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Antemurale Christianitatis *as a Realist Strategy: Serbia, Poland, and Croatia in the Ottoman Frontier*[*]

Antemurale Christianitatis jako strategia realistyczna:
Serbia, Polska i Chorwacja na pograniczu osmańskim

ABSTRACT

This article interrogates the historical narrative of *Antemurale Christianitatis* through the theoretical prism of classical realism in international relations. Focusing on Serbia, Croatia, and Poland during their encounters with Ottoman expansion, it contends that the rhetoric of Christian bulwark functioned less as a reflection of theological conviction than as a strategic device aimed at extracting security guarantees, military aid, and diplomatic recognition from external powers. Rather than viewing this discursive tradition as an expression of collective religious identity, the analysis demonstrates how frontier states instrumentalised it in pursuit of material interests and regime survival. By situating the *antemurale* motif within the logic of security maximisation and asymmetrical alliance formation, the article contributes to a reconceptualisation of historical mythmaking as a form of geopolitical rationality. The findings offer broader insight into the mechanisms through which weak states narrate existential threat in order to shape external patronage within hierarchically structured international systems.

Keywords: realism, frontier diplomacy, *Antemurale Christianitatis*, Ottoman Empire, strategic mythmaking

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INTRODUCTION

In medieval and early modern Europe, *Antemurale Christianitatis* arose first as a theological formulation, designating territories that served as buffers between Christian Europe and encroaching Islam [Kekez 2024; Srodecki 2024]. Popes, bishops, and Christian princes deployed the label of "the bulwark of Christianity" to mark regions which defended Christendom against Muslim Ottoman expansion. Over time the term evolved into a political myth: it moved beyond ecclesiastical pronouncements into diplomatic correspondence, court rhetoric, and national historiographies. Thus, the phrase transitioned from an explicitly religious label to a signifier of geopolitical role and identity among frontier states such as Croatia, Poland, and Serbia.

Most existing scholarship treats *Antemurale Christianitatis* in cultural, religious, or identity based terms. Studies have emphasized its meaning in national self conceptions, collective memory, and civilisational boundary making [Blažević 2021; Varezić 2022]. For example, scholars of Croatian political and cultural iconography examine how the myth persists in modern history textbooks and political speeches, evoking notions of Christian civilisation and resistance to the "Ottoman Muslim element" [Rajković, 2012]. Other work analyses how folk epic cycles in Serbia, such as those around Kosovo mythologies, embed narratives of martyrdom, faith, and moral duty [Greenawalt 2001]. Such readings foreground symbolic and cultural dimensions of the myth rather than its strategic utility.

Realism in international relations offers a contrasting framework in which states act as rational, purposeful actors in an anarchic international system [Lomia 2020; Kumar 2022]. States seek survival, security, and power, and use whatever means available (including ideological and symbolic means) to advance material interests and negotiate favourable alliances. Within realism, discourses of threat, boundary defence, and identity serve as tools for rational actors to shape external incentives, extract assistance, and establish legitimacy [Schmidt, Wight 2023; Mazurkiewicz 2024]. Interpretive work must therefore explore how frontier polities exploited the bulwark myth not merely to assert identity but to reshape the balance of power, secure external patronage, and manage their dependency on stronger Christian centres.

This paper argues that Serbia, Croatia, and Poland utilized the *Antemurale Christianitatis* identity primarily as a realist strategy: to attract military and diplomatic support, to maximise security in a hostile geopolitical environment, and to manipulate alliances with more powerful Christian polities in response to Ottoman threat. While religious identity and moral claims played visible roles, they functioned instrumentally. Frontier states deployed the bulwark label when external actors' self interests could be aligned with protecting Christendom; they modulated or moderated the rhetoric when material realities demanded compromise or even vassalage. This reinterpretation holds significance for our understanding of medieval and early modern political mythmaking. Treating *Antemurale Christianitatis* as geopolitical

rationality reframes notions of civilisational identity as part of strategic state behaviour. Such a lens also illuminates continuities into modern politics, where states contest external backing by framing themselves as protectors of existential values. Methodologically, the study proceeds through comparative case analysis of the cases of Serbia, Croatia, and Poland during the period of Ottoman expansion (c. 14th–17th centuries, see: Stiles, 1989; Lewis, 2002), the approach employs realism theorisation to interpret both discourse and action. The comparative dimension facilitates identifying common patterns of how frontier states balance identity, material threat, and alliances, while preserving agency within constrained choice.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK – REALISM AND RHETORICAL STATECRAFT

The conceptual scaffolding for this analysis rests on the foundational principles of classical realism in international relations theory, particularly its conception of power, survival, and alliance behavior in a competitive and anarchic international system. Emerging in the early twentieth century with antecedents in Thucydides, Hobbes, and Machiavelli, realism holds that states, as the primary actors in international politics, operate within a structure that lacks central authority and is therefore defined by self-help and permanent insecurity [Waltz 1979; Morgenthau et al, 1985]. Under these conditions, the imperative of survival compels states to seek not only the preservation of sovereignty but also the accumulation of power sufficient to deter or overcome external threats.

In realist thought, the distribution of capabilities, rather than the alignment of norms or values, governs the logic of alliance formation. States do not align on the basis of ideological affinity or moral commitment, but out of necessity, particularly in response to shifting threat environments [Walt 1987]. This logic is especially salient in the historical context of Ottoman expansion, where frontier states such as Serbia, Croatia, and Poland navigated existential pressures by aligning with external Christian powers not because of spiritual unity, but because such alignments could furnish the material means of defence. Hence, realism discounts any presumption of automatic solidarity based on shared identity, instead foregrounding the instrumental calculus that governs state behavior.

Within this frame, the role of ideology (including religious, civilizational, but also moral discourses) is understood not as a determinant of state action per se, but as a functional resource that can be mobilised to achieve strategic objectives. Far from being ends in themselves, ideological constructs are harnessed to legitimate policies, mobilise populations, or solicit support from external actors. In this sense, realism does not reject the existence of ideational variables; rather, it treats them as endogenous to strategic behavior, based on the works of Gustav Meibauer [2020] and distinctions given by Elias Götz [2021]; a perspective that informs this article's analysis of *Antemurale Christianitatis* as rhetorical statecraft.

The concept of rhetorical statecraft refers to the intentional deployment of narrative by political actors to influence the perceptions, expectations, or behavior of others within the international system. This may involve the articulation of normative claims, moral appeals, historical analogies, or civilizational identities, all oriented toward shaping the strategic environment in ways that favour the state's interests [Ringmar 1996; Krebs, Jackson 2007]. Particularly for weaker or peripheral states, which lack the hard power necessary to compel others, rhetorical statecraft becomes a vital mode of exerting influence. By framing themselves as defenders of universal values (such as Christianity, Europe, or civilisation itself) small states seek to inscribe their own security needs within the broader normative commitments of more powerful actors.

In the context of *Antemurale Christianitatis*, this takes the form of frontier states presenting themselves as the sacrificial shield of Christendom. This identity was not merely a reflection of internal self-image; it was a discursive strategy aimed at external audiences, namely, the Papacy, the Holy Roman Empire, Venice, and later the Habsburgs. In their diplomatic correspondence and petitions, such states sought to induce material assistance, military alliances, or political recognition by emphasizing their function as buffers against Ottoman incursion [Graf 2022; Muhaj 2022; Alenezi, Abdelfattah 2024; Kolçak 2024]. The objective was to transform a geopolitical liability (their location on the edge of a threatened civilisational domain) into diplomatic capital. Rhetorical appeals to shared religion or moral duty, then, become realist acts: they are calculated to alter the strategic calculus of potential patrons and thereby shift the balance of power in favour of the frontier state.

Although constructivist scholars have offered important correctives to the materialist assumptions of realism by highlighting the constitutive role of identity, norms, and discourse [Checkel 1998; Wendt 1999], the present analysis does not reject the validity of ideational factors. Rather, it situates them within the logic of survival, treating them as endogenous elements within the strategic behaviour of states. Whereas constructivism might emphasise how bulwark identity shapes national self-understanding and socialised expectations, a realist account focuses on the conditions under which such identity is mobilised externally and the strategic gains it is meant to achieve. Thus, while not antagonistic, the two frameworks yield different causal claims: the constructivist foregrounds identity formation, the realist foregrounds interest maximisation.

In other words, realism provides a robust framework for interpreting *Antemurale Christianitatis* as more than a symbolic or religious construct. It enables us to understand how frontier states in early modern Europe engaged in rhetorical statecraft as a means of navigating asymmetrical power structures. By deploying moral narratives, they sought to manipulate the interests of stronger states and thereby maximise their own security. This reading restores agency to peripheral actors, not as cultural relics of a civilisational frontier, but as rational strategists operating within a world of constraints.

SERBIA AND THE BALKAN CHRISTIAN BUFFER

In the late 14th and early 15th centuries, the Serbian polity occupied a liminal position between Christendom and the Ottoman frontier. The Serbian Empire under the Nemanjić dynasty had already begun to fragment following the death of Stefan Dušan in 1355, giving rise to competing regional lords whose loyalties to a central authority waned. After the decisive Ottoman victory at Maritsa in 1371, which shattered Serbian dominion in Macedonia, the way lay open for further Ottoman incursions toward Serbian heartlands [Sopov 2007]. This epoch of fragmentation rendered Serbia especially vulnerable; princes such as Lazar Hrebeljanović emerged in this milieu as focal points for both resistance and negotiation [Emmert 1991].

The Battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389 has since attained mythic proportions in Serbian historiography [Lugar, 2005]. Prince Lazar led a coalition of Serbian lords, together with aid from neighbouring Christian actors such as King Tvrtko of Bosnia, against Sultan Murad I. Although modern scholarship generally treats the outcome as a defeat for Serbia, contemporaneous reports were ambiguous, emphasising the death of Sultan Murad and framing Prince Lazar's death in martyr terms [Emmert 1991]. Oral epic poems, cultic encomiums (e.g. Danilo III's hagiographic writings, works of monastics such as Jefimija) emerged soon after, depicting Lazar's sacrifice as a sacrifice for the Christian cause. These texts contributed to Serbia's self image as a defender of Christian Europe, even while political power in the territory diminished [Emmert 1991; Kinđić 2024].

In parallel, Serbia attempted diplomatic appeals to Hungary, Venice, and the Papacy. Prince Lazar, and later Serbian despots, sought recognition and military support from Christian monarchs. For instance, in the period before Kosovo, Serbian rulers looked to Hungary as an ally; correspondence is extant of Serbian envoys negotiating with Hungarian powers, and sometimes seeking ecclesiastical sanction from Rome to bolster legitimacy [Fine 1994]. Although sources that literally invoke *Antemurale Christianitatis* in diplomatic letters are rare or non extant, the rhetorical pattern (defense of Christendom, appeals to Christian solidarity) clearly maps onto what later authors would describe as the bulwark motif. After Kosovo, Serbia's survival increasingly depended upon shifting alliances and occasional vassalage to the Ottomans when direct military confrontation proved untenable.

From a realist perspective, one sees that Serbia deployed Christian identity and religious rhetoric to position itself as a "bulwark" worthy of protection. Such positioning served two strategic aims. First, it attempted to elicit external military aid and political support from stronger Christian powers; second, it sought leverage – a way to negotiate status, autonomy, or favourable terms in peace treaties. Where possible, Serbian rulers used moral framing of duty to Christendom to amplify their strategic indispensability. But the record also shows pragmatic adaptation: when Western aid failed to materialize or when the cost of resistance became too high, Serbian leaders

accepted vassal status under Ottoman suzerainty, or negotiated terms that preserved autonomy in exchange for tribute [Barbir 2014].

Western support was inconsistent. Papal calls for crusade sometimes included Serbia within broader Christian appeals, yet the Papacy's material capacity or political willingness (especially in the fragmented Christendom of the period) often fell short [Housley 2012; Samchenko 2023]. Hungary's engagement fluctuated according to its own threat perceptions and internal politics [Bak et al. 2023]. Venice sometimes traded with Ottomans or negotiated local peace rather than commit fully to Serbian defense. The failure of reliable external backing reinforced Serbia's retreat toward a logic of survival. The opening gambit of moral appeal, of being "Christendom's shield", yielded insufficient returns. Realism suggests that when material interests of potential patrons (military cost, risk, resource allocation, strategy) diverge from those appeals, the weaker actor must recalibrate strategy.

The motif of *Antemurale Christianitatis* in Serbian national myth crystallized over subsequent centuries. The Battle of Kosovo was reinterpreted in later hagiographic and epic literatures not merely as a military defeat, but as a sacred sacrifice, the founding moment of Serbian identity, resisting Ottoman expansion at the cost of bodily ruin for spiritual and civilizational purpose [Emmert 1991]. During Ottoman rule, Serbian monastics and chroniclers preserved memories of resistance, martyrdom, moral steadfastness [Branković 2023]. In the 19th century, as nationalist movements spread across Europe, these myths were resurrected and reshaped: Serbian political leaders used them to frame claims to territorial and political legitimacy, and to solicit support from Orthodox Christian Russia and from Western European publics [Ramet 2005]. The myth thereby became an instrument of rhetorical statecraft, enabling Serbia to leverage its symbolic role as defender of Christian civilization in pursuit of external backing.

Serbia's diplomatic pragmatism likewise appears in episodes of vassalage. After Kosovo, Serbian despots occasionally submitted to Ottoman overlordship, paid tribute, or entered into treaties that limited their independence [Šuica 2008]. Such behaviour reflects survival realism: when direct confrontation fails, a weaker state seeks to preserve what it can, from autonomy via cultural integrity to whatever institutional structure remains, in exchange for acquiescence in overlordship. These episodes do not negate the bulwark rhetoric; rather they reveal that Serbia's identity as frontier defender was mobilized selectively, calibrated to threat level, external capacity, and internal political coherence.

Serbia's role during the late medieval and early Ottoman era offers a case in which the *antemurale* motif functioned strategically rather than purely ideologically. Christian identity underpinned claims to moral legitimacy; appeals to Christendom aimed at extracting assistance; alliances (when they existed) were forged under duress; and compromises (vassalage, treaties) emerged when survival demanded. The myth of being Christendom's bulwark lay not only in self image, but in the applied exigencies of foreign policy and diplomacy under deeply asymmetric power relations.

CROATIA – BORDERLAND STRATEGY AND HABSBURG *REALPOLITIK*

After the catastrophic defeat of Christendom at Mohács in 1526, the political and military terrain of southeastern Europe changed irreversibly [Andrusyak, Tovtyn 2023]. The Kingdom of Croatia, long in a personal union with Hungary, suddenly found its sovereign protector vulnerable [Gusarova 2024]. The Ottoman advance that followed Mohács stripped the Croatian borderlands of much of their defensive depth, intensifying the strategic exposure of its nobility and peasantry. In that moment, Croatian elites and Habsburg claimants both adopted a discourse in which Croatia served the bulwark of Christian Europe seeking to leverage moral obligation among the Christian West, particularly the Papacy and the Habsburg court, to secure aid, privileges, and institutional backing [Housley 2014]. That discourse did not arise in isolation but interacted with the practical exigencies of defence: fortification of frontier towns, mobilization of border militias, and formation of the Military Frontier (*Vojna Krajina*) as a semi-autonomous militarized zone under Habsburg imperial authority.

The label *Antemurale Christianitatis* entered royal and ecclesiastical rhetoric more visibly during the humanist period. Croatian humanists and envoys in Rome and Venice articulated Croatia's plight, emphasizing its role in halting Ottoman expansion into Central Europe. Tomaso Negri and others composed orations to this effect, combining appeals to Christian duty with concrete demands for military subsidies [Housley 2014]. Pope Leo X is reputed, in Croatian historical tradition, to have called Croatia the forefront of Christianity in 1519, a symbolic recognition which Croatian chroniclers and later nationalist historiographies have reiterated. Such recognition functioned not merely as flattery but as a claim to external patronage, legitimacy, and rights within Christendom's political order. The military and institutional responses followed. After Mohács, Croatia chose Habsburg allegiance; the 1527 election of Ferdinand I as king of Croatia and Hungary formalised this shift [see: Tracy 2015]. This alliance offered promise: Habsburgs had broader resources, more established military capacity, and political influence at the imperial and papal levels. For Croatia, alignment with the Habsburg monarchy promised both protection and leverage; tax, land, and privilege negotiations were conditioned on frontier service against the Ottomans. The Croatian nobility and institutions such as the Sabor (parliament) used their bulwark identity to demand concessions (territorial, judicial, fiscal) from the Habsburgs in exchange for defending frontier zones.

The formation of the Military Frontier represents a materialization of realist bulwark logic: a border region endowed with special legal status, populated by peoples (Serbs, Vlachs, refugees) granted land and freedoms in return for military service [Dronov 2020; Petrović, Bukvić 2022]. The frontier zone was directly administered by imperial war councils in Vienna rather than fully under Croatian civil authority, reflecting both imperial interest in securing the border and Croatia's limited capacity to do so alone. The frontier's legal arrangements (such as *Statuta Valachorum*)

codified the reciprocal obligations: military obligation in exchange for rights and tax privileges [Pöll 2013]. This structure embodies realist concerns: survival requires capability, and capability requires both coercion (military readiness) and incentive (privileges, autonomy).

Through realist reading, Croatia's use of Christian defense rhetoric can be seen in strategic terms. The bulwark narrative elevated Croatia's indispensability to the broader Christian West. It was not only moral appeal; it was bargaining leverage. Croatian elites understood that to compel Habsburg and papal commitment, they must frame their borderline (frontier) losses and risks as shared threats to all Christendom. The Ottomans were external enemies whose further expansion threatened Central Europe; hence Croatia's defence was posited as the defence of Europe itself. That argument sought to align material self-interest of external powers (e.g. Habsburgs needing buffer zones, Papacy concerned with securing Christendom) with Croatia's needs.

Yet this rhetoric coexisted with deep pragmatism. Croatia's frontier lords, Uskoks, local bans and captains, regularly made peace, negotiated truces, sometimes paid tribute where direct resistance was impossible. They defended strongholds such as Klis (1536–37) long after Mohács with only partial Habsburg support, relying on local resources and improvisation [Mandarić 2021]. In many cases, delays in Habsburg aid, or competing commitments (such as wars elsewhere or internal dynastic matters), forced frontier defenders to make do with what was locally possible. Thus the bulwark identity sometimes functioned as rhetorical insurance rather than guarantee.

Croatia's dual role emerges clearly: ideological frontier and imperial military asset. On one hand, it was the moral sentinel of Christendom; on the other, it was an instrument in Habsburg imperial strategy. As frontline lands, Croatia's border defenses reduced the burden on the core Habsburg territories. Fortifications, frontier militias and permanent soldiery in *Vojna Krajina* provided early warning, delaying Ottoman incursions and thereby preserving deeper imperial hinterlands. In return, Habsburgs granted certain privileges – military command rights, local autonomy in military and civil matters, exemption from certain taxes, legal recognition for frontier social structures – that acknowledged Croatia's special status. These concessions constituted strategic bargains [see: Lebow 2006; Lewis 2008]: Croatia secured what it could, the Habsburgs preserved buffer space and reduced its own exposure.

The realism reading thus reveals that *Antemurale Christianitatis* in Croatia was more than symbolic. It was woven into decisions about treaties, resource allocation, military logistics, settlement policies (settling border families and rewarding service), administrative reshaping of frontier governance, and frontier institutionalization. The rhetoric served to shape expectations of external actors, to generate where possible material support, and to discipline internal elites around frontier defense.

Croatian deployment of the bulwark motif after Mohács exemplifies realist strategy. Croatia's elite framed Christian civilization as under threat, thereby seeking to induce costly commitment from stronger powers even as they themselves bore disproportionate burdens of defense. The Military Frontier stands as an institutional

structure reflecting those demands in material form. Although Christian defence rhetoric often appears in public symbolic discourse, its operational value lay in enabling frontier Croatia to participate in a precarious alliance order, extract privileges, and sustain its survival in an era defined by Ottoman pressure and Habsburg *realpolitik*.

POLAND AS DEFENDER AND OPPORTUNIST

The Polish Lithuanian Commonwealth occupied a distinctive position in the Christian Muslim frontier narrative. Bordered by the Crimean Tatars (often Ottoman vassals) and periodically by Ottoman incursions through Moldavia and Wallachia, the Commonwealth's eastern and southeastern frontiers were a zone of both intermittent warfare and diplomatic negotiation [Chuchko 2022]. The idea of Poland as a *przedmurze chrześcijaństwa* has roots in Polish thought from the late medieval through early modern eras. Janusz Tazbir's essay "From Antemurale to Przedmurze" traces how Polish elites in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries increasingly made rhetorical claims about defending Christendom against Tatars and Turks [Tazbir 2017].

Poland's military engagements against Tatars and Ottomans furnished concrete expressions of frontier defence. Raids by Crimean Tatars onto Polish borderlands compelled repeated defensive campaigns. At the Battle of Khotyn in 1621, Polish Lithuanian forces under Jan Karol Chodkiewicz successfully held the line against Ottoman and Tatar coalition armies, forcing the Ottomans to agree to the Treaty of Khotyn. That victory became an important symbol in Polish discourse of the Commonwealth's duty and capacity to protect Christian Europe [Tazbir 2017]. Earlier, Polish kings like John I Albert conducted the Moldavian Campaign of 1497 1499, seeking both to curb Ottoman advance via Moldavia and to safeguard trade and frontier security [Pilat, Cristea 2017].

Rhetorically, Poland used *Antemurale* motifs in appeals to the Papacy and other Christian powers. Polish correspondence with Rome, humanist writings, and patriotic pamphlets invoke the image of Poland as buffer or rampart between Christendom and "barbarous" or "Turkish" foes [Tazbir 2017]. Humanist authors, and later pan European propagandists, praised the Commonwealth for its role in halting Muslim and Tatar incursions. These rhetorical claims often accompanied efforts to obtain subsidies, elevate status at European courts, or persuade other Christian monarchs to join coalitions.

From a realist perspective, Poland's behaviour shows selective engagement from the perspective of foreign policy [Sisco 1981; Art 1998]. The Commonwealth did not intervene in every Ottoman or Tatar threat beyond its borders. Intervention occurred when Polish interests (secure borders, trade routes, prestige, or dynastic influence) converged with the costs and possible gains. Conversely, when intervention promised great cost with little expected payoff, Polish rulers deferred or negotiated peace. For example, after the Khotyn victory, Poland did not press further into Ottoman territory

in directions that would provoke overextension; defensive treaties and embargos of aggression often followed rather than sustained deep campaigns [Tazbir 2017].

Material incentives underpinned Poland's bulwark rhetoric. Defensive wars enhanced its diplomatic capital; victory at Khotyn increased Poland's standing in Christian Europe, enabling more favourable treaties and raising its value as ally to Western powers and the Papacy. Trade was also a factor: Polish economic interests in Moldavia, the Black Sea region, and routes through the Ottoman vassal states meant that stability (or at least managed relations) brought tangible benefits. Religious positioning also mattered: as a Catholic realm, Poland derived ideological prestige in Christendom by framing itself as a defender of the faith; that prestige could translate into clerical support, papal favors, or foreign recognition [Tazbir 2017; Niemczyk-Wiśniewska 2019].

Polish Ottoman non aggression and occasional cooperation display *realpolitik* trumping ideological consistency. Poland and the Commonwealth often concluded peace treaties that left northern Moldavia or Podolia, or agreed to tribute or tolerated Ottoman suzerainty over certain vassal states to avoid overextending resources. Diplomatic envoys sometimes maneuvered to maintain favourable trade and to minimize frontier devastation [Wasiucionek 2021]. For example, in a number of diplomatic exchanges with the Porte, Polish envoys insisted on recognition of equal status and non subordination (even in ceremonial terms), which sometimes resulted in breakdowns of negotiations or in cautious peace rather than open warfare [Wasiucionek 2021].

Thus, the *Antemurale* rhetoric in Poland served both defensive identity and opportunistic statecraft: when threat was real and gains plausible, Poland assumed a leadership role in Christian defence; when risk or cost outweighed benefits, retreat, treaty, or selective non involvement prevailed. The mythic self image as bulwark of Christendom, sustained by battlefield successes and humanist and religious rhetoric, functioned as a tool in foreign policy, diplomacy, and alliance building rather than as a binding moral obligation per se. Poland's behaviour in the face of Ottoman threat illustrates realist logic: survival, selective alliances, material interest, and symbolic leverage combined to produce a frontier policy that was ambitious yet calculative.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS – REALIST PATTERNS ACROSS THE BULWARK STATES

Examining the foreign policy behaviour of Serbia, Croatia, and Poland through the prism of realism reveals a shared strategic logic behind their invocation of the *Antemurale Christianitatis* motif. Despite substantial differences in political structure, geopolitical position, and military capacity, these states developed analogous discursive and diplomatic strategies. In each case, the rhetorical self-presentation as the "bulwark of Christendom" was not simply an expression of identity or ideology; it was an instrument of geopolitical manoeuvre aimed at maximising survival, extracting support, and managing asymmetrical dependencies.

A core pattern emerges in the appeal to universal Christian identity as a diplomatic resource. The invocation of "Christendom" allowed these states to position their local security dilemmas as matters of civilisational significance. In realist terms, this represents an effort by peripheral or semi-peripheral actors to link their parochial threats to broader systemic concerns, thereby persuading stronger actors, be they papal, imperial, or monarchical, to internalise those threats as their own. This externalisation of local conflict into a supranational moral narrative was consistently employed across the three cases.

In Serbia's case, the appeal was made to the Papacy and to regional Christian monarchs, particularly Hungary and Venice, in the context of resisting Ottoman expansion after the fall of the Serbian Empire. This appeal was couched in Christian symbolic language, and in the construction of martyrdom narratives around Prince Lazar and the Battle of Kosovo [Emmert 1991; Zlatanov 2007]. However, the strategic payoff was limited; aid from Western Christendom was minimal, and Serbia was eventually forced to accept Ottoman suzerainty. The bulwark rhetoric persisted, but its instrumental value diminished in the face of material realities.

Croatia, by contrast, was able to more effectively translate its bulwark narrative into institutional integration. The post-1526 alliance with the Habsburgs allowed the Croatian elite to mobilise their strategic location as a bargaining chip. In exchange for loyalty and participation in frontier defence, Croatia secured legal and fiscal privileges, institutional protections, and relative autonomy within the Habsburg monarchy [Imbrišak 2022]. The creation of the Military Frontier codified this relationship: Croatia became a permanent military zone and a buffer for the Habsburgs, while maintaining its rhetorical claim as the shield of Christianity [Housley 2014]. The symbolic discourse of Christian sacrifice thus enabled material survival and partial empowerment within imperial structures.

Poland demonstrates the most ambiguous use of the *antemurale* identity. While the Commonwealth celebrated its role as Christian protector (especially after victories such as Khotyn in 1621; see: Okoń 2022; Paradowski 2023) its actual policies toward the Ottoman Empire and Tatar powers reveal a pattern of selective engagement. Poland entered into peace treaties, abstained from Balkan campaigns, and occasionally cooperated with Ottoman vassals when it served domestic or dynastic interests. The bulwark rhetoric was often deployed for prestige or diplomatic advantage rather than to justify sustained intervention [Tazbir 2017]. In realist terms, Poland used the identity flexibly: to consolidate its own status in Europe, to deter encroachment, and to legitimise its non-alignment when intervention was not viable.

This brings us to a second strategic pattern: geopolitical balancing between East and West. Serbia attempted to balance Ottoman suzerainty with appeals to the Latin Christian world. When Western support proved elusive, it made tactical peace with the Ottomans, often acting as vassal. Croatia, under Habsburg control, balanced loyalty to Vienna with local autonomy and negotiated privileges, using its frontier status as leverage. Poland navigated between the Papacy, the Habsburgs, and the

Ottomans, avoiding overcommitment and adapting its posture based on cost-benefit assessments.

In all three cases, identity and myth served instrumental functions. The antediluvian image of a Christian wall shielding Europe was a rhetorical device whose content was tailored to the audience instead of a simple static descriptor. Whether seeking financial subsidies from Rome, institutional protections from Vienna, or political prestige in pan-European courts, these states shaped their bulwark identity to suit external interlocutors. This flexibility underscores the third common pattern: the instrumentalisation of identity and mythology to maximise foreign alignment.

A fourth pattern concerns the conditional morality underpinning alliance choices. None of the three states demonstrated unwavering loyalty to a particular civilisational bloc. Alliances shifted when strategic calculus changed. Serbia's overtures to Christian powers yielded to pragmatic Ottoman vassalage. Croatia's loyalty to the Habsburgs remained contingent on material support and institutional recognition. Poland's position alternated between Christian leadership and calculated neutrality. In each instance, realism explains these shifts as responses to power differentials, threat environments, and material incentives rather than betrayals of ideological consistency. This pattern is usefully summarised in Table 1.

Table 1. Rhetoric, goals, and responses

State	Use of Bulwark Rhetoric	Realist Goal	External Response
Serbia	Diplomatic appeals to Christian powers during Ottoman expansion	Survival amid fragmentation and military weakness	Minimal Western aid; eventual Ottoman vassalage
Croatia	Papal and Habsburg alliance rhetoric; strong humanist discourse	Military protection, institutional autonomy	Strategic integration into Habsburg Military Frontier
Poland	Symbolic leadership; use of humanist and religious discourse	Power projection, prestige, regional autonomy	Mixed; fluctuating Papal/Habsburg support; diplomatic ambiguity

Source: Author's own study.

While the specific configurations differ, the underlying realist logic remains constant: all three states used moral discourse as a currency to purchase material support or political space. Appeals to Christian unity, existential threat, and civilisational defence were not expressions of metaphysical conviction; they were instruments of statecraft. When those appeals yielded results, they were retained and ritualised; when they failed, they were subordinated to the imperatives of survival.

Furthermore, the enduring presence of the *Antemurale Christianitatis* motif in national historiography, political culture, and diplomatic memory suggests that such strategic rhetoric can become sedimented over time. What begins as a calculated posture may become internalised in collective identity, producing feedback loops that shape future strategic behaviour. Yet from a realist standpoint, even this sedimentation

must be understood in terms of utility: a narrative that once helped secure alliances may continue to serve as a symbolic anchor for legitimacy, cohesion, or deterrence.

The comparative analysis underscores how the bulwark identity, often romanticised in nationalist or cultural terms, can be reinterpreted as a rational strategy employed by peripheral states in a hostile and asymmetrical international system. The *Antemurale Christianitatis* motif was less an expression of religious obligation than a form of rhetorical statecraft, deployed to recalibrate the incentives and actions of stronger powers. It reveals the agency of small states navigating empire, threat, and alliance, not through force alone, but through the calibrated use of discourse, identity, and myth in the pursuit of security and influence.

MODERN IMPLICATIONS AND LEGACY

The myth of *Antemurale Christianitatis* continues to exert influence in contemporary nationalism in Serbia, Croatia, and Poland, informing how political actors represent threats, borders, and identity. In Serbia, narratives about "defending Christian Europe" resurface in discourse surrounding migration crises, EU accession, and foreign policy, particularly among radical right parties and civil society that evoke historical memory of Ottoman encroachment as analogies for modern external pressures [Saggau 2019; Tepšić 2025]. Croatia similarly frames itself, especially since the Yugoslav Wars and more recently in debates about migration across the Balkan route, as a protector of European stability and values. Poland, facing migration influxes from the East and South, regularly appeals to its role in defending Europe's external borders, underscoring both its physical location and its civilisational self image.

In EU and NATO policy positioning the legacy of the *Antemurale* myth manifests in how small or peripheral states present themselves as indispensable guardians of the West's frontier [Lamoreaux, Galbreath 2008; Biziewski 2019]. Poland's rhetoric in recent decades has emphasised its frontline role in resisting perceived threats – from migration to Russian assertiveness – to justify military spending, border controls, and deeper integration with Western security structures [Lisiakiewicz 2018; Zaborowski 2019]. Croatia's participation in EU border security, its insistence on robust external asylum controls, and framing migration as a challenge to shared European values [see: Subotić 2024, and critical views: Župarić-Iljić, Gregurović 2020] reflect that small state striving to convert symbolic performance into political leverage.

Realist continuity appears in how these states invoke identity as a means of anchoring themselves to larger powers. By presenting themselves not merely as vulnerable but as essential to the security of Europe, they leverage moral and civilisational claims to attract diplomatic support, funding, or legitimacy. Such narratives operate when material threats (real or perceived) align with the interests of more powerful actors. The success of these strategies depends on whether external powers see utility in responding: the framing of migration or border security as shared threats can

shift burden, but only when larger states perceive stakes high enough to intervene. Otherwise, the discourse remains rhetoric.

Constructivist appropriations complicate this continuity. European Union values, human rights discourse, and civilisational identity have been taken up by political actors both to bolster inclusive narratives and to contest identity claims derived from *Antemurale* myth. For example, some Croatian and Polish parties critique the bulwark rhetoric as exclusionary, pointing instead to refugee rights, pluralism, and transnational European norms. The result is a contest between competing identity framings: one that draws on historical Christian civilisational boundary, the other that tries to re ground security and community in universal norms, legal order, and shared citizenship. Both discourses matter, and in some cases they overlap: political elites may mix bulwark imagery with EU normative frames to maximize domestic political advantage and external legitimacy.

Modern migration debates illustrate these tensions particularly clearly. When migration from Muslim majority or conflict affected regions increases, political actors in Croatia or Poland often use metaphorical boundary language: protecting Europe, upholding Christian civilization, preserving cultural identity; by and large, such discourses are frowned upon within the Academe [Konopka 2019; Mirocha 2019; Henning 2023]. Yet these same actors sometimes find themselves constrained by EU legal obligations, international human rights norms, or by trade and aid dependencies. In such moments the realist dimension reveals itself: rhetoric is calibrated so that identity claims align with the interests of Western partners (commonly: security co-operation, border funding, asylum burden sharing) rather than purely moral assertion.

The legacy of *Antemurale Christianitatis* endures as a rhetorical resource in modern nationalism, foreign policy, and identity politics. The myth serves as a bridge between historical memory and contemporary strategy, allowing small and frontier states to claim moral and strategic importance. While constructivist elements remind us that identity and norms are not static, the realist through line remains clear: identity myths such as *Antemurale* endure only insofar as they help states navigate a world of asymmetric power, attract support, and sustain their security and status in a contested international environment.

CONCLUSION

The narrative of *Antemurale Christianitatis*, when scrutinised via international relations theory, emerges not as a mere relic of Christian symbolism but as an active instrument of state strategy. Frontier states confronting Ottoman expansion such as Serbia, Croatia, and Poland employed the bulwark myth as a calculated mechanism to mobilise external support, enhance legitimacy, and secure their survival in a system where material security and alliance politics were paramount. Their invocations of Christian defence, rather than reflecting purely spiritual conviction, functioned as

tactical prompts addressed to the Papacy, imperial institutions, and powerful Christian monarchs who held the capacity to intervene.

Applying realist theory to historical narratives proves particularly fruitful because realism illuminates the conditions under which identity becomes useful. Realism's assumption of a self help international order forces us to ask: Who gains when a state frames itself as a front line defender? What external obligations does such a framing create? How do power asymmetries mediate the response? In these cases, the bulwark narrative aligned the existential threats faced by frontier states with the normative investments of external Christian powers. Yet, the responses varied according to external actors' own capacities, threat perceptions, and competing priorities.

The broader lesson this history teaches is that state survival often co opts ideology for geopolitical ends. Ideological or symbolic narratives may outlive their literal contexts, but their persistence depends on the extent to which they remain serviceable in aligning interests. For instance, in modern Serbia, nationalist and migration discourses draw upon imagery of defending Christian civilization to foster both internal cohesion and external legitimacy [Silaški, Đurović 2025]. In Poland, identity inflected security policy (especially since Russia's attack on Ukraine) has intertwined civilisational rhetoric with material calculations of military burden sharing and border defence [Szynowski 2025]. Across these instances, narrative functions less as an end in itself and more as a tool for managing asymmetrical power relations.

This continued legacy underscores realist continuity: small or peripheral states invoke identity not merely to signal difference, but to anchor themselves to stronger powers and shared norms, to gain moral leverage, and to shape the agendas of more powerful actors. While the terms, context, and audiences have changed, the underlying grammar of strategic mythmaking – turning vulnerability into moral urgency – remains present. Constructivist approaches highlight the normative and discursive complexities, showing how identity and myth are socially constructed, contested, and reinterpreted. Yet, realism clarifies that myths of defence are seldom innocently held: they are mobilised when survival or status is at stake, and scaled back when costs or risks overwhelm symbolic utility.

Looking ahead, further research might undertake systematic comparative studies with modern buffer states. Examples might include Georgia's self presentation relative to Russia, Turkey's role as a bridge and buffer between Europe and the Middle East, or Myanmar with respect to migration into Southeast Asia. Such comparisons can test whether the logic of bulwark mythmaking generalises beyond Christian Muslim historical lines.

The second direction is quantitative analysis: constructing datasets of diplomatic appeals, rhetorical references (in speeches, national strategies), military aid, treaty concessions, and border security expenditures to examine whether greater bulwark rhetoric corresponds to measurable gains. This method could help assess the efficacy of rhetorical statecraft as distinct from symbolic legitimacy, though it would require coordinated efforts by a research team.

Third, applying the framework to non Christian border identities would deepen understanding of how civilisational boundary narratives operate in different religious, cultural, and geopolitical contexts. For example, how Islamist border states frame themselves versus secular or Buddhist borderlands, or how indigenous border identities in Latin America interact with state power. These studies might reveal both structural similarities and important divergences.

The story of *Antemurale Christianitatis* reveals that identity myths are not static ornaments of history. They are tools forged in circumstances of threat and inequality, employed by frontier actors in pursuit of security, alliances, and legitimacy. Frontier states, by interpreting threats through civilisational frames, manage to make themselves strategically necessary. The bulwark myth thus stands not only as memory, but as strategy (continuously remade when useful) and its study offers insight into the tangled interplay between narrative, power, and survival in both past and present.

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ANTEMURALE CHRISTIANITATIS JAKO STRATEGIA REALISTYCZNA: SERBIA, POLSKA I CHORWACJA NA POGRANICZU OSMAŃSKIM

Streszczenie: Artykuł analizuje historyczną narrację *Antemurale Christianitatis* przez pryzmat teoretyczny klasycznego realizmu w stosunkach międzynarodowych. Koncentrując się na Serbii, Chorwacji i Polsce w okresie ich starć z ekspansją osmańską, autor dowodzi, że retoryka chrześcijańskiego bastionu funkcjonowała nie tyle jako odzwierciedlenie przekonań teologicznych, co jako narzędzie strategiczne, mające na celu uzyskanie gwarancji bezpieczeństwa, pomocy wojskowej i uznania dyplomatycznego od mocarstw zewnętrznych. Zamiast postrzegać tę tradycję dyskursywną jako wyraz zbiorowej tożsamości religijnej, analiza pokazuje, jak państwa graniczne wykorzystywały ją instrumentalnie w dążeniu do materialnych interesów i przetrwania reżimu. Sytuując motyw *antemurale* w logice maksymalizacji bezpieczeństwa i asymetrycznego tworzenia sojuszy, artykuł przyczynia się do rekonceptualizacji historycznego mitotwórstwa jako formy geopolitycznej racjonalności. Odkrycia te oferują szerszy wgląd w mechanizmy, za pomocą których słabe państwa opowiadają o egzystencjalnym zagrożeniu, aby kształtować zewnętrzny patronat w ramach hierarchicznie ustrukturyzowanych systemów międzynarodowych.

Słowa kluczowe: realizm, dyplomacja graniczna, *Antemurale Christianitatis*, Imperium Osmańskie, strategiczne tworzenie mitów

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