

## FROM ROME TO BELGRADE: THE ITALIAN SPIRIT IN SERBIAN LIFE



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### From Rome to Belgrade: the Italian Spirit in Serbian Life

**Abstract.** This paper explores the profound and multifaceted cultural and historical relationship between Serbia and Italy, spanning centuries of political, economic, and artistic exchange. Beginning with the Roman Empire's presence in the Balkans and continuing through medieval interactions and 19th-century national movements, the two nations have fostered a dynamic and mutually influential bond. We specifically analyze the enduring presence of Italian influence across various aspects of Serbian life, including diplomatic relations with particular emphasis on academic and linguistic cooperation. The study traces the main stages of the Italian language's integration into Serbia, highlighting the historical foundations of Italian studies within Serbian universities. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature and historical accounts, we demonstrate the significance of these cultural connections and their ongoing impact on strengthening bilateral ties and enriching the cultural landscape of Serbia.

**Keywords:** Italian culture, Serbian-Italian relations, Italian language, cultural exchange, academic cooperation, historical influence.

### De la Roma la Belgrad: spiritul italian în viața sârbească

**Rezumat.** Acest studiu explorează relația culturală și istorică profundă și complexă dintre Serbia și Italia, care se întinde pe mai multe secole de schimburi politice, economice și artistice. Începând cu prezența Imperiului Roman în Balcani și continuând prin interacțiunile medievale și mișcările naționale din secolul al XIX-lea, cele două națiuni au cultivat o legătură dinamică și reciproc influentă. Analizăm în mod special prezența durabilă a influenței italiene în diverse aspecte ale vieții sârbești, inclusiv relațiile diplomatice, cu un accent deosebit pe cooperarea academică și lingvistică. Studiul urmărește principalele etape ale integrării limbii italiene în Serbia, evidențiind fundamentele istorice ale studiilor italiene în cadrul universităților sârbești. Printr-o revizuire cuprinzătoare a literaturii existente și a relatărilor istorice, demonstrăm semnificația acestor conexiuni culturale și impactul lor continuu asupra consolidării relațiilor bilaterale și îmbogățirii peisajului cultural din Serbia.

**Cuvinte-cheie:** cultura italiană, relații sârbo-italiene, limba italiană, schimb cultural, cooperare academică, influență istorică.

**Introduction.** The enduring relationship between Italy and Serbia is deeply rooted in centuries of intertwined histories, shaped by a complex interplay of political alliances, economic exchanges, and profound cultural influences. From the legacy of the Roman Empire's presence in the Balkans to significant medieval interactions between Serbian rulers and influential Italian city-states like Venice and Naples, the two nations have consistently maintained a dynamic and multifaceted connection. During the 19th century, Italy's Risorgimento profoundly inspired Serbian national aspirations, fostering a period of mutual admiration and solidarity. While a detailed exploration of all historical and political dimensions influencing bilateral relations is beyond the scope of this paper, we aim to highlight key events that have fostered reciprocal ties between the Italian and Serbian peoples. Consequently, these interactions have significantly shaped the enduring presence and importance of Italian language and culture within Serbian society. This paper will demonstrate the significance of various cultural connections between Serbia and Italy, trace the main stages of the Italian language's presence in Serbia, and acknowledge the foundational development of Italian studies within a university context.

**Historical Cultural Nexus.** The foundations of strong cultural relations between Italy and Serbia are deeply embedded in historical interactions dating back to the medieval period. Records indicate that Serbian rulers engaged significantly with Italian city-states, including Venice and Naples, establishing diplomatic and commercial ties [1, p. 49; 2, p. 6]. This early engagement created a fertile ground for reciprocal cultural influences, which deepened particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century, as Serbian aspirations for national unification drew inspiration from the Italian Risorgimento. In its struggle to achieve national freedom, Serbia looked to the model of Italian unification, and during key turning points, relied on Italian support to reach its goal [3, p. 9].

Consular contacts had existed even earlier; in 1849, the Italian consul Marcello Cerutti arrived in Belgrade. He was a seasoned diplomat by the time he was appointed Sardinian Consul in Belgrade in 1849. His mission came at a politically charged moment, as the Kingdom of Sardinia sought influence in the Balkans amid rising tensions with Austria [4, p. 56-57]. He tried to sway Serbian newspapers to write favorably about Italian unification efforts, aligning with the broader Risorgimento movement. With the spirit of the Risorgimento guiding them, Italian politicians began deploying highly capable consuls to Serbia [5, p. 28]. This move ushered in a new phase of cooperative diplomatic relations between the modest Serbian principality and Italy, a relationship that blossomed both before and after Italy's own unification. As the 19th century drew to a close, a powerful shared conviction emerged: both countries viewed Austria as a major impediment to their growth and national unity [4a, p. 62]. This mutual understanding forged a stronger friendship between Italy and Serbia, prompting the establishment of a consulate in Belgrade, marked by the arrival of Francesco Astenga [6, p. 5]. Francesco Astenga had a good relationship with Serbian politicians. In order to explore all possible angles of cooperation with Serbia, he traveled through the country [4b, p. 57]. Although his diplomatic activities were often under suspicion by Count Cavour, after the signing of the armistice in Villafranca in 1859, consular activities with Serbia continued. As a result, Belgrade evolved into a significant focal point for Italian political interests during the first half of the 19th century.

Based on authoritative sources [Stipčević, Aleksić Pejković, Banjanin, in 7, p. 16], it can be concluded that the relationship between Italy and Serbia in the 19th and 20th centuries, up until World War I, left a significant mark on Serbian history, shaping the political relations between the two countries. Until the late 1860s, Italy and Serbia shared common political goals. As long as Italy pursued an anti-Austrian policy, it established strong political ties with Serbia. However, when Italy moved closer to

Austria-Hungary, its focus on Serbia weakened.

One more among many pieces of evidence of the strong Italian-Serbian relations is the document we are submitting:

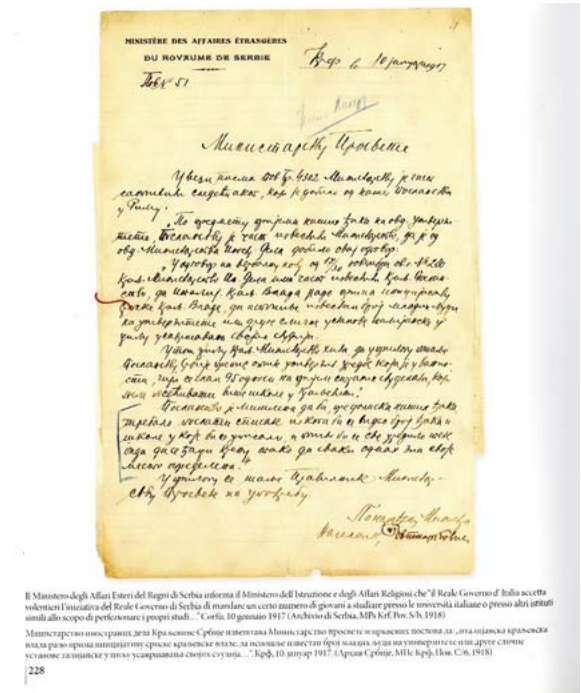
During World War I, when Serbia was in exile on Corfu, Italy proved to be a crucial ally, not only on the battlefield but also in supporting education and preserving intellectual potential. Documents like this letter from the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1917 vividly illustrate the depth and significance of diplomatic ties between Italy and Serbia, even during the most challenging periods of history. In essence, this document serves as a testament to a crucial diplomatic and educational endeavor by the Kingdom of Serbia during World War I, aimed at preserving and developing Serbian intellect with the support of its ally, Italy.

This document [8], titled “Pov. № 51,” is an official correspondence from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Serbia to the Ministry of Education of the Kingdom of Serbia, with reference to communication with the Serbian Legation in Rome. The document’s

date, January 10, 1917, and its location, Corfu (which served as the temporary capital of Serbia during World War I), are crucial for understanding its historical context. It concerns the Kingdom of Serbia’s initiative to send a certain number of young people to study in Italy. The document begins by informing the Ministry of Education about the positive response received from the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Italian response is overwhelmingly positive. The Italian government (“Royal Ministry of Foreign Affairs”) “gladly accepts and participates” in the Serbian government’s initiative to send “a certain number of young people” to Italian universities or similar institutions for “the purpose of perfecting their studies.”

Despite periods when relations between the two countries were not positive and lacked mutual interest, among Serbian intellectuals, understanding of the ideas that once brought Italy and Serbia together has almost always been, and still is, alive [5, p. 35].

**Italian Language and Educational Integration.** The Italian language has attained a significant and growing presence within the Serbian educational system. Universities across Serbia offer specialized programs for Italian language and literature, with Departments of Italian Studies consistently ranking among highly sought-after programs, indicative of a sustained and increasing interest in Italian culture. This academic integration is further bolstered by active promotion initiatives from Italy, including university collaborations and lecturer exchange programs that ensure a strong presence of Italian studies in foreign institutions. Furthermore, the Italian government supports Serbian students through various scholarship programs for study in Italy, reinforcing academic ties. A notable contemporary example of this integration is the Serbian-Italian bilingual department at the Third Belgrade Gymnasium, which actively enhances linguistic proficiency and cultural understanding among students. This robust educational framework not only fosters a new generation of Italian speakers but also strength-



Letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kingdom of Serbia to the Italian Government, 12 August 1917. Source: Diplomatic Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, Political Archive, Italy, 1917, f. 228.

ens cultural bridges and promotes deeper bilateral understanding. Such initiatives are vital for cultivating long-term diplomatic and economic partnerships between the two nations.

The presence of the Italian language in Serbian education is not a recent phenomenon but rather a gradual evolution deeply intertwined with historical, political, and cultural exchanges between the two nations. Early language learning would likely have occurred through private tutors, self-study, or within commercial circles, reflecting pragmatic needs rather than institutionalized curricula. The true institutionalization of Italian language teaching began in the early 20th century, particularly within higher education. Already in the period immediately following World War II, Italian was taught continuously, particularly at the university level. Soon after the war ended, school administrators taking inspiration from the Russian language policy of the time recognized the need to offer students a wider variety of foreign languages. In post war Yugoslavia, Russian was introduced as the primary foreign language, while English and French were offered as secondary options. Italian and German, on the other hand, carried negative connotations, as they were associated with the languages imposed by the occupying regime [9, p. 2].

A pivotal moment was the work of Bruno Gujon, an Italian who taught at the Higher School (later the University of Belgrade) from 1912 to 1914 [Klajn in 10, p. 476]. His efforts laid the groundwork for what would become formal Italian studies. Matija Ban is widely recognized as one of the earliest figures to promote the Italian language and literature in Belgrade. He delivered the first lectures on Italian literature at the Belgrade Lyceum. Initial efforts to integrate Italian into the school system, beginning in 1927, did not gain much traction with educational authorities. At the Belgrade School of Commerce, Italian was taught as a compulsory subject alongside German and French [11, p. 694].

The most significant milestone for academic Italian language education came in October 1930, with the establishment of a dedicated

department (then called a “Seminar”) for Italian language and literature at the University of Belgrade’s Faculty of Philosophy. Academician Stanko Škerlj delivered the inaugural lesson, marking the beginning of organized, university-level instruction in Italian philology. From its inception, the department embraced an international outlook, fostering connections with Italianists worldwide. The period following World War II saw the consolidation and growth of Italian studies. After the Faculty of Philology gained its independence from the Faculty of Philosophy in 1960/1961, the Italian “Seminar” became an autonomous Department of Italian Studies. This era was marked by the contributions of prominent scholars such as Prof. Eros Sequi, S. Turconi, M. Savić, and academicians Nikša Stipčević and Ivan Klajn, who shaped the curriculum and research directions [7a, p. 16-18]. The presence of native Italian lecturers (readers) has been a constant and vital element, ensuring authentic language instruction. The study program has consistently balanced language acquisition with in-depth literary analysis, alongside a strong emphasis on scientific research.

In recent decades, the demand for Italian language education has steadily increased. This is evident in the substantial enrollment numbers at the Department of Italian Studies in Belgrade, which today rivals some of the leading departments like English Studies in terms of student numbers. Beyond Belgrade, other universities in Serbia, such as those in Novi Sad and Kragujevac, have also developed strong Italian language programs. Furthermore, the introduction of bilingual Serbian-Italian departments in secondary education, such as the one at the Third Belgrade Gymnasium, signifies a commitment to cultivating high-level proficiency from an earlier age. This expansion reflects Italy’s significant economic presence in Serbia, the cultural appeal of Italy, and the increasing opportunities for Serbians who possess Italian language skills in various professional fields. The historical journey of Italian language teaching in Serbia, therefore, mirrors the deepening and broadening of bilateral ties over more than a century.



**Italian Language Education in Serbian Public Schools.** In 2000, Serbia embarked on a major overhaul of its public education system, with foreign language instruction taking center stage. That year, the Ministry of Education and Sport initiated a comprehensive curriculum reform aimed at modernizing the country's educational framework and aligning it with contemporary European standards. A key element of the reform was the enhancement of foreign language programs, shaped by the principles of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) established by the Council of Europe in 2001. This framework offered a unified approach to language learning, teaching, and assessment across Europe.

Amid these sweeping changes, Italian alongside Spanish was officially added in 2001 to the list of foreign languages taught in Serbian public schools. Previously limited to English, German, Russian, and French, the inclusion of Italian greatly expanded linguistic opportunities and catered to the growing interest from students and their families. This rise in interest occurred against the backdrop of increasingly strong cultural and economic relations between Serbia and Italy, making Italian not only an appealing option but also a practical and strategic choice for younger generations in Serbia [12, p. 112].

**Artistic and Cultural Institutional Presence.** Italy actively promotes its cultural heritage in Serbia through dedicated institutions and collaborative projects. The Italian Institute of Culture in Belgrade serves as a primary hub for cultural exchange, regularly hosting artistic exhibitions, concerts, and literary events. This institution facilitates direct collaboration between Serbian and Italian artists and musicians, fostering a dynamic exchange of creative ideas. Beyond this, the presence of Italian museums, libraries, and cultural centers within Serbia enhances public accessibility to Italian heritage. Cultural events, such as Italian cultural weeks in Serbia and Serbian cultural showcases in Italy, serve as ongoing platforms for strengthening bilateral ties and celebrating shared artistic

expressions. Italian language courses offered throughout Serbia also play a key role in fostering cultural appreciation and linguistic connection. Joint educational programs between universities in both countries encourage academic collaboration and student exchange. Italian culinary festivals organized across Serbian cities introduce the public to regional Italian cuisine, enriching the cultural experience. Collaborative film screenings and theater productions further promote artistic diversity and mutual understanding. Altogether, these efforts weave a rich tapestry of cultural diplomacy that continues to deepen mutual respect and admiration between Italy and Serbia.

**Cinematic and Literary Impact.** Italian cinema and literature have consistently exerted a profound impact on Serbian audiences. Classic Italian films and contemporary productions are regularly featured at Serbian film festivals, celebrating Italy's rich cinematic legacy. Concurrently, Serbian publishers frequently translate and distribute Italian literary works, often supported by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, thereby ensuring a continuous exchange of narrative traditions and philosophical ideas between the two nations. Many Serbian cinephiles and scholars study the works of Italian directors such as Federico Fellini, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Paolo Sorrentino, whose artistic vision has influenced local filmmakers. Workshops and retrospectives dedicated to Italian film are frequently organized by cultural institutions, providing Serbian audiences with deeper insights into Italy's cinematic techniques and storytelling traditions. Italian literary figures like Umberto Eco and Elena Ferrante enjoy widespread readership in Serbia, with several of their works included in university curricula.

Collaborative book fairs and literary events often feature guest appearances by Italian authors, creating opportunities for direct dialogue and mutual enrichment. Serbian libraries and cultural centers curate collections of Italian literature, offering readers a gateway to explore historical and contemporary themes in Italian

writing. Film co-productions between the two countries have also gained momentum, showcasing stories that reflect shared experiences and diverse perspectives. This ongoing engagement through the arts contributes not only to cultural understanding but also to intellectual synergy that spans generations. As Italy and Serbia continue to invest in these creative collaborations, the resonance of Italian cinema and literature within the Serbian cultural landscape remains vibrant and enduring.

**Broader Diplomatic and Scientific Cooperation.** Beyond direct artistic and academic exchanges, Italy and Serbia maintain robust economic and diplomatic relations where cultural diplomacy plays a critical role in fostering mutual understanding. This broader cooperation also extends to scientific and technological collaborations, with both countries partnering on initiatives in applied technology and advanced manufacturing systems. This synergy has led to joint research centers and academic exchange programs that further strengthen institutional ties. Italian companies have invested in Serbian infrastructure, energy, and automotive sectors, contributing to regional development and job creation. In turn, Serbian exports to Italy have steadily increased, reflecting deepening economic interdependence. Bilateral forums and conferences regularly bring together experts and policymakers to shape shared strategies for innovation and sustainable growth. Ultimately, this partnership not only reinforces stability in the Balkans but also exemplifies how cultural and economic diplomacy can complement each other.

**Significance of Cultural Exchange.** The vibrancy of the Italian-Serbian cultural relationship exemplifies the broader importance of cultural exchange between nations. Such exchanges are critical for societies as they foster mutual understanding, enrich diverse perspectives, and strengthen global connections. By facilitating direct exposure to different traditions, art forms, and philosophies, cultural exchange

inherently encourages mutual respect, thereby reducing stereotypes and prejudice. This cross-cultural dialogue also serves as a potent catalyst for innovation and creativity, inspiring novel ideas across various fields. Furthermore, cultural diplomacy is a cornerstone of robust international relations, building bridges that can facilitate cooperation in areas spanning trade, politics, and education. It also plays a vital role in preserving and revitalizing unique cultural heritages while simultaneously introducing new influences, thereby enhancing the overall educational landscape by improving linguistic proficiency and global awareness.

**Challenges in Sustaining Cultural Exchange.** Despite the evident benefits, sustaining vibrant cultural exchange faces several inherent challenges, many of which are relevant to the Italian-Serbian context. Language barriers can impede deep interactions, limiting comprehensive cultural understanding. Stereotypes and misconceptions, if not actively addressed through educational initiatives, can hinder genuine cross-cultural engagement. Logistical issues, including securing adequate funding, establishing proper infrastructure, and navigating visa policies, often pose practical hurdles for organizing and participating in exchange programs. Furthermore, the process of integration and adaptation for individuals immersed in a new culture can be overwhelming due to significantly differing norms and traditions. Broader political and social tensions between nations can also occasionally impact the willingness or ability to engage in cultural collaborations.

**Strategies for Overcoming Challenges and Future Outlook.** Overcoming these challenges necessitates thoughtful and collaborative strategies. Providing comprehensive language support through translation services, dedicated language courses, and immersive cultural programs can significantly bridge communication gaps. Educational initiatives in schools and through cultural organizations, such as workshops and storytelling events, are crucial

for dismantling stereotypes and promoting cultural awareness. Governments and institutions can facilitate exchange programs by working to simplify logistics, including making visas, scholarships, and travel grants more accessible. Providing robust integration support, including mentorship programs and community events, can help individuals navigate new environments more smoothly. Ultimately, strengthening diplomatic ties and fostering open dialogue remains paramount to mitigating tensions that might otherwise impede cultural collaboration.

Looking ahead, cultural exchange will continue to evolve, potentially facing new challenges in an increasingly globalized and technologically driven world. The balance between digital and physical interactions will be crucial, as technology offers accessibility but may diminish the depth of in-person experiences. Geopolitical shifts and economic barriers could impact cultural partnerships, while climate and travel restrictions might necessitate alternative approaches, such as hybrid programs. The rise of AI and its role in cultural authenticity also presents a novel challenge, as distinguishing between genuine human cultural expressions and AI-generated interpretations may become a concern. Despite these potential obstacles, the fundamental human need for connection and understanding suggests that cultural exchange will adapt and continue to thrive, finding new avenues through virtual reality, enhanced cross-cultural collaborations, and innovative hybrid models.

**Conclusions.** The cultural relationship between Italy and Serbia stands as a compelling testament to their shared history and mutual appreciation for extensive artistic, linguistic, and academic exchanges. This paper has demonstrated how historical ties, notably the enduring presence of Italian language and culture, have profoundly shaped and continue to enrich Serbian society across educational, artistic, and diplomatic spheres. As both nations actively pursue collaborations in diverse cultural sectors, their bond remains a critical element of their bi-

lateral diplomatic and social interactions. The ongoing commitment to high-quality Italian language education within Serbia, spearheaded by Departments of Italian Studies, is crucial. Future generations of Italian language teachers are uniquely positioned to further disseminate Italy's rich linguistic and cultural heritage. Their role will involve innovating teaching methodologies, fostering new forms of exchange and collaboration, and continuously exploring engaging approaches for Italian as a foreign language. Ultimately, the preservation and promotion of the Italian language in Serbia will continue to emphasize its historical depth, rich vocabulary, and profound literary and cultural contributions, thereby strengthening the bonds between these two culturally connected nations.

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Citation: Stanić, T.; Iordan, M. From Rome to Belgrade: the Italian Spirit in Serbian Life. In: *Dialogica. Cultural Studies and Literature Scientific Journal*, 2025, nr. 2, p. 116-123. <https://doi.org/10.59295/DIA.2025.2.14>

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