

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE WESTERN BALKAN AND GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL (GCC) STATES: AN INTERSUBJECTIVE AND SYSTEMIC DISCUSSION

BATI BALKAN VE KÖRFEZ İŞ BİRLİĞİ KONSEYİ (KİK) DEVLETLERİ ARASINDAKİ İLİŞKİ: ÖZNELERARASI VE SİSTEMİK BİR TARTIŞMA

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ABSTRACT

The study analyzes the relationship between the Western Balkan and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states by integrating Structural Realism with the concept of intersubjectivity. It explores how systemic structures influence interregional dynamics and how shared beliefs and cultural meanings interact within these constraints. Although economic engagements constitute the primary driver of GCC–Western Balkan relations, they are significantly shaped by the global systemic environment, limiting regional agency. The study reveals that efforts to promote intersubjective meanings - such as religion and cultural identity - have achieved only partial success, often constrained by the influence of dominant global powers like the United States. Attempts to project soft power through cultural and religious initiatives, including Wahhabism, have frequently deepened societal divisions. However, intersubjective meanings have fostered limited soft power dynamics and cultural exchanges. The findings emphasize that overlooking systemic constraints weakens the explanatory power of interregional analyses. The study argues for a dual-level theoretical model that integrates systemic and intersubjective approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of GCC–Western Balkan relations and proposes a conceptual framework for future interregional studies.

Keywords: Intersubjectivity and Structural Realism, Interregional Relations, International Institutions.


JEL Classification Codes: F50, F55, F53.

ÖZ

Bu çalışma, Batı Balkanlar ile Körfez İşbirliği Konseyi (GCC) ülkeleri arasındaki ilişkileri, Yapısal Realizm ile intersübjektivite kavramını bütünleştirerek analiz etmektedir. Sistemik yapılar ile bölgesel dinamikler arasındaki etkileşimi incelerken, ortak inançlar ve kültürel anlamların bu yapı içinde nasıl şekillendiği değerlendirilmektedir. GCC-Batı Balkan ilişkilerinin temelini ekonomik etkileşimler oluştursa da bu ilişkiler büyük ölçüde küresel sistemik yapılar tarafından belirlenmekte ve bölgesel aktörlerin özerkliği sınırlandırılmaktadır. Çalışma, din ve kültürel kimlik gibi intersübjektif anlamları teşvik etme çabalarının sınırlı başarı sağladığını, hatta çoğu zaman bölgesel uyumu artırmak yerine toplumsal ayrışmaları derinleştirdiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Özellikle Vahhabilik yoluyla yumuşak güç inşası girişimleri beklenen etkiyi yaratamamıştır. Buna rağmen, intersübjektif anlamlar sınırlı da olsa kültürel değişim ve yumuşak güç dinamiklerini desteklemiştir. Bulgular, sistemik kısıtların göz ardı edilmesinin açıklayıcılığı zayıflattığını göstermektedir. Bu bağlamda, çalışma GCC-Batı Balkan ilişkilerini anlamada sistemik ve intersübjektif analizleri bütünleştiren çift düzeyli bir kuramsal model önermekte ve gelecekteki bölge-dışı çalışmalar için kavramsal bir çerçeve sunmaktadır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Intersübjektivite ve Yapısal Realizm, Bölgelerarası İlişkiler, Uluslararası Kurumlar.

JEL Sınıflandırma Kodları: F50, F55, F53.

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EXTENDED SUMMARY

Purpose and Scope:

The study aims to examine the growing political, economic, and cultural interactions between the Western Balkans and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states through a multi-level theoretical perspective. Its primary objective is to examine how constraints imposed by the international systemic structure shape state behavior, and how intersubjective meanings produced at cultural and ideological levels interact and transform one another. Drawing on Waltz's Structural Realism, the study assumes that state behavior is conditioned by systemic-level influences, while simultaneously incorporating Wendt's Social Constructivism to emphasize the role of actors' identities, beliefs, and perceptions at the sub-systemic level. It investigates whether intersubjective elements - such as religion, identity, and ideology - enhance soft power capacity in interregional relations and to what extent they can reshape systemic constraints through the formation of historical blocs. Furthermore, the study evaluates the effectiveness of GCC states' strategic initiatives in the Western Balkans - including foreign investments, religious institutions, cultural programs, and educational activities - within the hegemonic influence of systemic actors such as the United States. In this context, it offers a theoretical and empirical framework to assess whether sustainable interregional cooperation can emerge at the intersection of systemic structures and cultural affinities.

Design/methodology/approach:

The study is grounded in qualitative research paradigms and adopts a multi-layered analytical approach integrating both inductive and deductive reasoning. The research first establishes a theoretical framework, followed by the analysis of sample-based data in light of these perspectives. Secondary sources are used as the primary data source; academic publications, government reports, documents from international organizations, and reports by think tanks are examined in detail. The analytical process draws on thematic analysis, textual analysis, and comparative case study methods. Intersubjective meanings are traced through shared religious and cultural norms, institutional interaction patterns, and public diplomacy initiatives, while the actors and discourses involved in their construction are systematically identified and analyzed. Conversely, systemic-level constraints are examined in terms of the distribution of power in the international system, the regional strategies of major powers, and the configuration of security architectures. The foreign policy instruments of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Kosovo are evaluated through a comparative case study approach; economic investments, religious activities, media collaborations, and cultural programs in these countries are analyzed in a multidimensional manner. Furthermore, the absence of direct data on the functioning of soft power is mitigated through the triangulation of diverse sources and systematic document-based comparisons. This methodological approach synthesizes Wendt's Social Constructivism, Cox's Critical Theory, and the system-centered analytical power of Structural Realism to analyze the interaction between global systemic pressures and local agency in a multi-level framework.

Findings:

The findings of the study reveal that systemic-level constraints play a decisive role in GCC–Western Balkan relations and that these relations are largely shaped by the power asymmetries predicted by Structural Realism. Despite significant investments in the fields of education, religion, and culture, these initiatives have proven insufficient in generating lasting regional integration. Religiously based soft power initiatives implemented in Muslim-majority countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo have yielded limited impact, primarily due to sectarian differences and societal resistance. The establishment of religious institutions grounded in Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi interpretation has often conflicted with local Islamic traditions and, in certain contexts, has undermined its cultural influence by exacerbating societal polarization. While economic investments have demonstrated the potential to generate political influence in the short term, they have not translated into long-term institutional transformation or durable security cooperation. Post-9/11 political pressures imposed by systemic-level actors, particularly the United States, resulted in the termination of numerous Saudi-backed NGOs, thereby constraining the GCC's capacity to pursue independent soft power initiatives. Interaction mechanisms established in fields such as education, media, tourism, and religious diplomacy have failed to translate into stable, trust-based regional integration. Consequently, intersubjective meanings have produced only limited effects, failing to give rise to structures such as regional identity formation or ideological bloc formation. These findings suggest that systemic power relations constrain the effectiveness of soft power, even in the presence of factors such as cultural proximity.

Conclusion and Discussion:

The findings demonstrate that intersubjective meanings serve as a significant explanatory factor in regional relations, yet their influence remains constrained by the limiting effects of systemic-level structures. Despite cultural proximity and shared beliefs, GCC–Western Balkan relations are structured and predominantly shaped by global power dynamics. In line with the assumptions of Structural Realism, state behavior is primarily determined by the anarchic structure of the international system and the distribution of capabilities at the systemic level. However, intersubjective meanings appear to function in the construction of perceptions and the generation of limited soft power effects. By proposing a theoretical model that integrates the analysis of these two levels, the study offers a conceptual basis for enhancing the effectiveness of local actors in cultural and ideological spheres. Future studies should explore the institutionalization of intersubjective meanings within the international system and assess the extent to which international organizations and regional frameworks can act as transformative agents in this process. In this way, the study contributes to a more comprehensive and systemic understanding of South–South and non-Western interregional relations.

GENİŞLETİLMİŞ ÖZET

Amaç ve Kapsam:

Bu çalışma, Batı Balkanlar ile Körfez İşbirliği Konseyi (KİK) ülkeleri arasında son yıllarda artan siyasi, ekonomik ve kültürel etkileşimleri, birden fazla düzeyi olan bir teorik perspektiften analiz etmeyi amaçlamaktadır. Araştırmanın temel amacı, uluslararası sistemik yapının kısıtlarının devletlerin eyleme biçimleri üzerindeki belirleyici etkisi ile kültürel ve ideolojik düzeyde üretilen intersübjektif anlamların nasıl bir araya geldiğini ve birbirlerini nasıl dönüştürdüğünü ortaya koymaktır. Bu bağlamda çalışma, Waltz'ın Yapısal Realizminden hareketle devletlerin sistemik seviyenin etkisi ile hareket ettiğini kabul ederken, aynı zamanda Wendt'in Sosyal İnşacılığını merkeze alarak aktörlerin kimlikleri, inançları ve algılarının da alt-sistemik seviyede etkili olduğunu savunmaktadır. Araştırma, din, kimlik ve ideoloji gibi intersübjektif öğelerin, bölgelerarası ilişkilerde yumuşak güç kapasitesini artırıp artırmadığını ve bu öğelerin tarihsel bloklar oluşturarak sistemik seviyenin kısıtlayıcı ve sınırlayıcı etkisinin ne ölçüde dönüştürebileceğini sorgulamaktadır. Ayrıca, ABD gibi sistemik seviyede eyleme kapasitesi geniş aktörlerin hegemonik etkisinin gölgesinde, KİK ülkelerinin Batı Balkanlara yönelik dış yatırımlar, dini kurumlar, kültürel programlar ve eğitim faaliyetleri yoluyla geliştirdiği stratejik girişimlerin işlevselliği değerlendirilmektedir. Bu doğrultuda çalışma, sistemik seviyedeki yapısal etkenler ile alt-sistemik seviyedeki kültürel yakınlıkların kesiştiği noktada, sürdürülebilir ve anlamlı bir bölgelerarası iş birliğinin mümkün olup olmadığını sorgulayan hem kuramsal hem de ampirik bir çerçevede sunmaktadır.

Yöntem:

Bu çalışma, nitel araştırma paradigmaları çerçevesinde tasarlanmış olup tümevarım ve tümdengelim yaklaşımlarını entegre eden çok katmanlı bir analiz yöntemi benimsemiştir. Araştırmada öncelikle kuramsal çerçeve belirlenmiş, ardından örnekleme dayalı veriler bu teoriler ışığında analiz edilmiştir. Veri kaynağı olarak ikincil kaynaklar kullanılmış; akademik yayınlar, hükümet raporları, uluslararası kuruluş belgeleri ve düşünce kuruluşu raporları detaylı şekilde incelenmiştir. Analiz sürecinde tematik analiz, metin analizi ve karşılaştırmalı vaka çalışması tekniklerinden yararlanılmıştır. Ortak dini ve kültürel normlar, kurumsal etkileşim biçimleri ve kamu diplomasisi girişimleri üzerinden intersübjektif anlamlar ortaya konmuş; bu anlamların inşasında rol oynayan aktörler ve söylemler belirlenmiştir. Öte yandan, sistemik seviyedeki kısıtlar uluslararası güç dağılımı, büyük güçlerin bölgesel politikaları ve güvenlik mimarileri üzerinden değerlendirilmiştir. Katar, Suudi Arabistan ve Birleşik Arap Emirlikleri'nin, Sırbistan, Bosna-Hersek ve Kosova'daki dış politikaları karşılaştırmalı vaka analizi yöntemiyle değerlendirilmiş; bu ülkelerdeki ekonomik yatırımlar, dini faaliyetler, medya iş birlikleri ve kültürel programlar çok boyutlu olarak analiz edilmiştir. Ayrıca, yumuşak gücün işleyişine dair doğrudan veri eksikliği, farklı kaynakların çapraz analizi ve belge temelli karşılaştırmalar yoluyla giderilmeye çalışılmıştır. Bu yönetsel yaklaşım, Wendt'in Sosyal İnşacılığı, Cox'un eleştirel kuramı ve yapısal realizmin sistem merkezli analitik gücüyle birlikte sentezlenerek, küresel sistemik baskılar ile yerel aktörlük arasındaki etkileşimi çok düzeyli biçimde çözümlemeyi hedeflemiştir.

Bulgular:

Çalışmanın bulguları, KİK-Batı Balkan ilişkilerinde sistemik seviyenin kısıtlayıcı ve sınırlandırıcı etkisinin belirleyici bir rol oynadığını ve bu ilişkinin büyük ölçüde yapısal realizmin öngördüğü güç asimetrisine dayandığını ortaya koymaktadır. Eğitim, din ve kültür alanlarında yapılan önemli yatırımlara rağmen, bu girişimler kalıcı bölgesel entegrasyon yaratmakta yetersiz kalmıştır. Özellikle Müslüman çoğunluklu Bosna-Hersek ve Kosova gibi ülkelerde yürütülen dini temelli yumuşak güç faaliyetlerinin, mezhepsel farklılıklar ve toplumsal direnç nedeniyle sınırlı etki yarattığı gözlemlenmiştir. Suudi Arabistan'ın Vahhabi anlayışına dayalı dini kurum inşası, yerel İslami geleneklerle çatışmış ve kimi durumlarda toplumsal kutuplaşmayı artırarak kültürel nüfuz kapasitesini zayıflatmıştır. Ekonomik yatırımların siyasi etki üretme potansiyeli ise kısa vadeli projelerde gözlemlenmiş; ancak bu yatırımlar uzun vadeli kurumsal değişim veya güvenlik iş birliklerine evrilememiştir. ABD gibi sistemik seviye aktörlerin 11 Eylül sonrası süreçte uyguladığı politik baskılar, birçok Suudi destekli STK'nın faaliyetlerinin sonlandırılmasına neden olmuş, böylece KİK'in bağımsız yumuşak güç projeleri sekteye uğramıştır. Eğitim, medya, turizm ve dini diplomasi gibi alanlarda oluşturulan etkileşim mekanizmaları ise bölgesel düzeyde istikrarlı, karşılıklı güvene dayalı bir bütünleşmeye dönüşmemiştir. Dolayısıyla intersübjektif anlamlar sınırlı ölçüde etki üretmiş; bölgesel kimlik oluşumu ya da ideolojik bloklaşma gibi yapılar ortaya çıkmamıştır. Bu bulgular, sistem düzeyinde belirleyici olan güç ilişkilerinin, kültürel yakınlık gibi faktörlere rağmen yumuşak gücün etkisini sınırladığını göstermektedir.

Sonuç ve Tartışma:

Elde edilen sonuçlar, intersübjektif anlamların bölgesel ilişkilerde önemli bir açıklayıcı rol oynadığını ancak bu anlamların sistemik seviyenin kısıtlayıcı ve sınırlayıcı etkisi karşısında sınırlı kaldığını ortaya koymaktadır. KİK-Batı Balkan ilişkileri, kültürel yakınlık ve ortak inançlara rağmen, küresel güç dengeleri tarafından biçimlendirilen ve çoğunlukla yönlendirilen bir yapıya sahiptir. Yapısal Realizmin öngördüğü şekilde, devletlerin davranışları büyük ölçüde uluslararası sistemik seviyenin anarşik doğası ve güç dağılımı tarafından şekillendirilmektedir. Bununla birlikte, intersübjektif anlamların algı üretimi ve sınırlı yumuşak güç etkisi yaratma bağlamında işlevsel olduğu gözlemlenmiştir. Çalışma, bu iki düzeyin birlikte analiz edilmesini sağlayan kuramsal bir model önererek, yerel aktörlerin kültürel ve ideolojik alanlarda nasıl daha etkin hale getirilebileceği üzerine düşünsel bir zemin sunmaktadır. Gelecek araştırmalarda, intersübjektif anlamların uluslararası sistemde nasıl kurumsallaştırılabileceği ve bu süreçte uluslararası kuruluşlar ile bölgesel çerçevelerin ne ölçüde dönüştürücü rol oynayabileceği incelenmelidir. Böylelikle, Güney-Güney ya da Batı dışı bölgelerarası ilişkilerin daha kapsamlı ve sistemik analizine katkı sağlanabilir.

1. INTRODUCTION

This study investigates whether systemic level analyses can explain the relationships between the Western Balkan and Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states through the concept of intersubjective meanings forming historical blocs. It also examines how individual-level dynamics may influence systemic-level relations, aiming to bridge these two analytical levels and provides a more comprehensive understanding of interregional political interactions. By integrating systemic and individual-state level analyses, this research offers a robust theoretical framework to analyze interregional political dynamics. The study is significant as it connects two theoretical levels while exploring the relationships between two regions that exhibit substantial socio-cultural, socio-political, and socio-economic differences. This article makes three original contributions to the literature on GCC engagement in the Western Balkans and on interregional relations more broadly. First, it advances a dual-level explanatory framework that integrates Structural Realism's systemic constraints with intersubjective meanings as mediating mechanisms, thereby moving beyond accounts that treat economic interdependence, identity politics, or soft power as standalone explanations. Second, it re-reads GCC–Western Balkan interactions as a structured outcome of global political relations—particularly in the post-9/11 environment—while specifying the conditions under which culturally framed initiatives (e.g., religious and educational networks) generate limited influence or produce unintended societal fragmentation. Third, by comparing the policy instruments of Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia, the study clarifies variation within “GCC influence” and identifies when economic investment, religious outreach, and cultural diplomacy converge or diverge in their political effects. In doing so, the article offers a conceptually transferable model for future interregional studies in other non-Western or South–South contexts. To address these issues, this study proposes the following key research questions: How do systemic and sub-systemic structures shape the relationships between Western Balkan and GCC states? Can intersubjective meanings, such as shared beliefs, and cultural values, form historical blocs that influence these relationships? How do economic and cultural interactions mediate the dynamics between systemic and individual-levels in this interregional context?

Based on these research questions, the study's first hypothesis is that the relations between Western Balkan and GCC states are primarily shaped by systemic-level constraints, while intersubjective meanings create opportunities for cooperative dynamics. The second hypothesis is that economic investments by GCC states in Western Balkan countries function as tools for political influence, contributing to the establishment of regional hegemony. The third hypothesis is that despite shared beliefs and cultural affinities, systemic-level factors -particularly the influence of global powers such as the US- constrain the independent development of alliances based on intersubjective meanings. The study adopts an inductive approach to explore whether intersubjective meanings can form historical blocs, complemented by a deductive analysis of systemic-level effects. In this study, intersubjective meanings are defined as shared beliefs, cultural norms, and ideological values, operationalized through economic, social, and political interactions. By combining systemic and individual-level analyses, the study introduces a distinctive dual-level framework, offering a unique perspective on the chosen case study.

The study employs a comprehensive research design that integrates multiple sources, including notable books, peer-reviewed academic articles, government and NGO reports, news sources, and publications from international organizations. A dual-method approach is utilized: an inductive analysis to identify intersubjective meanings and a deductive framework to evaluate systemic constraints imposed by dominant powers, such as the US. Intersubjective meanings -such as shared cultural norms and religious values- were operationalized through textual analysis of policy documents, theoretical studies, media reports. Systemic constraints were examined through case studies of regional economic and cultural relations. Thematic analysis was applied to identify recurring patterns of cultural and economic interactions between the regions, while comparative case studies were used to highlight variations in systemic constraints across different GCC and Western Balkan states. The study recognizes limitations, including the scarcity of primary data on informal cultural exchanges and potential biases in secondary sources. These challenges were addressed by triangulating data from multiple sources to ensure reliability and validity.

2. THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

The study adopts a comparative case-study design with purposive sampling. On the GCC side, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE are selected because they rank among the most active GCC actors in the Western Balkans, deploy distinct combinations of policy instruments—ranging from FDI-driven economic engagement to religious

outreach, cultural diplomacy, and media and educational initiatives—and allow for within-GCC variation to be examined rather than treating the GCC as a unitary actor. On the Western Balkan side, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Serbia are selected to capture meaningful variation in societal identity structures and external alignment patterns. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo constitute most-likely cases for the operation of intersubjective mechanisms due to their sizeable Muslim populations and post-conflict institutional environments, whereas Serbia represents a least-likely case in which engagement is expected to rely predominantly on material instruments such as foreign direct investment and state-level agreements. Data are drawn from secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic studies, policy documents, reports by international organizations and think tanks, and credible news sources. These materials are analyzed using a structured and focused comparative case-study design combined with thematic analysis. Inductive coding is employed to identify recurring intersubjective narratives—such as religion, identity, and cultural affinity—and their institutional carriers, while deductive analysis assesses how systemic constraints, including global power hierarchies, post-9/11 securitization dynamics, and external political pressures, condition the scope and effectiveness of GCC initiatives.

Methodological triangulation is employed to enhance empirical credibility by systematically cross-validating evidence drawn from multiple types of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed academic studies, policy documents, reports by international organizations and think tanks, and credible news sources. Patterns identified in one source category are compared against others to assess convergence and divergence in interpretations of GCC engagement. This form of qualitative triangulation strengthens the empirical foundation of the analysis while remaining consistent with the study’s theory-driven and interpretive research design. To enhance analytical clarity, the study operationalizes its hypotheses through qualitative indicators rather than statistical measures. Systemic constraints are examined through observable patterns such as the involvement of global powers (e.g., U.S. political pressure, post-9/11 securitization), alignment with Western-led institutional frameworks, and limitations imposed on GCC initiatives. Intersubjective influence is assessed through indicators including the presence and sustainability of religious institutions, cultural and educational programs, media initiatives, and societal reception of these activities. Economic influence is operationalized through the scope, sectoral focus, and continuity of GCC foreign direct investment and development assistance. These indicators allow for systematic comparison across cases while remaining consistent with the study’s qualitative and theory-driven design. To enhance analytical transparency, the qualitative indicators through which the hypotheses are operationalized are systematically summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Operationalization of Hypotheses and Analytical Indicators

Hypothesis	Core Concept	Qualitative Indicators
H1	Systemic constraints	U.S. political pressure, post-9/11 securitization, alignment with Western institutions, limits on autonomous GCC initiatives
H2	Economic influence	Scale and sectoral focus of FDI, continuity of investments, linkage between economic projects and political cooperation
H3	Intersubjective meanings	Religious institutions, cultural/educational programs, media initiatives, societal acceptance or resistance

The application of international political theories in research often generates significant debate, particularly regarding the choice of theory and its application at different analytical levels. Deciding which theory to use at which level of analysis presents notable challenges. Structural Realism, a theory designed to explain systemic-level relations, encounters difficulties when applied to bilateral state relations, especially in terms of falsifiability. Waltz (1996, p. 54-55) argues that the theories of international politics and foreign policy exhibit minimal explanatory overlap. In contrast, Elman (1996, p. 9) challenges Waltz’s perspective, suggesting that Neo-Realism functions as a collection of research programs and that Structural Realism can indeed be applied to foreign policy analysis. While Elman’s approach exposes certain tensions within Structural Realism, the evolution of “Neo-Realist Theories” as a research program represents a significant contribution to the field. This discussion underscores the idea that “Neo-Realisms” encompasses multiple theoretical approaches. Understanding the relationship between Realism and Neo-Realism thus remains a central issue in international political theory.

2.1. Structural Realism and “Neo-Realisms”

Theoretical debates in international politics are often highly contentious, underscoring the need to clarify what qualifies as a theory. Sutton and Staw (1995) argue that not all proposed perspectives meet the criteria of a theory, offering a critical lens for evaluation. They caution that the overly broad use of the term “theory” can lead to conceptual ambiguity, diminishing its significance (Sutton & Staw, 1995, p. 371). In the field of international politics, Waltz provides a clear framework for defining theoretical structures. His Theory of International Politics serves as the foundational text for “Neo-Realism” in international relations. However, subsequent works often lack detailed discussions about what constitutes a theory. Instead, many build on Waltz’s framework, particularly by expanding beyond the original “Neo-Realist” theory. This evolution has facilitated the emergence of multiple “Neo-Realisms” rather than a singular, unified “Neo-Realism.”

The plurality of “Neo-Realisms” enriches Structural Realism as a comprehensive research framework. While this study employs “Structural Realism” to analyze the relationship between structure and unit, the contributions of “Neo-Realisms” must also be considered to provide a more nuanced theoretical perspective. Waltz’s work is often categorized as defensive realism, primarily due to its insufficient focus on structural factors for explaining and defining coalitions. In contrast, Mearsheimer introduced offensive realism to the “Neo-Realist” framework in *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*. Mearsheimer (2001, p. 21) argues that great powers adopt aggressive strategies within the systemic structure of international politics to security maximization and ensure survival. Unlike the balance of power approach associated with status quo, offensive realism emphasizes the revisionist tendencies of great powers (Toft, 2005, p. 401). Mearsheimer’s perspective underscores the importance of regional hegemonic states and geography as a key variable. According to Mearsheimer (2001, p. 141), great powers pursue aggressive expansionist policies to achieve regional hegemony, as global hegemony is unattainable due to the constraints of the anarchic international system. This perspective, aligning with Waltz’s concept of anarchy, highlights how “Neo-Realisms” bridge regional and systemic levels of analysis.

Waltz’s theoretical framework, on the other hand, examines international conflict and anarchy through three levels of analysis: the individual, the state, and the structure shaped by states. He analyzes these dimensions across three core areas: human behavior in international conflict (2001, p. 16-41), the international conflict and international structure of states (2001, p. 80-123), and international conflict and international anarchy (2001, p. 159-186). By exploring these levels, Waltz provides a foundational lens for understanding the dynamics of international conflict and the interplay between units and systemic structures.

Research on the systemic implications of regional structures and relations has intensified since the dissolution of the USSR, often at the expense of earlier theoretical contributions. Schweller (1994, p. 72), through his “Neo-Classical Realism” framework, examined whether states align with weaker or stronger sides in conflicts, introducing these ideas in the mid-1990s. In later work, Schweller (1997, p. 927) argued that the critical issue is not merely balancing or bandwagoning but understanding the conditions under which states make these choices. These discussions suggest that a comprehensive “Realist Research Program” should integrate debates across Realism, Neo-Classical Realism, Defensive Realism, and Offensive Realism.

As previously noted, these frameworks often overlook the unit- and individual-level analyses emphasized by Waltz since 1954. Criticism that Waltz ignores individual and state-level dynamics are largely unfounded. Waltz (2010, p. 100) asserts that while state attributes may influence foreign policy, systemic structures constrain states, limiting the effectiveness of those attributes at the systemic level. Furthermore, Waltz (2010, p. 76) highlights those structural effects are shaped through socialization process, which create similarities in state attributes and behaviors. He illustrates this with the differing legislative and policy-making structures of the US and UK, which nevertheless experience similar constraints within the systemic structure of international politics (Waltz, 2010, p. 82-83). According to Waltz, foreign policy and international politics involve distinct areas of analysis, but domestic policy-making processes and the foreign policy-making processes are not disregarded.

The systemic structure of international politics is defined by an anarchic environment in which states are not obligated to obey one another (Waltz, 2010, p. 88). This foundational concept aligns Structural Realism with Neo-Classical Realism in their shared understanding of systemic dynamics. However, Neo-Classical Realism extends its analytical scope to include short-term crisis decision-making, foreign policy behavior, grand strategic adaptations, and even the evolution of the systemic structure of the international politics (Ripsman et al., 2016, p. 1). In contrast, the broad explanatory claims of Classical Realism often prove problematic due to their lack of specificity. Ultimately, the

Realist Research Program does not disregard the importance of individuals and states; instead, it prioritizes analyzing their influence within the context of systemic structures -a critical point of contention in international politics. Exploring intersubjectivity within the broader context of systemic structures highlights the intersection of constructivist, critical and realist perspectives in international relations.

2.2. Intersubjectivity as a Theoretical and Methodological Perspective

Cox and Wendt have both explored the concept of intersubjectivity, albeit from distinct perspectives, making it challenging to establish a unified framework for examination. Intersubjectivity represents the intersection between two approaches: one that aims to present a social theory of international politics and another that focuses on production relations. Although Waltz (2001) does not explicitly use the term intersubjectivity, his approach incorporates the analysis of individuals through factors such as education, social activities, cultural transmission, and economic practices. Adler (1997, p. 334) discusses these constructivist and realist approaches as part of an effort to find middle ground. According to Adler, Cox views constructivist theory as encompassing both critical and problem-solving dimensions, while Wendt interprets self-help as a socially constructed phenomenon. By employing a shared set of concepts, Adler seeks to bridge these theoretical perspectives and create a more integrated understanding.

Adler argues that case studies require the convergence of two theoretical perspectives on a shared conceptual foundation, particularly within the framework of intersubjectivity. The notion that self-help is a socially constructed concept holds significant theoretical relevance. Given that this concept primarily originates from Structural Realism, and that its critical dimension emerges as a rejection of this theory, it becomes apparent that structure and intersubjectivity can be analyzed through a holistic approach. Wendt (1999, p. 93) critiques international political theory for offering a superficial explanation of ideas, reducing them to power, interests and institutions. In contrast, the liberal epistemological approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of institutions within international politics. However, Waltz (2010, p. 97-98) emphasizes the pivotal role of ideological forms, conceived as attributes, in shaping system-wide concepts such as the distribution of capabilities. According to Waltz (2010, p. 76), these attributes emerge through process of socialization and social competition, with economic knowledge playing a critical role in this context.

An analysis of these definitions reveals notable parallels between Waltz's concept of attributes and the constructivist notion of intersubjectivity. This suggests that the Structural Realism shares conceptual commonalities with its "rival" ontological epistemological approaches. Furthermore, Waltz highlights the reciprocal interaction between states and the distribution of capabilities. In summary, attributes or intersubjective meanings contribute significantly to the definition structure. Within this structure, the positioning of states capacities -shaped by intersubjective meanings or attributes- is intrinsically linked to the distribution of capabilities. The relationship between intersubjectivity and the distribution of capabilities offers a bridge between Structural Realist, constructivist and Marxist analyses, emphasizing how social forces and state forms shape world orders.

Social constructivism recognizes the central role of the state in shaping political and social dynamics. Adler (1997, p. 323) characterizes social constructivism as a form of ontological realism, highlighting its commitment to understanding how social realities are constructed. Constructivism seeks to explain the emergence of national interests and the implementations of political understandings (Adler, 1997, p. 337). Addressing the interplay between structure and agent, Wendt (1999, p. 313) argues that this relationship, influenced by political culture, is fundamentally shaped by practices.

From a Marxist perspective, Cox (1981) examines the dynamics of interaction within social structures. The shift from constructivist focus on practices to a Marxist analysis introduces a materialist dimension, emphasizing how social structures interact with the distribution of capabilities and global production processes. In this vein, Cox (1981, p. 128) famously asserts that "theory is always for someone for some purpose," rejecting the notion of scientific objectivity in political science and framing it instead as a narrative endeavor. His approach challenges the neutrality of theoretical studies, emphasizing their embeddedness in specific social and political contexts. Furthermore, Cox's (1981, p. 138) exploration of intersubjectivity focuses on the social forces arising from production process, the forms of states shaped by state-society relations, and the dynamics of war and peace within the global order of states. According to Cox, these elements are interconnected through a cyclical relationship

between state forms, social forces, and world orders, creating a dynamic and evolving structure within the international system.

Waltz's *Man the State and War* examines the social interactions of the individuals, incorporating influence from both Liberal and Marxist traditions. Overlooking this work, as well as the concept of attributes outlined in the *Theory of International Politics*, a foundational text in Structural Realism, leads to significant interpretive gaps. Cox's Marxist perspective, on the other hand, frames intersubjectivity as central to the formation of social power and the construction of a world system, thereby advancing a structural discussion. Similarly, Wendt's effort to develop a social theory of international politics ultimately transitions into a structural analysis. Despite differing epistemological foundations, rival approaches share the goal of defining structure through comparable conceptual frameworks.

The primary divergence lies in how intersubjective meanings are evaluated in relation to the systemic structure of international politics. Structural Realism posits that intersubjective meanings function as attributes in state formation but argues that these effects should be excluded from the definition of states, as they are constrained and limited by systemic structure. In contrast, Cox and Wendt assert that states are shaped by intersubjective meanings and, through relationships they form, actively construct the structure of the international system. Unlike Structural Realism, their perspectives emphasize that this capacity for agency and power can also influence and reshape the systemic structure itself.

In his *Beyond Empire and Terror: Critical Reflections on the Political Economy of World Order* article, Cox (2004, p. 307-308) argues that theory should address contemporary global developments that challenge orthodox approaches. With this perspective, Cox departs from his 1981 stance, redefining his theoretical outlook with a more objective focus. Notably, Cox (2004, p. 308) identifies key global issues such as the collapse of the USSR, environmental crises, widening economic disparities, rising ethnic and cultural conflicts, increasing organized crime and terrorism, and growing skepticism toward authority as central to understanding contemporary world dynamics. At this juncture, power configurations are seen to emerge. While Critical Theory contends that such developments serve specific purposes or actors, addressing issues like the collapse of the USSR or the rise of terrorism and organized crime risks leading to explanatory frameworks that could veer into conspiracy theories.

Cox (2004, p. 314) replaces the term "world order" with "state system," asserting that the UN has become an instrument of the US power. His preference for "state system" over "world orders" underscores the systemic structural constraints that limit the scope of intersubjective meanings. The systemic structure constrains and limits the distribution of states' capabilities, irrespective of intersubjective meanings. This structure encompasses economic, military, religious and cultural interactions. State capacity, shaped by intersubjectivity, influences state behavior in international politics and is closely tied to the concept of self-help. While traditionally associated with Realism, Wendt reinterprets self-help as a socially constructed concept rather than one rooted in anarchic structure, though he struggles to entirely dissociate it from anarchic assumptions (Adler, 1997, p. 334). Within this context, the impact of intersubjectivity on systemic structure level can be analyzed through the lenses of self-help and distribution of capabilities. Consequently, the systemic framework of Structural Realism and the intersubjectivity emphasized by critical theories must converge to provide a comprehensive understanding of international politics.

The relevance of intersubjectivity to the chosen case study lies in its ability to bridge systemic-level constraints with local agency. This aligns with the study's first hypothesis, which posits that shared meanings and cultural norms can form historical blocs that influence systemic-level relations. Moreover, the application of intersubjectivity to GCC-Western Balkan states relations illustrates how shared beliefs, such as religion or cultural values, may foster economic and political alignments, thereby supporting second and third hypotheses. Ultimately, this study advocates for the convergence of Structural Realism and intersubjectivity as complementary frameworks for analyzing the dual dynamics of systemic structures and local agency. While Structural Realism provides a macro-level perspective on systemic constraints, intersubjectivity serves as a lens through which the mediating role of shared meanings and values in specific regional contexts can be understood.

Building on the theoretical perspectives of Structural Realism and intersubjectivity, the following section focuses on the specific case of the Western Balkan and GCC states. By analyzing the interplay between systemic structures and intersubjective meanings, this section examines how economic, cultural, and political interactions influence the relationships between these regions. This empirical investigation seeks to test the proposed hypotheses shedding light on the dual-level dynamics outlined in the theoretical framework.

3. WESTERN BALKAN AND GCC STATES RELATIONS

Discussions on alliance relations and regional hegemony within the Realist Research Program often overlook a critical question: can regional hegemony be adequately defined without considering the systemic structure? Moreover, can economic activities be ignored when evaluating hegemony primarily through the lens of military power? To address these questions, this study examines the intersubjective relations between the Western Balkan and GCC states. By analyzing the military, economic and social power structures of these two seemingly unrelated regions, the study provides an opportunity to test “Realist” theories through the framework of intersubjectivity. This approach aligns with Waltz’s systemic framework, which emphasize the role of structural constraints in shaping state behavior. Within this context, the GCC’s regional hegemony efforts can be interpreted as strategic attempts to navigate systemic pressures while leveraging intersubjective meanings to achieve political and economic objectives.

Examining intersubjective meanings, often considered outside the Realist Research program, is essential for understanding the dynamics of power and influence. Stephen Walt (1985, p. 9), in his theory of defensive realism within the balance of threat framework, identifies the sources of threat as aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability, and offensive intentions. Aggregate power defined as a state’s total power, encompasses population, industrial and military capacity and technological prowess (Walt, 1985, p. 9). Walt's concept of aggregate power closely parallels Waltz's definitions of attributes, as both theorists analyze power through components such as economic power, population power and geographical position. These components shed light on networks of production relations as well as processes socialization and intersubjectivity (Cox, 1987, p. 395).

Furthermore, Mearsheimer's emphasis on geographical position in achieving regional hegemony warrants further exploration. The application of Mearsheimer’s concept of regional hegemonies offers a valuable framework for assessing the GCC’s influence in the Western Balkans, where geography and systemic-level constraints play pivotal roles. This analysis underscores the importance integrating intersubjective meanings with Realist frameworks to better understand how power operates within and across regions.

3.1. Geographic Description Challenges

Mearsheimer emphasizes that geographical position is a key factor in the emergence of a regional hegemon. This raises an important question: Can geographical location function as an independent variable in the analysis political identity? It is difficult to argue that geographies of the Western Balkan and the GCC are devoid of political considerations. Both regions, politically contested since the early 20th century, carry significant political and historical implications. Formerly under Ottoman rule, the Western Balkans and the Arabian Peninsula, were shaped by political definitions imposed by great powers from the early 19th century through World War I.

The 21st-century emergence of the term “Western Balkans” exemplifies a politically motivated redefinition of Balkan geography (Arman & Cengiz, 2020, p. 128-129). The term, primarily encompassing the states of the Former Yugoslavia, was formalized through the Berlin Process as a response to counter the ideological influence of the Russian Federation and the People's Republic of China (Ginali, 2023, p. 112). Consequently, the broader concept of the Balkans underwent a politically driven transformation, resulting in the designation of the “Western Balkans,” a term whose geographical acceptance remains contested.

A similar issue of geographical redefinition arose with the conceptualization of the Middle East during the final years of the Ottoman Empire. Arab communities that broke away from the Ottoman Empire under British influence during World War I faced both internal and external conflicts in their processes of state formation. Davison (1960, p. 665) argues that while the concept of the Middle East gained prominence in American discourse during the Cold War, its precise definition has remained ambiguous. In 1957, US Secretary of State John Foster Dulles defined the Middle East as a region extending from Libya in the west to Pakistan in the east, Turkey in the north, and the Arabian Peninsula in the south (Davidson, 1960, p. 665). However, in a 1958 speech, President Eisenhower referred to the same area as the Near East, prompting questions from the press about the difference between the terms. The US State Department subsequently clarified that the two terms were interchangeable (Davidson, 1960, p. 665). This illustrates that the concept of the Middle East is inherently controversial, shaped largely by political concerns to align with the US strategic objectives.

Mearsheimer’s concept of geographical proximity, while highlighting its importance for regional hegemony, holds limited significance when considered in isolation. Instead, it must be contextualized with broader political

requirements and systemic constraints. This analysis underscores that systemic political definitions, such as those shaped by the Berlin Process, play an equally critical role in constructing regional power dynamics. The redefinition of the Western Balkans and the Middle East as politically motivated constructs highlights the intersubjective nature of geopolitical identities, reinforcing Cox’s argument on the production of intersubjective meanings within systemic structures. This dynamic invite further examination of the political relationships between the Western Balkan and GCC states.

3.2. Economic Relations of the Western Balkan and GCC States

The hypothesis posits that the strategic-political relations between GCC states and Western Hemisphere states, particularly the US, significantly influence the "Western Balkans". A political parallel can be drawn between the Berlin Process, which seeks to counter Russian and Chinese influence in the formerly socialist region, and the post-World War II Marshal Plan, which aimed to prevent Soviet expansion into Europe. This dynamic is also evident in the relationships between Western Hemisphere states, particularly the US, and GCC states. These interactions reflect the interplay between regional and global hegemony, where relationship-building often begins with economic initiatives and progressively extends into military structures.

This analysis highlights the influence of global hegemony on regional dynamics, emphasizing economic, military, social structures over mere geographical proximity. GCC’s economic engagements, particularly through Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), exemplify an effort to construct hegemonic influence via material capabilities. This approach aligns with Cox’s framework, which emphasizes the interaction of ideas, institutions, and material capabilities in shaping global and regional hegemonic dynamics.

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) stands out as a key actor in initiating economic investments in the Western Balkans, leveraging FDI to advance its security and foreign policy objectives in international politics (Barlett et al., 2017: 95). This strategy gained greater prominence following the ascendancy of Zayed al Nahyan to a position of significant influence in 2004 (Barlett et al., 2017, p. 95). In contrast, Saudi Arabia’s involvement in the region has historically focused on providing financial and logistical support, such as Bosnia during the 1992 war (Wither, 2016, p. 43). Qatar has also increased its investment activities in the Western Balkans, initially focusing on Bosnia but shifting toward Serbia as of 2008, similar to the UAE’s approach (Mandacı, 2018, p. 348-350). Qatar's foreign policy is framed as a strategy to establish political influence by offering economic support, employing the concept of “Smart Power” (Mandacı, 2018, p. 344).

The GCC states strategically use their economic capacities as political tools to influence the Western Balkans through FDI. However, explaining these actions solely through the concept of smart power is insufficient. Instead, these investments should be evaluated as contributions to a hegemonic approach that extends influence from one region to another. This perspective better explains the structure of international politics, where economic capacity is used as a tool to shape social structures through FDI. Such a model illustrates how economic influence can redefine power relations and support hegemonic ambitions on a global scale. While GCC states broadly rely on economic instruments to expand their influence in the Western Balkans, the intensity, configuration, and strategic purpose of these instruments vary significantly across GCC actors and target states.

Table 2. Patterns of GCC Economic and Political Engagement in the Western Balkans

GCC Actor	Primary Western Balkan Targets	Dominant Instruments	Nature of Engagement	Strategic Function
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Serbia, Albania	Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), infrastructure projects, arms trade	Predominantly material and state-to-state	Economic stabilization, strategic alignment, regional leverage
Saudi Arabia	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Serbia, Montenegro	Religious institutions, development aid, FDI, arms trade	Material combined with ideological outreach (Wahhabism)	Ideological influence constrained by systemic pressures
Qatar	Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia	FDI, media initiatives, cultural diplomacy, education	Mixed material and cultural engagement	Smart power-oriented influence with limited systemic autonomy

Investments by GCC states in Serbia began to intensify in 2012. Following a \$1 billion debt agreement in 2013, the UAE significantly increased its investments, particularly in Serbia’s private sector, which played a critical role

in averting the country's bankruptcy and addressing public deficits by 2016 (Ejdus, 2017, p. 54). Saudi Arabia also emerged as a key GCC actor in fostering high-level FDI relations with Serbia (Bonomi and Uvalic, 2020, p. 50). For example, Saudi Arabia's arms import from Serbia amounted to 2.12 million Euros in 2019 (Dopchie, 2022, p. 311). Similarly, Bosnia and Herzegovina attracted substantial Saudi investments. Saudi interest facilitated direct Sarajevo-Riyadh flights and spurred investments in shopping malls, particularly in Sarajevo, transforming the city into a preferred destination for Saudi holidaymakers (Dopchie, 2022, p. 311). Additionally, Saudi Arabia, alongside the UAE, secured a tender for the construction of highways in Albania as of 2012 (Bishku, 2013, p. 100). Notably, arms exports from the Western Balkan states to the GCC states, which were negligible before 2012, surged to 561 million Euros by 2016. (Ejdus, 2017, p. 54).

Saudi Arabia's aid to Kosovo began in April 1999 with a telethon campaign, raising \$45.5 million within five months, including a personal donation of \$5 million from then-King Fahd of Saudi Arabia (Volný, 2023, pp. 534-535). As of 2017, the Saudi Fund for Development provided a \$15 million loan for the construction of highways in Kosovo (Volný, 2023, p. 535). In Montenegro, Saudi Arabia's export volume amounted to \$846,000 in 2022, with \$444,000 of this figure derived from oil products (Saudi Arabia and Montenegro Trade, 2024). Conversely, Montenegro's exports to Saudi Arabia totaled \$359,000, of which \$328,000 consisted of bakery products (Saudi Arabia and Montenegro Trade, 2024).

As of 2023, Saudi Arabian investors plan to expand their investments in Montenegro, focusing on tourism, infrastructure and health sectors. Negotiations have also been underway to establish direct flights between Saudi Arabia and Montenegro to facilitate these economic initiatives (Saudi Arabia Ready for Deepening Economic Ties with Montenegro, 2024).

It is evident that the GCC states, particularly the UAE and Saudi Arabia, are the primary drivers of this relationship, with reciprocal actions from the Western Balkans remaining minimal. Under these conditions, it has been hypothesized that the GCC states -primarily the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Qatar- exercise a directional initiative aimed at enhancing the economic capacities of the Western Balkan States. From a Structural Realist perspective, these investments represent strategic adaptations to systemic constraints, enabling the GCC states to protect power beyond their immediate region while aligning with Waltz's emphasis on systemic socialization processes. Wahhabism, which permeates the socio-cultural fabric of the GCC states, emerges as a motivational value underpinning these efforts. While the GCC states are often argued to safeguard their socio-political structures through economic influence framed as soft power, this is better understood as a manifestation of intersubjective meanings within the broader context of systemic and regional dynamics.

3.3. Common Belief as Intersubjectivity

Cox defines a hegemonic group one that is preferred over a subordinate group, linking this dynamic to intersubjective meanings rooted in production relations (1987, p. 22-23). These intersubjective meanings, which emerge from production relations, simultaneously establish dominant-subordinate relationships. Cox (1981, p. 136-137) asserts that material capabilities, ideas and institutions interact to form a coherent structure. Furthermore, Cox seeks to analyze the contradictions and conflicts inherent in social structures through a diachronic perspective (Sinclair, 1996, p. 9). Similarly, Wendt (1992, p. 397) explicitly connects intersubjectivity to state security within an anarchic structure, arguing that the distribution of capabilities within this structure shapes state behavior. However, this realization depends on intersubjective understandings, shared expectations, and what Wendt terms the "distribution of knowledge" (1992, p. 397).

Despite differences in their definitions, both Cox and Wendt agree that intersubjectivity contributes to the emergence of a common structure. Wendt (1992, p. 399) asserts that institutionalization occurs through formal rules and norms, while socialization and motivation are rooted in collective knowledge. He further notes that group identities based on religion, culture, belief, and ethnicity often persist even after state formation (Wendt, 1999, p. 210). However, Wendt (1999, p. 357) critiques the limited unity among Arab states despite their shared identity structures. Similarly, Cox's framework suggests that achieving unity among Arab States is challenging within the context of production relations. These insights underscore the need to examine the influence of shared belief systems on GCC-Western Balkan relations through the lens of intersubjective meanings.

A significant portion of the population in the Western Balkan states identifies as Muslim, whereas, the GCC states have overwhelmingly Muslim-majority populations. Shared religious belief can therefore be considered a significant catalyst for relations between the two regions. However, this catalyst is particularly relevant for states

like Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and North Macedonia, where Muslims constitute a substantial proportion of the population. Differences in Islamic sects and interpretations of shared beliefs play a crucial role in shaping these dynamics. During the Ottoman Empire's long-term dominance in the Western Balkans, the Hanafi School of jurisprudence remained unchallenged until the Bosnian War (Ajzenhamer, 2013, p. 112).

The Bosnian War (1992-1995) fundamentally altered this dynamic, introducing Saudi-origin Wahhabism and Iranian-origin Shiism into the region (Koppa, 2021, p. 257). Since the 1990s, Saudi Arabia has actively promoted Wahhabism, exemplified by a \$30 million budget allocation for the construction of the King Fahd Madrasa in Bosnia (Wither, 2016, p. 46). Similarly, in Kosovo, over 100 religious institutions reportedly operated without the permission from the Kosovo administration after 1999 (Wither, 2016, p. 46). However, Wahhabi efforts to assert dominance often disrupted the existing Hanafi community, leading to periodic conflicts (Wither, 2016, p. 46). These conflicts underscore the limited acceptance of Wahhabism in the region, highlighting the complex interplay of shared beliefs and sectarian differences in shaping relations between the Western Balkans and GCC states.

The creation of a common denominator within intersubjective meanings extends beyond uniting individuals of the same faith; it necessitates shared sectarian understandings and lifestyles. To solidify this hegemony, various institutional structures have been established. Saudi Arabia founded the Saudi High Commission for Aid to Bosnia (HSC) to promote Wahhabism, while Iran supported the establishment of pro-Shia *Muslimanski Život* (Muslim Life) structures. The HSC was created under the leadership of Salman bin Abdulaziz, who later became the King of Saudi Arabia (Sritharan et al., 2023, p. 10). At the time, King Fahd articulated the Kingdom's objectives, declaring, "We in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia renew the determination to do our utmost to help these sister states recover their position in the (Islamic) nation," and allocated \$8 million to the HSC for this purpose (Sritharan et al., 2023, p. 10). The emphasis placed on the HSC by King Fahd and Salman bin Abdulaziz underscores Saudi Arabia's strategic efforts to establish a sphere of influence in the Western Balkans by leveraging shared religious beliefs.

Active Islamic Youth (AIY), one of the key organizations established by HSC, was founded after the Bosnian War. AIY reached its peak activity between 1999 and 2000, driven by the efforts of el-Mujaheed's Bosnian members in the post-war period, organizing weekly lectures, round table discussions, summer schools and youth camps (Karčić, 2022, p. 282). Other organizations, including the Muslim World League, Al Haramain Foundation, World Assembly of Muslim Youth, Saudi Arabian Red Crescent Society, Islamic Waqf Organization, Society for the Revival of Islamic Heritage, Muwafaq Foundation, Third World Relief Agency, and the Makkah Humanitarian Organization continued their activities after the Bosnian War. However, these organizations were shut down due to US pressure following the events of 9/11 (Karčić, 2022, p. 282). Meanwhile, *Muslimanski Život* (Muslim Life's) to spread Shiism provoked conflicts with Wahhabi representatives in the region and contributed to the emergence of volunteers supporting anti-Shia groups in Syria during the Civil War (Azinović & Jusić, 2015, p. 20). In the case of the European Union, a comparable pattern can be observed. Although EU discourse emphasizes multiculturalism, religious diversity, and freedom of religion, the extent to which these norms are institutionally and politically upheld varies across contexts (Yenigün, 2013, p. 126-127). Moreover, the applicability of the European Union's Western Balkans policy—formulated largely in response to human rights violations that emerged after the dissolution of Yugoslavia and grounded in a human-rights-based normative framework—remains open to debate (Köseoğlu, 2020, p.153). This situation demonstrates that, in addition to the US' post-9/11 policy stance, the EU's political discourse emphasizing human rights and freedom of religion has likewise remained constrained by systemic pressures, preventing these normative commitments from being fully translated into concrete policy action.

The Bosnia–Saudi Arabia relationship constitutes a particularly illustrative case for examining the interaction between economic engagement and intersubjective influence in the Western Balkans. As Mandacı (2018) demonstrates, Saudi involvement in Bosnia has combined financial assistance, investment initiatives, and religious outreach, positioning Bosnia and Herzegovina as a focal point of Saudi engagement in the region. However, the Bosnian case also reveals the limits of translating economic and religious instruments into sustained political influence. Domestic resistance, sectarian diversity within Islamic communities, and competing external pressures—most notably from the United States and European institutions—have constrained the long-term effectiveness of Saudi initiatives. This case therefore reinforces the article's core argument that intersubjective mechanisms may generate short-term influence but remain structurally bounded by systemic constraints.

These conditions complicate the evaluation of differing interpretations of common beliefs within the framework of intersubjective meanings. More significant than these conflicts are the ability of US, as the dominant actor in the systemic international political structure, to exert influence over Saudi Arabia, the leading actor in the sub-systemic structure. Although the actions of other GCC states are notable, Saudi Arabia's position as a regional hegemon reveals its inability to resist the demands of the systemic power. This is evident in Saudi Arabia's post-9/11 alignment with the US stance against Wahhabism, which undermined its own ideological policy.

It is essential to explore why intersubjective meanings failed to achieve their intended impact and why Saudi actors and Wahhabi in the Western Balkans could not unite under common beliefs to counteract US political influence. From a positive perspective on intersubjective meanings, shared values in international politics are expected to foster unity and provide guidance. However, the influence of systemic-level powers, particularly the US, has proven more effective in guiding international political dynamics than the unifying potential of common beliefs. The promotion of Wahhabism in the Western Balkans highlights the use of intersubjective meanings to create ideological alignments, aligning with Cox's argument that such meanings are critical to establishing of hegemonic structures. Nevertheless, systemic constraints imposed by dominant global powers, illustrate that intersubjective meanings are often subordinate to broader structural dynamics. This analysis supports Wendt's view that shared beliefs and cultural identities, while impactful at the sub-systemic level, are insufficient to counter systemic-level pressures shaping international politics. To fully understand why a strong mechanism like shared belief can be directed or undermined, the role of cultural interaction must also be assessed.

3.4. Cultural Interaction

Cultural interaction plays a pivotal role in transforming social structures, with education serving as its cornerstone. Waltz (2001, p. 52) argues that the foundation for engineering a peaceful society lies in educating the nations of the world. Within the framework of the first image, Waltz (2001, p. 17) examines the potential for achieving peace by altering human behavior and instincts through education, citing Beverly Nichols' assertion that a world dictator prioritizing education could swiftly eliminate war. Similarly, Wendt (1999, p. 141) highlights how the distribution of knowledge fosters a shared foundation in cultural encounters, identifying a direct correlation between shared knowledge and cultural cohesion. Cox (1987, p. 169-171) emphasizes that state-led educational initiatives aim to reinforce the established social order by investing in knowledge development. Keohane (2005, p. 123) introduces the concept of empathetic interdependence, suggesting that positive developments in one state can influence others within the interconnected international political economy.

Despite diverse theoretical perspectives agreeing on the critical role of education and cultural interaction in strengthening states, certain questions remain unanswered. Specifically, it is unclear whether cultural relations developed through educational activities consistently yield positive outcomes or how dominant actors in the systemic structure might respond when such activities emerge among sub-systemic actors. This section aims to address these questions, arguing that the cultural exchange and interaction between the two regions should prioritize areas such as Islamic cooperation, education, and youth programs. By focusing on these areas, it is proposed that an Islamic perspective may gain an interregional identity, fostering stronger ties between regions (Al Mughairi et al., 2019, p. 1178).

Cultural exchange programs and educational initiatives by GCC states can be interpreted as efforts to institutionalize intersubjective meanings, aligning with Wendt's perspective on the social construction of power in international politics. However, significant challenges to this perspective persist, with the "Greater Albania" debates serving as a notable example. The proposition that the "Greater Albania" conflict could be resolved through a the GCC-inspired model (Yenigün, 2009) rests on the concept of cultural partnership. Nonetheless it is important to acknowledge that the GCC itself faces significant internal conflicts, which remain unresolved.

Mass media plays a critical role in fostering cultural interaction. The absence of GCC-operated media outlets, apart from Qatar's Al Jazeera, in Bosnia and Herzegovina highlights a significant gap in using mass media to enhance cultural interaction in the Western Balkans (Latal, 2019, p. 43). According to some perspectives, the limited media presence in Bosnia and Herzegovina is due to covert activities between certain officials in the country and GCC investors (Latal, 2019, p. 43). Waltz's (2001, p. 69-70) views on the importance of mass media in creating supranational identities and enlightening the society are particularly relevant here, as media can shape social understanding and perception, both positively and negatively.

Additionally, the UAE's tourism related-activities in Bosnia and Herzegovina represent another factor contributing to cultural interaction and transformation. The influx of UAE tourists to Sarajevo and its surrounding areas has sparked local interest in learning Arabic, reflecting a limited but tangible cultural impact (Rrustemi, et al., 2019, p. 47). These activities illustrate how tourism, alongside media and education, can play a role in fostering cultural exchange and shaping intersubjective meanings between regions.

Saudi Arabia's cultural influence and transformative role in the Western Balkans surpass that of the UAE. The cultural impact of the Wahhabi doctrine has notably influenced dress styles and social behaviors in Kosovo (Rrustemi et al., 2019, p. 55). These trends, which intensified between 2010 and 2018, appear to have slowed in recent years due to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 reforms and increased US pressure on the kingdom. Saudi Arabia's efforts to promote cultural transformation through the Wahhabi lifestyle in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo have generated significant opposition. These opposing viewpoints, particularly among young people, have deepened societal divisions and created a potential environment for conflict (Rrustemi et al., 2019, p. 55-57). The emphasis on religious education as a medium for cultural interaction and transformation further exacerbates this potential for conflict.

Qatar's cultural transformation initiatives in the Western Balkans are perceived as a more moderate adaptation of Saudi Arabia's policies (Rrustemi et al., 2019, p. 68). In 2014, Qatar and Albania signed cultural cooperation agreements, partly reflecting the presence of Albanians residing in Qatar (Rrustemi et al., 2019, p. 69). Qatar has also contributed to the establishment of kindergartens, cultural centers, schools, libraries and museums in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Rrustemi et al., 2019, p. 69). Additionally, an agreement was reached to establish a North Macedonia branch of the Qatar News Agency. Notably, Qatar, in collaboration with Iran, established a publishing house reportedly targeting the Albanian elite (Rrustemi et al., 2019, p. 69). These initiatives demonstrate Qatar's active role in fostering cultural interaction and transformation in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Albania and Kosovo.

However, these policies have also facilitated cultural fractures and created potential environments for conflicts. US sensitivities in the post-9/11 period cast doubt on the sustainability of these initiatives. Qatar's collaboration with Iran, in particular, could complicate broader GCC intervention efforts in the cultural transformation of the Western Balkans and potentially reignite tensions within the GCC, reminiscent of the Qatar crisis. At the same time, EU enlargement initiatives toward the Western Balkans are structured around institutional integration. Despite persistent conflict-related challenges in the region, enlargement is often viewed as a means to promote regional security, manage irregular migration, and capitalize on the region's strategic geographical position (Canveren & Öztürk, 2018, p. 57). However, the European Union's enlargement efforts toward the Western Balkans—despite their supranational character—demonstrate that disputes may arise even within international institutions, as illustrated by Greece's non-recognition of Kosovo. Such disputes indicate that, rather than operating primarily through institutionalized consensus, states continue to act in accordance with their relative power capabilities (Gürsel, 2016, p. 25-26). The limited success of these initiatives highlights the constraints imposed by systemic structures, reinforcing Waltz's argument that state behavior is ultimately shaped by the distribution of capabilities in the anarchic international system. The systemic dominance of the US post-9/11 era further illustrates how cultural initiatives by sub-systemic actors, such as GCC states, are restricted by systemic-level dynamics.

4. CONCLUSION

Economic activities serve as the primary driver of interregional relations between GCC and Western Balkan States. The GCC's investment initiatives, particularly in the Western Balkans, have facilitated both regional and bilateral relations. These efforts stem from GCC states' pursuit of diversifying their oil-dependent economies and Western Balkans' need for external financing. While economic foundation of these relations has occasionally extended into security-related engagements, such interactions have largely been confined to arms sales, with minimal influence on broader bilateral and regional dynamics.

The findings partially support first hypothesis, as systemic constraints continue to dominate interregional dynamics, while intersubjective meanings have had limited success in fostering long-term cooperation. Despite shared beliefs, cultural affinities, and historical linkages, intersubjective meanings derived from production relations have failed to establish a cohesive social structure, contradicting the hypotheses of Cox and Wendt. These dynamics reaffirm Waltz's emphasis on the primacy of systemic structures in shaping state behavior, while

simultaneously underscoring the limitations of intersubjective frameworks in explaining sustained structural transformations.

The exportation of Wahhabism during and after the Bosnian and Kosovo wars highlights the interplay between economic activities and cultural transformation. While these initiatives reflect efforts to project intersubjective meanings, they failed to establish lasting unity within the region. Instead, they efforts often exacerbated divisions, as seen by in conflicts over sectarian interpretations and the influence of external actors. This limitation aligns with second hypothesis, demonstrating that the GCC's economic engagements, while serving as tools for political influence, are constrained by systemic factors. Furthermore, the third hypothesis is validated through the analysis of US systemic influence, which significantly curtails the GCC's independent initiatives in the Western Balkans. US' hegemonic role, particularly in the post-9/11 period, reshaped the GCC's regional strategies, limiting their capacity to independently project intersubjective meanings. This systemic dominance underscores the challenges faced by regional hegemony, as conceptualized by Mearsheimer, in operating independently from the influence of global powers.

While intersubjective meanings and cultural interactions were anticipated to foster shared identities, systemic-level constraints continue to serve as the primary determinants of interregional outcomes. As Structural Realism asserts, the anarchic international system imposes significant limitations on state agency, even when intersubjective meanings are strategically employed. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that intersubjective meanings have facilitated limited cultural and economic exchanges, suggesting their potential role in fostering soft power dynamics, albeit within a restricted scope.

Beyond its explanatory contributions, this study also carries important normative implications for understanding EU–GCC competition in the Western Balkans. While the European Union positions itself as a normative power emphasizing human rights, the rule of law, and freedom of belief, the findings indicate that these principles are frequently constrained by systemic pressures and geopolitical considerations. In contrast, GCC engagement—largely driven by economic investments and culturally framed initiatives—does not seek to replace EU normative frameworks but instead operates within the structural limits imposed by the global power relation. As a result, competition between the EU and the GCC does not unfold as a contest between rival normative orders, but rather as an asymmetrical interaction in which both actors' normative ambitions are selectively filtered through systemic constraints. This dynamic reveals a persistent gap between normative discourse and political practice and suggests that neither EU nor GCC initiatives can independently generate transformative regional outcomes without alignment with broader systemic conditions.

In summary, while economic relations play a pivotal role in interregional studies, overlooking systemic factors - particularly those emphasized by Structural Realism- diminishes the explanatory power of such analyses. Further research should aim to integrate systemic constraints with intersubjective dynamics to develop a more holistic understanding of interregional relations, as evidenced by the GCC-Western Balkan case.

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