

GEOPOLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF HYBRID OPERATIONS: THE EXAMPLE OF THE SOUTHERN GAS INTERCONNECTION

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Review paper

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Abstract: The Southern Gas Interconnection project is conceived as an energy link between Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia, carrying significant geopolitical and economic potential to

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reduce BiH's dependence on Russian gas. Despite its strategic importance, the project faces internal political disagreements that reflect a broader framework of hybrid action through energy policy. This paper analyzes how energy interests and international influences shape internal political attitudes and decisions in BiH. Croatian political actors support the Southern Gas Interconnection project as part of their pro-European and security policies, with an emphasis on reducing energy dependence on Russia and strengthening regional energy security. On the other hand, the Republika Srpska represents a pro-Russian position, favoring existing energy flows that enable the maintenance of Russian influence on the local market. Bosniak political actors take a pragmatic and flexible approach to the project, adapting their positions and decisions to current political interests and strategic benefits. Methodologically, the paper will include the analysis of media discourse, political statements and relevant documents. In the first part of the paper, the chronology of the project will be presented in detail, as well as the attitudes of domestic political actors towards it. Furthermore, the geopolitical context in which the entire process takes place and how broader geopolitical forces are refracted within BiH will be presented, precisely on the example of the Southern Gas Interconnection. The second part of the paper is devoted to the qualitative analysis of media content within the media space of BiH. It will present the internal "narrative dispute" and different interpretations of the effects that the mentioned project could have both for BiH and for the wider regional energy and security structure. The emphasis will be on the informational dimension of hybrid threats, pointing to the role of the media in shaping the perception of the public and political actors. The paper will provide a basis for further discussions on energy connectivity as a

means of strengthening the resistance of NATO and the EU to Russian influence in South-Eastern Europe, it is expected that the research results will contribute to a better understanding of energy policies as a tool of hybrid influence and their implications for regional stability and safety.

Keywords: Southern Gas Interconnection, hybrid warfare, regional geopolitics, energy policy, media analysis

Geopolitical context

Not so long ago, energy and public policies related to the energy sector were perceived exclusively as an economic variable and a development component of the state. They were rarely viewed as a matter of national security, with the exception of major global powers. Today, energy is one of the priority issues of national security of almost every modern state. „Energy security is an important component of the national security of any country. The availability of energy and energy sources and the efficiency of critical infrastructure are of enormous importance for the economy, but also for all other sectors. Therefore, throughout history, control over energy sources and flows has been a frequent subject of social conflicts and security crises” (Tatalović, 2008, p. 20). There is no doubt that the concept of national security has been transformed from the former direct and dominantly military threats into a much broader spectrum of threats, most of which are of a non-military character, and which can have devastating consequences for the state and society as well as war threats. Energy vulnerability is certainly one of the more serious ones. „According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), global demand for energy is expected to rise by one-third

by 2035 as economies in both developed and emerging countries continue to grow and standards of living improve. In the past – and perhaps for years to come – the global energy security architecture has been geared to the needs of the Western market. However, with recent population forecasts showing Asia as a centre that will host nearly half of the world's urban population, with a concomitant increase in oil consumption, the gradual shift of global energy trade to this region will have many geostrategic implications” (Olayele, 2015, p. 29).

Diversification of energy sources, especially supply routes, the possibility of independent production and supply, and the protection of critical energy infrastructure have opened up a vast area of geopolitical analysis that should grapple with understanding these variables.¹ In other words, geopolitics should become the operational matrix for understanding energy elements and their spatial distribution. „Geopolitics and geostrategy are increasingly mentioned in the context of the transport of energy from sources to end consumers. Energy distribution networks are now almost as important as the sources themselves. New energy routes are opening up, a new form of competition is being created in which producers and consumers participate equally. Some authors believe that most of today's conflicts are actually a struggle for influence over oil and gas sources, if not over transport routes” (Olayele, 2015, p. 28). Every country, if it wanted stable economic flows, necessarily had to become a geopolitical subject

¹ „Today, the characteristics of the concept of energy security are no longer linked to the effectiveness of warfare, but to the depletion of resources and the geographical concentration of energy sources” (Cvrtila & Barić, 2008. p. 29).

in the deliberations of its own energy flows and capacities. Otherwise, it would become easy prey for the energy flows of much larger powers that exercise significant geopolitical influence through them. Since the case study of this paper concerns the gas pipeline, the focus will be on this energy source. It is already possible to speak of a relatively new field of study called “geopolitics of gas”: the immensely political actions of governments, investors, and other key actors who decide which gas trade projects will be built, how the gains will be allocated, and how the risks of dependence on international gas trading will be managed” (Grigas, 2017, p. 10). This analytical perspective is important for us in order to outline the contours of the geopolitical context from which it is possible to understand the hybrid conflict using the example of the Southern gas interconnection.

The current conflicts, especially the one in Ukraine, have drastically changed the world's geopolitical constellation, and with it the energy component. Namely, before the aforementioned conflict, Russia was a key European energy partner, supplying it with oil and gas, and a significant part of European economic development depended on the unhindered flow of Russian energy products. In this geopolitical constellation, Ukraine played the role of the most important transport zone and was an important link in supply routes. However, today the situation is drastically different. „Since January 1st 2025, only the Turk Stream pipeline supplies European countries with Russian gas by land” (Lepesant, 2025, p. 1). Until then, Russia was an extremely powerful actor with energy levers of influence that it skilfully used for political purposes. It should not be forgotten that after the ‘energy crisis’ of

2005/2006 in Europe, caused by Ukraine's refusal to accept a unilateral increase in gas prices by Russia, the conclusion of the agreement led to Russia's Gazprom co-owning 50% of Ukrainian gas pipelines, as well as Belarusian ones. (Olayele, 2015, p. 40). „Using its control over other countries' access to Russian gas, Moscow was able to assist its friends and punish its enemies. At the same time, Gazprom's behavior in European markets was shaped both by the company's commercial considerations and by Moscow's political objectives.” (Grigas, 2017, p. 136). For Southeastern Europe, Russia was a key factor of dependence as the largest supplier. (Grigas, 2017, p. 18).

The newly emerging situation, especially after the destruction of the Nord Stream gas pipeline, pushed Europe, especially the European Union, into a completely new phase of its own energy thinking and the search for alternative solutions to compensate for Russian energy sources. One part of the new policy was the reduction of the need for natural gas.² „As a matter of fact, between August 2022 and March 2023, European demand for gas declined by almost 20% compared with the period 2017-2022, under the cumulative effect of higher prices, a milder winter and an increase in renewable energies (RE) production” (Lepesant, 2025, p. 5).

The second part of the answer has been the massive construction of LNG, a kind of „tsunami of LNG production” (Grigas, 2017, p. 24). Particularly important for the case study is the LNG terminal on the island of Krk in the Republic of Croatia. „In Croatia, the Krk

² „In the EU's periphery, Turkey and Azerbaijan are benefiting from this reorganisation and serve as relays for Russian gas and oil exports.” (Lepesant, 2025, p. 5).

terminal has benefited indirectly from reductions in Russian supplies after being underused until 2022, and its capacity has now been increased. A connection to the Southern European gas pipeline is planned with the construction of the Ionian Adriatic Pipeline (IAP) between Fier (Albania) and Split (Croatia)” (Lepesant, 2025, p. 4). The latter is actually an entry point into a potentially new supply route that would go towards BiH and whose operational part is the Southern Gas Interconnection, which we have taken as a case study for this paper.

Moldova example of good practice: Iasi-Unghenu-Chisinau pipeline

Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) is faced with numerous challenges that may affect its energy policy, but also the overall social and state processes: economic, security, social, demographic, energy and political. Although it has a surplus of electricity production, at the same time it faces serious challenges in the supply of energy sources such as gas and oil. Currently, BiH is supplied with gas only from Russian sources, which are proven to be dependent on the political positions of the Kremlin. Therefore, it is extremely useful to compare the Southern Gas Interconnection project with similar processes in the immediate vicinity, which could serve as a landmark in the search for possible solutions that would move BiH away from complete dependence on the supply of energy from Russia. After the drastic change in the situation in the energy sector throughout Europe, and due to geopolitical circumstances in its entirety, many countries in a situation of energy dependence and political influence had to reorient themselves to energy sources and supply routes that reduce their dependence on

Russia. The example of Moldova will serve as one of the most vivid examples, and at the same time interesting projects that can be an example for BiH. Thus, the dependence on Russian energy products in that country was absolute, as well as a serious political problem caused by the existence of Transnistria (the occupied part of Moldova under the control of the Russian armed forces and politically pro-Russian circles).

„Russia's strategy was very simple: make Moldova completely dependent on Russian energy and at the same time force the central authorities to buy energy coming from the occupied territory and thus finance the pro-Russian administration in the area. Gazprom has been supplying Transnistria with free energy sources for thirty years, which these authorities then use: (a) for their own use, (b) for the production of electricity, which they then (at market prices) sold to the central authorities in Moldova, and (c) for the sale of gas to Moldova, also at market prices” (Akrap et al., 2024, p. 77). Russia often used its dominant position to try to influence political processes in Moldova, for example, after the aggression against Ukraine, Gazprom cut gas exports to Moldova in half and significantly increased prices, thereby creating an energy crisis and a potential economic-political problem. It should be emphasized that at that moment, the power in Moldova is held by pro-European forces that are not influenced by Russian influence. So, with its energy capital, Russia tried to fabricate a social and political crisis and potentially change the mood of the Moldovan people against pro-European politicians. In addition to the energy impact, hybrid operations and propaganda worked in sync.

This forced the Moldovan authorities to turn even more strongly to the West, especially Europe, and to look for ways to reduce Russian influence. Moldova initiated processes with which it wanted to get rid of such dependence on Russian energy products. By the end of 2023, Moldova almost completely succeeded in this. In 2023, Moldova transferred the gas pipelines operated by the company Moldovatrangaz, which was fully controlled by Gazprom, to the management of the company VestMoldTransgaz. „VestMoldTransgaz is a company controlled by the Romanian company Transgaz (75%) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (25%). Therefore, control of the pipeline has passed into the hands of reliable Western companies that will not, especially not directly, import Russian gas and will not manipulate the supply and prices in the market. VestMoldTransgaz has become the temporary operator of Moldova's entire gas pipeline system. The pipeline was funded by the EBRD and the EIB (\$45million each and they bought 25% ownership of VestMoldTransgaz in mid-202049), financial assistance from Romania (\$600k) and funds from the Government of Moldova, with a \$1million EU's financial injection” (Akrap et al., 2024, p. 79).

With this, Moldova partially broke away from Russian geopolitical influence through energy dominance and created prerequisites for a more independent energy policy and development. Furthermore, with this, it reduced the potential political influence of Russia as well as the hybrid threats coming from Russia, and tied itself to the Western world. The example from Moldova shows that if there is political will on both sides (especially in Brussels), there are financial capacities and innovative models that can create completely new companies for the

management of infrastructure with the long-term benefit of both the domestic population and the stability of the European Union. The Southern gas pipeline in BiH is an outstanding example of this situation.

Reflection on the local situation in Bosnia and Herzegovina

First of all, BiH, as a reactively underdeveloped European country with a low rate of industrialization and household gasification, did not directly feel the consequences of energy restructuring in Europe. Namely, in BiH there is a general problem of defining a coherent national security policy, and in addition, the understanding of the energy sector in the context of new security processes is completely outdated. In other words, the question arises as to whether a state that has not even entered into the Westphalian concept of modern statehood can talk about the state's interest at all, and how it can control the processes that are undoubtedly imposed as a priority, which the new energy situation in Europe undoubtedly represents. Paradoxically, weak statehood and insufficient industrialization ensured that BiH did not feel the consequences of energy crises, but this only pushed the problem under the carpet.

In a theoretical sense, BiH belongs to the group of countries that fall under the label of 'dependency policy' in the energy sector. (Grigas, 2017, p. 17). „The politics of dependence is a set of economic and political policies available to energy-importing states that are disproportionately dependent on a particular exporting state and thus are pursuing their interests vis-à-vis the exporter from a position of weakness. Three key factors determine whether a country is playing the politics of demand or being played by the politics of dependence:

diversification, volumes of imports, and market conditions” (Grigas, 2017, p. 17). In this context, BiH does not play a significant energy role in the regional environment, but serious economic development would indeed require a complete redefinition of energy policy, the search for new supply routes or the construction of internal energy capacities, which requires large financial investments. In BiH, energy security is not simply determined by the position of a ‘developing country’ or a state with insufficient capacity for its own energy resources and energy storage, but also by the position of dependence on a particular geopolitical actor. In other words, economic criteria and sound business logic do not play too big a role here, because sometimes it is much more important to be dependent on an energy supplier that is on the ‘right side’ of the geopolitical moment of world history. Simply put, stability in supply coupled with a connection to the ‘right suppliers’ are the key criteria for the energy component security of BiH.

When it comes to planning the development of the energy sector, geopolitics plays a key role and creates an apparent economic paradox. Namely, with a completely reasonable tactic of increasing its own energy capacities, along with complete modernization and compensating for outdated forms of production, BiH unfortunately does not have the luxury of diversification due to its strong commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration goals. Today's geopolitical context dictates that this path must be synchronized with the energy flows that NATO and EU countries are planning. More or less, it is a reduction and a complete shutdown of Russian energy routes and a switch to Western European supply routes. Because if the much larger and more influential EU member states had to give up the relatively cheap energy that came from

Russia, it is almost unthinkable that such a supply would be allowed to a small state that received candidate status.

Unfortunately, in BiH, even such moves aimed at reducing dependence on Russian gas are carried out in an inadequate and dilettantish manner. The case from April 2024, when the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina lost a multimillion-dollar dispute with the Hungarian supplier FGSZ, otherwise a member of the MOL group, is extremely symptomatic. Namely, in 2021, the Government of the Federation unilaterally terminated the multi-year contract with the aforementioned supplier and switched to supplying via the Turkish Stream, which stretches from Russia through Turkey to BiH. With this decision, the companies Energoinvest and BH Gas are obliged to pay damages in the amount of 11.6 million dollars to the aforementioned supplier.

„The Turkish Stream gas pipeline was part of Russia's long-term ambition to reduce gas transport through Ukraine to a minimum by building alternative routes, such as Turkish and Nord Stream 1 and 2. The decision of Energoinvest, as an authorized gas supplier for the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, to sign an annex to the contract with Gazprom, which, as of April 1, 2021, changed the route and selected Turkish Stream, has since been followed by mutual accusations by the then management of BH Gas and Energoinvest” (Augustinović, 2024). The then adviser to the management of BH Gas stated that the money that was kept for the Southern Interconnection project will now be used to pay the fine. „Now that money can be used for completely different purposes. Apparently, no one wanted to reserve this money to pay the Hungarian

company. It is absurd that we are paying more expensive gas via the Turkish Stream, and at the same time penalizing Hungary. So, millions and millions are going on two grounds” (Augustinović, 2024). The BiH side, i.e. the actors, justified such an unreasonable policy move by the political decision of Gazprom and their blackmail. It is worth noting that the protagonist at the time assured the public that the transition to Turk Stream meant a 20-25% reduction in the price of gas, which did not happen, and dependence on Russian gas was completely maintained (*Prelazak na Turski tok: umjesto obećanog smanjenja, prijeti povećanje cijene gasa za građane*, 2021).

Southern gas interconnection pipeline

Under the influence of the USA and with the wholehearted assistance of the Republic of Croatia, BiH embarked on the development of the Southern Gas Interconnection gas pipeline project in order to reduce dependence on Russian gas. Namely, Croatia has committed to building a pipeline through its LNG all the way to the border with BiH, after which the gas pipeline would continue to extend to central Bosnia. This would reduce serious dependence on Russian supply routes, create the prerequisites for the gasification of households, but also the development of mass industry. Interestingly, the project is planned exclusively in the territory of the Federation of BiH, because the political representatives of the Republika Srpska are not at all inclined to such a project due to their interest ties with Russia. Furthermore, the entire length of the gas pipeline through BiH would extend through the territory inhabited by the majority Croat population, i.e., the majority Croatian cantons. Key Bosniak and Croat

political subjects gave principled support to such a proposal. However, the divergence in political attitudes and the final split occurred due to the proposal to establish a new public company owned by the Federation with headquarters in Mostar that would manage the planned gas pipeline. Such a position was categorically rejected by Bosniak politicians, ultimately demanding that this function be performed by the existing public company BH Gas, which was completely unacceptable to Croatian politicians. First of all, because this company with headquarters in Sarajevo has almost no Croats in its administrative and working structure, it is a proven loser with a lost million-dollar arbitration dispute. So, Bosniak politicians insisted that the gas pipeline, which is largely built by Croatia, which runs through Croatian territories in BiH, is managed by a company that is completely managed by Bosniaks. This led to a blockade of the gas pipeline development process.

The situation was further complicated by the former American ambassador Michael Murphy, who forced the representatives of all Bosniak parties, positions and the opposition, to override the Croatian ministers in the Government of the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina, then in the House of Representatives and the House of Peoples, and unilaterally impose the law on the Southern Gas Interconnection while completely ignoring the political will of the Croats (*Usvojen Zakon o Južnoj plinskoj interkonekciji*, 2025). This created additional tension and imposed a law that remained a dead letter on paper as a personal whim of the former ambassador, but without any effective useful function because it does not maintain the will and interest of all actors who should be involved in this project. It is therefore paradoxical that the former American

ambassador temporarily undermined the possibility of building a new gas pipeline that would further relieve BiH of Russian energy and geopolitical influence and trample on the will of its NATO ally Croatia, and completely humiliate the Croats in BiH. The Southern gas interconnection has become a first-class political issue, and from a joint Bosniak-Croat project under the blessing of the USA, an unresolved dispute has been left that has put a heavy burden on inter-national relations in BiH and has maintained an energy status quo that currently suits only Russia.

The passing of the law on the Southern Gas Interconnection and all subsequent processes have shown that the issue of energy security has become an extremely propulsive area of many asymmetric conflicts, which definitively includes various types of hybrid actions and threats. A Pandora's box of asymmetric actions³ in the public sphere was opened, which wanted to politically discredit the Croats as the smallest constituent peoples and portray them as pro-Russian actors, and Bosniaks as bearers of Euro-Atlantic values. The continuation of the paper brings an analysis of the media content that deals with the hybrid action that took place within the thematic discourse on the Southern Gas Interconnection.

Media and public in divided societies

The entire media policy of the European Union takes place in a highly pluralistic environment. Both large and medium-sized and small EU member states view

³ „These threats do not carry the danger of turning into a major conventional war of the countries of the developed world, but they represent an equal, if not greater, threat to national and international security” (Tatalović, 2008, p. 20).

production, distribution and consumption as a means of protecting European values, but also their own national ones. This is why media policies within the EU remain largely within the competence of the states. This was particularly advocated by the British while they were a member of the EU and their public broadcasting system, the BBC, which firmly advocates that „national, not European, public programs are best for maintaining standards“ (Rooke, 2011, p. 146).

In such a plural Europe, there are states that are not civic, composed of a single ethnic or linguistic group but of multiple segments.⁴ For example, Belgium, Switzerland, Spain, Luxembourg, North Macedonia, Moldova and Bosnia and Herzegovina. And just as the member states of the European Union want broadcasting and thus most of the media space to remain at the state level, and not at the level of the Union, so too do the different segments within complex states want to exercise their rights regarding media policies. While the old democracies in Western Europe have in most cases successfully responded to such challenges, in Eastern Europe there are discussions about whether certain segments should even be allowed the right to information in their mother tongue, the right to representation of personnel and program content that preserves the specificities of a particular segment.

Rooke (2011, p. 200) writes that „the media maintain the differences between the communities that make up the federal state“. Lijphart (1992, p. 124) places the media in a high position. And since the media are part of the cleavage in such states, there are also multiple publics.

⁴ Segment – a term used for different national, religious, linguistic, racial, ideological members in pluralistic states.

Publics are usually divided into segments. For example, in Belgium, the Walloon or Flemish public, or in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Croatian, Serbian and Bosniak public. Kasapović states that it is precisely because of the absence of a public sphere that it is difficult to talk about a functional democracy. „Bosnia and Herzegovina is an example of an ethnically divided society with segmented publics – Bosniak, Serbian and Croatian – which have different media, educational narratives and political goals“ (Kasapović, 2005, p. 31).

Media as a tool of Hybrid warfare in the context of the Southern gas interconnection

Hybrid warfare is characterized by the intensive use of information and disinformation, where in the post-truth era fake news and so-called alternative facts serve to manipulate public opinion, spread fear and polarize society. The consequence of the phenomenon of 'information disorder' is the increasingly frequent occurrence of fake news, although the manipulation of information has been going on for thousands of years, while the evolution of journalistic professionalism is a relatively new concept. (Ireton-Posseti, 2020, p. 17).

These campaigns target emotional perception, often mixing true and false claims to incite uncertainty and distrust towards strategic projects such as the Southern Gas Interconnection. „The expansion of the Internet has disrupted the economy of discourse (their production, accumulation and circulation) and undermined the place and status of the credibility of narratives (political, economic, scientific, religious), the division between true and false, reality and fiction“ (Salmon, 2011, p. 10).

One of the tools is source bias. The media often use the so-called opportune witnesses – experts or actors whose views synchronously follow editorial views and comments, thus creating the illusion of consensus (Kunczik and Zipfel, 2006, p. 146). Bourdieu assesses this as manipulation. „The most successful censorship consists in putting those people in the places where they speak who have only to say what they are expected to say or, even better, who have nothing to say. The titles by which they are addressed contribute to giving their statements authority“ (Bourdieu, 2000., p. 117).

The media shape and limit the public perception of topics through the selection and presentation of content. According to the agenda-setting theory, the public's focus is directed to topics that the media consider important, while framing additionally shapes the way these topics are interpreted through specific frameworks. Pariser (2011, p. 31) warns of the emergence of the 'filter bubble' phenomenon, where social network algorithms show users information that confirms their existing attitudes, creating information bubbles. Although this theory refers to social media, the information bubble actually occurs in traditional media as well. It is an old European and American media practice when it comes to the press, as well as television news channels, to know exactly which media are left- or right-oriented, their worldview or ideological stance, or globalization or sovereignty. This situation contributes to increased polarization and hinders the exchange of information, which is desirable in hybrid warfare strategies that rely on social divisions.

On the other hand, 'narrative warfare' refers to the deliberate construction and dissemination of certain

narratives that shape social perceptions, values and political decisions. This concept emphasizes that the conflict between actors is not only conducted in the physical or information field, but also at the level of control over the interpretation of reality. In the case of the Southern Gas Interconnection in BiH, different narratives about energy security, sovereignty and external influence serve as means to mobilize support or opposition to certain political options.

The above strategies are part of a broader repertoire of hybrid warfare as actors seek to shape not only public opinion but also political decisions, often using mass media, social networks and experts as channels for dissemination. When all these methods are sublimated, it is evident that bias appears in each. Bias can refer to any systematic preference for one point of view or a systematic preference for a particular set of interests.

For the analysis of media coverage of the Southern Gas Interconnection in BiH, McQuail's (1992) detailed division of bias according to the following dimensions is appropriate:

- News selection bias – the selection of topics to be covered while others are ignored. For example, media that systematically omit positive aspects of energy independence and EU integration.
- News treatment bias – the way in which news is presented, including sensationalism, emotionally charged expressions or concealment of key information.

- Formulation bias – linguistic and rhetorical manipulations that shape perceptions, such as stereotyping actors or negative labeling.
- Source bias – the selection of interlocutors and expertise, i.e. favoring opportunistic witnesses whose views confirm the dominant narrative, while marginalizing those with different opinions.
- Ideological orientation bias – the presence of a broader political and ideological framework that shapes all the previous dimensions and directs media discourse towards certain interests.

However, for the analysis of the topic of the Southern Gas Interconnection, biases that are particularly prominent in divided societies such as Bosnia and Herzegovina can be used. This applies in particular to ethnic bias (Vasilj-Bago, 2019, p. 135). This categorization allows for a precise analysis of media content in which hybrid warfare is reflected through media manipulation and propaganda.

Research methodology and results

The period in which the research was conducted is January, February and March 2024. The time span of the research is aligned with the intensity of the topic within the public space. The media analyzed are three Croatian-language media from the Mostar area: Večernji list, Hrvatski medijski servis, Dnevnik.ba, and three Bosnian-language media from the Sarajevo area: Dnevni Avaz, Klix.ba and Slobodna Bosna. Given that Serbian politics and media in Banja Luka occupy the position of an indifferent actor in the discussions around the Southern Gas Interconnection, mostly because they

remain strategically oriented towards the Russian energy direction, Serbian-language media in BiH will not be included in the content analysis. The unit of measurement is text. Text is understood to mean any independent journalistic unit in this case on an internet portal, regardless of its scope and form.

The analysis will be conducted according to McQuail's dimensions of bias: selective bias, news treatment, formulation, source selection and ideological orientation, which are additionally adapted to the specificities of the divided Bosnian and Herzegovinian society through the identification of ethnic bias. In this way, a deeper insight can be gained into how the media shape public perception of the project and reflect broader geopolitical processes.

The research will be conducted using the methodology of content analysis, which is one of the most commonly used research methods in the social sciences.

The variables used in the analysis are as follows:

- Selective bias – refers to the choice of topics and events that the media decides to present or ignore.
- News treatment – the way in which the news is presented – highlighting certain aspects, the ratio of positive and negative tones – e.g. discrediting the 'other side'.
- Formulation – the use of language and expressions that implicitly express a value judgment, e.g. portraying opposing views as irrational, threatening or submissive.
- Source choice – preferential use of certain sources that represent a one-way perspective.

- Ideological orientation – framing the news in accordance with a particular political or ideological agenda.
- Ethnic bias – the use of symbolic terms that arouse ethnic loyalty or fear (e.g. 'national threat', 'majorization'). Reflection of the political views of the dominant ethnic elite through media content.

News selection bias:

- Croatian media (Večernji list, HMS, Dnevnik.ba): emphasize the positive effects of the Southern Gas Interconnection on reducing dependence on Russia, regional security and the position of Croats in Bosnia and Herzegovina. Examples are the statements of Plenković and Čović, where the project is presented as a strategic interest of Croats and BiH as a whole.
- Bosniak media (Dnevni Avaz, Klix and Slobodna Bosna): more often emphasize political tensions and international disagreements (eg the US administration and Washington have reservations). They focus on the dangers of ethnic dominance through the new operator in Mostar, which emphasizes risk rather than energy security.

Bias in the treatment of news:

- Croatian sources: the news is presented affirmatively, with expressions such as 'great success', 'key interest', 'the most important project'.
- Bosniak sources: the treatment is often critical, includes warnings about 'chauvinism', 'ethnic

disagreements' (for example, the transmission of a New York Times article about Mostar as a 'bastion of Croatian chauvinism').

Bias in formulation:

- Croatian media: use rhetoric of stability, development and European future. Words such as 'the key role of Croats', 'European path', 'energy security' are often repeated.
- Bosniak media: present expressions with negative connotations ('chauvinistic bastion', 'arrogance', 'imposing conditions') that shape the perception of Croats as political opportunists.

Bias in sources:

- Croatian media: rely on statements by Plenković, Čović, Džeba, political leaders of the Croatian side. Expert sources (studies and analyses) are mentioned only as a support for transparency.
- Bosniak media: often use foreign sources (e.g. NYT) or Bosniak political actors, while Croatian political voices are presented as controversial or disputable.

Bias in ideological orientation:

- Croatian media: the framework is pro-European and pro-Western, with an emphasis on the Croatian national component in BiH.
- Bosniak media: emphasize civic, pro-Bosnian discourse, but with ideological distrust towards strengthening Croat political autonomy.

Specific biases in a divided society:

- Party bias: HDZ media (VL, HMS) emphasize Croat political interest; Bosniak media (DA, Klix) often in line with Trojka/SDA narrative.
- Ideological bias: seen in language choice, 'energy security' (Croatian), 'ethnic interest' (Bosniak).
- Ethnic bias: Croatian media link the project to Croats as 'key beneficiaries'; Bosniak media emphasize threat of domination.

Table 1: Bias in media discourse on the Southern Gas Interconnection

Media	Quote/Paraphrase	Type of bias (McQuail)	Specific bias
Večernji list (Croatian)	Plenković: 'Croats must play a key role in the Southern Interconnection'	Selective bias focus on Croatian interests	Party (HDZ) / Ethnic (Croat perspective)
Večernji list (Croatian)	The project is presented as 'the most important infrastructure energy project in FBiH'	News treatment, affirmative tone	Ethnic and party emphasis on Croat political role
HMS (Croatian)	Čović: 'We don't want anyone to close the gas pipeline from Sarajevo to Posušje tomorrow'	Formulation of dramatization and emotional framework	Ethnic, protection of Croat people
HMS (Croatian)	NYT article presented as evidence of 'American dissent', with criticism of Mostar as 'bastion of chauvinism'	Choice of sources, use of international sources for political purposes	Ethnic and ideological defense of Croatian narrative

Dnevni Avaz (Bosniak)	Mostar described as 'bastion of Croatian chauvinism' (NYT)	Formulation / Ideological orientation	Ideological and ethnic Bosniak perspective, emphasis on threat
Dnevni Avaz (Bosniak)	Project described as a potential source of 'ethnic discord'	Selective bias highlighting conflict	Ethnic and ideological focus on Bosniak interest
Klix (Bosniak)	Highlighting disagreements with the US administration over the project	News treatment focuses on conflict	Party pro-Bosnian actors (Trojka/SDA)
Klix (Bosniak)	Čović's demand for Croatian management of BH Gas portrayed as 'attempt at domination'	Formulation of negative labeling of actors	Ethnic and ideological emphasis on danger of Croat domination

Synthesis by dimensions of bias based on the table and analyzed articles

Bias in news selection:

- Croatian media (VL, HMS, Dnevnik.ba) selectively emphasize the economic and security benefits of the project, while ignoring potential ethnic tensions or international reservations.
- Bosniak media (Avaz, Klix and Slobodna Bosna) choose topics that emphasize the conflict, American reservations and potential ethnic dominance.

News selection shows a pattern of ethnic and partisan bias, with the same event being filtered through particular political and national interests.

Bias in news treatment:

- Croatian sources: affirmative tone, the project is described as 'most important' and 'crucial'.
- Bosniak sources: treatment is critical, with a focus on potential threats and ethnic disagreements.

News treatment reflects ideological orientations, pro-European, pro-Bosnian and pro-Russian.

Bias in formulation:

- Croatian media use positive terms ('security', 'key role').
- Bosniak media: use negative and emotionally charged terms ('chauvinism', 'domination').

Formulation is a tool for rhetorical manipulation of perception, where actors are portrayed as either legitimate protectors of the people or as threats to national interests.

Bias in sources:

- Croatian media refer to HDZ actors (Plenković, Čović) and EU sources.
- Bosniak media emphasize foreign sources (NYT, US administration) and pro-Bosnian politicians.

The choice of sources clearly shows party and ethnic bias, as each media gives voice to 'their own' and diminishes the legitimacy of others.

Bias in ideological orientation:

- Croatian framework: pro-European, pro-Western, energy security and strengthening the role of Croats.

- Bosniak framework: civic, pro-Bosnian, but with ideological skepticism towards strengthening Croatian autonomy.

The ideological framework shapes all other dimensions of bias and confirms the divided narrative in BiH. The bias diagram shows the intensity of bias (from 1 to 5) according to McQuail's dimensions for Croatian and Bosniak media.

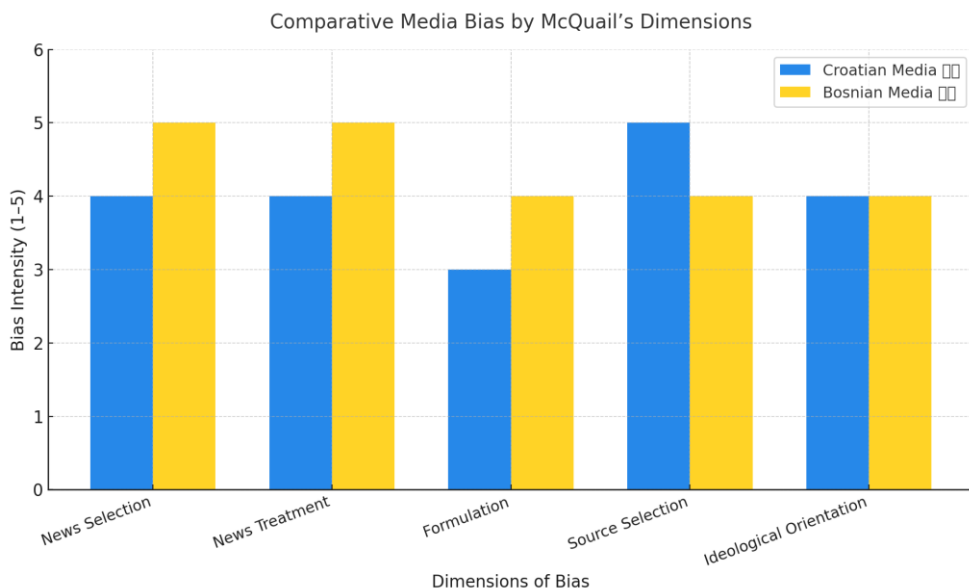


Figure 1. Comparative Media Bias

The diagram shows that Bosniak media (Dnevni Avaz, Klix.ba, Slobodna Bosna) show a higher degree of bias in the selection and treatment of news, with the content most often shaped through conflictual and emotionally colored discourse. Croatian media (Večernji list, HMS, Dnevnik.ba) show the highest level of bias in the selection of sources, since they rely predominantly on Croatian political representatives and institutions. The ideological orientation of both groups of media shows a

similar intensity, but a different direction: Croatian media tend to be pro-European and pro-Western, while Bosniak media more often take a defensive and suspicious stance towards international actors, especially when it comes to projects initiated by Croatian politics. This comparative analysis confirms that media bias in BiH has an ethno-political, and not exclusively professional, character, which further strengthens the argument about the role of the media in hybrid information operations.

Table 2: Treatment of major political actors in different media

Political actor	Croatian media	Bosniak media
Andrej Plenković	Positive: his role as 'guarantor of BiH's European perspective' and 'ally of the Croats' is emphasized.	Neutral to critical: they portray him as an external actor who 'helps Čović' and 'protects Croatian interests'.
Dragan Čović	Central figure: presented as an advocate of stability, energy independence and European integration.	Negative: accused of 'privatizing the project' and 'connecting with the Croatian HDZ for political profit'.
Milorad Dodik	He is mostly mentioned in the context of obstacles and pro-Russian influence; negative or neutral.	Critically depicted as a 'Russian man in Bosnia and Herzegovina', but not directly linked to the interconnection project.
American administration	They are presented as partners and guarantors of energy security.	They are often referred to as 'external pressure' and 'interference in the internal affairs of BiH'.
EU and international actors	Prominent as strategic partners of BiH and Croatia in the fight against energy dependence.	Presented as critics of local policies, with a dose of distrust towards their intentions.

Conclusion

The analysis of the media discourse on the Southern Gas Interconnection has shown that energy issues in Bosnia and Herzegovina cannot be viewed exclusively as technical or infrastructural, but primarily as political and ideological issues rooted in the national, political, media... divisions of three social segments. The media in BiH often act as an extended arm of political entities from their own segments, taking on the role of shaper of all three public opinions and spokespersons of national interests, thus confirming their function in hybrid operations.

The obtained results show that the media coverage of the Southern Gas Interconnection is not only informing the public about the infrastructure project, but also a form of political and ideological positioning. Through the analysis, it is observed how each media, depending on its ethno-political orientation, selectively chooses topics, sources and rhetorical frameworks, thus building a narrative that confirms the interests of its own political community. This pattern corresponds to the theoretical framework of hybrid warfare, in which the media become instruments of geopolitical competition and a means of shaping public perception. Energy interests and international pressures are thereby reflected in the internal media space of Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the global conflict between the West and Russia spills over into the form of local narratives and internal political disputes.

The research results showed two clearly differentiated narratives and a complete split between these publics

in BiH. Croatian media portray the project affirmatively, emphasizing its importance for BiH's European path, energy security and the position of Croats. Bosniak media emphasize potential risks and dangers of ethnic domination, using international sources to support their critical stance. The Serbian media narrative, due to its indifference and commitment to the status quo, i.e. continued dependence on Russian gas, is not a significant factor in the hybrid media conflict, and therefore has not been analyzed.

By applying McQuail's dimensions of bias and the additional categories of partisan, ethnic, and ideological bias, it was determined that:

- selective bias shows ethnic filters in the choice of topics,
- the treatment and formulation of news reveals the ideological coloring of the discourse,
- the choice of sources confirms party loyalty and the division of public space.

In the broader theoretical framework of NATO and the EU, these patterns can be placed in the domain of hybrid warfare, where energy and media function as tools of geopolitical competition. The Southern Gas Interconnection thus transcends local significance and becomes a mirror of the global struggle between the West and Russia, the reflections of which are transmitted to Bosnia and Herzegovina's political and media spaces.

This paper shows that the Southern Gas Interconnection issue cannot be understood without

taking into account the wider geopolitical context and internal ethno-political dynamics. Energy in BiH, through media narratives, turns into an instrument of hybrid conflict, and the analysis of the media discourse reveals how internal political actors simultaneously reflect and amplify global strategic interests. The analysis clearly shows that the Serbian community is firmly attached to Russia and its geopolitical influence, that the Bosniaks are formally pro-Western, but with strong ties to the Arab world, Iran and Turkey, and that the Croats are currently the only true advocates of the NATO and EU path and the integration of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

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