security as practice: Discourse analysis and the Bosnian war*. London: Routledge.
[12] Campbell, David. 1998. *Writing security: United States foreign policy and the politics of identity*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
[13] Doty, Roxanne Lynn. 1996. *Imperial encounters: The politics of representation in North–South relations*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Milliken, Jennifer. 1999. The study of discourse in international relations: A critique of research and methods. *European Journal of International Relations* 5(2), 225–254.
[14] Weldes, *Constructing national interests.*
[15] Weldes, *Constructing national interests,* 14.

state is constituted and articulated through external relations with other states.[16] This means that neither national identity nor national interest, nor the behavior of sovereign states in the international arena, is fixed or unchangeable. On the contrary, history offers numerous examples of significant shifts, even radical changes, in foreign policy orientation. Since any performance of identity is, of course, a political performance,[17] the 20th century, for instance, saw notable shifts in such performativity – from Tito's 1948 pivot away from Soviet compliance toward a policy of non-alignment, to President De Gaulle's decision to recognize Algeria's independence, despite it having been perceived as an inseparable part of France hitherto.

This raises questions about how national identity can correspond with a neutral foreign policy orientation. The notion of 'greatness,' which characterizes many national sentiments, is often linked to exerting dominance or seeking broader international influence through direct actions, interventions, or the spread of universal values a nation believes it embodies. Neutrality, however, reflects a distinct sensibility, both in how it emerges from national identity and in how it, in turn, reshapes that identity.

Neutrality and Identity

Although the terms 'neutrality' and 'non-alignment' are often used interchangeably,[18] I will treat non-alignment as specific to the Non-Aligned Movement, and 'neutrality' in the specific Serbian context, thereby drawing a clear distinction between the two. Additionally, I argue that non-alignment represents an active stance in the international arena, unlike Serbian neutrality, which is far more passive – a 'passive counterpart' to non-alignment. Before engaging in a deeper discussion of this claim, it is important to begin with some more conceptual clarifications.

In its strictest and more general sense, neutrality is a position that states adopt during times of war or heightened risk of conflict.[19] Yet neutrality encompasses more than just a response to immediate war threats; it can also signify a long-term strategy in foreign policy applicable in both peace and wartime. Historically, this type of sustained neutrality has been typical of smaller states with limited military resources. For example, some of the earliest long-term neutrals were states with significant maritime interests, like the Netherlands and Denmark.[20] The third type of neutrality, permanent neutrality, was an outcome of the nineteenth-century conference system. It was neutrality guaranteed to a state by an agreement among the great powers. Two classical cases of permanent neutrality were Switzerland and Belgium.[21]

Beyond the interests of great powers and the role of neutral states from the 1800s onward, it is crucial to ask why certain countries choose neutrality and to what extent they actually remain neutral across shifting historical contexts. During World War I, for example, some states

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[16] Neumann, Iver B. 2003. *To know him was to love him. Not to know him was to love him from afar: Diplomacy in Star Trek*, in *To seek out new worlds: Science fiction and world politics*, edited by Weldes, Jutta. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 36-37.

[17] Molloy, Patricia. 2003. *Demon diasporas: Confronting the Other and the other-worldly in Buffy the Vampire Slayer and Angel*, in *To seek out new worlds: Science fiction and world politics*, edited by Weldes, Jutta. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 105.

[18] Even during the non-alignment period, these two terms (but also others) were used interchangeably. For instance, 'positive neutralism' was advocated by Egypt, in a similar vein to Yugoslavia initially using the terms non-engagement, non-bloc policies or uncommitted countries for its understanding of non-alignment. See: Čavoški, Jovan. 2022. *Non-Aligned Movement summits: A history*. New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 18.

[19] Müller, Leos. 2019. *Neutrality in world history*. London & New York: Routledge, 4.

[20] Müller, *Neutrality,* 5.

[21] Müller, *Neutrality*, 6.

increasingly felt the pressures of total war, viewing neutrality as a means to preserve their autonomy of action.[22] Here, the rationale is straightforward: to secure greater maneuverability in the face of complex warfare or the prospect of imminent conflict. World War II saw ostensibly neutral countries like Spain under Francisco Franco and Portugal under Salazar, among others. Spain and Portugal, although ideologically more than close to the Axis powers, adopted neutrality, though Portugal shifted its stance in 1944, siding with the Allies as their victory became evident. Given these regimes' affinity for the Axis, their neutrality raises questions: why refrain from aligning with 'natural allies'? This question gains significance considering the Spanish Civil War, which received decisive Axis support for Franco's nationalists and set the stage for his authoritarian rule. For Rome, Berlin, and Moscow, however, the Spanish Civil War foreshadowed the coming global conflict, a 'testing ground' of sorts for World War II.[23] In other words, it is conceivable that authoritarian fascists, particularly Franco, who had seized power just seven months before the onset of WWII, were reluctant to risk rekindling republican resistance by engaging alongside Axis powers in a global conflict. Supporting the Axis abroad might have drawn attention and resources away from maintaining control at home, potentially emboldening the republicans. After all, a socialist revolution during a world war was not without precedent; the October Revolution erupted while Tsarist Russia was deeply embroiled in World War I.

An important aspect of neutrality, however, lies beyond immediate international dynamics, agreements among great powers, or other external factors. Neutrality is also closely tied to national identity, meaning that there are some internal reasons for external neutrality, as well. Long-term neutrality, which can offer a distinctive kind of international legitimacy, often contributes to a nation's self-concept.[24] For enduring neutrals such as Switzerland and, post-WWII, Austria, neutrality has defined a core dimension of national identity. Conversely, when neutrality is not directly imposed by external powers, the relationship between national identity and neutrality becomes reciprocal: national identity can shape foreign policy and the nature of neutrality just as much as neutrality can influence the national identity itself.

The case of Austria is interesting here. After Stalin's death, during a respite in Cold War tensions in 1955, Austria managed to rid itself of a quadripartite occupation regime and become a neutral state. As the Cold War continued, Austria's policy of neutrality helped make this small country into an important mediator of East-West differences, and neutrality became a crucial part of Austria's postwar identity.[25] In the meantime, Austria's position of neutrality has come under national debate multiple times, including in the early 2000s, following the wars in the former Yugoslavia, which unfolded in Austria's immediate neighborhood.[26] More recently, the 2024 European elections in Austria brought this issue back into focus, this time in the context of the war in Ukraine. While some historically neutral countries, such as Sweden and Finland, chose to join NATO and abandon their neutrality in response to recent developments in the East,

[22] den Hertog, Johan and Samuel Kruizinga (eds.). 2011. *Caught in the middle: Neutrals, neutrality and the First World War*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 12.
[23] Pavlaković, Vjeran. 2017. *Jugoslaveni u Španskom građanskom ratu*. Belgrade: Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Europe, 6.
[24] Müller, *Neutrality*, 6.
[25] Bischof, Günter / Pelinka, Anton, and Ruth Wodak (eds.). 2001. *Neutrality in Austria*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.
[26] Günter et.al.,*Neutrality in Austria.*

Austria has maintained its neutral stance. Since 1955, when permanent neutrality became one of the most important identity-promoting characteristics of the Second Republic, this position remained, regardless of the circumstances, a prominent part of the 'Austrian way' promoted by Federal Chancellor Bruno Kreisky in the 1970s. It, furthermore, played an essential role in the 'success story' of Austrian politics and molded the image of the Second Republic as an 'island of the blessed' and as a diplomatic meeting place.[27]

Austrian neutrality, like other cases of neutrality around the world, is hence deeply rooted in political and historical contexts, as well as in the perception of national identity. For some countries, neutrality proves functional and beneficial not only for themselves but also for their surrounding regions and the interests of great powers. Serbia's international position could, indeed, have been built on a foundation similar to Austria's. Historically, it had relevant experience to draw upon, and politically, it enjoyed a comparable level of consensus about neutrality.

Like Austria, Serbia had the potential to become 'a diplomatic meeting place,' particularly in the case of the Russia-Ukraine conflict. However, something went wrong. Serbian neutrality definitely appears less grounded than that of Austria. To understand why and how Serbia missed the opportunity to establish neutrality as a well-functioning, meaningful, and proactive international stance, it is essential to examine the contradictions within Serbian national identity, which have inherently shaped and transferred these contradictions onto the concept of neutrality itself.

Serbian National Identity

The sense of a proud past, during which Serbia – unlike other former Yugoslav republics – played a role on the international stage in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, along with narratives of historical injustices, victimhood, and national pride, continues to shape Serbia's domestic and international policies. While some voices advocate for a 'political realism' that recognizes the limitations of small states in imposing their interests on great powers and emphasizes the need to recalibrate national interests in accordance with those of major powers[28], this is not the prevailing view. Unlike the dominant ideologies in Kosovo, Bosnia, or Croatia – which largely draw elements of national identity from the conflicts of the 1990s – Serbian historiography emphasizes the pre-socialist era, focusing on the legacy of World War I and earlier periods. This historical narrative is evident in the selection of national holidays and in cultural expressions, particularly cinema, which underscore this heritage as the foundation of Serbia's national identity, together with the Kosovo myth.[29]

This does not mean that Serbia ignores the 1990s altogether. Often, it addresses this period in response to narratives from neighboring countries, which commemorate or celebrate military

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[27] Wodak, Ruth / de Cillia, Rudolf / Reisigl, Martin, and Karin Liebhart. 2009. *The discursive construction of national identity*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 63.

[28] Cvijić, Srđan. 2024. Vraćanje spoljne politike u državni okvir. *Radar*, 24 July 2024.

[29] "The myth of the Battle of Kosovo Field on June 28th 1389, in which the armies of the Ottoman Sultan Murat I and Serbian Prince Lazar clashed, has, since the early 19th century to this day, served the purpose of legitimizing various political and military projects: From the breakup of communist Yugoslavia and the policies of Slobodan Milosevic, through the 'Kosovo is Serbia' motto, as part of the Serbian 'European agenda', to the dialogue – both internal and with Brussels – led by Aleksandar Vučić. The 'Kosovo Covenant' in modern Serbian history is used to accommodate various political ideas and actions." See, Čolović, Ivan. 2024. The Kosovo myth in modern Serbia: Its functions, problems, and critiques. *Heinrich Böll Stiftung*, 26 April 2024.

victories that Serbia views as acts of war crimes or ethnic cleansing. In this way, the Serbian narrative about the 1990s emphasizes Serbian suffering and victimhood, often linked to the Jasenovac concentration camp and other atrocities committed primarily by the Ustaša against Serbs during WWII. World War Two topics also prominently glorify Nazi-Fascist collaborators – the so-called Chetniks – over the communist-led liberation struggle against fascism. Yet, it is Serbia's deeper past that holds central importance. Figures of WWI military leaders, like Živojin Mišić, in other words, carry more ideological weight for 'national rebuilding' than war criminals from the 1990s, though public attention may sometimes suggest otherwise.

Connecting this ideological framework to a shared tendency across former Yugoslav republics – namely, the (partial) demonization of the Yugoslav socialist legacy – reveals what I term the "Serbian ideological paradox".[30] While Serbia's critique of its socialist past is significantly less intense than in Croatia and Kosovo, it is more pronounced than in Bosnia or Slovenia. This paradox reflects the unique and often inherently contradictory development of Serbia's dominant ideology. On the one hand, some nationalist political actors in the 1990s opposed the war, and others, nominally left-wing actors, led military actions across the region. Serbia's selective engagement with its Yugoslav heritage – balancing pride in its historical role with a cautious disavowal of the socialist period – intensifies the ideological paradox, wherein political sentiments traverse traditional divisions and fuse with contradictory, often mutually exclusive values. Consequently, this situation has enabled Serbia to attempt to preserve elements of the Yugoslav legacy, despite significant differences between socialist Yugoslavia and today's Serbia, which was built on, among other things, the demonization of Yugoslavia and its anti-nationalism. In doing so, Serbia seeks to emulate the international significance that Yugoslavia once held due to its non-aligned stance.

Serbia is the only former Yugoslav republic that still, even if partially, badly or dishonestly, leverages the Yugoslav foreign policy legacy. Nearly all other republics, including Kosovo, have either aspired to join NATO or have already joined. The other former republics have largely accepted their marginal roles on the global stage, acknowledging their limited capacity to shape international affairs. This has resulted in their alignment with NATO in military terms and with the political leadership of the most powerful European countries and the U.S. Post-Yugoslav countries are, therefore, either following their self-perception as being more 'European' and distancing themselves from the pejorative associations of the Balkans,[31] such as in the case of Slovenia and Croatia, or they are actively seeking to escape the influence of Serbia or Russia, as seen with Kosovo or Montenegro. Serbia had different plans: it aimed to claim the glory of Yugoslav non-alignment while simultaneously building 'Serbdom' through disregarding and demonizing socialism and other aspects of the Yugoslav heritage.

Yugoslav Non-Alignment vs. Serbian Neutrality

The Cold War, which settled on the world after the second wave of world revolution, was a contest of nightmares.[32] Not only was there the looming danger of war between superpowers, but the complexity of global affairs was also increasingly tilting towards a condition of perpetual instability due to conflicts between other nations. In this context, Yugoslavia's position was

[30] Balunović, Filip.2024. *Revival of the left in the Balkans: Counter-hegemonic activism and ideas that fueled it*. New York: Routledge, 86.
[31] Todorova, Maria. 1997. *Imagining the Balkans*. New York: Oxford University Press.
[32] Hobsbawm, Eric. 1994. *The age of extremes: The short twentieth century 1914–1991*. London: Abacus, 83.

unique. As a socialist country with a complex, multi-ethnic, and multi-religious population of nearly twenty million, it faced significant internal challenges, including vast social and economic disparities between its most and least developed regions. To legitimize its political system and maintain internal cohesion, Yugoslavia employed several strategies. One was the ideological construct of 'brotherhood and unity' among all Yugoslav nations, rooted in its celebrated anti-fascist struggle during World War II. Another was the innovative economic model of self-management, which set Yugoslavia apart from other socialist states. In the context of global ideological, political, and military polarization, the concept of non-alignment became an equally important pillar of unity within the country. Together with other founding states, primarily Egypt and India, Yugoslavia initiated a new era of balancing between the blocs and launched the 'third way' – or 'Yugoslavia's own way' – which enabled this socialist state to have a very significant role on the international scene, where it often became a negotiator during the Cold War crises.[33]

By positioning itself as one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Yugoslavia not only sought strategic autonomy on the international stage but also reinforced its domestic narrative of strength coming out of 'brotherhood and unity.' A prominent role in global diplomacy thus provided Yugoslavia with an additional advantage, enhancing both its international prestige and internal legitimacy – primarily through its soft power.[34]

Non-alignment was not only a refusal to align with either side in the Cold War but also an active foreign policy stance with strong principles, such as anti-imperialism, anti-colonialism, peaceful coexistence of sovereign states, and a vision of what the world should look like. Yugoslavia, as a co-founder and one of the leaders of the non-aligned movement in 1961, faced numerous challenges: from the Cuban Missile Crisis only one year after the establishment of the movement in 1962, to U.S. aggression in Vietnam, Soviet aggression in Afghanistan, and the Palestine-Israel conflict. In all these cases, Yugoslavia considered not only its own interests but also its vision for the world, based on values such as peace, international equality, and solidarity.[35] This was no easy task, as the Non-Aligned Movement was built on values that were frequently violated by both the East and the West. Within the movement, countries like Cuba often advocated for a 'natural alignment' with the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc, while others, such as Egypt, were more focused on pursuing narrow national or regional ambitions.[36] Yugoslavia, however, stood out among the most active members of the movement (together with India, Egypt, Ghana, and Indonesia) as the one consistently pushing for broader, globally relevant issues rather than solely advancing its own national interests.[37] There was an emphasis on building and organizing peace, cooperation, active participation of all in global affairs, resolving conflicts between states, equal development of humanity, and peaceful, active coexistence. Through its active involvement in the movement, official Belgrade sought to

[33] Vučetić, Radina. 2013. Yugoslavia, Vietnam War and antiwar activism. *Tokovi Istorije* 2, 165–180, 166.
[34] Miholjčić-Ivković, Nina. 2020. The Non-Aligned Movement: In pursuit of validity and relevance in the contemporary global order. *Caucasus Strategic Perspectives* 1(1), 45–58.
[35] Stubbs, Paul. 2023. *Socialist Yugoslavia and the Non-Aligned Movement: Social, cultural, political, and economic imaginaries*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill–Queen's University Press.
[36] See more on the the history of the conflict between Cuba and Yugoslavia over the definition of non-alignment in: Cosovschi, Agustín. 2024. Clashing visions of non-alignment: The origins of the Cuban–Yugoslav conflict. *Cold War History* 25(2), 197–217.
[37] Jakovina, Tvrtko. 2018. *Nesvrstavanje: Čarobni štap(ić) jugoslavenske diplomacije*, in *Marksističke teorije međunarodnih odnosa*, edited by Jović, Dejan. Zagreb: Fakultet političkih znanosti, 255–291.

maintain the organization on the "original principles of non-alignment,"[38] which Yugoslavia most often interpreted and innovated.

The decline in the Non-Aligned Movement's coherence was especially acute after the Cold War. Yugoslavia's earlier leadership set a precedent for ideological innovation and geopolitical maneuvering that some former or contemporary members of the movement have struggled to replicate.[39] In some cases, such as Serbia, a weak attempt to mimic non-alignment has resulted in a form of neutrality defined more by non-involvement than by proactive engagement. The Serbian neutrality has thus grown increasingly passive and hollow with each new international challenge – the Ukraine crisis being the most recent example.

Such neutrality has remained devoid of substantive values and meaning because it is crafted to adapt to every possible scenario, both externally and internally. Even though it has been an effective tool for the government, this is not just a pragmatic maneuver that serves the authorities – it is actually an image of the inherent contradictions of the Serbian national identity. Particularly under the Serbian Progressive Party's rule since 2012, Serbia has been perpetuating anti-Western sentiment while developing ever-closer ties with European leaders such as President Macron and others. This sentiment has been a hallmark of Serbian politics for decades, with few exceptions, such as former President Tadić and Prime Minister Đinđić. From the era of Yugoslav President Milošević to Koštunica and now President Vučić, the 'evil West' has consistently been positioned as a convenient scapegoat or a political 'ace up the sleeve,' while at the same time claiming Serbian 'Europeanness' and 'modernity.'

The last example of "aiding and abetting foreign enemies and fifth columnists in Belgrade" came in the aftermath of the snap December 17 parliamentary and local elections. President Vučić insinuated that "an important country" had interfered "in the most brutal way" [40] in the vote (a veiled reference to Germany). On the other hand, in parallel with framing any critical stance on his governance as part of a 'Western conspiracy', President Vučić likes to look at Germany as a role model. "He often brags about the new German words he has learned, the German companies he has brought to invest in Serbia, the Serbian equivalents of Germany's autobahns that he has built […]."[41] In both scenarios – whether the West is portrayed as an adversary or as a prosperous and wise 'teacher' – Russia is conspicuously kept in the background, at least in official foreign policy discourse. Instead, the idea of 'Russia' operates more as a subconscious element within the Serbian national psyche. It serves as a comforting presence, a symbolic anchor that provides warmth when the 'cold winds' of Western criticism blow too hard, and a patient observer when Serbia seeks opportunities under the 'Western sun.' This dynamic resonates deeply with cultural narratives, reflected in the colloquial term for Russia as 'Mother Russia.' Much like a maternal figure, Russia is imagined as simultaneously nurturing and forgiving – a steadfast presence that allows Serbia to navigate its vacillations between East and West.

To add on this 'walking contradiction' called 'Serbian national identity' and thus, 'Serbian neutrality,' one can easily trace this country's aim to emulate Yugoslavia's non-aligned stance,

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[38] Jakovina, *Nesvrstavanje*, 256.
[39] Keethaponcalan, I. Soosaipillai. 2016. Reshaping the Non-Aligned Movement: Challenges and vision. *Bandung: Journal of the Global South* 3(4), 1–14.
[40] Bechev, Dimitar. 2024. Serbia's authoritarian (re)turn. *Carnegie Endowment*, 11 January 2024.
[41] Ristić, Marija. 2021. How Serbia can learn from Germany's post-war remorse. *Balkan Insight*, 12 April 2021.

as shown by numerous instances in which high-ranking officials speak affirmatively about this legacy or directly praise it. This trend has even led some authors to speak of "neo-non-alignment".[42] Indeed, foreign Minister Selaković's numerous visits to non-aligned countries, Foreign Minister Dačić's praises of Tito's Yugoslavia in the 'Third World,' and Serbia's hosting of the 60th anniversary of the first Non-Aligned Movement Conference on 11 to 12 October 2021, in Belgrade, seemingly all illustrate Serbia's attempt to "follow in the footsteps of old Yugoslavia".[43] In reality, however, and in stark contrast to the clear strategic direction of socialist Yugoslavia's non-aligned stance, Serbia's foreign policy has been marked by vagueness, disorientation, and a lack of substance. One of the most illustrative examples of this was President Vučić's signing of the Washington Agreement during the Trump administration. Beyond the non-binding provisions on the Kosovo-Serbia relationship, the agreement included an unexpected commitment to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital. Such moves have foreshadowed further indecisiveness and wandering in international affairs. When Russia invaded Ukraine, this was humorously encapsulated in a joke: 'Serbia should set an 'out of office' email until the war in Ukraine is over.'

Rather than carving out a distinctive position on the international stage – one that could establish Serbia as a respected and valuable partner among major powers and other key global actors – Serbia's declarative stance of 'not yielding to any foreign interests' has, paradoxically, resulted in a state of yielding to all interests. Whether from East or West, democratic or autocratic, Muslim or Christian, these distinctions no longer hold significance. But this position is not about embracing anti-colonial values, solidarity, anti-fascism, or cosmopolitan ideals from the era of Yugoslav non-alignment; instead, it has created a situation where Serbia remains open to exploitation from all sides, allowing Russians and Americans, Europeans and Arabs alike to enter, extract, pollute, and assert their interests without restraint. One of the most pressing issues in Serbia related to foreign investors and 'developers' concerns the prominent mining company Rio Tinto, which plans to carry out a lithium mining project in the Jadar Valley in Western Serbia. Both the Serbian government and key political figures from highly developed European countries, including Chancellor Scholz, are advocating for this project, citing the alleged growing demand for lithium in electric vehicle batteries and other renewable technologies. However, the initiative, driven by the Anglo-Australian mining giant alongside political partners in Serbia and influential international actors, has sparked environmental, political, and social concerns among local communities and environmental activists. The majority of these groups oppose the project due to anticipated and unforeseen environmental risks and the potential for natural disasters.

This contradiction highlights the superficiality of its proclaimed neutrality, which lacks the strategic coherence and principled foundation necessary to command genuine respect or influence in international affairs. This comes as no surprise, given that Serbian national identity itself reflects comparable signals of confusion and incoherence – largely shaped by what might be conceptualized as a sense of Serbian exceptionalism.

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[42] Vuksanović, Vuk. 2021. Aligning with the non-aligned: Serbia follows in the footsteps of old Yugoslavia. *RUSI*, 19 October 2021.
[43] Vuksanović, *Aligning with the non-aligned*.

Serbian Exceptionalism

Historically, Serbia has viewed itself as the 'Piedmont' of the Balkans – a political force spearheading the inevitable and natural unification of Serbs and other South Slavs.[44] This conventional narrative of Serbia's rise is often premised on the idea that the Serbian population throughout the Balkan Peninsula shared a strong aspiration towards living in an independent and unified state of all Serbs, with or without other South Slavic peoples.[45] Sentiments of freedom, resistance, and defiance against powerful forces – beginning in 1804 under Ottoman rule – have fueled a self-perception that glorifies the nation, both its glorious victories and its victimhood. This narrative has remained a persistent and influential force in shaping Serbian national identity. Along this trajectory – with an interruption during the Yugoslav socialist era – Serbia eventually developed a distinct approach, especially unusual for smaller nations. This path has, I would argue, led Serbia to embrace a form of what could be termed Serbian exceptionalism, a concept that simultaneously feeds into and is reinforced by the country's stance of neutrality.

At first glance, this may seem unusual, as the concept of exceptionalism is typically associated with great powers, which often exercise political authority beyond the usual constraints of the rule of law. We commonly discuss US exceptionalism, but there is a growing body of literature on Israeli, Russian, and Chinese exceptionalism as well. Exceptionalism, whether American or otherwise, is understood as an "unexpected intervention in the realm of the ordinary,"[46] which cannot be judged or perceived through analogies with similar events but rather as exceptions arising from sudden, urgent, and unforeseen circumstances requiring immediate action. With this understanding, one can identify numerous examples where governments of states with an 'exceptional' reputation have committed mass atrocities or genocides without being held accountable or even widely perceived as criminal. Israel, particularly in the current context, stands as a prominent example of this phenomenon, especially with its genocidal actions in Gaza.

Exceptionalism, on the other hand, also serves as a valuable framework for defining "the elusive category of national identity".[47] In the case of American exceptionalism, for example, it should not be treated as an objective truth but rather as a form of subjective self-perception.[48]

American exceptionalism signifies, thus, "a perceived need to safeguard the special features and protections of the U.S. Constitution from external interference, which also taps into a core element of American identity: ours is a civic nationalism, defined by the institutions and practices that bind us […]."[49] This self-definition created a particular notion of Russian identity as being equal to – but qualitatively distinct from – other nations. This construction has played

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[44]MacKenzie, David. 1994. Serbia as Piedmont and the Yugoslav idea, 1804-1914. *East European Quarterly* 28(2), 153-155.

[45]. MacKenzie, *Serbia as Piedmont*,153.

[46] Kurnyshova, Yulia, and Andrey Makarychev. 2023. *Exception and analogical reasoning in Ukrainian and Russian political discourses*, in *Exploring Russia's exceptionalism in international politics*, edited by Taras, Raymond. London & New York: Routledge, 66.

[47] Restad, Hilde Eliassen. 2015. *American exceptionalism: An idea that made a nation and remade the world*. London & New York: Routledge, 2-3.

[48] Restad, *American exceptionalism*.

[49] Ruggie, John Gerard. 2005. American exceptionalism, exceptionalism, and global governance, in *American exceptionalism and human rights*, edited by Ignatieff, Michael. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 305.

a significant role in the internal legitimization of President Putin's rule, while at the same time generating domestic consent for foreign policies, especially the invasion of Ukraine.

Serbian exceptionalism operates similarly to other forms of exceptionalism, particularly in terms of identity and self-perception. What renders Serbian exceptionalism vulnerable to theoretical critique is its inability to leverage this self-perception for interventions, either regionally or globally, as larger powers like the U.S. or Russia do. Most authors would rightfully argue that exceptionalism is a concept reserved for great powers, who justify their misconduct on the international stage through their exceptional status. Even socialist Yugoslavia, in its own way, laid claim to a form of exceptionalism[50] – opposing Soviet-style socialism and charting an independent path both internally (through self-management and other unique features of Yugoslav socialism) and externally (as one of the founding and most prominent members of the Non-Aligned Movement). Of course, Tito's conflict with Stalin was a highly contingent outcome of international rivalry and may have been possible only in the Cold War era, when defecting regimes could play one superpower off against the other.[51] At the same time, Yugoslavia's unique – or exceptional – position was acknowledged and recognized by the most powerful international actors,[52] who even sought to instrumentalize this exceptionality for diplomatic purposes, such as conducting negotiations or conveying messages to the 'other side.'

Small countries, by contrast, often pursue meaningful and plausible neutrality – rarely or never exceptionalism. However, exceptionalism is not confined to international behavior; it also encompasses national identity, the self-perception that legitimizes international actions. Serbian exceptionalism, hence, primarily functions on this internal level, deeply entwined with national identity, which in turn shapes international behavior and leads to meaningless and passive neutrality. It is a form of self-perception rooted in Serbia's history and sense of uniqueness. Serbian exceptionalism serves as an additional instrument on the international stage, particularly when neutrality alone cannot justify specific foreign policy decisions – such as Serbia's choice to refrain from sanctioning Russia, even as other European neutral states opted to do so. Unlike neutral Austria, or previously neutral Sweden and Finland, which imposed sanctions without much hesitation, Serbia sought to affirm its unique stance, grounding it in a sense of exceptionalism and asserting its sovereign right to an independent foreign policy.

In reality, however, this stance has not received much understanding from other actors, especially in the West. Ultimately, Serbian exceptionalism has proven no more viable as a foreign policy platform than neutrality. Like neutrality, the sense of being 'an exception' – a sentiment embedded within Serbian national identity – serves primarily for domestic purposes. On the one

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[50] Denitch, Bogdan. 1981. *Yugoslav exceptionalism*, in *Blue-collar workers in Eastern Europe*, edited by Triska, Jan F., and Charles Gati. Boston: George Allen & Unwin, 256–258.

[51] Grdešić, Marko. 2015. *Exceptionalism and its limits: The legacy of self-management in the former Yugoslavia*, in *Working through the past: Labor and authoritarian legacies in comparative perspective*, edited by Caraway, Teri L. / Cook, Maria Lorena, and Stephen Crowley. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 103–121, 121.

[52] Among the paradigmatic cases was the one of the British newsreel media's largely unknown role in propagating Yugoslavia as a country that defied the Cold War binary. Research of the British Information Research Department (IRD), the first anti-communist propaganda agency, shows how the IRD and British newsreel companies' cooperation helped establish Yugoslavia's Cold War myth as 'a pleasurable' albeit socialist country. See: Ćulibrk, Jelena. 2021. Moulding and mutilating: Newsreels, the British state, and Yugoslav 'exceptional' socialism, 1946–1961. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 41(3), 477–494.

hand, Serbia's unique geographical and historical positioning indeed reinforces this self-perception, often fueling a sense of standing apart from or resisting prevailing narratives from neighboring countries or pressures from global powers. Since 2012, however, with the rise of the Serbian Progressive Party and President Vučić, the country's foreign policy has continued to reflect the contradictions inherent in Serbian national identity. Rather than embodying genuine state autonomy, this orientation has primarily functioned to legitimize the SNS's broader agenda of consolidating and sustaining political power. This agenda has, in effect, sought to reproduce – and even exacerbate – the Serbian 'identity crisis,' leveraging the internal tensions of national identity to serve the interests of an increasingly authoritarian leadership, its party apparatus, and its governance model.

Conclusion

In the early 2000s, a small, post-socialist, and peripheral nation, Serbia seemed determined to 'join the Western civilization,' particularly under the leadership of Prime Minister Đinđić, who was tragically assassinated. Serbia aspired to follow a path similar to other former Yugoslav republics, but this trajectory has never been fully compatible with the process of rebuilding Serbian national identity after Yugoslavia's dissolution. In its retraditionalization, Serbia's foreign policy inherited two contrasting elements of its legacy: a view of itself as the 'Piedmont' of Balkan freedom, with a sense of historical significance, and the socialist legacy of non-alignment. Like other post-socialist states, Serbia largely distanced itself from its socialist past, as it posed a challenge to the newly established narrative of 'Serbdom.' However, the framework of non-alignment provided a beneficial stance for its international positioning, offering a basis for a sense of 'exceptionalism' and a unique pride in balancing between East and West.

Serbia's attempt to reconcile these contradictions – its Yugoslav legacy with a re-traditionalized national identity – resulted in mutually contradictory elements within its national identity and a similarly fragile platform of neutrality, largely devoid of coherence and of substance. Unlike other neutral states, Serbia has not been acknowledged by global powers in a way that could yield the strategic benefits typically associated with neutrality. Instead, Serbia has become a dependent European periphery, caught between competing global interests, leading to a neocolonial condition. Rather than effectively balancing these interests, Serbia increasingly capitulates to all of them. Economically, this translates to an open-door policy, welcoming capital from across the globe – whether from the Arab world, the United States, Russia, Germany, or China – with minimal oversight or constraints. Politically, this approach enables Serbia's dominant elite, particularly over the last 12 years, to mask this dependency by celebrating a narrative of Serbian neutrality and autonomy, drawing on an idealized past and a sense of national pride.

In the context of Russia's aggression in Ukraine, Serbia's international positioning has led to continuous excuses and an evident discomfort on the world stage. Had Serbia developed its neutrality with greater strategic focus, Belgrade might have been seen as a suitable meeting point for negotiations toward a ceasefire or peace agreement in Ukraine. Achieving this would have required far more skillful international engagement over recent decades, along with a fundamentally different foundation for Serbian national identity – one that more robustly defines national interests on the global stage. As it stands, Serbian neutrality and its sense of exceptionalism seem primarily symbolic, while perpetuating national identity's contradictions

and serving domestic narratives rather than conveying a courageous or sovereign stance internationally. This positioning, in other words, appears more juvenile than resolute, despite how it is often portrayed in Serbian public discourse.

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