
Comparative Analysis of the “Serbian World” and “Greater Serbia” Concepts

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Abstract

This article aims to present designated outcomes of the author's research on the *Serbian world* concept, which surfaced as an indispensable part of the public discourse in the year 2020, and has been ever since repeatedly identified with the notion of "Greater Serbia". Hence, the methodology of the comparative analysis will be applied with the intention of systematically examining the resemblances and differences of the said concepts, including also elements of the qualitative content analysis. The qualitative content analysis includes pre-selected public statements of prominent regional stakeholders in which they identify the *Serbian world* with the "Greater Serbia" concept. This represents a significant approach for the understanding of the *Serbian world per se* and its comparison with other note-worthy concepts, because it is still regarded mainly as a mental construct. Therefore, whilst analysing this concept the focus must be placed on processes of mental shaping of the world as understood by the participants of the discourse, and on the process of the conceptualization of reality. Based on the results of the analysis, the author concludes that only its opponents regard the *Serbian world* as a modernized version of "Greater Serbia" with the purpose of discrediting the newly popularized term, and for which they assume will have an exclusively territorial connotation with imperial pretensions. However, the analysis has shown that the constant comparisons with "Greater Serbia" are part of an ongoing anti-Serbian campaign, and that the concept was not designed after any greater-state ideas. The *Serbian world* concept has a predominantly cultural dimension, with a focus on the promotion of the 'world of values' of the Serbian people.

Key words: Serbian world, Greater Serbia, concepts, greater-state projects, borders

Comparative Analysis of the "Serbian World" and "Greater Serbia" Concepts

Introduction: From "Greater Serbia" to "Serbian World" accusations

For roughly two centuries now, since the beginning of the Serbian struggle for a single and independent nation state, the political and intellectual elites from its neighbouring countries have been uninterruptedly spreading their concerns about the supposed intentions of the Serbs to create a "Greater Serbia" (Krestić 1998, p. 134). As of that moment, this represented a relentless catchphrase of all anti-Serbian statements and narratives, not only for their domestic audiences, but for the much wider global public. These continuous accusations arose because of the persistent aspirations of the Serbian people for a national liberation and unification, which encroached on the imperial interests of great powers, and on the other hand, on the greater-state ambitions and demands of its neighbouring countries such as Albania, Bulgaria, Croatia and Hungary. Such tactics have been well known for a long time now and were inherited by the regional political and intellectual elites from "the cradle of accusations about a Greater-Serbian threat" which refers to the Habsburg Monarchy, and especially Benjamin von Kallay, the Austro-Hungarian minister of finance and administrator of the Condominium of Bosnia and Herzegovina (1882–1903) (Popov 2008, p. 9; Antić/Kecmanović 2016, p. 121). The phenomenon called "Greater Serbia" has, thus, been one of the most powerful means of combatting the national interests and existential rights of the Serbian people, led by its various opponents, without interruption for two centuries now, making this campaign almost as long as the Serbian struggle for a nation state itself. Accusing the Serbian elites for "Greater-Serbian nationalism", the regional decision-makers saw the Serbs as their main obstacle in order to realize their greater-state projects, on which they worked consistently and persistently, adhering to the Machiavellian principle that all means are allowed to achieve this goal, which, at times, even included the genocidal destruction of Serbs (Krestić 1998, pp. 123–124).

Since the moment, the term *Serbian world* became indispensable in the wider domestic and regional public discourse, it was a substantial part of an especially eye-catching narrative that occurred in the statements of usually Bosniak, Croatian, Montenegrin, and, in some smaller extent, Western European and Albanian political and intellectual elites, and which referred to the frequent comparisons of the concept with the regionally widespread notion of "Greater Serbia" (Vukićević/Tuhina 2021). In contrast to the main Serbian social actors, who in the vast majority looked favourably upon the newly popularized term, its opponents began publicly criticizing the emergence of the notion of the *Serbian world*, interpreting it as a renewal of irredentist and greater-state aspirations of the Serbian state leadership. The first in a series of high-ranking officials from the region and abroad, who explicitly declared the *Serbian world* as "a euphemism for the idea of greater Serbia, endangering other countries and the identities of other nations" was none other than the former President of Montenegro, Milo Đukanović (Beta 2021; Marković 2020; Sloboden pečat 2020). After that statement, numerous other social actors, including mostly the political and intellectual elite, started following the same narrative as Milo Đukanović, and, since the year 2020, began constantly identifying the *Serbian world* with the notorious "Greater Serbia" idea. Consequently, this article sets out to analyse the main similarities and differences between the *Serbian world* and "Greater Serbia" in order to prove that the newly popularized syntagma is much broader than the territorial connotations it has been accused for by its opponents. This will be achieved by using the methodological approach dubbed as the comparative analysis, with a partial application of the qualitative content analysis, which is crucial for the better understanding and definition of the concept in academical terms, given that the *Serbian world* is still widely regarded as a mental construction. Hence, whilst analysing the *Serbian world* concept, the focus must be placed on processes of mental shaping of the world as it is understood by the prominent social actors participating in this particular narrative, as well as on the processes of the conceptualization of reality. After the concept is defined as understood by the political and intellectual elites using it

in their public statements, it can be effectively compared with the notion of "Greater Serbia" in order to answer the main question of this article and prove the *Serbian world* to be an authentic idea of the current Serbian political and intellectual elites. At the end, a synopsis of selected research results will be presented, as well as possible perspectives for further analysis of the concept.

Methodological approach

As this article aims to compare the *Serbian world* concept to the widespread notion of "Greater Serbia", the use of the comparative analysis as the methodological foundation is rather logically imposed. This analytical methodology is a systematic approach used to evaluate and compare two or more social phenomena, in order to identify their resemblances and variances, as well as to develop patterns that facilitate their understanding (Della Porta 2008, p. 199; Cocq/Szekely 2021, p. 14). In addition, the comparative research involves the explanation of similarities and differences of conditions or outcomes among large-scale social units, usually nations, cultures or even concepts (Drobníč 2014, p. 1127). Accordingly, the main goal of this methodological approach is the comparison of phenomena in order to identify key independent variables and establish what link, if any, exists between them and the dependent variables. The comparative analysis can be, therefore, be also useful to establish the nature of that relationship, assessing whether it is necessary, sufficient, or both. Moreover, cross-case comparison allows social scientists to build broad theories that are applicable in different contexts (Cocq/Szekely 2021, p. 13). Hence, by relying on the comparative analysis, the author of this paper seeks to determine the links, if any, between the *Serbian world* and "Greater Serbia", in order to prove that the former isn't merely a 'newly continued' or 'modernized' version of the latter, or in other terms the 'dependent variable'. However, in order to successfully conduct the analysis, the first process must include the presentation of the pre-selected dataset on the concepts, as well as the narrative from public statements in which the notion *Serbian world* is identified with "Greater Serbia", so that their similarities and differences may be observed in more detail. This is an especially

significant approach, because the credibility of the findings of the comparative analysis depends significantly on the quality of the research work done before, and after, the central part of the analysis (Schneider/Wagemann 2012, p. 13).

In that regard and in contrast to the "Greater Serbia" concept, the notion of the *Serbian world* remained under-researched in social sciences, given that only a few academic papers are devoted to its detailed and structured analysis. In academic journals published on the territory of the Republic of Serbia, there is only one note-worthy contribution, which at the same time represents a pioneering input on this topic, entitled "Creating the 'Serbian world': Qualitative content analysis of public statements regarding the concept and defining its dimensions" (2024) and composed by the same author of this text. In this particular work, the author delineates different dimensions of the *Serbian world* concept, relying on the qualitative content analysis of the available public statements of high-ranking Serbian officials and its intellectual elite. Moreover, what especially attracts attention is the fact that there are more published scientific contributions on the *Serbian world* outside of Serbia, which proves that it caught more attention in its neighbouring countries and the West, including numerous broadcasts, articles, researches, studies and interviews dedicated to the analysis of the said concept. One of the first and most notable studies was conducted by the Digital Forensic Center (DFC) from Montenegro, under the name "The Serbian World – Originally Borrowed Concept" (2021) in which the *Serbian world* concept is presented as Serbia's new strategy for gaining influence within and meddling with the interior political affairs of Montenegro, with the sole intention to integrate it into the political orbit and state borders of Serbia. In the same year, the mentioned DFC, published another, rather extensive, study about "Russia's role in the Balkans: The Case of Montenegro", financed by the U.S. State Department, in which one chapter is devoted to a comparative analysis of two concepts – the *Serbian world* and the *Ruskiy mir* – which are claimed to be identical. The author states that the idea of creating a *Serbian world* is one of the key tools for spreading Russian influence which aims to undermine Western values, as well as

the process of European and Euro-Atlantic integration in the Western Balkan region. Among the notable works is also the one published by a German-Bosniak institute called *Pangea*, titled "The Serbian World of Aleksandar Vučić" (2021), where the author presents the concept as a camouflaged version of the 'Greater Serbia dreams' and a strategy of the Serbian political leadership for the secession of the Republic of Srpska. Additionally, there is the scientific effort of the German communicologist Thomas Brey, entitled "Staatsziel Revisionismus: Die Jugoslawienkriege und Russlands Angriff auf die Ukraine" (2022), where the *Serbian world* is portrayed in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which should imply that, similar to the *Ruskiy mir*, the Serbian concept will grow into an aggressive and revisionist project with tendencies to invade its neighbours. The last notable academic paper is titled "Serbian World" (2022) and is published in the magazine *Međunarodni Forum Bosna*. The author, similar to the previous studies, suggests that the concept serves Russian foreign policy objectives in the Balkans and states that Serbia still has territorial aspirations towards its neighbours. Therefore, the above-mentioned studies, published outside of Serbia, depict the *Serbian world* in a negative way, advocating the narrative that the concept is a continuation of the "Greater-Serbian threat", serving also Russian interests in the Western Balkan region.

Considering that there aren't many trustworthy studies on this topic and due to the lack of official sources defining the concept, the *Serbian world* largely remains a mental construct of leading social actors, who have an influence on the formation of the public opinion, and the way in which they understand, accept and use the term in their public addresses. Consequently, this research also partially focusses on the reconstruction of cognitive structures from public comments on the *Serbian world* concept in contemporary Serbian, regional, and foreign media outlets, relying on the methodological approach of the qualitative content analysis, with a focus on especially non-Serbian political and intellectual factors, given that the dataset has shown that it was usually foreign and regional actors comparing it with the notion of "Greater Serbia". This is regarded to be a significantly important approach whilst

analysing the *Serbian world* concept *per se* due to its insufficient processing in social sciences and the fact that the notion is yet to be defined in, for instance, official state strategies or documents such as notable foreign concepts based on similar ideas (*Russian world*, *Turkic world* etc.). Hence, this article focusses in part on the processes of mental shaping of the world how it is understood by the participants of the *Serbian world* narrative, and the processes of the conceptualization of reality. In this context, the participants of this discourse must be understood as elites of symbolic power, capable of creating constructed communities, controlling the means of communication and possessing adequate capital, therefore being able to rule over others and influencing their way of thinking by forming public opinion (Kozdra 2018, p. 62).

In this regard, the qualitative content analysis will be used to systematically process the content of public statements with the purpose of extracting meaningful insights and patterns from the collected dataset, which is an important approach for the sake of reconstructing the *Serbian world* concept in the way it is understood, accepted and used by the prominent social actors (Gheyle/Jacobs 2017, p. 2). Put differently, the qualitative content analysis is a useful tool for effectively transforming raw data into valuable insights, which entails more than simply reading or observing, and is about redefining key points, categorizing differences and identifying recurring patterns that might otherwise slip unnoticed through gaps (Krippendorff 2004, p. 17). At the same time, by monitoring the content, it tries to establish appropriate connections and relationships between phenomena in the collected data, which makes it possible to theoretically establish the way in which stakeholders observe the *Serbian world*. As dictated by the qualitative content analysis, the research consists of purposefully selected texts and articles, including statements of leading non-Serbian social actors, who publicly criticized the said concept since the year 2020 (Zhang/Wildemuth 2009, p. 2). The analysis of the dataset contains over thirty public statements published in relevant regional media, including *Politika*, *Tanjug*, *Radio-television of Serbia* (RTS), *Danas*, *Novosti*, *Standard*, *Beta*, *N1* (Serbia), *Al Jazira*, *Federalne*,

Slobodna Bosna, Istraga (B&H), *Jutarnji list*, *Croatian Radio-television* (HRT), *Laudato TV* (Croatia), *Dnevne novine*, *Pobjeda*, *Vijesti* (Montenegro). In addition, the analysis incorporates relevant foreign media houses, such as *Associated Press*, *Foreign Policy*, *Neue Züricher Zeitung*, *Deutsche Welle*, *Radio Free Europe*, *Der Standard*, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*. The time frame from 2020 until today (2024) was chosen for the reason because the modernized version of the term *Serbian world* originally came under the spotlight of the wider domestic and regional public on September 4th, 2020. It was the first time the term was mentioned in a public address by a high-ranking official of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, namely the then Minister of Defence, Aleksandar Vulin, which gave the concept the outline of an important political and national idea (Ljubomirović 2024, p. 106; Borba 2022; Karabeg 2021). From its beginning, almost all significant social actors were involved in the debate about the its essence, contributing to the *Serbian world* becoming an unavoidable part of the public discourse, but not the academic community as well.

The “Serbian World” concept – a euphemism for “Greater Serbia”?

Interestingly, it was, like in the previous cases throughout modern Serbian history, the foreign or rather non-Serbian stakeholders who initiated the discourse about the *Serbian world* being the modernized version of the old “Greater Serbia” aspirations of the Serbian political and state elite. The first among many to impose such a narrative was the then Montenegrin President, Milo Đukanović, when he assessed the *Serbian world* as an unequivocal threat and a “a euphemism for the idea of a greater Serbia” (Beta 2022; Marković 2020; Sloboden pečat 2020). What specifically draws attention in this aspect is the fact that the assessment of Milo Đukanović dates from September 30th, 2020, which is less than a month after a high-ranking Serbian government official used the term *Serbian world* for the first time in a public appearance (Uredništvo srpskog sveta 2022). This would, in turn, imply that the labelling of the *Serbian world* concept as a ‘newer version’ of “Greater Serbia” is almost as old as the usage of

the coin itself in public by Serbian social actors, and suggests that its opponents contributed to the promotion and popularization of the term (Raković 2022, p. 11-12). Less than a month after minister Vulin's speech in Banja Luka, Croatian President Zoran Milanović hosted his, at the time, Montenegrin counterpart, Milo Đukanović. On the same occasion, when Đukanović marked the term as a 'euphemism for "Greater Serbia" ambitions', Milanović added that his primary task as of that moment would be discredit the *Serbian world* concept in the eyes of the West: "*Especially in the future, my task will be to draw the attention of my interlocutors [...] in the West, [...] to these things [Serbian world] that they actually know little about and are not interested in*" (Vukićević/Tuhina 2021). That this kind of narrative about the *Serbian world* concept has become widespread and largely accepted in Croatia is also confirmed by a detailed assessment given by another former Croatian President, Stjepan Mesić, who believes there are still unresolved greater-state projects in the Balkan region, among which the Serbian political and state elite stands out. On the same occasion, he underlined that "*not everyone understood that borders cannot be changed*" and compared the *Serbian world* to some, in his personal opinion, former Serbian greater-state ambitions, adding: "*We had 100,000 dead and the border didn't change a single millimetre. We return to those messages from the 'Serbian world' that Ilija Garašanin [Prime Minister of Serbia in the 19th century; author of "Načertanije"] sent, such as 'unification of countries wherever Serbs live', then Stevan Moljević, a member of Draža Mihailović's staff [leader of the pro-monarchist Chetnik troops during WW2], who promoted ideas for the expansion of Serbian borders*" (Ibid. 2021). Another former Croatian President, Ivo Josipović, joined this discourse on the *Serbian world* and assumed that nationalism, including territorial and imperial pretensions, were emerging once more in the Western Balkans. He emphasized that it is clear to everyone who the persons in charge are: "*The theoreticians of the 'Serbian world' and the awakened spirit of [Slobodan] Milošević [former President of Serbia & FR of Yugoslavia] are the most responsible for the restless political scene in the Western Balkans*" (Spalović 2022).

However, the most restless opponents of the concept are the outstanding social actors from Montenegro, probably due to the fact that this Adriatic country is generally regarded as one of the three pillars of the *Serbian world*, together with Serbia and the Republic of Srpska (Nikolaidis 2020). Especially Đukanović has repeatedly labelled the term as a threat to other countries and the identity of other nations: "There is no doubt that their ultimate goal is the unification of that Serbian area, thereby endangering other states and endangering the identity of other nations, starting with Montenegro". In addition, he assessed that the Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) is the spearhead of "Greater Serbian nationalism" and Russian imperial interest in the Balkans (Marković 2020). In his elaborations the narrative about the *Serbian world* being a continuation of the "Greater Serbia" project is also present: "Serbia's nationalism is trying to influence Montenegro in a malignant way, without giving up the Greater Serbia idea as a project which only changed its name into the 'Serbian World'" (Beta 2021). After the defeat of his Democratic Party of Socialists of Montenegro (DPS) in the parliamentary elections in 2020, Đukanović continued commenting the *Serbian world* concept. After the Montenegrin Assembly voted in favour of no-confidence motion for the Government of Zdravko Krivokapić, Đukanović stated for the German media outlet *Deutsche Welle*: "Greater Serbian nationalism from Belgrade realized that the victory of their favourites opened the door for a new annexation of Montenegro, this time through the 'Serbian world' project. That didn't happen because we had a responsible opposition led by DPS" (Politika 2022). After the victory of Jakov Milatović in the 2023 presidential elections, which marked the end of the decades-long rule of Đukanović, an author's text of the Bosniak journalist Avdo Avdić was published. In his text, the author stated that with the victory of Jakov Milatović, the *Serbian world* gained access to the sea, and that Montenegro will once again become the coast of the Serbian sea (Avdić 2023).

Furthermore, the Bosniak opponents of the *Serbian world* were equally voiced in their opposition to the newly emerged concept as their Montenegrin counterparts. While among the Montenegrin stakeholders usually the political elite stood out, among the Bosniak social actors,

the *Serbian world* concept was negatively commented by both members of the intellectual elite, as well as state-level decision-makers. Hence, when asked whether the concept should be taken seriously, Šefik Džaferović warned that the talk by Serbian politicians of a new *Serbian world* was reminiscent of former Serbian 'strongman' Slobodan Milošević's "Greater Serbia" project: "*It is, as presented by Serbian officials, just another name for Greater Serbia. [...] It is a dangerous message, which represents the continuation of the rhetoric about Greater Serbia, that is, Milošević's vocabulary about 'all Serbs in one state'*" (Aktuelno 2021). In addition to this, the former Chairman of the Presidency of B&H, Bakir Izetbegović, said that the *Serbian world* is just another name for the notion of "Greater Serbia" and that he expects Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić not to allow such statements by Serbian officials (meaning Aleksandar Vulin) and "*not to remain silent while such things are being said*" (Al Jazeera 2021; Beta 2021b). The same narrative can be found again in an author's text composed by Bosniak intellectual, Dr Nermin Tursić, for the internet portal *Slobodna Bosna*, in which he states: "*The 'Serbian world' is a modified type of the sophisticated Greater Serbia concept, adapted to new, contemporary circumstances. [...] Through the formulation of an integrated Serbia, it is necessary to re-create a unique 'Serbian space' that would be aligned with the interests of the 'mother country'*" (Tursić 2024). Lastly, the Associate Professor at the University of Sarajevo, Hamza Karčić, also wrote about the *Serbian world* concept in his author's text for the *Foreign Policy Magazine*: "*What 'Greater Serbia' failed to achieve by brute force in the 1990s may now be attempted by hybrid means. Political state capture from within independent states, rather than military incursion, seems to be Serbia's preferred method for pursuing the dream of a Serbian world*" (Karčić 2023).

Lastly, there were also Albanian and Western European stakeholders who identified the *Serbian world* with the "Greater Serbia" concept in their public addresses, but not in the same extent as their Bosniak, Croatian and Montenegrin complements. Among them, the current Prime Minister of the breakaway and so-called "Republic of Kosovo", Albin Kurti, stood out with his remarks on the *Serbian world*

concept, where he indirectly stated that it is nothing less than the continuation of the "Greater Serbia" project: "So, he [Aleksandar Vulin] who was once the Vice-President of the 'JUL' party, which was led by Milošević's wife Mira Marković, today [...] is praised for being the inventor of the term 'Serbian world'" (Venhari 2023). Additionally, the former Slovenian President, Borut Pahor, who, speaking at the opening of the 17th Bled Strategic Forum, stressed out that the European Union (EU) must do everything to convince Serbia to strengthen its policy of Western orientation and EU integration: "The official policy of Serbia should be to give up the idea of a Serbian world, to give up support for separatist aspirations in B&H, as well as to successfully end the dialogue with Kosovo" (Sandžacke 2022). Furthermore, along with important stakeholders from former Yugoslavia, there are also notable Western European social actors, who gave their views on the *Serbian world*, among which the German political scientist, Mihael Martens, sticks out: "Belgrade has never given up on the dream of a 'Greater Serbia'. It's just that the project is now known by a different name, that of 'Serbian world'" (Martens 2023). In conclusion, Toby Vogel, from the Council on Democratization Policy, understands the term as follows: "This is a continuation of Slobodan Milošević's 'Greater Serbia' project, although obviously through peaceful means and the articulation of the vision of President Vučić, which has been evident in his actions and policies for some time - Vučić as the leader of all Serbs" (Vukićević/Tuhina 2021).

The conducted qualitative content analysis of public statements about the *Serbian world* leads to the conclusion that, in fact, the non-Serbian social actors who are openly opposed to the concept, labelled it as an 'equivalent' of the much older and widespread notion of "Greater Serbia", and that, for them, it represents an expansionist and messianic policy of the Serbian state leadership, which in the near future will aim to redraw the borders of its neighbours in order to unite all Serbs in one political and national space (Stanković 2021). By comparing the concepts, the opponents of the *Serbian world*, therefore, strive to further discredit it amongst the general public and Western decision-makers, as seen from the statement of Croatian President, Zoran Milanović. Unlike the statements of Serbian social actors, where

five dimensions were reconstructed, the public addresses of non-Serbian stakeholders lead to the conclusion that, for them, there is only one territorial component (Ljubomirović 2024, p. 124). Accordingly, that component (1) is a newer version of the Serbian greater-state aspirations, (2) is based on the unfulfilled idea of "Greater Serbia", and (3) aims to threaten the territorial integrity of its neighbouring countries.

"Greater Serbia" and the "Serbian World" concepts – dismantling myths

The most important resemblance when comparing the *Serbian world* with the notion of "Greater Serbia" is undoubtedly their territorial or geopolitical dimension, given that both are, in a larger or smaller extent, connected to the idea of creating a single, united and independent Serbian state, bigger than the current border of the Republic of Serbia. Although this may be true, there is a major difference in their territorial dimensions. Whereas the "Greater Serbia" includes some territories where Serbs do not represent an absolute or even relative majority, like in Northern Macedonia, the *Serbian world* concept only aims to united those areas where the Serbian people signify an absolute or relative majority, such as in Serbia, Montenegro and the Republic of Srpska, with some variations also including the Union of Serbian municipalities in the Federation of B&H, as well as municipalities in Croatia with a Serbian national majority (Antić 2022, p. 324). Such a representation of the *Serbian world* also corresponds to the current ethnic distribution of the Serbs in the Balkans, which the results of the population censuses in the republic of the former Yugoslavia clearly show. Therefore, the "Greater Serbia" concept is much more exclusive and aggressive than the *Serbian world*, which, in contrast, aims to fulfil the two centuries long struggle for a Serbian nation state, based on European models.

Furthermore, the opponents of the Serbian struggle for a nation state, connected the roots of the "Greater-Serbian threat" to a well-known document on foreign and regional policy, composed in 1844 by the then Prime Minister of Serbia, Ilija Garašanin, titled "Načertanije",

to which the *Serbian world* was compared with by former Croatian President, Stjepan Mesić (Vukićević/Tuhina 2021). While stakeholders from neighbouring countries of Serbia view this document as the start of the "Greater-Serbian threat", a careful analysis of the document "Načertanije" in the context of the entire European, Balkan and South Slavic historical situation during the 19th century, carried out by prominent academics Radoš Ljušić, Milorad Ekmečić, and Vasilije Krestić, clearly shows that Garašanin was drawing up a plan for the future Serbian nation state, including the proposal to solve the so-called *Serbian question* within a much broader South-Slavic country (Ekmečić 2002, p. 216; Ljušić 2004, pp. 18-42). According to the idea of Garašanin, Serbia would represent a centre around which all willing areas inhabited by Serbs of the Balkans would gather, with the accession being open to other South Slavic peoples such as Bulgarians as well as Croats (Popov 2008, pp. 47-52; Garašanin 2016, p. 44). In accordance to the said, the notion of *Serbian world* is much closer to Ilija Garašanin's idea, introduced in his famous national and foreign policy program "Načertanije", in which he understood Serbia as a centre around which all Serbs and potentially other South Slavic nations of the Balkans would gather, than to the accusations of a "Greater Serbia" with territorial claims and imperial pretensions suggested by its opponents in order to discredit and oppose the Serbian national struggle. In that context, the *Serbian world* concept should be understood similarly to the way other European nations view their own 'worlds' such as the *Francophonie*, *Russian world* or *Turkic world*. In the concept of the *Serbian world*, the notion of 'world' should be understood by its ancient meaning, that of a civilizational space. In this context, ancient sources spoke about the Hellenic, Roman and Byzantine world as a way to define broad territories under the influence of a singular centre. Not only did these large spaces share the centre's cultural values, but they displayed political loyalty to it and were integrated into its economic orbit. In many of these aspects, the concept of the *Serbian world* is an updated version of the ancient perception of a shared civilizational space (Laruelle 2015, p. 3). Thus, the *Serbian world* is in many aspects an updated version of the older perception of the historical notion of the 'world'. In this context,

Belgrade, as the capital of Serbia, would represent the political, economic, cultural, and even religious centre of all Serbs, while Serbia, as currently the only independent Serbian state, would assume the role of the Italian region of Piedmont and serve as the core of an all-Serbian integration (Ljubomirović 2024, p. 106). This was also confirmed on several occasions by Serbian stakeholders outside of Serbia, referring to the statement given by the President of the Republic of Srpska, Milorad Dodik, who stressed out that Belgrade is the capital of all Serbs from Bosnia (Beta 2024). In addition, the largest Serbian political party in Montenegro, Democratic Front (DF), sincerely supports the idea behind the *Serbian world* concept, which was confirmed by its leader, Andrija Mandić: "*The idea of a 'Serbian world' appeals to Serbs across the border and we are already working on its realization*" (Vukićević/Tuhina 2021). However, to prevent Serbia from becoming a 'Balkan Piedmont' in the 19th century, the main factors of the Austro-Hungarian political elite made it their main task to degrade the prestige of Serbia among all Serbs and South-Slavic people in its Monarchy, and all under the banner of a "Greater-Serbian threat". The Austrian authorities managed to successfully spread this narrative among the South-Slavic people of its Monarchy (Bosniaks & Croats), who, after its collapse, together with their Albanian and Montenegrin counterparts, became the frontrunners in the anti-Serbian campaign, which, as the previous chapter shows, is still ongoing today (Popov 2008, pp. 280-289).

Nevertheless, the concept of borders and its changing is an important narrative when it comes to, both, the propagators and opponents of the *Serbian world* as well as "Greater Serbia". The importance of borders is further elaborated by Alexander Dugin, a well-known Russian geopolitician, who notes that the concept of boundary is the essence of politics and determines the future of a state: "*The boundary is the quintessence of politics. [...] Boundaries determine success or failure, define starting conditions, and decide an inevitable defeat in the future. [...] This is the very metaphysics of boundaries*" (Kozdra 2018, p. 62). However, borders are not only real geographical objects, but also mental constructions, which are closely related to the mechanisms of social inclusion and exclusion, which separate and draw

lines between cultures and civilizations. Moreover, mental constructions are often referred to in public discourse by political elites, who have institutional or symbolic power. These mental constructions of borders, which elites reproduce in public discourse, do not remain products of imagination, but become a source for the creation of contemporary identities, taking concrete actions and creating policies. Another important element regarding borders are concepts, which are cognitive structures in the form of mental representations, associations, and knowledge, and which create a framework for explaining the physical and symbolic space in which a people live (Laruelle 2015, 8-10). Russian academic, Yuri Stepanov, claims that concepts are "cultural clusters", which differ depending on the culture, and are therefore an element of collective knowledge or awareness of the world shared by one speech community (Suslov 2018, 341). The concept of borders is similarly understood by Serbian intellectuals, such as Dositej Obradović, the first Serbian minister of education and an influential protagonist of the Serbian national and cultural renaissance. In his *Letter to Haralamije*, he pointed out that "one language means one national community and that the borders of that language are also the borders of the nation in question, regardless of what countries they live in and what churches they belong to" (Popov 2008, p. 35).

In this aspect, from the moment when the term *Serbian world* became relevant in contemporary political and ethnocentric discourse, it immediately turned into an important motif in the narrative about borders, mental construct, and concepts in their various dimensions. This is also the key difference between the two notions, as the *Serbian world*, in contrast to "Greater Serbia", is a much broader concept with different dimensions that doesn't merely relate to territorial connotations, but also aims to foster a cultural, religious, political, economic, and national unity among the Serbian people worldwide, beyond geographical borders. This is in line with the way how the ideologues of the *Serbian world*, particularly historian Aleksandar Raković, assesses the concept, stating that in the national politics of Serbia there are different models of how the term is interpreted (Novosti 2021). In accordance, a qualitative content analysis of the

collected data from fifty online texts and articles, published from 2020 until 2024, shows that the *Serbian world* concept consists of five dimension – national, cultural, religious, psychosocial and territorial – with a possible sixth (economic), in contrast to the concept of "Greater Serbia" which solely has a territorial connotation (Ljubomirović 2024, p. 124). Another architect of the notion, Gojko Raičević, founder of the national TV station *IN4S* that frequently broadcasted the show *Srpski sv(ij)et (Serbian world)*, also believes the newly popularized term to be much broader than the "Greater Serbia", highlighting the following: "*The Serbian world is bigger than Greater Serbia, but don't worry those who think that there is some danger lurking in that world, we are completely benevolent*" (IN4S 2021). The concept, indeed, received its territorial dimension only as of the year 2020, when the Belgrade-based newspaper *Politika* published an article by Dr Aleksandar Raković, where he presents his view on the *Serbian world* idea, which would implicate a Serbian unification: "*In my opinion, the best solution would be to have a federal state comprising Serbia, Montenegro and Republika Srpska*" (Pobjeda 2020). Only two months later, the territorial dimension was adopted by the then minister of defence, Aleksandar Vulin, with whom the *Serbian world* concept was launched to the highest political level and became an important state idea (Karabeg 2021). In Vulin's public addresses, the issue of administrative borders is often brought up, as can be witnessed at the annual meeting of the Socialist Movement (PS), when he, as the party's president, emphasized that "*the Serbian world should be one political space, one state*" (MORS 2020; Stanković 2021).

Nonetheless, that Serbia is not aspiring to change the existing *status quo* and borders of its neighbouring countries is confirmed in an interview given by Serbian President, Aleksandar Vučić, during which he was answering to the numerous accusations that arose after minister Vulin's speech on the *Serbian world* and unification of the Serbian people: "*Every time they say it's Vučić and Serbia because they have to find the culprit in Serbia for everything. That is why it is important that people know what the official policy of Serbia is, it is the one that says that Serbia's borders are inviolable, and we are not interested in*

*other people's borders. We have to protect our own and show clearly and unambiguously what our policy is" (RSE 2021). In that regard, Aleksandar Raković, although a firm advocate of the territorial model, believes that the cultural dimension is the prevailing one: "If I were to interpret Vučić's model of the Serbian world, it would be about cultural connection. In contrast to Vulin's, which is clearly defined as national integration. Therefore, the Serbian world is not a concept that is unambiguous or strict. The cultural concept that has conquered the Serbian world is dominant in relation to the rest, and those who are against it have nothing left but to criticize it" (IN4S 2021; Novosti 2021). That the cultural dimension is the prevailing one can be witnessed also through the tireless effort of the Serbian Government in systematically aiding institutions and organizations gathering Serbs outside their home country, which serve as informal cultural centres (Matica Srpska, Vukova zadužbina, Prosjeveta, etc.) and aim to promote the values of the Serbian nation (DFC 2021, p. 4). This strongly correlates to way how the last of the *Serbian world* ideologues, Miljan Glišić, the founder of the internet radio *Snaga Naroda*, understands the concept: "The 'Serbian world' refers to the world of values of a nation, with its peculiarities. The phenomenon is universal, and geopolitical circumstances are transitory" (Jadovno 2021). The notion of 'values' is also crucial in the concept of soft power, with which other people and nations need to identify and which, in turn, cannot be imposed on others (Kosachev 2012, p. 2). Therefore, the *Serbian world* concept should be understood as Serbia's new (unofficial) soft power approach, similar to other European models, such as the *Francophony*, *Russian world*, or *Turkic world*, as it relies on the same ambivalence. It is based on a cultural approach, closely linked to the national cultural heritage and has related political aspirations through which it seeks to defend the 'world of values' of the Serbian nation in the regional and international arena (Laruelle 2015, p. 23). In this context, it should be emphasized that many other European countries work towards the creation of their own so-called 'worlds', in which their language is spoken or their people live, as is the case with *The Organization of Ibero-American States for Education, Science and Culture (OEI)**

(Avijucki 2009, pp. 58–59). Therefore, the *Serbian world* concept is fully in line with European practice, and as such represents a legitimate basis for the promotion of the Serbian language and culture, as well as the realization of a paternal relationship with Serbs living outside the borders of Serbia.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the two widespread and, in the public discourse, popular concepts has shown that, although there are certainly some resemblances which might suggest that the *Serbian world* is an updated version of the "Greater Serbia" notion, these accusations predominantly derive from the numerous opponents of the struggle of the Serbian people and their political leadership for a nation state. Thus, the *Serbian world* has been constantly identified with the notorious notion of "Greater Serbia" by its opponents with the sole intention of discrediting the concept in the eyes of the regional public, and especially important Western decision-makers. Moreover, what particularly attracts attention is the unremitting overlap or continuity in the political discourse of the opponents of the *Serbian world*, given that all significant regional social actors adopted basically the same, to some extent *Serbophobe*, narrative and uninterruptedly identified the concept with "Greater Serbia". Among the main rivals of the idea behind the *Serbian world* concept were usually Croatian, Bosniak and Montenegrin stakeholders as well as their intellectual elites, along with Western European and Albanian social actors in some smaller extent. Overall, as this article has shown, there wasn't a significant member of the regional intellectual or political elite who didn't mention the term at least once, as evidence of Serbia's 'disintegrating', 'non-European' and 'aggressive' policy towards its neighbouring countries. In fact, it was rather its opponents than its supporters who unintentionally contributed to the popularization of the concept, which is confirmed by one of the ideologues of the *Serbian world*, Dr Aleksandar Raković, in his book "*Srpstvo i Pravoslavlje*" (2022): "Although they didn't mean to, all of them promoted and popularized a new term – the *Serbian world*" (Raković 2022, pp. 11–12).

These continuous accusations arose because of the persistent aspirations of the Serbian people for a national liberation and unification, which encroached on the imperial interests of great powers (in the past), and on the other hand, on the greater-state ambitions and demands of its neighbouring countries such as Albania or Croatia (in the present). Therefore, they often sought to present all national-oriented concepts (*Serbian world*) and documents ("Načertanije") throughout modern Serbian history as a "Greater-Serbian hegemony" and in order to prevent the Serbian people of fulfilling their national interests which were in direct contrast to their own. Additionally, although there certainly were some "Greater-Serbian thoughts" throughout modern Serbian history, such concepts were never part of the official Serbian state policies, in contrast to some greater-state projects and imperial pretensions in neighbouring countries like Albania and Croatia, which are to some extent ongoing today. Therefore, the accusations of the *Serbian world* being a camouflaged version of "Greater Serbia" have no grounds and represent a continuation of the anti-Serbian campaign which has been ongoing for almost two centuries now (Popov 2008, p. 136). Lastly, as stated in the analysis, the *Serbian world* concept, unlike some analogous notions such as the *Russkiy mir*, *Francophonie*, or *Turkic world*, has not officially become part of the Serbian foreign or regional policy orientation or any other state document for that matter, and the question arises whether this will be the case in the future. Therefore, discussions about true nature, meaning and intentions of the *Serbian world* concept remain almost exclusively the product of mental constructions and understandings of the term in public appearances by prominent social actors who use it.

Nevertheless, this article has shown that both concepts are strongly connected to the still unresolved *Serbian question* which implies the creation of a single nation state of the Serbian people in the Balkans based on legitimate European models and which, in turn, has been ongoing for almost two centuries now. The idea of the *Serbian world* has arisen at a time when the Serbs in the region of former Yugoslavia are practically the most endangered and marginalized ethnic group in Europe and while the state of political rights of the Serbian people in the

neighbouring countries of Serbia is concerningly low (Pešić 2018; Antić 2021, p. 9). This was recorded in the annual *Report on the Political Rights of the Serbian People in the Region*, which states that there is a further decline in the political rights of the Serbian people in almost all states and entities in the neighbouring countries of Serbia (Antić 2021, p. 102). Therefore, the main aspect of the *Serbian world*, even though it has a territorial connotation as well, aims to take care of the Serbian people outside its borders, and on the other hand, refers to the much broader 'world of values' of the Serbian nation which cannot be imposed and thus needs to be accepted by others. The notion of 'values' is crucial to any soft power approach and therefore the *Serbian world* needs to be regarded in this aspect (Kosachev 2012, p. 2).

At the very end, bearing in mind that the *Serbian world* is a relatively new and under-explored concept, it is worth mentioning the potential perspectives for further research and analysis in the social sciences. Since the term is often identified with analogous concepts such as the *Russkiy mir*, with the purpose of presenting it as a continuation of the Russian foreign policy in the Balkans, they should be compared in order to determine if the Serbian approach derives from the Russian one, or if it represents a unique idea based on the national interests of the Serbian people and its political leadership. At the same time, it is worth analysing the *Serbian world* concept as a soft power approach of the Republic of Serbia, because it truly is based on this particular method, like other similar European models. Finally, the genesis of the modernized version of the term should be investigated in more detail from the year 2016, when it was developed by its ideologues, until today, when it is a widely popularized concept and a serious state idea.

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Komparativna analiza „Srpskog sveta“ i koncepta „Velike Srbije“

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Sažetak

Ovaj naučni rad nastoji da predstavi odabrane ishode autorovog istraživanja o konceptu *Srpskog sveta*, koji je od trenutka kada je postao sastavni deo javnog diskursa, konstantno poistovećivan sa idejom „Velike Srbije“. Stoga se rad zasniva na komparativnoj analizi, s namerom da se sistematski ispituju glavne sličnosti i razlike navedenih koncepta, pritom se delimično oslanjajući na kvalitativnu analizu sadržaja. Navedeni metodološki pristup obuhvata unapred odabrane javne iskaze istaknutih društvenih aktera u kojima oni identifikuju *Srpski svet* sa konceptom „Velike Srbije“. Ovo predstavlja izuzetno značajan pristup za razumevanje *Srpskog sveta* kao takvog, kao i za njegovo poređenje sa drugim konceptima, jer se on i dalje smatra mentalnim konstruktom, zbog nedovoljne obrađenosti u društvenim naukama. Dakle, pri analizi koncepta fokus se stavlja, kako na procese mentalnog oblikovanja sveta na način na koji ga razumeju učesnici diskursa, tako i na procese konceptualizacije stvarnosti. Na osnovu rezultata analize, autor dolazi do zaključka da isključivo njegovi oponenti, *Srpski svet* doživljavaju kao modernizovanu verziju „Velike Srbije“, s namerom da ga diskredituju u javnosti, smatrajući da on ima isključivo teritorijalnu konotaciju, kao i imperijalne pretenzije. Međutim, rezultati analize pokazuju da je poistovećivanje *Srpskog sveta* sa „Velikom Srbijom“ deo dobro osmišljene viševjekovne anti-srpske kampanje, te da koncept nije nastao po uzoru na prethodne velikodržavne ideje. *Srpski svet* ima pretežno kulturološku konotaciju, sa fokusom na promociju 'sveta vrednosti' srpskog naroda.

Ključne reči: Srpski svet, Velika Srbija, velikodržavni projekti, granice, koncepti