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Identity as a Foreign Policy Determiner for Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

SUMMARY

The paper examines the deterioration of regional relations and stability in the Western Balkans, focusing on the foreign policies of Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), beginning with the onset of acute tensions in 2021. The study employs a comparative foreign policy analysis within a constructivist theoretical framework, arguing that identity-based concerns and disputes are the primary drivers of foreign policy in both states, often to their mutual detriment. Using interpretive process tracing, we observe how conflicting national identities and national roles, as well as incompatible identity narratives, undermine regional reconciliation and stability. The findings indicate that identity-based competition founded on concerns of incompatible moral superiority and legitimacy claims between Serbs and Bosniaks generates diplomatic and political crises. Since the two nations primarily use their foreign policies to pursue identity-driven interests, reconciliation is significantly hindered. The findings therefore suggest the need for a more pragmatic foreign policy approach based on the de-escalation of tensions and the avoidance of unproductive identity conflicts, which can lead to major crises and further deterioration of relations.

Keywords: foreign policy, Western Balkans, constructivist analysis, regional stability, peacebuilding.

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Identitet kao spoljnopolitička odrednica za Srbiju i Bosnu i Hercegovinu

SAŽETAK

Rad analizira pogoršanje regionalnih odnosa i stabilnosti u zapadnom Balkanu, sa fokusom na spoljnu politiku Srbije i Bosne i Hercegovine (BiH), počevši od početka akutnih tenzija 2021. godine. Studija sprovodi komparativnu analizu spoljne politike kroz usvajanje konstruktivističke teorijske perspektive, tvrdeći da su identitetski zasnovane zabrinutosti i sporovi glavni pokretači spoljne politike u obe države, često na štetu obe strane. Korišćenjem interpretativnog procesnog traganja, posmatra se kako sukobljeni nacionalni identiteti i nacionalne uloge, kao i nespojive naracije identiteta, podrivaju regionalnu pomirbu i stabilnost. Nalazi ukazuju da identitetska konkurencija zasnovana na zabrinutostima zbog nespojive moralne nadmoćnosti i zahteva za legitimitetom između Srba i Bošnjaka izaziva diplomatske i političke krize, i da, budući da dve nacije prvenstveno koriste svoju spoljnu politiku za ciljeve zasnovane na identitetu, pomirenje je onemogućeno. Nalazi sugerišu potrebu za pragmatičnijim pristupom spoljnoj politici, zasnovanom na smanjenju tenzija i izbegavanju neproduktivnih identitetskih sukoba koji mogu dovesti do velikih kriza i pogoršanja odnosa.

Ključne reči: spoljna politika, Zapadni Balkan, konstruktivistčka analiza, regionalna stabilnost, mirovni napori.

Introduction

The fragile regional peace and stability of the Western Balkans have been further undermined in recent years due to escalating problems in the bilateral relations between Serbia and BiH. A political crisis within BiH has spilled over into regional relations and threatened peace due to high-level identity disputes. The study analyses the foreign policies of Serbia and BiH in recent years in relation to the increased tensions caused by the ongoing crisis, which began in 2021 when High Representative Inzko promulgated a law criminalising genocide denial in BiH. As the crisis is related to the question of war crimes and the blame for the ethno-national wars of the nineties, as well as to bilateral relations, the argument is advanced that, since this is essentially a question of national identity and national roles, the topic is best analysed through a constructivist lens. The article proposes that the problems in regional relations are caused by identity-based issues and the prioritisation of identity concerns over practical, material gain and benefit. For this reason, the two states do not follow either the standard liberal or realist logic, but use identity politics as the primary foundation of their foreign policies, as politicians try to present their nation as morally and historically superior. Regional relations will struggle to improve while this remains the case, as both Belgrade and Sarajevo seem to be using their policies to advance their identity-based

interests as a primary goal, to the detriment of regional reconciliation and compromise. Through comparative foreign policy analysis, the study examines the policies of Serbia and BiH, or rather of Belgrade and Sarajevo, as representing two ethno-national groups (with Banja Luka aligned with Belgrade) by focusing on their bilateral and regional policies in relation to identity claims and disputes.

Assuming that the foreign policies of the two states are primarily determined by identity, the method used is interpretive process tracing, which enables the researcher to follow the process of policy implementation while analysing the discourse of political leaders to understand their interpretation of events. The study analyses the effects on foreign policy of the acute and long-lasting identity-based political conflict between Serbs and Bosniaks that has regional repercussions, in the context of regional stability and reconciliation. The article explores whether identity is truly the primary driver of the two foreign policies, and, if so, whether reconciliation is possible without the resolution of the identity disputes. The paper contributes to the literature by applying a constructivist theoretical framework to foreign policy analysis in the context of an acute crisis in the Western Balkans, with an innovative method. The argument is that identity politics, rather than material interests, fundamentally determine the foreign policy behaviour of both states, leading to repeated crises rather than mutual gain and stabilisation. The relevance of identity in foreign policy has grown substantially in recent years, with policy increasingly justified and formulated through historical and identity-based narratives, especially in relation to ongoing crises and security threats. The paper is divided into the following sections: first, there is an overview of the bilateral and regional relations between the two states and the general situation in the region. Second, a constructivist theoretical position is established arguing that identity is a primary driver of the foreign policies of the two states. Third, a comparative foreign policy analysis based on interpretive process tracing is conducted and supplemented by discourse analysis. Finally, a discussion regarding the findings is provided, and they are placed in the proper theoretical context, concluding the paper.

The Context of Serbia-BiH Relations

Serbia and BiH have had a troubled relationship, owing to the conflicts of the past that remain embedded in collective memory and to disputes arising from the conflict that remain unsolved. Ethnic nationalism and identity politics have been a destabilising factor for the whole region, and they continue to be highlighted in the discourse used by populist politicians for political gain, exacerbating tensions between identity groups. Nordman emphasises that this nationalism continues to

undermine regional relations and prevent reconciliation, gaining strength when there is a lack of trust in national authorities or state legitimacy. It is often used as a mobiliser for political gain, increasing tensions due to its rhetorical connection to past conflict, which fits well with this approach, as the region is in such a state (Nordman 2016). Drystad explains that conflict leads to the further entrenchment of mistrust between identity groups, increasing polarisation and fostering a heightened reliance on national identity among the populations. In post-conflict societies, there is always a negative opinion towards the opposing side, especially in ethno-religious conflict, and the region remains highly segregated along ethnic lines. The legacy of the conflict in BiH continues to produce tension, causing the internal problems of the country to spill over into the region, thereby internationalising them, which is particularly relevant as the regional states still exist in a post-conflict environment without closure regarding the previous conflict (Drystad 2012). As the national communities transcend the Serbian-BiH border, any issue within them becomes bilateral and even regional.

In BiH, the Serb community is oriented towards Serbia, while the Bosniak community seeks to reorganise the country as their own nation-state rather than a multi-ethnic one. This contributes to national identities being strengthened in opposition to the other community (Sokol 2014). Vuković notes that even small differences are exaggerated in the region, and that the political task of defending national culture and characteristics is complicated by strong and exclusive nationalism. Attachment to a collective identity results in negative emotions towards the other group and a greater desire for distinction, leading to the instrumentalisation of the past in political disputes and to nationalism being directed against the other group (Vuković 2021). Discourse, then, can lead to policy changes due to the emotions and fear connected to it and what it symbolises, creating an additional responsibility for political leaders to be mindful of their rhetoric. Although these problems exist in other regional states, which also have some problems with neighbours, the most serious issue is the one between Serbia and BiH, which has the greatest potential impact on regional peace and security. The strong emotions and open issues related to identity questions, tied to ethnicity and religion, significantly complicate this dispute (Petrović & Wilson 2021). The three ethnic groups in BiH have failed to establish a functional state due to high levels of national intolerance and due to the political system being a fragile ethno-democracy (Mirel 2018). This has reached such an extent that the internal problems of BiH are now a constant problem for relations in the whole region.

Tepšić considers the country to be locked in a post-conflict context, suffering from ethno-national tensions caused by a failure to move beyond the conflict. It is exacerbated by a condescending attitude of the international community, which is counterproductive to reconciliation and

does not contribute to meaningful political change. As he points out, peace is sought only for the leaders' own ethnic groups, who do not take responsibility for reconciliation and do not internalise liberal norms imposed from abroad (Tepšić 2017). This is likely due to the structure of BiH, which, in fact, neither necessitates interethnic cooperation, nor rewards it. The external factor is also evident in the maximalist demands of Bosniaks, who demand a unitary state controlled from Sarajevo while securing external support for it by claiming to be threatened by the Serbs. In turn, this makes the Serb community in BiH feel threatened and even introduces separatism into the discourse. These politics are based on national identity and prevent not only internal reconciliation in BiH, but also draw regional states into issues and tensions (Davidović 2020). This reliance on external support frames the internal political situation as one in which blame is strategically assigned to present a community as endangered, further preventing internal dialogue. Ethnic divisions are still strong enough to undermine positive peace in the region, and politics is still primarily based on nationalism. Therefore, Serbs and Bosniaks have different perspectives on both the past and the desired future (Tepšić & Džuverović 2018). It is evident how the existence of three ethno-national groups in BiH, two of which have a neighbouring nation-state, ensures that the internal affairs of the country will have a regional effect on relations, especially when questions of the region's future are opened.

Discourse and narratives seem to be the main instruments through which tensions are reproduced. Nielsen explored how nationalistic narratives often unnecessarily reinforce regional political problems and tensions, and prevent a common understanding of the past. Discourse based on stereotypes is especially apparent in the Bosniak community, which enforces internal cohesion by politically instrumentalising a "genocide narrative" with disproportionate emphasis, while characterising their community as blameless victims and thus directly attacking the Serb community (Nielsen 2013). Mijić suggests that neither side wants to accept guilt for the past conflict, as it would cause a loss of their group cohesion and moral superiority, leading to an insistence on incompatible narratives where all sides seek the moral high ground to justify their policies (Mijić 2021). Subotić points out that official narratives of the past assert that the two sides have developed in direct opposition to each other, and in fact depend upon blaming each other, which makes compromise very difficult (2015). These identity narratives interfere with their relations, as accusations of each other's role in the past and danger to one another are used in internal political mobilisation and regional relations (Subotić 2015). This creates a situation where peaceful relations are not only hindered but actively obstructed by political narratives, and by a lack of genuine attempts to compromise.

These narratives and identities are used, and even manipulated for political gain. As McConnell argues, historical narratives are used as a political tool to legitimise policies that contribute to increased tensions (McConnell 2019). In that context, any compromise is framed as one side effectively surrendering the moral high ground to the other, thereby rewarding intransigence. David explores the use of historical narratives and how political elites control them to maintain cohesion around national identity. In doing so, they prioritise narratives that fit a positive image of their nation in relation to others. Yet, external interference in the standardisation of historical memory, which was meant to alleviate this, has produced the opposite effect (David 2018). This can lead to simplistic and negative images of other communities being normalised, removing the foundation for the improvement of relations. The mass media contribute to this, as the largest outlets are influenced by political leaders who often have personal and emotional connections to the conflict (Golčevski, Von Engelhardt & Boomgaarden 2013). Identity issues are at the core of the tensions in BiH, and they are politically instrumentalised in such a way that any challenge to identity narratives provokes regional tension.

The historical and security narratives include a particularly important element of victimhood. Each nationality in BiH represents itself as the victim of the conflicts of the 1990s, with collective victimhood being conducive to a positive image of the national group and a negative image of competing nations, strengthening boundaries and mistrust between the groups (Mijić 2021). The communities regard themselves as being endangered by the other, and the groups have opposite perceptions of the past, all leading to conflicting desires and justifications for the future of the country (Sokol 2014). These contrasting narratives are present in official discourse, which is controlled by political elites. As such, they are connected to claims of righteousness and are carried through social discourse, which connects the recent past to the distant past (David 2015). In this way, the three national communities in BiH still disagree over the causes and responsibility for the war, allowing for ethno-national mobilisation to be maintained through socio-political conflict, and providing them with different visions of the future based on their intra-group logic of justification.

The topic of Srebrenica is the strongest symbol of the conflict. It is one of the most contentious points in the relations between Serbia and BiH, significantly influencing the bilateral relationship. Jagiello-Szostak highlights the significant influence that official historical memory has on the foreign policies of the two states, particularly in their relationship with each other, as governments attempt to defend national identity. Serbia, in particular, is oriented towards protecting its national identity through support for Serbs in BiH (Jagiello-Szostak 2024). NATO is another important symbol for bilateral relations, with the alliance being highly

supportive of BiH joining. That position is supported by Bosniaks but rejected by Serbs, who have decided to follow Serbia's foreign policy of neutrality (Đukanović 2019). This connection between Belgrade and Banja Luka is an important element of Belgrade-Sarajevo relations, a key determinant, and directly connects Serbia to internal relations in BiH (Đukanović, Simić & Živojinović 2013). Less contentious is the topic of joining the EU, a rare topic of consensus in the region and in BiH, which actually lessens tensions. The EU is primarily oriented towards supporting state capacities and maintaining interethnic dialogue to help BiH develop democratic procedures that would improve regional relations (Keil 2013). However, the minimal progress towards EU accession limits the Union's influence in lessening tensions, particularly as it focuses more on statebuilding than identity issues and reconciliation.

Attempts to improve bilateral relations were few. However, a series of attempts was made through foreign mediation by Turkey, while Vučić was the prime minister. These attempts focused on identity-neutral topics such as economic cooperation, but failed due to identity-related discourse. They ended after President Nikolić made comments about Srebrenica, which Sarajevo deplored (Pavlović 2016). Further attempts to improve relations, while avoiding difficult subjects related to reconciliation, also failed, as reconciliation was not possible through economic cooperation alone. Belgrade continued to fully support Banja Luka, to the detriment of its relations with Sarajevo (Mulalić 2019). Attempts at EU mediation were also made, which relied on conditionality, demanding that bilateral problems, particularly those resulting from BiH's internal struggles, be overcome before accession. The EU also failed to resolve these issues as the two sides continued to prioritise identity politics and mutual accusations (Petrović & Wilson 2018). Solutions enforced from the outside failed, and it seemed impossible to avoid identity issues and focus on cooperation through economic mechanisms and mutual material interests. The resolution, or at least the management of the identity disputes, prevents other avenues through which relations can be improved.

As mentioned, the EU has limited influence on regional reconciliation and governments, which also have a limited ability to promote reconciliation if the population is not strongly supportive of it (Dragović-Soso 2012). Even so, it acts in support of peace and continually pressures the regional states to relax rhetoric and decrease tensions, while trying to further integrate the region. Nordman warns that, due to ethno-religious groups extending across borders, the polarisation within a state has direct effects on regional relations and policies. Therefore, the EU has the obligation to continue its efforts in BiH and the region to achieve results. Almost half of all post-conflict societies renew conflicts within a decade, particularly in areas such as the Western Balkans, where many problems that caused the conflict persist, and inter-ethnic cooperation is lacking

(Guss & Siroky 2012). It is encouraging that despite persistent tensions and unresolved issues, conflict has not re-emerged, and remains confined to the political sphere. However, the situation became more complex with the calls for secession, as they built popular support based on simple identification, mobilising around nationalism, and asking for support from their ethno-national group outside the borders of the disputed territory (Saideman, Dougherty & Jenne 2005). Therefore, it is not surprising that regional tensions and political conflicts have continued.

It is apparent, therefore, that the topics of identity and reconciliation have been explored. However, there is a notable lack of studies linking identity directly to foreign policy behaviour, particularly through constructivist theoretical frameworks. It appears that identity-based issues are not only a source of tension, but also the key to tension, and that they are an essential element of foreign policy. Considering that the relations between Serbia and BiH are the most complicated and least productive in the region, there is an alternative way foreign policy can be developed, which would limit interference from identity competition. That necessitates a comparative study of the two states, analysing how identity issues affect their foreign policy, and thereby regional relations.

A Constructivist Theoretical Approach

Assuming that the two states' foreign policies are primarily determined by national-identity concerns and related competition, the article takes a constructivist theoretical position. The study assumes that interests emerge from identity, and that identity itself is dynamic, with states developing identities through foreign policy interaction (Smith 2016). This implies that identities are developed in opposition to another identity, which contests the identity claims that a state provides. This is done while considering that discourse shapes and frames policies and political processes through the contestations of identity. This contestation is connected to the role a state perceives for itself and for other states, which Finnemore and Sikkink consider an important part of identity and policy formation (Finnemore & Sikkink 2001). According to constructivist theory, states act based on their identity-based roles, reifying their identity through behaviour considered appropriate for their role. Discourse is also an important aspect of political processes, and helps explain causal mechanisms, especially considering Checkel's argument that ideas and identity significantly shape and determine interests, and therefore policies, keeping in mind that they are not fixed and evolve through international interaction and discourse (Checkel 1998). This aligns with the argument that it is the identity-based ideas that shape the interests and, therefore, the policies of the two states, with their discourse determining the policies that are possible and appropriate.

Constructivism allows us to focus on the ever-evolving identity rather than material power when analysing the self-interests of states, providing us with a useful framework (Hopf 1998). Guzzini provides a basic constructivist argument that policies and actions are in fact primarily guided not by rational choice, but by the ideas and norms within a society, which makes the theory not only useful but essential, at least in the studied case, where the states even adopt policies that harm their positions due to identity concerns (Guzzini 2000). Considering that states act based on the meanings they assign to ideas and their roles in relation to them, and the meanings that emerge from interaction, it can be considered that policies and even identities develop in a mutually-constitutive way (Adler-Nissen 2016). In relation to the region, Jagiello-Szostak points out the importance of a state attempting to recreate or maintain a positive identity through a coherent narrative about the nation, using historical memory to that effect (2024). Taking the view that identity is developed through interaction, it is important to point out the importance of trust, which is essential for a positive interaction, and, as Hoffman stresses, it involves beliefs about the motivations of others and determines how willing states are to take risks towards each other (Hoffman 2002). A lack of trust could be the source of both the fear and enmity between the two analysed states. Weinhardt develops the importance of trust by stating that it is particularly important when foreign policy depends on the perception of a state's identity towards itself and its counterpart, as identity determines trust (Weinhardt 2015). This lends further credence to the argument, considering that the region of the Western Balkans has a range of contested identities and disharmonious perceptions of the identity of "the other".

Taking Wendt's position that identities are reified through international relations and have direct effects on perception, and therefore on foreign policy, there is further use for constructivism in this case study (Wendt 1998). As opposed to this theoretical position, realists would argue that it is power and the competition for relative gain that determines foreign policy. Mearsheimer argues that states must rely on themselves in the international system of anarchy, being focused on power and security (Mearsheimer 1995). Waltz concurs, explaining that as states are pressured to survive, they consistently seek to enhance their power relative to their rivals within an international system defined by power and anarchy, which cannot be altered by international institutions (Waltz 2000). The quest for power is, therefore, the main determiner of international relations according to realists (Rose 1998). Liberal thinkers claim that international institutions facilitate cooperation among states, and therefore mitigate the negative effects of international anarchy, as states can find common interests (Keohane & Martin 1995). Keohane expects that reciprocal actions can create cooperation, leading to mutual expectations, and making states more predictable so that they do not have to resort to power politics, expecting

more cooperation where there is repeated interaction and the common interest of economic progress and stability (1986). These theorists expect that states are becoming more interdependent, and therefore oriented towards cooperation and mutual benefit (Katzenstein & Keohane 1998).

Constructivism offers a different perspective on the determinants of foreign policy. Choi argues that because the foreign policy of states is influenced by ideational and social motivations, informed by culture and identity, policies are often driven by identity concerns rather than objective gain. He also warns that relations frequently depend on imperfect information and perception (Choi 2015). This means that attention must be paid not only to the identities that states imagine for themselves, but also to how they perceive their rivals' identities. Freyburg and Richter highlight that national identity plays a crucial role in the foreign policy decisions of the region, with identity determining national interests and influencing which behaviors are considered appropriate (Freyburg & Richter 2010). What leaders officially say about their state and its neighbours therefore directly affects both policy and identity, and what they can do depends on what is considered appropriate in identity terms. Accepting the view that national identity and the constructed national roles significantly influence foreign policy and relations, Lantis and Beasley argue that this can be explored through case studies and process tracing (Lantis & Beasley 2017). Weaver adds that discourse analysis can support these methods, as it explores how policy is shaped by narrative (Weaver 2001). If identity competition is the primary determinant of regional policies, then any crisis will be interpreted through the lens of identity politics, and likewise any perceived challenge to the identity of the other would lead to disproportionate enmity.

Therefore, if a constructivist view is taken, assuming that interests emerge primarily from identities rather than material capabilities, which are developed through international relations, the regional policies begin to make more sense (Kubalkova 2016). Likewise, if national identity formation involves defining the self against a perceived other, and is reproduced through political discourse that interprets historical legacy, then identity has a direct effect on foreign policy, which is also used to entrench that identity. Foreign policy and identity are especially closely linked in states with fragile or contested identities (Morin & Paquin 2018). Bickl argues that when identity narratives are powerful, there is a low chance that bilateral disputes can be settled, and when identity issues are contested, it is difficult to move from a perception of threat, insecurity, or victimisation to one of cooperation and compromise (Bickl 2023). Therefore, the political animosity between Belgrade and Sarajevo can be taken as an example of this identity-based struggle and competition over which nation is a victim and morally correct, with their repeated interactions leading to tension. Their foreign policies do not appear to be

directly motivated by either comparative gain, as realists would suggest, or gain through cooperation, as liberals would suggest, as neither side derives much advantage from their animosity, nor does any substantial cooperation occur through international institutions.

Theoretical Framework

The foreign policies of Belgrade and Sarajevo have not been sufficiently explored in relation to their identity-based interests and roles, especially within a constructivist framework. This approach can yield meaningful insights, as considering how discourse can not only result from political events but can also cause them, particularly in the context of identity challenges, allows for a better understanding of the cause and effect of foreign policy. The article situates bilateral and regional relations within the context of an identity struggle over moral superiority and competing roles, aiming to explain the crises as primarily caused by this struggle, and exacerbated by an over-reliance on identity in foreign policy. This is done by arguing, based on the theoretical position used, that identity is the main determinant of foreign policy for Belgrade and Sarajevo, both in their bilateral and regional policies. It takes the position that if their identity-based roles and historical narratives are incompatible, their bilateral relations will be negatively affected. The article employs Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) as an approach, which allows us to focus on how decisions are made and what internal and external factors influence them, to analyse how national identity shapes foreign policy (Alden & Aran 2017). Constructivism can be applied here to highlight the role of shared meanings in determining state behavior, as states in similar international circumstances can still exhibit significant differences in foreign policy (Kaarbo, Lantis & Beasley 2013). Hansen proposes that identity, including state identity, is developed in opposition to an “other” which is constructed through discourse and narratives, making identity construction relational and discourse constitutive. This implies that foreign policy is not only about state interests but also about the performance and assertion of identities, serving as an outward expression of desired or actual identity, which allows threats to emerge through narrative and perception (Hansen 2006).

Therefore, the main question the article seeks to answer is whether the foreign policies of Belgrade and Sarajevo are primarily driven by identity concerns, and if so, how this manifests and why it causes crises. This is understood in the sense that a struggle over defining the identity-based roles of their nations, including their historical responsibilities and current roles, and the struggle for moral superiority between the nations, are their primary foreign policy concerns that determine policy. In that sense, the study aims to uncover whether these identity-based issues are truly the

main cause of crises and tensions, and how they operate. An innovative way to approach these problems is through interpretive process tracing (IPT), which is more context-sensitive than standard process tracing and emphasises the importance of meaning-making processes in politics. It adds an analysis of intersubjective meanings to causal explanations and allows for a deeper understanding of identity and perception in political processes (Norman 2015). This approach retains the standard process tracing logic of following theoretically predicted steps to understand how a phenomenon unfolds, while still allowing for the constant reevaluation of theoretical predictions as correlations are discovered (Checkel 2006a) (Checkel 2016b). Even though ideas are difficult to study as causal mechanisms, they provide important insight into political decisions (Jacobs 2014). IPT enables a better understanding of the meanings and interpretations actors assign to events, and helps to understand the narratives and discourses that shape foreign policy in the context of identity and perception (Guzzini 2017). This approach allows for the tracing of political processes while simultaneously tracing how they are framed and how they affect not only foreign policy but also identity.

Method

A comparative Foreign Policy Analysis is conducted by using a comparative case study, achieved through interpretive process tracing, as the focus is on identity and its expression through bilateral and regional relations. The method is suitable for tracing how identity-based claims evolve and determine foreign policy over time, and how political events affect perceptions of identity-based roles. What is followed are not only the linear political processes, but also how discourses shape identity-narratives and lead to political crises within those processes. The sources used include official reports, public speeches, minutes of sessions of the UN Security Council, and press statements, focusing on the discourse in them to reconstruct the processes of Belgrade and Sarajevo's foreign policies, particularly in relation to each other. This illustrates the use of IPT, with the narrative of the linear political processes being supplemented by public discourse, which reveals the interpretation that actors assign to events based on their identity concerns. As the analysis relies on IPT and contextual discourse assessment, political actors' statements are used primarily as reported speech, with the aim of reconstructing their meaning-making and interpretation.

The focus is on several significant political events and traces them fully to determine how identity claims led to them or affected them, and what consequences arose for the consolidation or challenge of competing identity claims. In the discourse of the actors, the study highlights themes related to identity, victimhood, national role, historical narrative in relation

to identity, and identity framing in relation to the “other”, and then follows the policies developed in line with the discourse. To find the most relevant information, the focus is on the time period from the decision of the outgoing High Representative for BiH, Inzko, to criminalise “genocide denial”, to the attempts to prosecute the leader of Republika Srpska, Dodik. The comparison of policies is done directly and linearly, following events chronologically and comparing the two foreign policies at every important event, rather than separating the two case studies, all the while connecting policy to discourse as its normative source, according to the theoretical framework. The limitation is that the study relies on elite-level discourse, which excludes wider societal narratives and public opinion dynamics. This is justified by political elites being beholden to their electorates and wider political culture.

Empirical Analysis

One of the few official foreign policy objectives of BiH that has remained constant and uncontroversial is its decision to try to join the EU, and to align with its foreign and security policy in principle, including through increasing regional stability and security by fostering greater trust and understanding with its neighbours. With this justification, Sarajevo has continually supported the role of the High Representative in BiH, and considered it essential due to the political instability of the region. Even so, the public political commitment of authorities to the goal of EU integration has not been translated into concrete action, and alignment with EU foreign policy has remained low. BiH cannot contribute to regional stability without internal stability, which is lacking, as its three main ethnic groups have continued to have limited cooperation and difficult relations, with Serbs and Bosniaks often accusing each other of attacking and undermining the constitution. The two communities have different visions of the necessary policies for the country, and their competing visions determine the foreign policy of the country (Predsjedništvo BiH 2018–2023). External support has not helped, as the High Representative Inzko, just before leaving his post, enforced a law in reference to Srebrenica that prohibited genocide denial, which the Serb community perceived as a foreign imposition and an attack due to the imposition of a single view. Its leader, Dodik, then demanded that Serb diplomats in BiH only follow Banja Luka’s instructions, fracturing BiH’s foreign policy in two (EC 2021). He and his representatives further complained that Bosniak representatives were only expressing the views of Sarajevo in international activities (UNSC 2021a). In this context, Sarajevo and Banja Luka began to openly pursue separate foreign policies, despite the constraints of the constitution and the official foreign policy strategy of BiH.

The two communities framed their political stances based on this law, with Bosniaks conditioning peace and reconciliation upon the Serbs' acceptance of the narrative (RSE 2021a). This set the stage for an identity-based political conflict with regional effects, based on narratives of victimhood, which were followed by political claims. The identity-based crisis was quickly internationalised when the new High Representative, Schmidt, was selected controversially. Russia, which supported Belgrade and Banja Luka, rejected Schmidt's appointment, as the Security Council did not approve of him, as was usual practice. However, the US representative ignored the complaint and argued that the High Representative is appointed by the Peace Implementation Council's Steering Board, which does not require unanimity in its decisions, and not by the Security Council (UNSC 2021c). Banja Luka's declarative calls for secession were framed as existential threats and a danger to regional peace and stability. Belgrade responded by trying to lower tensions, and by calling for dialogue and compromise, while stressing its support for Banja Luka and the parallel relations it maintains with it (UNSC 2022a). Schmidt immediately sided with Sarajevo, going so far as to state that Banja Luka was threatening the constitutional order of BiH, raising fears of another regional war. Sarajevo used this to demand a further centralisation of power in BiH, calling on the international community to intervene. Džaferović, the Bosniak member of BiH's Presidency, accused Serbia of arming itself and criticised it for including Banja Luka in its national defence strategy. He connected the issue directly to identity, criticising the existence of multiple historical narratives of the past conflict, which earned him a rebuke from Belgrade. Belgrade called for all crimes to be condemned and all victims to receive empathy rather than assigning blame, thereby placing added emphasis on narrative and identity in regional relations (OHR 2022).

President Vučić presented Serbia's foreign policy objectives as focusing on the preservation of peace and stability, framing Serbs as victims of injustice that destabilised the region, and calling for respect for Serbia's integrity and Srpska's Dayton-based rights in that regard (UNGA 2022). Džaferović likewise presented Bosniaks as victims suffering from foreign aggression in the 1990s, rejecting the narrative that BiH suffered a civil war. He placed Sarajevo on the right side of history, portraying it as a multicultural and peaceful country that is undermined only by Serb ethno-nationalists, blaming Serbs for both contemporary and historical conflict, and claiming that only NATO membership could create regional peace (UNGA 2022). The discourse clearly indicates the divide between the identity claims underpinning the foreign policy of both sides, showing that discourse directly affects policy. Sarajevo represented BiH at a summit of heads of state and government on Ukraine, which angered Dodik, who called it a criminal offense against the constitution, as Sarajevo continued

to develop close relations with Turkey, while Banja Luka continued to support Russia (OHR 2022b) (EC 2022). Sarajevo then criticised both Belgrade and Zagreb, arguing that while BiH's neighbours claim to be guarantors of the Dayton Agreement, this was not justified by this agreement, and was rather a means to interfere in their internal affairs and undermine BiH by supporting their co-nationals. Belgrade rejected this, again calling for a decrease in regional tensions and for compromise (UNSC 2022b). In this case, Sarajevo used a narrative of victimhood and self-defence, meant to underline its sovereign position, treating the other two constituent peoples as minorities in their own state, and conditioning relations in this way.

Belgrade's attempts to improve relations with Sarajevo by stressing the need for more trust and solidarity (RSE, 2023) yielded only limited results (RSE 2023). Schmidt continued to support Sarajevo and he repeatedly criticised Dodik, portraying him as seeking a union with Serbia and a dissolution of BiH, and demanded that he accept Sarajevo's narrative of the past. Banja Luka criticised his office as a colonial mechanism, called for further decentralisation to protect the constituent nations of BiH, and demanded that the international community stop pushing for greater centralisation (UNSC 2023). The situation caused Vučić to lament that there was an erosion of trust and an increasing abandonment of compromise, as many countries began prioritising their direct interests without consideration for others (UNGA 2023). At the same time, the progress towards EU integration was not able to stabilise the regional relations or lead to a consensus within BiH (OHR 2023). Even though both nations supported EU accession, this common interest was not enough to move towards compromise due to identity disputes. The EU accession process gave the Union a way to influence BiH and the region towards greater stability by urging it to align its foreign policy with its own; however this did not amount to much as alignment in Banja Luka remained low (OHR 2024). The lack of EU focus on solving identity disputes and creating an inclusive reconciliation process undermined the benefits that the states were supposed to receive from its mediation.

The crisis intensified as a draft resolution was being prepared in the UN to commemorate events in Srebrenica as a genocide. Sarajevo used extreme rhetoric, saying that Serbs not only glorified war criminals and denied war crimes, but that its political leaders acted like war criminals by opposing the draft. The reconciliation and peace were only possible if Serbs accepted the Bosniak narrative. Belgrade blamed Sarajevo for causing unnecessary ethnic tensions through the draft and for perpetuating hatred and intolerance against Serbs. It also criticised Sarajevo for conducting foreign policy without consent or consultation with Serbs in BiH (UNSC 2024a). This continued the tendency to frame political differences in identity-based language, and for foreign policy to

be oriented towards achieving identity-based goals. Belgrade supported Banja Luka through its foreign policy activity by lobbying against the draft resolution, considering it an attack on the Serb nation. Even though Dodik warned that tensions had risen so high that Banja Luka could leave BiH, Vučić reaffirmed the integrity of BiH and urged that peace be maintained (RSE 2024a). This situation clearly shows how identity contestation and narratives shaped foreign policy choices, and how they became a key element of regional relations and stability. Political discourse about dissolving or centralising the state was conducted as if in a vacuum, with both clinging to their identity narrative and structuring policy around it, placing those narratives above constructive dialogue and compromise, which they perceived as a threat to their identity.

The two Serb leaders showed unity and framed themselves as fighting for the Serb nation, which was united against the Srebrenica resolution because of the importance of the issue for national identity (RTV 2024). Dodik framed the vote as an attempt by Bosniaks to morally disqualify Serbs, seeking aid from the head of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and calling on Serbs in Montenegro to refuse to be part of any Montenegrin government that would vote for the resolution, tying the issue to both regional politics and identity-based concerns (Politika 2024). Vučić declared that countries that supported the resolution stabbed Serbia in the back, singling out Montenegro for having an unexpectedly negative role (N1 2024). After the barely successful vote, Sarajevo sent a protest note to those states that voted against the resolution, framing their refusal as siding with war criminals (RSE 2024b). This was meant to portray Sarajevo as the arbiter of regional diplomatic relations in international affairs, both regarding memories and guilt, thus marginalising the role of its neighbours. Vučić was happy that the diplomatic actions of Belgrade led to the resolution having more abstentions or votes against than positive votes, stressing the importance of Serb unity across borders. As the resolution had more neutral or against votes than votes in favour, Vučić said that the attempt to brand and insult the Serb nation as genocidal failed, framing it in the context of Serb national unity that was protected across borders (RTS 2024). The draft resolution was therefore framed as a crucial event for the identity of both nations, driving foreign policy and undermining regional relations.

A rare success of BiH's foreign policy during this period was the European Council's decision to open accession negotiations, though this did not reduce tensions. Sarajevo used the opportunity to declare that BiH's goal was also to join NATO, framing it as the only way to safeguard its sovereignty and political independence (UNSC 2024b). The momentum gained regarding EU accession was lost when BiH failed to provide a reform agenda for the growth plan, and negotiations did not begin due to stalled reforms. Sarajevo continued its intensive diplomatic campaign,

condemning the actions of Banja Luka. Bosniak leaders continued to publicly speak about their perceived threat of a “Greater Serbia”, framing it in relation to Srebrenica. Banja Luka considered such behavior to be a complete failure of BiH’s foreign policy system and of the reconciliation process (OHR 2024b). Each side blamed the other for the breakdown in regional relations, approaching relations from an identity-based position, arguing that the opposing side was threatening them and regional peace. In response to the UN resolution, Vučić and Dodik signed a declaration on the protection of national and political rights and the common future of the Serb people at an “All-Serb assembly”, stressing the importance of protecting Serb identity through political action (MoD 2024). Its foreign policy elements included preserving the autonomy of the Serb entity in BiH, keeping BiH out of NATO, and maintaining Serb unity while protecting national identity across borders. Related to identity, it framed Serbs as a people on the right side of history, who fought for the freedom of Balkan peoples (Službeni glasnik 2024). This document placed identity concerns at the forefront of Serbian foreign and regional policy as a primary guiding principle.

After this event, Sarajevo reaffirmed its goals of BiH joining NATO as a strategic foreign policy goal, framing it as a necessity. Bećirović, the Bosniak member of the presidency, speaking at the highest diplomatic forum at the UN, condemned the “all-Serb” assembly as a threat to BiH and as part of the mentality that led to war crimes against Bosniaks (UNGA 2024). Sarajevo continued to frame the civil war of the 1990s as a direct Serbian attack, portraying BiH as a country illegally partitioned from the outside and denying the right of the Serb entity to exist through a historical, identity-based narrative. Sarajevo went as far as accusing Serbia of militarisation that threatened regional peace and called for international support and militarisation of BiH. This was based on the Srebrenica resolution, which they called a moral victory over Serbs (UNSC 2024c). In response, Vučić increased his identity-based rhetoric and spoke of Serbia as a historic victim of aggression that always fought against injustice. He framed the regional problems as part of injustice suffered by the nation. He complained that the Srebrenica draft resolution was highly politicised and used for moral posturing that would hinder rather than advance reconciliation, warning that it would create further divisions in BiH. Vučić portrayed Serbs as victims of numerous crimes and aggressions during the previous century, who were now collectively being accused of genocide (UNGA 2024). The foreign policy of both states not only developed in a reactive and intersubjective way, but was largely determined by the identity claims that both sides made, and while engaging in identity contestation their bilateral relations deteriorated along with regional stability.

After these events relations deteriorated even further, as BiH's court convicted Dodik to one year in prison and barred him from running for office for six years, for refusing to respect the decisions of the High Representative related to Srebrenica. To show solidarity, Vučić went to Banja Luka to express support for Dodik, where the leaders framed Sarajevo's court ruling as a coup, with Vučić saying that it was an attack on the entire Serb nation (Radio Slobodna Evropa 2025). This situation had a clear effect on the perception of foreign relations, with Banja Luka's position being that BiH did not have a clear foreign policy, describing it as fragmented and dominated by Sarajevo. They distanced themselves from the official BiH foreign policy by labelling it as Bosniak (Politika 2025). As Dodik's conviction was upheld, he emphatically warned that the attempt to destroy the Serb entity was ongoing, as part of a Bosniak plan to expel and marginalise Serbs. However, this time he used openly anti-EU rhetoric, claiming it was punishing and attacking Serbs in an undemocratic way. In connection to that, he first directly included Serbia in the issue, making it regional, and then added that he would call upon Russia and the US to react (Politika 2025). This constant deterioration of relations within BiH and between BiH and Serbia, which is based on a fundamental dispute over identity, continues to prevent the normalisation of relations and threatens to escalate political conflict into outright confrontation.

Discussion

The analysis showed that foreign policy disputes between Bosnia and Serbia are not rooted in material, interest-based or institutional conflicts, but in incompatible identity narratives. Their foreign policies are determined by their identity-based interests rather than by material or direct political gain. Both engage in mutually exclusive claims to victimhood and moral superiority, which escalate symbolic disputes into foreign policy standoffs with negative regional effects, and which in turn cause them to adjust or pause other foreign policy activities. Their foreign policy actions are often justified through historical and moral narratives rather than through cost-benefit logic, prioritising identity protection above other foreign policy needs. This demonstrates that identity is not just something in the background, but serves as an active cause of foreign policy choices, with discourse being directly causal. Foreign policy becomes an arena in which identity is performed through discourse, and where it is contested and defended in order to justify policies, but also an arena in which policies themselves are created. These identity disputes are so significant that they persist even when the foreign policy interests of the two states are aligned, such as in relation to their stated desires for EU accession and regional stability, placing identity threat above pragmatism when determining foreign policy priorities.

The paper therefore challenges the liberal assumptions that integration incentives, such as EU accession and economic benefits, will neutralise conflict, as identity narratives must first be reconciled or transformed. Each contestation of identity becomes a crisis and reactivates deep-seated identity threats and historical trauma, making institutional or technical solutions insufficient, as they ignore the fact that foreign policy is used to reinforce national narratives. The empirical analysis supports the argument that the two states define their identities in opposition to each other, and their foreign and regional policies according to their identity-based roles and self-perception. Likewise, domestic political actors also benefit from discursive escalation, using foreign policy crises to consolidate internal legitimacy. A paradox thus becomes visible, as both sides invoke peace, justice, and stability, but do so in mutually exclusive ways due to their identity narratives and fear of their contestation. This highlights the danger of competitive identity contestation and moral superiority claims in post-conflict regions. As identity provides a role for a nation and state and legitimises its actions above all else, in regions where it is challenged, states tend to prioritise identity in discourse and policy. The enduring antagonisms stem from identities and national roles being regularly disputed in order to gain or undermine legitimacy, leading states to prioritise identity protection in their foreign policy actions. The findings underscore the importance of identity and discourse, and the value of integrating discourse analysis and the study of identity within Foreign Policy Analysis, which must take domestic identity narratives seriously, especially in post-conflict contexts. The article adopts a constructivist approach to provide concrete explanatory power, and thereby demonstrates the value of interpretive approaches in FPA.

Conclusion

The paper explored the complex crises occurring in the Western Balkans, arguing that they emanate from unresolved questions of identity. Identity, being constructed through interaction with others, means that contestation of identity-based roles leads to constant disputes that spiral into crises through unrestrained, intolerant rhetoric. The analysis showed that Serbia and Bosnia's foreign policies are primarily shaped by identity narratives, which are tied to moral superiority and historical guilt. The prioritisation of identity explains the durability of these antagonisms, and the analysis argued that foreign policy is primarily determined by identity protection and drives policy. The empirical analysis showed that foreign policy is not just a response to external threats or alliances, but also a stage for performing and disputing collective moral roles, thus being an extension of identity conflicts. The paper also innovated methodologically by combining IPT with constructivist FPA in order to explain how

discourse both reflects and produces policy outcomes. It also offers a theoretical critique of dominant rationalist models of foreign policy that assume states act on strategic interests, by suggesting that identity drives foreign policy even at the expense of strategic interests and direct material or policy benefit, at least in the region.

The narrative reconstruction of bilateral and regional events as crises of identity contestation and perception, rather than merely as political disputes, provides a comparative FPA that is fully intersubjective in its logic. As such, the paper demonstrated how identity concerns not only shape foreign policy but also determine regional stability, warning that this can cause instability and further deterioration unless directly addressed. The article highlighted the normative limits of EU conditionality and liberal peacebuilding, noting that when identity claims and roles are incompatible, reconciliation and cooperation are hindered, and strategic objectives of material gain become secondary to identity disputes. The article argued for a normative shift in diplomacy towards empathetic dialogue without identity disputation, noting that peace requires a discursive transformation. Likewise, it suggested that promoting liberal norms may be counterproductive if framed in ways that threaten national self-image, and argued for a pragmatic decrease of tensions whereby both states should lower their identity claims against the other in a spirit of compromise. Finally, it is important to note the study's limitation, as it focused only on elite-level policy discourse, not on broader domestic political dynamics, and it does not analyse the discourses of international organisations which shape the discursive field. While focused on Serbia and BiH, the framework and approach are applicable to other post-conflict or identity-fragmented regions with contested national narratives. Future studies could address this limitation, or provide a wider comparative study of the whole region while retaining the general framework.

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