

# Geopolitical Positioning of a Small State: Serbia in the Shadow of Yugoslavia's 'Third Way'

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## Abstract

*This article examines Serbia's positioning in the East-West axis during the post-Cold War era. This is a specific example of the 'third way' in twenty-first century geopolitical behaviour. The small country remains non-aligned within the existing alliances of the East and the West, trying to find a balance between their influence and remaining faithful to its national interests. Although with far more modest resources, the situation of the Serbian state is reminiscent of the fate of Yugoslavia, which was among the initiators of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Relying on substantial empirical evidence, this article claims that being a small state is not an insurmountable obstacle to pursuing an assertive foreign policy, albeit at the cost of complicated relations with neighbouring countries and those geopolitical forces dominating the current world order. Summarising the Serbian experience in 'third way' geopolitics, a model of multiple asymmetries in interrelations between the small state and great powers is elaborated.*

**Keywords:** small states, geopolitics, third way, non-alignment, multiple asymmetries, Serbia, Yugoslavia

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## Introduction

Following the fall of the Iron Curtain, several small, newly-emergent European states found themselves in the epicentre of the reordering of power relations on the East-West axis. Most post-socialist countries have chosen the course of supranational integration or bandwagoning as an option for identification; and/or look for stability and protection among the great powers. These frontier nations can decide if they prefer to join the Western structures such as the EU and NATO or keep close relations with the post-Soviet East, limited to Russia and its attempts to create counter, less successful, models of political and economic integration.

In empirical terms, this research concentrates on the case of Serbian geopolitical positioning after the Cold War. To consider Serbia as a small state should not be met with serious counter-arguments. Although in the literature there are no generally accepted quantitative or normative criteria allowing a given country to be labelled a 'small power' (Neumann & Gstöhl 2006), those states with less than 10 or 15 million inhabitants and which are not great powers are usually recognised as such (Baldacchino & Wivel 2020; Thorhallsson & Steinsson 2017). Contemporary Serbia, excluding Kosovo, has a population of seven million and thus meets these basic criteria.

During the last three decades, Serbia's complex geopolitical location and unresolved territorial disputes have been the drivers forcing this country to find a balance between dominating supranational blocs in the light of the 'third way' concept. This is an option for the international positioning of a small country in a world of asymmetric relations in a region where the interests of the world's most influential powers collide. The Serbian geopolitical development evokes associations with its larger, multinational predecessor Yugoslavia's look for alternative international behaviour. Despite its high relevance for theory and practice, the Serbian case was not sharply articulated and approached in the small states' academic discourse. Serbia, located 'between a rock and a hard place' (Gajić 2018), is a small state with uncertain geopolitical and civilisational identity, dealing with several challenges in an area with a centuries-old tradition of divergence between the interests of global powers. All these current circumstances make Serbia, perhaps, the most intriguing example in modern Europe, both in terms of the formal self-determination of the state and society and the rival approaches of the great powers in attracting the non-aligned post-communist states to their spheres of influence. Despite its high relevance for theory and practice, with a few exceptions (Kovačević 2016, 2019; Radoman 2021; Guzina 2022), this case was not sharply articulated and approached in the small states' academic discourse. Taking Serbia as an example, the current article deals with how the complex geopolitical location and ambivalent ideas on a nation's civilisational identity of its leaders translate into the practical and institutional dimensions of the state's political and economic cooperation.

The article is structured as follows. It first raises issues that revolve around the 'third way's' specificity and outlines how theory and empirical research reflect contemporary small states' behaviour. The following section presents the article's research design, including its primary purpose and research questions. After that, the socialist Yugoslavia's ideological economic security positioning as a non-aligned state under conditions of a bipolar system is discussed. Next, relying on some empirical evidence, an attempt is made to answer whether, and if so how, the Yugoslav way of geopolitical self-positioning was embodied in the post-Cold War evolution of Serbian geopolitics. A model of multiple asymmetries is presented in the next article's section. The following section formulates differences and similarities between Yugoslavia's and Serbia's geopolitical 'third way', emphasising the aspects of their geography, security, economic orientation and cultural-ideological complementarity. The article's conclusion contains some general remarks that are important for small states' 'third way' and underscores the difficulties in defining and predicting Serbia's location in the international order unequivocally.

### **'Third way' and the small state positioning in theory and empirical research**

Although the discourse on small states has developed intensively in recent geopolitics and international relations (Henrikson 2001; Crowards 2002; Maas 2009; Steinmetz 2016; Cottey 2018), scholars have rarely addressed the 'third way' of post-socialist countries as a possible option of supranational identification (McSweeney 1987; Inbar & Sheffer 1997; Soni 2018; Makili-Aliyev 2021), which is associated mainly with security issues. In the sphere of security, it is believed that the constant concern of small states has often induced them to seek the protection of great powers and military assistance from larger states or alliances (Braun 1983; Brady & Thorhallsson 2021). Several terms that are more or less closely tied to the 'third way' concept circulate in the scholarly literature. Small states have also deployed a number of diverse strategies in their asymmetrical relations with the most powerful powers and alliances, including bandwagoning, balancing, integration, neutrality and non-interference (Kurecic 2017). When bandwagoning or integration are not appropriate options, it is believed that the state seeks to keep its interests, to mitigate external influences, or even to survive by 'balancing', 'remaining neutral', 'hedging' and, in some cases, 'omnibalancing' (Schweller 1994; Levick & Schulz 2020; Szalai 2022). What distinguishes the omnibalancing concept is the assumption that the governments/ruling power consider there are both internal and external threats to their existence. What distinguishes the omnibalancing concept is the assumption that the governments/ruling power consider there are both internal and external threats to their exist-

ence (David 1991). The author emphasised that the determinants of alignment overwhelmingly come from the structure of the international system. Hedging is another term frequently applied in recent decades to describe a state's behaviour in international politics, mostly South-Asian countries (Kuik 2008; Ciorciari & Haacke 2019; Korolev 2019). Despite the fact that the concept 'entails a degree of ambiguity' (Plagemann 2019: 740), it is associated with a middle position between balancing and bandwagoning (Kuik 2021). The concept of hedging seems less appropriate to describe the situation of countries whose behaviour could be depicted as a 'third way'. Hedging could also find an application to changing tactics in foreign security or economic policy of every kind of country, both large and small, allied and non-allied. Most importantly, to 'hedge' does not imply the presumption that states search for their place in world politics outside regional integrational associations.

While great power status is attributed on the basis of how central, strong or influential a state is in the running of international peace and security and the general maintenance of international society, small states achieve status through making themselves useful to greater powers

Neumann and de Carvalho (2015) described the mechanism of small states' participation in big politics. They usually 'achieve status through making themselves useful to great powers' and 'seek to be noticed [...] by taking (an admittedly small part of the) responsibility for matters of international peace and security' (Neumann & de Carvalho 2015: 1–2). In this context, the question arises whether, in times of globalisation and the high variability of the international environment (Vaičekauskaitė 2017), smallness forces these types of countries to seek partners and guardians among great powers and influential organisations, or whether they can afford to balance and benefit from privileged relations with several partners? This topical theoretical and empirical issue is particularly vital in the context of supranational regions, as the Balkans, Caucasus and Central Asia, concentrating geopolitically fragile small countries, whose space is a battlefield for fierce struggles for zones of multiple influence between the global and regional powers. While this type of country is often overlooked by researchers, well-known examples, which for a long time have been presented as the geographical focus of a small state's 'third way' positioning, include countries belonging to Western civilisation, i.e. Switzerland, Austria, Sweden and Finland. Scandinavian countries in particular serve as evidence that an essential aspect of 'third way' policy – institutional non-alignment – is highly dependent on the changing security environment (Pentiilä 1991; Can 2021; Radoman 2021). As Simpson (2018) pointed out, under the conditions of bi-polarity, the Soviet Union viewed the European Community as part of the West in tandem with NATO. This meant – the author noted – that Austria, Finland and Sweden could not apply for membership, fearing this would negate their neutrality. Remaining militarily non-aligned, these

countries became members of the European Union in the post-Cold War period (Simpson 2018). Sweden, for example, was later labelled 'allied partner' or 'partner number one' in NATO Headquarters in Brussels (Pettersen 2018: 74). Moreover, Western civilisational affiliation, democratic political system and market economy of these states continued during the Cold War and made them less compatible to the extensive understanding of a 'third way' followed in this study. Today, these states also do not constitute a proving ground for direct confrontation between political and economic alliances, including competition in energy projects, as is the case of Serbia and other post-socialist countries.

In recent years, the 'third way' seems relevant in the South Caucasus. Along with the Balkans, this region is perceived as one of the world's geopolitical and civilisational hotspots where divergent interests and values of some global and regional powers intersect. Azerbaijan sees multivectorism as the best strategy for its political, economic and security interests. Such a strategy is largely explainable given that three geopolitically significant states (Iran, Russia and Turkey) are its immediate neighbours, with which the state has established multidimensional historic, economic and geopolitical ties, including large Azerbaijani diasporas in all three mentioned countries. One also cannot deny the primary importance of a common religion, which favours deepening economic and political ties with Turkey and Iran. Interestingly, Azerbaijan joined Non-Alignment movement (NAM) in the early 2010s (Makili-Aliyev 2021: 364), which is best understood as a natural extension of the 'balanced foreign policy' doctrine introduced in the early 1990s (Strakes 2015). Another, even more remote geographically practical example is Mongolia. As a landlocked state neighbouring only two others – China and Russia – it represents a compelling example of an attempt to follow the third way. Mongolia remains highly dependent on its neighbours: 80% of its fuel it receives from Russia, and 80% of its exports go to China (Soni 2018). Seeking a balance outside Northeast Asia, Mongolia developed the 'third neighbour' concept, which emerged after the Cold War and was initially linked with the United States. In fact, all such potential partners/balancers that would favour a possible 'third way' are geographically remote; this third neighbour serves only as a theoretical option. With an aim to 'maintain balanced relations with Russia and China', Mongolia seeks to establish 'mutually advantageous ties with other countries that may well be treated as "third neighbors"' (Soni 2015: 41), including India, the Republic of Korea, Turkey, Thailand, Singapore and other ASEAN member countries.

From a conceptual point of view, two main aspects of the 'third way' could be specified. In more general terms, as a concept of international positioning of the state, the 'third way' emerged in conditions of a bipolar world in which non-aligned countries had to choose between two options for integration. However, the term was also grasped more broadly, as 'the theory and practice of Non-alignment reveals that it remains relevant to the changing world scenario, irrespective

of the fact that whether there is cold war or detente whether the world is unipolar, bipolar or multipolar' (Shukla 1995: 47). From the viewpoint of the domain of the external interaction of geopolitical entities, both states and international organisations, the 'third way' can be explored from at least two angles: first, as an option to protect national sovereignty and interests in a specific external environment, marked by confrontation between existing geopolitical alliances; and second, as a specific way to keep positive relations between both parties and gain the benefits of such a balanced position. Some authors insist that the merits of NAM, in order to achieve 'a fairer international economic order' were linked with reducing the military-political division of the world, strengthening solidarity among developing countries (South-South cooperation), as well as in conducting a North-South dialogue (Dimitrijević 2021: 55).

In more specific (sectoral) terms, the 'third way' traditionally refers to the defence and strategic-military sphere (e.g. Mates 1989; Coaty 2019), including the neutrality of small European countries (Binter 1989; Radoman 2018, 2021). However, more attention should be paid to the positioning of non-aligned states concerning trade and economic alliances, and to considering factors such as national traditions and nations' supranational identification, which are actively expressed by public opinion in small states and in the vision of domestic stakeholders. The aspects beyond defence matters have also rarely been addressed, even in Cold-War era literature (e.g. Karunanayake 1976; Sengupta 1976).

In this research, the 'third way' concept is applied more broadly, beyond the issues of security, defence alliances, threats, and war and peacekeeping, which dominate the most significant portion of the debates on small states' positioning. Even so, this concept seems appropriate to examine the geopolitical path of post-Yugoslav Serbia, whose predecessor's 'third way' strategy is often referred to by political and academic elite (NSPM 2011; Gajić & Janković 2012; Lekić 2017; Dimitrijević 2021). In the current historical context, the 'third way' concept also implicates the link between the two states. Concepts with a narrower application, such as balancing or neutrality, are undoubtedly among the key pillars of 'third way' geopolitics and foreign policy. Still, in the practical activities of the state, such strategies are limited to the political-military sphere.

Conceptually, I rely on the assumption that nation states are driven by the wish to follow their own way, which is rooted in domestic traditions, prevailing worldview and traditional identity; thus, the 'third way' is not limited only to deliberated actions and playing games to balance foreign influences. These factors, which conditionally could be labelled 'soft', impact the formulation of the geopolitical strategies and behaviour positioning of the state in regional and global geopolitical environments. Thus, the 'third way' is understood as a concept referring to the interplay of the following pillars of geopolitical/foreign policy activities: security, economy and cultural-ideological complementarity.

While the first directly relates to the very existence of small states, the second determines the conditions of their prosperity/backwardness, and the third is associated with emotions and lack of pragmatism. It should be specified that the last dimension comprises issues of identity, civilisational traditions, stereotypical imaginations of international order, and deeply rooted codes involving external friends and enemies. Cultural-ideological complementarity is undoubtedly that pillar of state geopolitics, which stands out with relatively long-term stability and undergoes slower evolution over time. Its influence over geopolitical positioning usually increases in periods of fundamental transformation of internal and/or international order. Every one of the single 'sectors' of international order and the policies directed towards them are tightly intertwined and affect each other in various time-space configurations.

It is worth emphasising one more, often overlooked, aspect of small state identification. It concerns the mutual interdependencies between the small states' domestic expectations of their main political and other public stakeholders, and their formulation of geopolitical priorities (Deets 2009; Doeser 2011; Ejodus 2011; Proroković 2015), and, in some cases, even the blurring of the lines between them (Szalai 2022). Thus, this article turns attention to the fact that international positioning also depends on the internal competition between values and visions for optimally placing one's own state in the world: how much distance must be kept from different poles of international politics, and how deep must the cooperation go?

### Research design

This study focuses on two closely related questions: Is the 'third way' a matter of course that Serbia followed during all the decades after the Cold War? And, if yes, to what extent was it determined by a consciously formulated, purposeful strategy, or was it rather the outcome of *ad hoc* decisions following long-lasting reconfigurations in the geopolitical and economic map of (Eastern) Europe? To answer these questions, the article's main purpose is to frame the stages of the post-Cold War evolution of the Serbian state, its positions and attempts to adjust its politics to the changing international environment.

Thus, following substantial empirical evidence, the article first sought to determine whether military and political non-alignment have been accompanied in recent years by a respective symmetry in investment inflows and trade exchange between Serbia and its main political partners. And, second, an attempt is made to establish whether, and, if so, to what extent, the activity in these spheres is affected by cultural-ideological factors and how they serve as prerequisites for foreign policy positioning. To fulfil these two tasks, this research considers the intensity of bilateral cooperation with global powers and supranational structures, primarily the EU and NATO. The study combines analyses of strategic state



documents, statesmen's speeches and selected political party programmes with empirical data concerning Serbia's bilateral economic exchange.

The study also made to draw parallels between the geopolitical path of post-Cold War Serbia, and search for similarities and differences between the policy of Yugoslavia's 'third way' under the conditions of a bipolar system (Mladenov 2014; Lekić 2017). In broader terms, an attempt was made to formulate some general regularities in the geopolitical positioning of small states. These are synthesised in the model of multiple asymmetries in the interrelations between the small state and leading world and/or regional powers and organisations, whose mutually hostile activities collide in the territory of this state.

### **Yugoslavia's 'third way': the non-aligned geopolitics of a socialist state**

After the First World War, the 'Serbian lands', as part of Royal Yugoslavia, geo-strategically became part of the 'sanitary cordon' in Central Europe aimed at blocking the expansion of the Sovietised Heartland to the west and the Germans to the Middle East. Russia did not play a major role in setting the political boundaries in the Balkans after the First World War. France and Great Britain imposed their visions of the geopolitical organisation of this area, supporting the creation of the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes, which is often treated as an extended 'Greater Serbia'.

During socialist Yugoslavia, the South Slavic and other peoples making up the federation had limited opportunities for public externalisation of their cultural-religious identities and their projection in the country's geopolitical activity. Apart from the ideology of socialism, emphasising solidarity with workers and peasants from all over the world, the main drivers of the orientation of the Yugoslav state were economic ties and positioning towards the two leading military blocs. Turbulent events marked the very beginning of this era. If the alliance with Moscow was a strategic priority for the Yugoslav communists in the first years after the Second World War, the Tito-Stalin split in 1948 led to a change in policy towards the Soviet Union and its satellites. At the General Assembly of the United Nations in Paris in 1949, Edvard Kardelj, Yugoslavia's foreign minister, used confrontational rhetoric towards Moscow. He talked about 'the discrepancy between words and deeds' and referred to the anti-democratic practice of the Soviet Government towards Yugoslavia (Dragojlović et al. 2011: 188). In February 1953, the Balkan Pact between Yugoslavia, Turkey and Greece was established. This agreement meant deepening cooperation with two countries that had joined NATO a year before and was considered a significant step in reversing Yugoslavia's international isolation and mitigating conflict with the Eastern bloc countries (Manić, Torlak & Simeunović-Bajić 2011).

The economic dimension of Yugoslavia's 'third way' orientation was established as follows. In addition to the high degree of dependence on the supply of Soviet



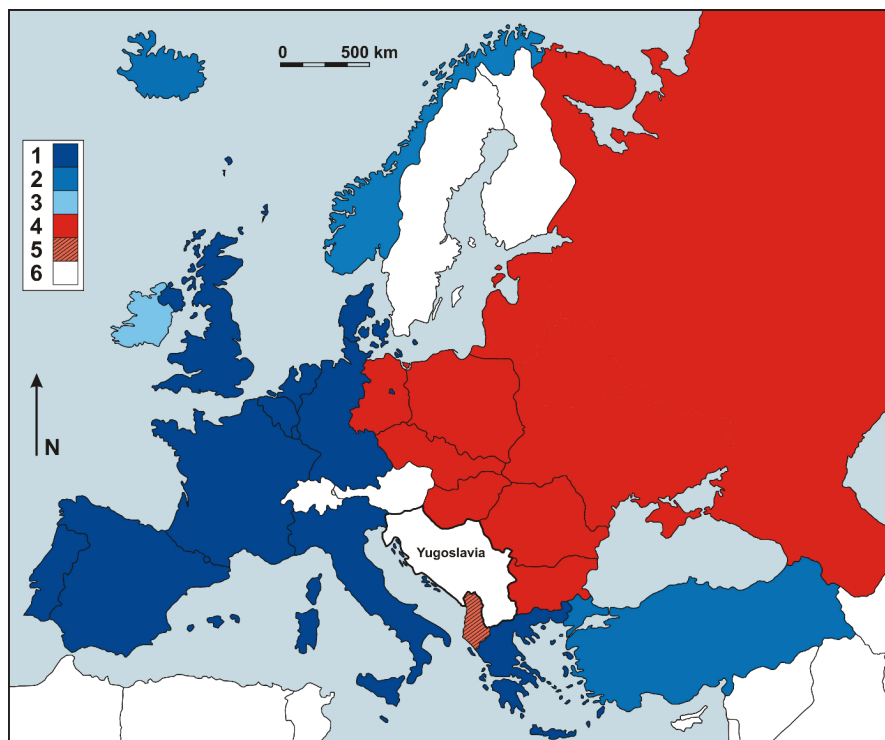
military technology and natural resources, relations with the US were necessary for the country's economic prosperity (Lampe, Prickett & Adamovic 1990). In some opinions, the Tito regime survived thanks to US military aid and economic assistance from the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the US Export-Import Bank, and the restoration of trade relations with the West in 1949. In exchange, Yugoslavia was assigned an important role in the anti-Soviet policy of the United States in the eastern Mediterranean. At the same time, the United States refused to reconsider Yugoslavia's request for inclusion in the Marshall Plan, and the USSR blocked its participation in the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (Woodward 1995: 26). From the late 1940s to the late 1980s, Yugoslavia received about USD 70 billion from the West in various forms and was dependent on financial and commercial credits from Western banks. At the same time, Yugoslavia was also turned to the East since it needed a socialist market for its sub-standard industrial exports and relied on Soviet oil and military hardware (Paparela 1989).

The security dimension of the country's 'third way' geopolitics was associated with the policy of military neutrality, which was more clearly expressed with the creation and development of the NAM (Kilibarda 2010; Kullaa 2012; Mišković, Fischer-Tiné & Boškowska 2014). The official policy of socialist Yugoslavia was not to seek a buffer position between the integrated blocs of the East and the West. In the opinion of the rulers, those in an independent position and outside the military blocs had an obligation to cooperate with all countries based on free choice and equal rights (Dragojlović et al. 2011).

The road to establishing contact with many non-European countries was launched by Tito in 1954, during his meetings with Nasser, the president of Egypt, and Nehru, the prime minister of India. Later, when tensions in the global confrontation between the socialist and capitalist worlds was culminating, Yugoslavia, in September 1961, hosted the first NAM conference and became one of the leading proponents of this organisation. This loose alliance of states, which had to mobilise and unify 'the materially less powerful nations' (Mates 1989: 167), played a prominent role in Yugoslavia's political and economic relations with the outside world until the federation's dissolution in the early 1990s (Bogetić 1990; Trültzsch 2021; Lopandić & Milikić 2021). Yugoslavia, as one of the most developed member countries of the NAM, financed loans for the purchase of equipment, machinery and transport vehicles, while simultaneously accepting foreign loans, mainly from the United States and Western European states. Foreign trade with these countries increased throughout the Cold War (Manić, Torlak & Simeunović-Bajić 2011). Yugoslavia's location in between the two political systems is best illustrated by the geographic structure of trade relations in the advanced phase of the Cold War. In 1983, capitalist countries accounted for 33.3% of Yugoslavia's exports and 46.1% of imports, while the trade exchange with socialist countries provided 46.7% of exports and 36.9% of imports (Mileta 1986).

Yugoslavia remained outside the supranational organisations of the two rival blocs (the European Community and NATO, and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the Warsaw Pact) until 1991 (Figure 1). Its 'third way' meant, first, balancing between the influence of great powers, and, second, striving to remain non-aligned in defence and economic blocs. The special status it had obtained in relations with the two superpowers provided advantages to relations both with the capitalist West and the socialist East. Yugoslavia's 'third way' was the result on the one hand of the country's geographic position vis-à-vis the bipolar geopolitical system and, on the other, of the very philosophy of pursuing an independent foreign policy under Josip Broz Tito's leadership. Rapprochement with the West was considered a potential threat to the position of Tito's communist regime, while integration with the socialist bloc would push Belgrade towards Soviet domination and loss of sovereignty.

**Figure 1.** Yugoslavia in the geopolitical environment of the late Cold War era



Source: Author

1 -Members of the European Community and NATO, 2 - NATO members, 3 - the European Community members, 4 - members of the Warsaw Pact and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance, 5 - a socialist country withdrew from the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance and the Warsaw Pact in the 1960s, 6 - non-aligned states

Attention should also be given to the relationship between the internal divisions and traditional civilisational affiliations of the republics and regions of Yugoslavia, on the one hand, and the external cultural and political centres, on the other (Mihailov 2011). Despite recognising the leading role of the League of Communists of Yugoslavia, individual federal units also participated in foreign policy. Each republic and autonomous region had its own constitution that regulated their participation in relations with foreign countries, although they had to be consistent with the established foreign policy of the state: 'permanent and strict adherence to non-alignment, as an independent, non-bloc and global orientation in international relations' (Petković 1986: 9). It is worth mentioning the opinion that the character of Yugoslavia's internal organisation necessarily determined its foreign policy orientation, and that 'insisting on the principle of different paths to socialism, depending on specific national conditions and needs, was the only alternative for preserving internal order from growing hegemony in the international community' (Bogetić 1990: 34–35). These were the conditions when constructed ideological unity pushed the real cultural-historical, ethnic and economic differences in the multinational federation into the background.

### **Post-Cold War geopolitics: the 'third way', like being in a 'geopolitical ghetto'**

This section examines to what extent the relationship between the dynamics of Yugoslav and Serbian geopolitical orientations and changes in the global balance of power is observable in the post-Cold War period, and how these changes force this country to take an alternative 'third way' option of identification. Tactical re-definitions of Serbian geopolitical priorities can be linked to the evolution of the international order from 1990 onwards. The last decade of the twentieth century was a time of political and economic isolation when the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia and Serbian nationalism clashed with separatist republics, which found more robust international support for their aspirations for independence. At the very end of this decade, Serbian authorities turned symbolically into the East. Later, during the pro-EU forces' transition to power, Serbian geopolitics faced an 'East or West' choice. After many years of volatile relations with the EU, real Serbian geopolitics had fallen into an 'East and West' formula, which integrates the policy to remain neutral and to follow other quintessential symptoms of the 'third way'. Thus, several strategic steps that show how Serbia, despite its formal pursuit of EU membership, cooperates with a number of political, economic and technological centres is – to one degree or another – consistent with its traditional in-betweenness regarding East and West.

*The 1990s: 'inward-looking nationalism' and a symbolic turn towards the East*

After the Cold War, the sphere of influence in the Balkans of the global geopolitical powers underwent a radical reconfiguration. Most countries in the region changed their geopolitical orientation by integrating into the West's economic and defence structures. Serbia is now the country with the most complicated relations with the EU and NATO – organisations with geostrategic initiative in the military, political and economic spheres. The post-Cold War Serbian geopolitical orientation is not only a direct result of the global changes, its geographic location and inherited civilisational peculiarities in the perception of the world. The main factor driving national strategic thought was the geographical distribution of the Serbs, who were divided among several newly-formed states. This time was marked by conflicts and 'inward-looking nationalism' (Kovačević 2016: 124).

Serbia found itself in a situation where it encouraged the armed struggles of its compatriots in the former Yugoslav republics, and the territorial integrity of the latter was supported by the most influential countries of the Euro-Atlantic community. During the breakup of Yugoslavia, Serbia lacked support from the West, who did not recognise the ruling socialists/nationalists as close partners (Thomas 1999). The European Community was guided by the principle of *uti possidetis juris*, and, on this basis, recognised the independence proclaimed by the Yugoslav republics, which was contrary to Serbia's interests (Dimitrijević 2010).

Essential changes affected the relations between what remained of the multinational federation and NAM. Even though Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro) was not formally excluded from its membership at the time, in 1992 it was de facto denied the right to participate in the work of the organisation. Non-aligned countries took different positions towards the Yugoslavian crisis: while Islamic states blamed Yugoslavia for the ongoing crisis, especially in Bosnia and Herzegovina, African and Latin American countries supported the position of authorities in Belgrade. This was the reason that the question of the legitimacy of further participation in NAM was 'an open political question' (Dimitrijević 2021: 50). It is worth recalling that the 'third', smallest Yugoslavia was not recognised for a long time and was accepted as a member of the United Nations only in 2000. During the period under consideration, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, and Serbia in particular, had to redefine its opponents and the states supporting its vital interests. Mired in a series of regional conflicts, the state structures ruled by Slobodan Milošević had no formulated international strategy. However, Russia and China acted as Belgrade's main supporters in the global arena. In most cases, these states supported the Serbian position on the UN Security Council, but failed to prevent either NATO military intervention or the de facto secession of Kosovo. Historical ties and civilisational closeness (expressed in the concept of Slavic and Orthodox 'brotherhood'), which replaced socialist internationalism in the 1990s, became undoubtedly the driving factor that enforced old geopolitical

complementarity between Serbia and Russia. Despite friendly diplomatic gestures and the participation of Russian soldiers in the KFOR mission, Russia not only lacked the resources of military support (Ambrosio 1999) but, at a time of difficult economic transition, it was also not in its interest to confront the West directly. Russia's positions, however, were more nuanced and changed over this decade. Moreover, in the early 1990s, Russia supported UN economic sanctions against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. It is worth mentioning that in April 1999, two weeks after the NATO war campaign against Yugoslavia, the country's parliament passed a resolution 'On the accession of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia to the Union of Belarus and Russia'. This was a symbolic act of desperation that was formally approved by the Russian and Belarusian parliaments, but remained without any practical consequences. Under such conditions, numerous stereotypes about the North Atlantic Alliance (Vraneš 1999) as a 'union of imperialist states' and the 'military machine of the West' were reinforced in Serbian society. This picture became even stronger after the alliance military intervention in 1999. As Đukanović (2015: 116) noted, this public attitude was often only a reflection of the deep anti-Western sentiment in Serbia, which was then gradually transferred to the image of the European Union.

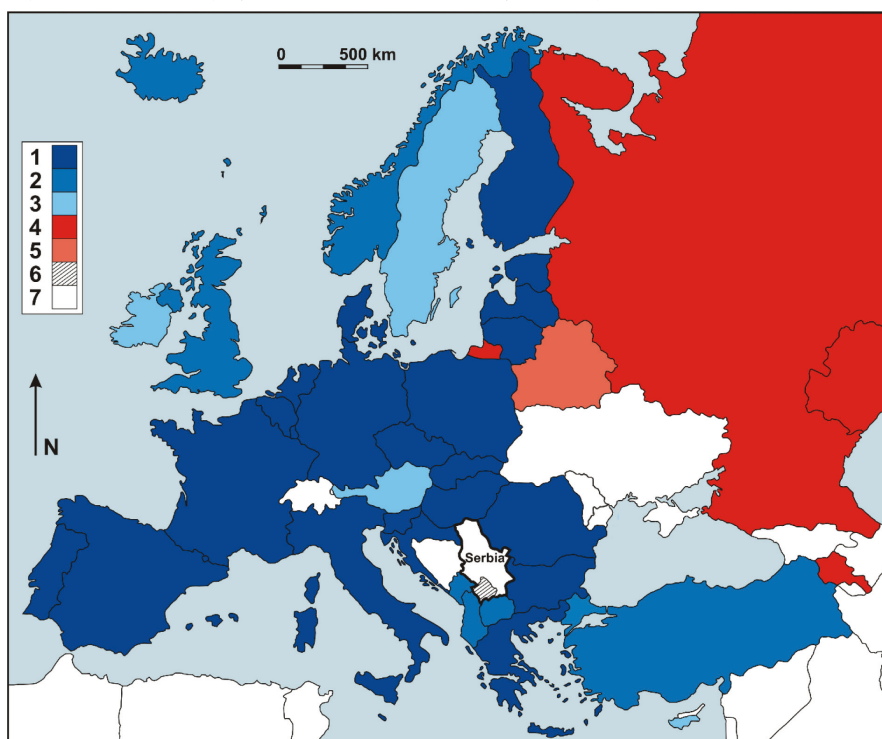
Without adequate support from Yugoslavia's main foreign supporter under Slobodan Milošević, the preservation of Yugoslav unity or the building of a Greater Serbia was doomed to failure. After the wars of the 1990s, which were unsuccessful for Serbia, the use of military means gave way to soft power, emphasising a policy of supporting the rights of the Serbian population in the newly-formed states by showing them comprehensive support. This is one of the main reasons for the continued suspicion towards Serbia among the neighbouring post-Yugoslav states, which led them to follow a course of Euro-Atlantic integration.

### *The 2000s: an irresolute turn towards the West*

During the 2000s, Serbia's 'third way' was marked by hesitation between the desire to join the EU and a desire to keep and develop its ties with Russia. After European integration emerged as a priority of the new democratic authorities, it gave rise to expectations of overcoming the policy of isolationism and of a symbolic and political return to Europe (Kostovicova 2004). The waves of enthusiasm after the overthrow of Milošević brought hopes for smooth integration into Europe (Ramet & Pavlaković 2005), but this proved to be a short-term phenomenon. In the mid-2000s, insufficient cooperation by the Serbian authorities with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia led to the postponement of the start of negotiations for EU membership. In the ideas of some more conservative domestic authors, the traditional identity of Serbia comes into conflict with the aspiration of the more liberal circles for rapprochement with the West. From this time onwards, one of the critical challenges of Serbia's international posi-

tioning remains how to adjust this purpose with the steps to keep close relations with Russia. Stepić (2012: 34), for example, believes that ‘in the ethno-national, religious, cultural and civilisation sense, the traditional affiliation of Serbs and Serbian lands to the East is indisputable’ and that of ‘transfer of the Serbian factor in the Balkans’ to incompatible Euro-Atlantic integrations is noticeable. In turn, such attitudes served as a suitable ground for deepening ties with Russia. Serbia was interested in attracting Russian capital, joint energy projects and increasing trade with Russia, which used this opportunity to strengthen its presence in the Balkans (Jović-Lazić & Lađevac 2018).

**Figure 2.** Serbia in the geopolitical environment of Europe (January 2024)



Source: Author

1 – Members of the European Union and NATO, 2 – NATO members, 3 – the European Union members, 4 – members of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, 5 – members of the Eurasian Economic Union, 6 – partially recognised states, 7 – non-aligned states

Territorially shrunk, Serbia was gradually encircled by member states of the EU and NATO (Figure 2). Excluding Kosovo, the country accounts for just 30% of the territory and population of the former Yugoslavia. Some Serbian experts

assessed this situation as being a specific form of 'geopolitical ghetto' (Gajić 2015). With the changing external and internal environment, the new, pro-Western course seemed to be a logical continuation of the essential shifts taking place in the domestic political arena. At the beginning of the post-Milosevic era, democratic, pro-European parties held dominant positions. Under their rule, attempts to establish Serbia's military and political neutrality have been based on: (1) the publicly-expressed wishes of Serbia's highest political representatives, as well as other public figures, and (2) a parliamentary resolution designating Serbia as a military-neutral (Lekić 2017).

The state's declared strategic aim of military neutrality testified to a willingness to follow its 'third way', at least in the sphere of security. Interestingly, according to some calculations, the budget incurs fewer costs in the case of neutrality towards defence alliances (see Stojković & Glišić 2020). The position of staying separate from existing military alliances can only await changes after a national referendum (Resolution of the National Assembly...). Against this, Serbia does not give up cooperation with military alliances. Serbia does not perceive other states or alliances as enemies, or look for further cooperation with EU and NATO members (Radoman 2021). Earlier, in 2006, Serbia joined the NATO Partnership for Peace Program. The question of possible candidature for NATO membership will undoubtedly remain an unpopular option for the public opinion in Serbia for a long time (Đukanović & Lađevac 2009). This option is currently supported by only a few Serbian experts. In contrast to the 2000s, when support for membership reached over 70% (Pjevović & Subotić 2009), the level of Euro-enthusiasm among citizens is declining. According to a survey from 2023, 43% of Serbs would vote for EU membership, 32 against, while another 12 find it difficult to answer the question (PTPC 2023).

In 2004, the newly-elected president, Boris Tadić, outlined his foreign policy philosophy which, according to him, depended on the geographical location of the country. That is why Serbia should be the centre of friendship and peaceful politics in the region. Thus, its foreign policy priorities are European integration, good neighbourliness, as well as equal relations with the three centripetal forces in world politics: Brussels, Washington and Moscow (Dragojlović et al. 2011). A few years later, in 2008, Tadić's vision became more varied. The president formulated a thesis of four strategic pillars of Serbia; the EU, Russia, USA and China (Gajić & Janković 2012). In the following decade, this thesis began to take real shape. The initial pro-Western course was replaced by a more irresolute view of Serbia's supranational positioning, preserving the scars of a specific, non-aligned, 'third way'.

After Milosevic was removed from power, Serbia 'was unwilling to raise the issue of renewed membership in the NAM'; the European integration was recognized as more significant than the relations with NAM (Svilanović 2001, as cited in Dimitrijević 2021: 51). These relations were intensified after the NAM



Ministerial Conference held in Tehran in 2008, when '[...] Serbia asked for the support of non-aligned countries in the UN General Assembly in order to address the International Court of Justice for an opinion on the legality of the unilaterally declared secession of [...] Kosovo [...]' (Dimitrijević 2021: 49).

### *The 2010s: East and West*

In the 2010s, efforts to implement its multivectoral vision of foreign relations intensified decidedly. It should be emphasised that, in terms of its institutional engagement, Serbia only has observer status in the NAM. It is worth mentioning that in 2011, the 50th jubilee summit of the ministers of the member states took place in Belgrade. President Tadić said in front of the summit participants that Serbia's foreign policy at that time was also based on 'respect for the universal principles of non-alignment' (NSPM 2011). In the context of updated relation with NAM 'it was considered that the revival of that cooperation is not incompatible with Serbia's aspirations to join the European Union and to build constructive relations with the great powers (USA, Russia and China)' (Dimitrijević 2021: 52).

A symbolic end to the participation of liberal parties in the governance of the Serbian state took place in 2012. The leading role in the new government was taken by the right-wing conservatives (Serbian Progressive Party) and socialists, which continued the policy of a multivectoral partnership. Paradoxically, it was during this period that negotiations with the EU began. The European integration course follows the logic of geography and economic interests, but its intensification coincided with the rapid shrinkage of Europe's role in global affairs (Haukkala 2021). The main concern of the democratic forces in Serbia was that the policy of nationalists might lead to isolation from the West (Seroka 2010). However, thanks in part to active cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague, it so happened that in 2014 the former nationalists and Milošević's party started negotiations for EU membership. Another important reason for this was the conclusion of the Brussels Agreement in 2013. The slow pace of accession negotiations (Subotić 2010; Stahl 2013) and the internal crisis in the EU, including the negative attitude of some community members to further enlargement in the Balkans, strengthened the Eurosceptic sentiment among Serbs (Bazić 2019). The main obstacle – both normative and psychological – on the road to the EU is that the leading countries of the community expect Serbia to accept Kosovo's independence. The EU-Serbia-Kosovo knot, however, is more entangled and unpredictable. The recognition of the *de facto* independence of a southern province that is not controlled by Serbian authorities is not a formal condition for membership (Baracani 2020).

The changing internal and external policy imperatives remain in line with the 'cognitive dissonance' of Serbian society (Ejdus 2011), which cannot choose its geopolitical and civilisational orientation, while unequivocally expecting simulta-

neous cooperation with different countries and regional alliances. More precisely, just as their political representatives did, 'the citizens have built a consensus that their country should become a member of the EU, that it should remain militarily neutral, and that it should never, at any cost, recognise Kosovo's independence' (ibid.: 16–17). This behaviour is tied to a national tradition, grasped by Savić (2014: 688) as a 'conjuncture of an outward-looking irredentist orientation and an internal East-West "disorientation"'. In the period under consideration, Serbia continues to recognise friends and makes partnerships with all countries that are against Kosovo independence considered a 'red line' in the state relations with the outside world. The activity of Serbian diplomacy in recent years has managed to impose its vision of Kosovo's political status. Thanks to Serbia's deliberate campaign, Kosovo has tried unsuccessfully to join Interpol several times. By early 2024, 13 countries had withdrawn their recognition of Kosovo's independence (Status of Kosovo: recogniton & derecogniton). These are indeed primarily small and medium-sized Third World countries, with little influence on global politics, e.g. Ghana, Suriname, Burindi, Togo or Papua New Guinea, but the change in these countries' position over Kosovo in favour of Serbia proves the determination of this small state and its ability to persuade other governments to support its position on such a knotty geopolitical issue.

The profound dilemmas observed in the supranational values and the traditional East-West dichotomy of the national consciousness can also be illustrated by the intensive domestic debate on the strategic vectors of cooperation. Here, attention is given to how the East-West dichotomy has been reflected in Serbia's changing geopolitical positioning as described in the strategic positions of the country's most prominent political parties. President Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party sets out visions of multi-vector geopolitics; the primary directions of Serbian foreign policy activity should be joining the European Union and developing the closest relations with the Russian Federation, the USA, China, India and the Arab countries (Srpska Napredna Stranka 2013). European Union membership is also seen as 'Serbia's top strategic interest' by the Social Democratic Party, which additionally advocates a multivectoral (Program Socijaldemokratske stranke). Against this background, the pro-Russian and *anti-Occidental* nature of the Serbian Radical Party and the Dveri political movement stand out. The Serbian radicals oppose a membership in the EU, which 'does not recognise the sovereignty and territorial integrity of our country', and is in favour of 'Eurasian integration and comprehensive cooperation with the Russian Federation, China, and other friendly countries' (Program Srpske Radikalne Stranke). Anti-EU positions are also taken by one of the new political movements, Enough is Enough (Dosta je bilo). Along with the declaration that 'Serbia should cooperate with both the East and the West', the fundamental values of the party's platform are expressed through the slogan 'For Europe, against the EU, against joining NATO' (Dosta je bilo 2016).

Despite various visions of domestic stakeholders, in line with the 'four strategic pillars' vision, Serbia maintains close relations with Russia and China and, to a lesser extent, with the USA. In addition to dependence on Russian oil and gas and investments in the fuel sector, cooperation also includes purchasing Russian weapons and a series of joint exercises with the Russian army. Since 2013, Serbia has had visitor status in the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (Subotić & Igrutinović 2019), but joining the alliance is not on Belgrade's security policy agenda. Serbia received military technology for free, including MIG-29 planes, BRDM-2 armoured vehicles and T-72 tanks. To modernise outdated technology which dates back to the Cold War, the Serbian government is buying modern Mi-17V-5 and Mi-35M helicopters and the Pancir S missile system (Đurđević 2020). Bilateral cooperation is gaining momentum in institutional terms as well. In addition to the Russo-Serbian Humanitarian Centre operating in Niš, in 2021 the Russian Balkan Centre was established in Belgrade, whose officially declared aim is 'development of dialogue between civil societies of Russia, Serbia and other countries of the Balkan region' (Teller Report 2021). Symptomatically, Serbia has consistently remained indifferent to the appeals of EU countries to expel Russian diplomats as a sign of solidarity with the EU. Serbia was the only country west of the former Soviet border not to impose sanctions on Russia after 2014 (Proroković 2017). Simultaneously, the adopted strategy of defence (2019) gave special attention to the potential for armed aggression against Serbia in the future. A state's defence policy may reduce such a threat 'based on military neutrality' (Strategija odbrane Republike Srbije 2019).

Under the leadership of Xi Jinping, in pursuit of its new geo-economic priorities, including the 'One Belt, One Road' project, China has been actively promoting its interests in the Balkans and has become more noticeable in the Serbian geopolitical discourse. In this context, Serbia promotes itself as an 'open door' for Beijing into the Balkans (Le Corre & Vuksanovic 2019) and was recognised as 'the country with the most intensive cooperation with China of all the Balkan states' (Karaskova et al. 2020: 22). China invested in a few strategic heavy industry manufacturers, including the takeover of the Smederevo steel plant from which the previous owner, US Steel, withdrew in 2012. The question remains whether the cultivation of many strategic partners is the result of awkward tactical steps or a thoroughly thought-out strategy of proper, multilateral relations oriented towards both the global West and the East. However, there is growing evidence that the traditional partnership with Russia and the deepened cooperation with China are not the only priorities for Serbia. For example, the agreements signed in Washington at the beginning of September 2020 by President Vučić on economic normalisation between Serbia and Kosovo caused much confusion among Serbia's traditional partners. There were attempts by the US administration to bring the positions of Serbia and Kosovo closer together (Danas 2020).

If, in terms of security, politics and ideology, Serbia in many respects resembles the Yugoslav non-alignment then, in the case of economic relations, the situation is more clear-cut. From 2010 to 2020 the EU member states invested EUR 17,4 billion in the Serbian economy; 67,6% of total direct foreign investment (FDI). Russia comes second with 9,3% (*Direktna strana investicija u Srbiji 2020*). In turn, the foreign trade of Serbia is more EU-oriented. According to 2019 data, exports and imports to EU countries accounted for 63% of Serbia's total trade exchange or EUR 24.9 billion. The volume of trade with Russia (EUR 2.7 billion) and China (EUR 2.4 billion) is ten times lower (EU i dalje daleko najveći trgovinski partner Srbije 2020).

### **Summarising the Serbian 'third way' experience: the model of multiple asymmetries**

The above-presented, chronologically ordered empirical analysis allows us to summarise the chief aspects of Serbia's 'third way'. The results may further serve as a stimulus for deeper comparisons of this particular experience with other states whose international positioning hesitates between two or more external vectors of geopolitical gravity, including Azerbaijan and Mongolia, mentioned earlier as appropriate examples. The conducted exploration of Serbia's geopolitical behaviour allows one to generalise its chief manifestations within a model of multiple asymmetries (Figure 3).

It is difficult to elaborate on a concept that can be equally applied to all small states, even those located in one region and sharing comparable military power, and economic and demographic characteristics. The asymmetry is usually linked to the existing dominance of a great state in terms of military, power and hegemony (Morrow 1991; Mouritzen 1991; Long 2015; Can 2021); but this is rather an obvious facet of these interrelations. Practice allows one to underline the existing asymmetry in the power of attraction between the small country and the geographically closest powers/coalitions. This asymmetry is bidirectional. It concerns the strength of geopolitical connections, manifested in the differences between interests and real possibilities for establishing favourable partnerships or entering into stronger alliances, the realisation of which is limited by size and geography. For example, apart from gestures of goodwill and support at the UN Security Council, Russia maintains its pro-Serbian position, but cannot support the Serbs in implementing their ethno-territorial policy in the post-Yugoslav region, in order not to risk further antagonising its relationships with major European and global players.

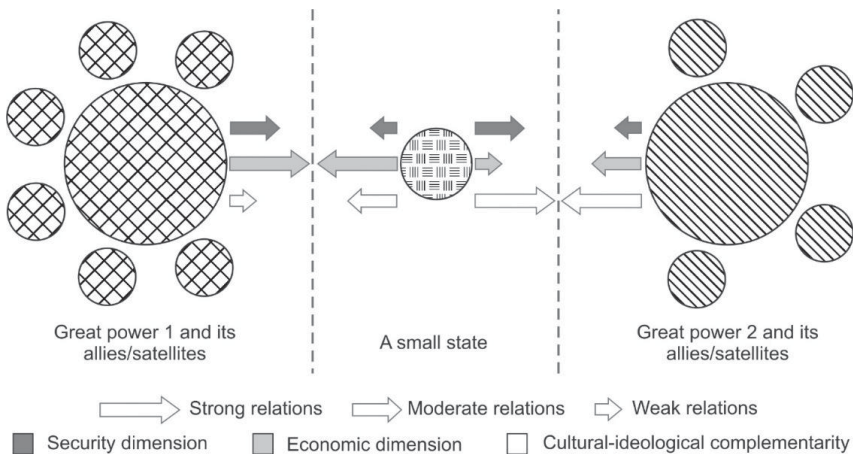
As the experience of Serbia during the post-Cold War period suggests, the 'third way' is, instead, a combination of policies for establishing strategic international partnerships in the three dimensions of geopolitics and international policy, constituting the foundation of the conceptual model: security, economy

and cultural-ideological complementarity. On the one hand, the asymmetry on the side of the small state concerns the uneven balance between identification and desire for rapprochement in each of these spheres (Figure 3). On the other hand, the potential of the main external powers to attract small non-aligned countries into the sphere of their interests varies greatly. In accordance with the empirical data revealing the practical outcomes of Serbian geopolitical positioning, the influence of the West in terms of economic cooperation/dependence, investment and technology far exceeds what the East could currently offer. In turn, the Serbian vision of military non-alignment as being the best solution for its territorial integrity, as it has gradually been surrounded by NATO members, will, sooner or later, face increasing isolation in the sphere of security. Moderate political circles in Serbian society support a possible 'marriage of convenience' with the West, which today has a decisive strategic advantage over players such as Russia, China and Turkey in terms of geographic closeness, soft power, security and economic attractiveness. What is causing some discomfort in the triangle Serbia – ex-Yugoslav space – Euro-Atlantic community is that Western states and organisations openly side with Serbia's regional opponents. Therefore, the path of full Euro-Atlantic integration (the EU + NATO formula) is supported by marginal political groups and is not on the current international security agenda. The Serbian model also implies a noticeable contrast in the small states of the whole of post-communist Europe. They first joined the North Atlantic Alliance, followed by EU membership, while the Serbian way deviates from this common model. The intensity of trade exchange is another asymmetrical dimension of mutual relations between small and great powers. It concerns the desire to join a particular economic organisation that could be, but is not always, mirrored by equal levels of cultural-ideological complementarity. After all, such aspirations are not a linear process in a Huntington-inspired sense, which postulated that nations will make alliances based on their civilisational (mainly religious) identity (Huntington 1996). An appropriate illustration here is the strategic behaviour of Orthodox countries such as Romania and Bulgaria (Mihaylov 2019, 2024). When they aspired to membership of Western political and defence structures, the highest politicians in these states employed a new rhetoric called 'civilisational choice' in reasoning their post-communist re-orientation. This still serves as evidence for the significance of soft factors in justifying a nation's international positioning. However, Serbia's path of using its cultural identity does not fit this pattern, and it still places great importance on its relations with Russia and continues the Slavic brotherhood rhetoric (Kovačević 2016).

Despite asymmetries in military and trade potential and soft power, being a small state does not automatically translate into a passive attitude towards areas of strategic national interest. It does not necessarily reflect the conformist or clientelistic behaviour both in the self-identification of the national elite and the

state's relations with key international stakeholders. Moving closer to advanced economies, which are the main source of investment and technologies, is not a target pursued at all costs. National(-istic) sentiments, often associated with irrationality, still take precedence over prospective political gains. The constant postponement of an acceptable compromise in Serbian policy towards the status of Kosovo has slowed the pace of accession negotiations with the EU. In this respect, the Serbian attitude is consistent, and there are also no compromises, even when it comes to its most complementary external supporters. A confirmation can be found in the negative Serbian attitude towards Crimea's annexation as well as the lack of recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in which separatism and independence are promoted by Russia, the state which is still widely perceived as the main foreign patron for Serbs and their interests.

Figure 3. The model of 'third way' multiple asymmetries



Source: Author

*Clarification:* arrow size expresses: for great powers and their allies/satellites, connections between the potential and willingness for cooperation or expanding its influence and the convergence of interests in a given direction and the capabilities to make a real impact; for the small state, connections between the potential and willingness for cooperation and the convergence of interests towards a given direction and the capabilities to attract the attention of the other side.

### Similar inspirations, asymmetric outcomes: Serbia and Yugoslavia's 'third way'

One of the study's main tasks was to compare the Yugoslav and Serbian Third Ways, mapped out in academic discussions and practical geopolitics. It could be assumed that there are more significant differences than similarities between the geopolitics of socialist Yugoslavia and independent, post-socialist Serbia. In



particular, this observation is grounded on many existing gaps in the asymmetrical positioning of both discussed states.

Regarding the changing political geography of Southeast Europe and the adherent regions, Serbia's positioning is influenced by less favourable conditions for building its 'third way'; it is surrounded by several unstable, post-Yugoslav states integrated into the structures of the Western political and civilisational pole. Serbia is a much smaller and strategically less significant country and a landlocked one. During the Cold War, its geographic location and more significant resources allowed Yugoslavia to be more ambitious in its global political and economic goals, i.e. pursuing the policy of creating a more peaceful international system (Igrutinović 2018). Moreover, its 'third way' is underway in a different international environment in which the old, bipolar ideological confrontation has given way to far more diverse, temporary and fluid constructions of international partnership.

What concerns the security dimension is that, like Yugoslavia, Serbia keeps its neutrality towards the existing defence alliances, but is less effective in maintaining beneficial relations with the East, West and partly with NAM members. During the process of Yugoslavia's dissolution, Serbia turned to establish antagonistic relations with Western countries. As a long-lasting legacy from this period, the country's international image is still associated with responsibility for the wars in the 1990s. The notable differences include the incomparably better reputation of Yugoslavia as a country fighting on the side of the Allies in World War II, which was a valuable asset in international negotiations. One more distinction concerning the cooperation with NAM should be emphasised. While Yugoslavia was among the organisation's most active members, relations relating to post-Yugoslavia Serbia underwent different phases. Most recently, these relations have been developing in an upward direction. The most important, however, is the status of an EU candidate and its integration has been formally accepted as a strategic purpose. Yet, this is just one of the geopolitical priorities, as Serbia is deepening its ties with Russia and China, which see the Balkan country as a springboard for their influence in the region. Paradoxically, the Serbian state has better relations with these Eastern powers than with many key EU countries. Despite the formal policies and declarations, it was Kosovo itself, not the EU, that was the chief priority of Serbian external strategy. Serbia's importance to the EU's leading powers is difficult to overestimate: Serbia's prosperity is a pre-requisite for implementing a common euro-Atlantic security policy in the Western Balkans.

It is also intriguing that, in economic terms, Serbia is more connected economically with the West than Yugoslavia; however, its strategic sectors depend on Russian natural resources, which, in the face of the global energy crisis and international isolation of the Russian Federation, directly raises Serbia's 'third-way' vulnerability. New (dis)balances were noticed between the economic and cultural-ideological determinants of geopolitical orientation and willingness to



cooperate with external partners. Representing a three times smaller country, compared to multi-religious Yugoslavia, Serbia is more homogeneous in terms of cultural-civilisational identity. Also, the country's cultural and geopolitical codes are more explicitly expressed. In Yugoslavia, internally generated nuances in the sympathies towards external civilisational and political poles, although not directly manifested, were grounded in ethno-religious and historical argumentation that varied among its constitutive nations and federal units. As an external projection of internal differences, the 'third way' of today's Serbia has another background. First of all, it is a state with a strong national identity. All the ideas of neutrality, non-alignment and balanced multivectoral geopolitics circulating among the Serbian political elite have been inspired by the Yugoslavian 'third way'. A conclusion could be drawn that, owing to their more limited resources, the efforts of Serbian statesmen are *less fruitful* and thus remain in the shadow of its multinational predecessor's achievements.

## Conclusion

The classical meaning of the 'third way' refers to a non-alignment policy towards two competing (security) alliances. However, the main assumptions of the article's conceptual framework and its empirical application suggest that the 'third way' means not only the country placing itself between third parties (great powers and formal alliances) but also defining its own position towards their civilisational values and vital economic interests. The Serbian case testifies to the intertwining of the main dimensions of the 'third way' – security, economy and cultural-ideological (civilisational) complementarity, and, what is more, that the weight of any of them could not be neglected. This sphere is especially relevant in the early twenty-first century's, vaguely configured, world geopolitical and geocultural map, which challenges the national communities traditionally positioned *in-between* in their choice of the most optimal supranational identification. The 'third way' concept allows the international positioning of states to be broadly analysed in academic research and approached in practical activities by considering ideology, civilisational traditions, cultural codes and other aspects of cultural-ideological complementarity more decidedly.

This study examined the complex ties between the permanent geographical position and changing geopolitical positioning of a small, post-socialist state, which does not formally belong to any of the main supranational alliances which are presented or try to expand their influence in a complex European region. An effort was made to answer how Serbia's geopolitical identification is perceived, defined and performed by this small state elite in the context of ongoing relations with the constantly transforming external environment. The research revealed that the current distribution of both hard and soft power in the existing international order and the diverse nature of cooperation with neighbouring countries

(relations vary from moderate-friendly, to cold and enmity) shapes a complex environment for the weakened Serbia in creating its own, 'third way'. Geostrategic partnerships and the asymmetric geography of political and economic ties became highly dependent upon the commitment of other countries to the Serbian state in their politics towards the geopolitical heritage of former Yugoslavia.

The answer to the first research question concerning whether the geopolitical positioning of post-Yugoslav Serbia can be labelled a 'third way' is rather positive. This Balkan state *de facto* follows the 'third way' and non-alignment model of geopolitics in particular: in searching for benefits from both Eastern and Western geopolitical poles, Serbia remains outside them. Then, the answer to the second research question is more nuanced. Serbia's geopolitical positioning is highly dependent on domestic geopolitical and civilisational codes. Whether by accident or design, the dynamic changeability observed in Serbia's international behaviour is a combination of *ad hoc* decisions with strictly followed steps toward one or another power or coalition states. However, continuing to follow its historical 'East-West "disorientation"' (Savić 2014), during the late 2000s and 2010s Serbia tried to adjust its geopolitical reasoning to the changing international conditions, including through formally declared national interests. Taken together, these interests, such as political multivectorism, military non-alignment, diversification of strategic trade partners, and the external projection of domestic cultural-historical sentiments, in one way or another, shape what was grasped in this article as a 'third way' geopolitical positioning.

Serbia's 'third way' is not a certain, rigid position within the asymmetrical competition between East and West in post-Cold War Europe, but a series of unfinished alliances and undecided choices of geostrategic orientation. Regardless of whether the small state from the Balkans receives new, pragmatic 'offers' or empty gestures from the most prominent global powers, the uncertainty of its 'third way' will remain the main feature of its geopolitical identity in the entire third decade of the 21st century and maybe even for longer. The ongoing regional and world geopolitical dynamics bring unexpected challenges to the map of supranational alliances. In the context of the current 'hypersecuritisation' of the whole contact zone between the ex-Soviet space and the EU (Andžāns 2023), enforced by the continuous Russian war against Ukraine, states such as Sweden and Finland have been forced to apply for NATO membership. Their partial 'third way' policy has been changing in the face of the rising security threats, while some newly emerged countries, such as Azerbaijan, confidently conduct their multi-vector and non-alignment policy. It also becomes evident that the Serbian policy requires rethinking and adjusting to the new international circumstances. Undoubtedly, this country is entering a time of difficult decisions, facing external expectations to define more clearly its geopolitical orientation. However, it can be expected that the (current) Serbian authorities will continue their balancing policy for as long as possible.



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