

# Emotions and Identity as Foreign Policy Determinants: Serbian Approach to Relations with Russia

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**Abstract** The paper argues that while the Serbian society and political elite are known for treating their country's accession to the EU in terms of pragmatic utility maximisation, they generally conceive of Serbian relations with Russia, contrariwise, as an identity-laden issue. To prove it, the author analyses Serbia's behaviour toward Russia along the features of emotion-driven cooperation, found in the literature on identity and emotions in foreign policy. In particular, the paper focuses on Serbians' especially strong friendliness vis-à-vis Russia, the parallel existence of the Other (the West) in their identity and the particularly strong intensity of their attraction to Russia during Serbia-West conflicts, the reinforcement of their affection to Russia by national traumas, the endurance of the affection's strength despite conflicting rational interests and negative experiences in bilateral interaction, the frequent occurrence of references to Russia in Serbia's domestic discourse and decisional justifications and a large use of historical analogies concerning Russia. Finally, the author ponders over the implications of the existent configuration of emotional and pragmatic forces in Serbian politics for the country's current and future conduct toward Russia and the EU.

**Keywords** Emotions · European Union · Foreign policy · Identity · Russia · Serbia

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# 1 Introduction

On 5 October, 2000, the so-called “Bulldozer Revolution” overthrew Serbia’s autocratic leader Slobodan Milošević, putting an end to the country’s decade-long confrontation with the international community. Since then, Serbia, like the other Western Balkan states, has pursued EU accession as its primary strategic goal, having achieved, to date, a great deal of success on this path. To illustrate, the country started its membership talks in January 2014, overtaking the region’s all other countries except Montenegro. Yet, researchers widely describe Serbia’s EU ambitions as instrumental, pragmatic and originated not in internalisation of European values, but in a mere desire to receive material benefits from the bloc (e.g. Subotić 2011; Stahl 2013; Radeljić 2014; Economides and Ker-Lindsay 2015). As one study notes, Serbs’ support of EU integration “relies mostly on the assumption that merely joining brings great economic advantages, yet that great social or mental adjustments are supposedly not required to achieve this” (Dimitrijević 2009, p. 44). In this vein, scholars argue that Serbia and the EU have “entirely different identities, i.e. world views, perception of the state, political cultures and the meaning of international politics”, characterising the country as a “problem child” of EU integration, stating that Serbia’s accession to the bloc is “strategic” (Stahl 2013, p. 447), that is, the country technically adheres to all EU requirements, simultaneously undergoing no normative shift (Stahl 2013; Economides and Ker-Lindsay 2015). Both at the societal and elite levels, Serbia is arguably driven chiefly by short-term interests, a trend manifesting itself in voting behaviour (Schimmelfennig et al. 2006, p. 94), public opinion surveys (Wohlfeld 2015, p. 5) and elite approach to foreign policy (*ibid*, p. 1). One paper posits that this stems from wider traditions of the country’s political culture, stating that “[t]he word ‘national interest’ is easily appropriated in a Serb context, thus short-term tactical advantages and disadvantages are often presented as long-term interests, making it easy to change opinions about them” (Dimitrijević 2009, p. 45).

Against this backdrop, it appears interesting to delve into the underlying foundations of Serbia’s attitude to Russia, a country presently acting as probably the most prominent challenger of the EU. In recent years, Russo-Serbian cooperation has strengthened to an unprecedentedly high level. Suffice it to say that economically, Serbia is currently the sole state outside the post-Soviet area which enjoys a free trade zone with Russia. As Đukić (2015, p. 35) notes, “[n]o other country than Serbia can boast of having such a widely open door to Eastern and Western integration markets, stretching from Vladivostok to Lisbon”. Similarly, in the security sphere, Serbia is the only Western Balkan country and EU candidate which has signed a “strategic partnership” agreement with Russia, regularly conducts joint military exercises with that country and enjoys the status of a non-member observer in the Russia-led Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO).

In this article, I contend that Serbia treats its collaboration with Russia as primarily an emotion-laden identity-driven issue with instrumental considerations

(e.g. to improve national security, economy, etc.) being by and large of peripheral significance. This approach originates in beliefs which are widely shared by Serbia's public, dominate the country's domestic discourse and are largely reflected in the self-positioning of its political elite. Obviously, my argument does not imply that the bilateral cooperation gives Serbia zero objective gains, albeit whether Serbia receives rational benefits seems indeed questionable in many instances. Rather, I maintain that, even where present, they hardly determine Serbia's rationale to hold friendship with Russia. Finally, I argue that the fact that Serbia strongly identifies with Russia, concurrently having limited rational considerations to cooperate, to a large extent determines the nature and peculiarities of Moscow's influence over Belgrade.

Some theoretical accounts on decision-making in IR deem actors' ideas/identities only as "simply another rather than the causal factor" (quoted in Parsons 2003, p. 11), as something that may affect states' decisions only together with instrumental considerations, considering that "[it is] 'how much' questions [that] make all the difference" (*ibid*). This article, however, rests on the theoretical tradition that allows for the possibility that ideas/identities can determine states' foreign policies independently of self-interest (e.g. Parsons 2003; Tannenwald 2005; Tsygankov 2014). A number of empirical studies based on this assumption conclude that Georgia's approach to the EU (Gvalia et al. 2013; Kakachia and Minesashvili 2015), Taiwan's policy toward China (Wang and Liu 2004), the Baltics' policy vis-à-vis Russia (Berg and Ehin 2009) are (or were for a certain period) largely identity-driven.

My study is grounded upon recent media publications and academic and think tank research articles, including many those authored by Russian and Serbian researchers. Chronologically, my discussion covers the entire post-Milošević period, principally focusing on the recent decade, when both Russo-Serbian cooperation and Russia-EU confrontation have been especially intensive. In Sect. 2, I elaborate on identity-driven cooperation in IR, concentrating on and the key role emotions play in it. In the subsequent Sects. 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9, my argumentation in outline centres on the main points described in Sect. 2. In particular, I focus on Serbians' particularly strong friendliness towards Russia, the parallel existence of the Other (the West) in their identity and the especially strong intensity of their attraction to Russia during Serbia-West conflicts, the reinforcement of their affection to Russia by national traumas, the endurance of the affection's strength despite conflicting rational interests and negative experiences in bilateral interaction, the abundance of references to Russia in Serbia's domestic discourse and decisional justifications and a large use of historical analogies regarding Russia. Following that, in Sect. 10, I review alternative accounts of Serbia's motives to collaborate with Russia, showing their incompleteness and drawbacks with respect to my explanation. Finally, I summarise the crux of my argument, contextualise it within other relevant research lines and utilise it to speculate about the possible behaviour of Serbia toward the EU and Russia.

## 2 Identity, Emotions, State and Foreign Policy

Theoretically, my argument rests on the studies on identity and emotions in foreign policy which draw on the social identity and self-categorisation theories from social psychology. Defining identity as “that part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (quoted in Sasley 2011, p. 457),<sup>1</sup> those papers argue that an actor’s self-identification with a certain group (or an individual actor) can alone determine his/her behaviour, in which case his/her cognitive function is accompanied by significant affective incentives (Chafetz et al. 1998; Mercer 2005, 2010; Sasley 2011). When this happens, the actor perceives the group as part of him/herself and looks at the world from the group’s perspective, considering it as diverse from and better than other groups, a tendency that springs from the human basic psychological need to evaluate themselves positively (Mercer 2005, p. 96; Sasley 2011, p. 458). Since identification hinges on the feeling of attachment, from a behavioural perspective, emotion constitutes a central component of identity. As observed by Mercer (2006, pp 297–298), “[e]motion is necessary for an identity to cause behaviour. Other variables contribute to identity, but even in the case of ideas or material interests it is an emotional connection with a group that gives identity its power”. Otherwise stated (2014, p. 522), “[i]dentification without emotion inspires no action for one does not care. Whereas indifference makes identities meaningless (and powerless), emotion makes them important”.

Notably, identity-driven emotions may be experienced by social groups as well as individuals. Drawing on works by psychological constructivists, Mercer argues that “emotions pertain to an identity and not to a biological individual” (quoted in Mercer 2014, p. 522, emphasis in original) and presents them as an “irreducibly social” phenomenon in the sense that “[e]motion can be causally reduced to the body (because nothing other than the body can cause emotion) but it cannot be ontologically reduced to the body (because it feels like something to have emotion)” (*ibid*, pp 518–519). He also points to four factors conducive to the origination of group emotions, namely culture, group members’ interactions with one another, contagious nature of emotions as well as events having group-level importance (for details, see *ibid*, pp 523–525). Finally, building upon recent research in psychology, Mercer contends that first, group emotion can be different from and is frequently more intense than individual emotion, second, members of the same group experience generally similar emotions and third, group emotions impact on conduct toward both in-group and out-group actors (*ibid*, pp 525–529). An important implication of this discussion is that “[i]dentities exist at individual, group, and *state* levels of analyses because emotion exists at these different levels” (*ibid*, p. 530). In other words,

<sup>1</sup> Incidentally, the social psychological perspective on identity is only one of the three that are popular in IR scholarship. The other two originate in sociological institutionalism and post-structuralism/critical discourse analysis (for a detailed literature review, see Urrestarazu 2015, pp 131–133).

provided that the state is considered as a social group, one can talk of state emotions and their influence on state conduct.

A relevant perspective on the state is given by Brent Sasley who theorises it as a “psychological-emotional group [which] chang[es] its members to think, feel, and react similarly so that we can speak of ‘state’ emotions” (2011, p. 465). Emotions experienced by the members of this group “determine the group’s action tendencies (inclinations toward a specific behavior) and thus actual behavior” (*ibid*, p. 463). Remarkably, noting that the state as a social group comprises both the political elite and the public, Sasley posits that the latter cannot be completely omitted from an analysis of a state’s emotions, because leaders conduct foreign policy “within a particular (social) context and on that (social) basis” (*ibid*, p. 465). Yet, according to him, for methodological reasons, it makes sense to treat the elite, where relevant, as a separate category (*ibid*, p. 469). First, social identity is stronger and gets activated more easily among state leaders given that they are those that directly represent states as psychological groups in front of other groups (*ibid*, p. 468). Second, while giving emotional responses and taking political steps, leaders act not as ordinary members of their groups, but as members officially enjoying a special status (*ibid*, p. 469). Third, due to their position, ruling elites—especially in democracies where they are publicly elected—tend to identify themselves stronger with their states, being, as research shows, especially likely to be patriotic and/or nationalistic (*ibid*, p. 468).<sup>2</sup>

Importantly, the way emotions operate generates empirically observable patterns of identity-driven behaviour. Firstly, strong positive emotions toward a group encourage an actor to trust it in a manner which tends to induce him/her to forgo his/her interests and act for the group’s needs even in the absence of tangible personal material stimuli (Mercer 2005, pp 96–97, Mercer 2010, p. 6; Sasley 2011, p. 464). Secondly, the fact that the group can be defined only vis-à-vis other groups prompts the actor to regularly compare his/her group with the Other, the actor that serves as a point of reference and is often (though not necessarily) perceived as an enemy/rival (Sasley 2011, p. 457; Stein 2013, p. 208). Importantly, in case of conflicts with the Other, the actor’s identification with his/her group strengthens thanks to the intensification of both his/her positive emotions toward his/her group and negative emotions toward the Other (Mercer 2005, p. 97; Sasley 2011, p. 460; Stein 2013, pp 207–212; Mercer 2014, p. 522). Thirdly, overwhelmed by positive emotions, an actor tends to rationalise and positively view his/her experience of interaction with his/her group, even if the actual utility he/she gets from this interaction is minor or negative (Crawford 2000, p. 142), which researchers consider to be one of defence mechanisms ensuring the relative stability of one’s social identity (Chafetz

<sup>2</sup> Alternatively, one can use a study by Wendt who, drawing on philosophy of mind and psychological studies, argues that states as IR actors can legitimately be viewed as superorganisms (Wendt 2004, pp 309–311), which implies, *inter alia*, that they possess sufficient power to make intergroup competition subservient to their necessities (*ibid*, p. 311). The latter also seems to presuppose that to analyse the emotions of a state, one has to especially focus on, first, its political elite (given their power to make political decisions and strong capabilities to influence public opinion) and second, the majority of its population (especially in democratic countries such as Serbia).

et al. 1998, p. 12). Important here is that by the impact of emotions, actors tend to be biased against counterfactual thinking (Crawford 2000, p. 143) and are especially prone to resort to analogical reasoning and (frequently inadequately selected) historical metaphors (*ibid.*, p. 141). Finally, in the development of identity-related emotions, an important role is played by traumas which, if experienced by a community, acquire a social meaning, mobilising emotions which bind its members more strongly to one another (Hutchison 2010, pp 67–69). Depending on how they react to representations of a trauma, other actors either get affectively connected with the community experiencing the trauma or fail to do so (*ibid.*, pp. 71–73).

Before concluding this section, it is worth noting that the presentation of a foreign policy as emotion-laden should not be considered as its criticism. In this study, such words as “emotional”, “identity-driven”, etc., are used as opposites of “cognitive”, “pragmatic”, “driven by utility maximisation” rather than of “rational”, “right” or “good”. In fact, as neuropsychological studies show, accurate judgements require emotions (Mercer 2005, 2006, 2010) and therefore, a study of rational decisions necessitates focusing not only on cognition, but also on emotion. In reality, “hyperrational” actions tend to be as detrimental to their makers as overly emotional ones: as phrased by Mercer (2010, pp 7–8), “[e]xtreme emotion distorts judgement, as does extreme cognition”. According to him, “someone deprived of all emotion becomes vacuous, not neutral” (Mercer 2010, p. 13, see also Stein 2013, pp 200–201) and hence, “[it is] the absence of emotion [that] makes people irrational” (Mercer 2006, p. 294, emphasis mine). More specifically (2005, p. 93),

[p]eople without emotion may know they should be ethical, and may know they should be influenced by norms, and may know that they should not make disastrous financial decisions, but this knowledge is abstract and inert and does not weigh on their decisions. They do not care about themselves or about others, and they neither try to avoid making mistakes nor are they capable of learning from their mistakes.

### 3 Serbia’s Identification with Russia: Society and Political Elite

Multitudinous opinion polls exhibit Serbians’ particular attachment to Russia, showing that they truly consider their ties with that country to be what Russian Deputy PM Dmitry Rogozin called “marriage for love” and not “marriage of convenience” (Helsinki Committee 2013, p. 8). Russia tops the list of Serbia’s friendly states by a large margin,<sup>3</sup> is perceived as number one country maintaining good relations with which is to Serbia’s best interest (IRI 2015, pp 20–22) and caps the list of the countries that arguably influence the Serbian foreign policy positively (BCSP 2017, p. 16). Furthermore, Russia enjoys the most positive views of Serbians among all countries—far more positive than the EU (Bechev 2015, p. 3)—with Serbia’s

<sup>3</sup> Helsinki Committee 2013, p. 7; <http://demostat.rs/en/vesti/istrazivanja/which-empire-to-lean-on-serbia-between-the-east-and-the-west/214>.

alliance with Russia being supported by them more than their country's accession to the EU (Szpala 2014, p. 8). In parallel, remarkable is high popularity Russian President Vladimir Putin has in Serbia among world leaders (Gallup International 2017, pp 7–10), being, according to one poll, the foreign leader Serbians trust most.<sup>4</sup> This attitude also manifests itself in people's own—often exotic—initiatives: to illustrate, in November 2016, the citizens of Adžince, a small village in Southern Serbia, voted to change their village's name to Putinovo.<sup>5</sup>

Interestingly, Serbians do not seem to be clearly divided into the pro-EU and pro-Russian camps: in 2014, for example, 50% supported Serbia's EU accession and 70% favoured closer relations with Russia (Torralba 2014, pp 2–3). Researchers generally state that Russia enjoys Serbians' support of foreign policy issues, whereas when it comes to their own and their families' lives, Serbians tend to give preference to the EU.<sup>6</sup> As formulated by Bogosavljevic, “[w]e [Serbs] love Russia, but we don't want to be part of Russia. And we don't like Europe, but we want to be part of Europe”.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, in 2015, more than 70% of Serbians wanted their children to live in the EU, while merely 17% preferred Russia (Nelayeva and Semenov 2015, p. 53). At the 2012 and 2016 parliamentary elections, the results of strongly pro-Russian parties never exceeded 20% of votes in total, whereas at the 2014 elections, these parties did not manage to enter the Parliament at all. In 2014, more than a half of respondents were opposed to a closer collaboration of Serbia with the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union (Atlagić 2015, p. 116).

Similarly to its citizenry, Serbia's leaders are notorious for praising Russia in general and Putin specifically. In the 1990s, the idea of Serbs being a traditionalist Orthodox nation was the base of the official state ideology with Milošević himself declaring that “[e]very Serb is looking with hope eastwards, is looking where the Russian sun comes out” (quoted in Schimmelfennig et al. 2006, p. 84). Among Serbian leaders in the post-Milošević period, Russia's probably keenest supporter was Tomislav Nikolić, the country's President in 2012–2017, whose attitude to Russia is best reflected in such of his phrases as “the EU only blackmails, humiliates, seizes our territory, while Russia helps” (quoted in Subotić 2011, p. 322), “Serbia must join all economic alliances worldwide, which suit it, especially the alliances formed with Russia's participation”, “[t]he only thing I love more than Russia is Serbia” (Helsinki Committee 2013, p. 5), “Serbia...sees Russia as its major ally” (quoted in Wohlfeld 2015, p. 2), etc. Also, Nikolić used to direct such commendations toward Putin personally, saying, for instance, “I wouldn't have won the election only if I had Vladimir Putin running for Serbia's presidency” (Helsinki Committee 2013, p. 3), “I would like you [Putin] to know that Serbia is Russia's partner in the Balkans...

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.nspm.rs/hronika/nspm-rusija-i-putin-u-srcu-srba-protivnici-i-pristalice-eu-skoro-izjednacen-i.html?utm\\_medium=twitter&utm\\_source=twitterfeed](http://www.nspm.rs/hronika/nspm-rusija-i-putin-u-srcu-srba-protivnici-i-pristalice-eu-skoro-izjednacen-i.html?utm_medium=twitter&utm_source=twitterfeed).

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.politico.eu/article/serbia-village-putinovo-praise-putin-hopes-for-trump/>.

<sup>6</sup> E.g., Atlagić 2015, p. 118; <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/survey-serbias-heart-is-in-the-east-pocket-in-the-west/>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/02/world/europe/serbia-aleksandar-vucic-president-elections.html?mcubz=1>.



Serbia loves you. And you deserved this love by the manner you rule Russia” (*ibid*, p. 4), etc.

Remarkably, even those Serbian leaders who enjoy the reputation of being pro-Western—such as the country’s ex-President Boris Tadić and its current President Aleksandar Vučić—have made outstanding pro-Russian moves. It is Tadić who put forward a doctrine naming Russia one of the “pillars” of Serbian foreign policy (Varga 2016, p. 191). Both Tadić and Vučić paid visits to the Kremlin during their reelection campaigns—officially, to discuss security and economic issues, but unofficially, to ensure Putin’s support in the upcoming elections. Vučić, moreover, proudly stated to have met Putin “more than all others [the other candidates] combined”.<sup>8</sup> Even incumbent Serbian Prime Minister Ana Brnabić who, as an LGBT activist and an open lesbian, can hardly be expected to have personal pro-Russian attitudes, once said that the EU is Serbia’s “partner” while Russia is Serbia’s “friend”.<sup>9</sup>

One may question the sincerity of these statements, deeming them as mere attempts to gain public approval. Indeed, the current Serbian political culture gives room for leaders to act opportunistically, attaching little value to ideas and changing their political affiliations throughout their careers. As a result, Serbian politicians’ statements tend to contradict their real actions. For example, despite his pro-Russian statements, Nikolić and his administration “proved to be more committed to EU accession, both in word and deed, than anyone had expected” (Economides and Ker-Lindsay 2015, p. 1035), not to mention that his primary advisor during his 2012 electoral campaign was a US official who was also later instrumental in the government’s formation (Helsinki Committee 2013, p. 5). Remarkably, after being elected, Nikolić paid his first official visit to Brussels and only second to Moscow.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, one can recall that initially, both Nikolić and Vučić started in the fiercely pro-Russian and nationalistic Serbian Radical Party, then left it to found the center-right Serbian Progressive Party which favours EU integration. All in all, stating that Serbia’s leaders are generally more pragmatic than its society appears reasonable. Yet, the continuance and endurance of their pro-Russian statements, the fact that they are expressed by politicians belonging to various, sometimes opposite, camps as well as a more general logic of Serbia’s approach to Russia (discussed below) indicate the rather high importance of identity considerations for Serbia’s political elite.

#### 4 The West as the Other

This subheading may appear odd in relation to a state whose strategic goal is EU integration; nonetheless, it perfectly reflects the findings of recent studies which largely depict the contemporary Serbian identity as somewhat reminiscent of that

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/putin-wishes-vucic-luck-in-serbian-presidential-election-03-27-2017>.

<sup>9</sup> <https://beta.rs/en/67435-brnabic-eu-is-serbias-partner-russia-is-a-friend>.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/serbia-president-elect-nikolic-to-travel-to-moscow/24591618.html>.



of the present-day Russia rather than compatible with European values. First, Serbs are commonly described as entrapped by and obsessed with their history, “stuck in a nineteenth-century world of nationalism” (Dulić 2011, p. 26), a quality hampering their willingness to accept the realities of contemporary politics (Radeljić 2014, p. 254). Serbian political discourse is arguably highly influenced by the “perception of sanctity of territorial integrity” (Dimitrijević 2009, p. 42) and “[t]reating Serbia and Serbdom as one and the same” (*ibid.*, p. 40), which, again, dates back to the nineteenth-century principle of nation-state. Remarkably, in contemporary Serbia, “instead of describing and analyzing past reality, [history] became a kind of experimental science” (Stojanović 2011, p. 222) with official history textbooks presenting Serbs as “chosen people” who constantly fell victims of their neighbours and great powers throughout their history and never began any annexationist wars themselves (*ibid.*, p. 228). Those textbooks are also argued to posit that both world wars started and finished in Serbia (*ibid.*, p. 227) and endeavour to whitewash Serbs who collaborated with Nazis in the WWII. With regard to this, Ramet (2010, p. 33) notes that “[n]owhere in Europe has there been such enthusiasm for the rehabilitation of Axis collaborators as in Serbia, and this desire to embrace the defeated side in World War Two is not without psychological and political consequences”.

Second, Serbian identity in general seems to have undergone little substantial change since Milošević was cashiered. *Domestically*, it is still distinguished by the prevalence of a culture of violence, the supremacy of economic sphere of life, social acceptance of bribery—on top of the standard set of traditionalist mentality including nationalism, clericalisation, traditional gender roles, enmity against homosexuality, etc. (Dulić 2011, pp 28–32). *Internationally*, Serbs keep ambitiously fancying themselves as the region’s dominant power (Subotić 2011, p. 322). Importantly, in Serbia’s case, inclination towards conservatism and collectivism can hardly be reduced to the lot of uneducated people, for it is shared by a great part of intellectuals, who in recent years have been increasingly coming up with new intellectual theoretical accounts of “Serbianness” (Bianchini 2011, pp 98–99). Moreover, as Pešić (2009, pp 185–188) argues, Serbs have not fully assumed neither criminal-legal nor political nor moral responsibility for the Milošević regime’s war crimes: since his overthrow, no lustration has taken place and his crimes tend to be “normalised” in the country’s mainstream media with those responsible for them having been sent to the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) merely for technical reasons, due to international obligations. In this context, one can agree with Bianchini (2011, p. 78) that the West’s general presumption in the 1990s that Serbian nationalism would be over once Milošević is defeated seems to have naïvely mistaken cause for effect. Indeed, while throughout the second half of the twentieth century, most Western and Central European autocrats hardly enjoyed genuine domestic popularity, receiving public condemnation after being toppled, Milošević proved to be “more of an “elected autocrat” than a “dictator” (Schimmelfennig et al. 2006, p. 84), getting criticised in contemporary Serbia principally for his inefficiency rather than immorality. As nicely summarised by Subotić (2011, p. 321),

the predominant political narrative in post-Milošević Serbia rejected Milošević’s wartime strategies as wrong and destructive; not because they

caused great suffering and mass casualties in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo, but because they economically, politically, and diplomatically devastated Serbia and denied it aspirations to regional domination. In other words, Milošević was not wrong to fight the wars; he was wrong to lose them.

Notably, Serbs' attitude to EU accession is mostly neutral-positive, but again, they largely associate the positive component with instrumental (in the first place, material) benefits. This becomes evident in opinion polls showing that most Serbs favour EU accession because of employment and travel opportunities it will provide (BCSP 2017, p. 33) with a half of them reporting they would feel indifferent if one day the bloc went out of existence (*ibid*, p. 34). Moreover, the European idea and support for EU integration are less perceptible in Serbia than elsewhere in the Balkan region (Subotić 2011, p. 322) and, as was shown above, they are coupled with widespread anti-EU sentiments. As Subotić (*ibid*, p. 326) puts it, "Europe came to be constructed in Serbia as an other, not quite a foe (that would be the United States and NATO), but never a friend (that would be Russia)".

A number of factors have kept Serbian conservatism and nationalism afloat, partially even strengthening it, making it, according to Dulić (2011, p. 36), "a far greater threat for Serbia than for other European countries". Some of them—such as "the low standard of living of the majority of the population; low educational level and modest social mobility; great disparities in the level of development of different parts of the country" (*ibid*, p. 31)—are objective and seem identical to those in most European countries. However, specifically in the post-Milošević Serbia, a favourable ground for conservatism also appears to be the result of particular actors' activities. The first of them is Serbia's *political elite* which chiefly include the country's old nomenklatura who successfully made use of freedom of speech and democratic procedures to stay at power (*ibid*, p. 27, 33). Subotić (2011, p. 320, p. 326) argues that it is largely their responsibility that, in publicly promoting EU integration agenda, they tend to prioritise short-term over long-term interests, inflaming nationalism and conspirational thinking and trying to capitalise on "the confusion and conflation that existed in Serbia about what, exactly, Europeanization entails" (*ibid*, p. 326) in place of "delinking requirements of Europeanization from more contested national myths" (*ibid*). Second, the mainstream Serbian *media*—both state-owned and private—are also notorious for simply following and exploiting the popular mindset with a "nationalistic-conservative ideological matrix" dominating most of them (Dulić 2011, p. 33). To illustrate, most Serbian media are sympathetic to Putin's position on the Ukrainian crisis, inflaming the already widespread nationalistic attitudes (that is, the idea of "Great Serbia" connoting that all Serbs should live in one country) of a large part of Serbs who perceive contemporary Ukraine as similar to Croatia in the 1990s and therefore, regarded the 2014 Ukrainian Euromaidan with suspicion (Varga 2016, pp 181–187).

Third, however paradoxical it may sound, *human rights NGOs* also conduced to Serbia's failure to successfully "come to terms" with its past. According to Obradović-Wochnik (2013, p. 225), they proved to be too inflexible, ruling out all the views contradicting their own ones, which has resulted in the exception of ordinary people from the public debate on recent Serbian history. Moreover, Ostojić

(2013, p. 243) notes that NGOs strongly demanded that the state assume responsibility for war crimes, in particular, for the Srebrenica genocide, which encountered opposition even from reformists, for assuming such a responsibility would have been catastrophic for Serbia's worldwide legitimacy and obliged the country to pay significant compensations to Bosnia. Fourth, *the West* has its share of accountability for reinforcing Serbian nationalism by being insensitive to Belgrade's requests to protect Kosovar Serbs. In March 2004, for instance, Serbs presumed the West would take strong measures in response to the ongoing outbreak of hostility against Kosovar Serbs. Yet, instead, Western politicians replied by increasingly agreeing to concede to Kosovo's independence demands (Simić 2008, p. 6).

## 5 Affection toward Russia and Serbia-West Conflicts

Serbia's "othering" of the West, coupled to its simultaneous attachment to Russia, becomes especially activated when it comes to concrete issues on which Belgrade finds itself in conflict with the West. Among them, three particularly stand out, namely the ICTY, Kosovo and NATO. First, reluctant to effectively distance itself from Milošević, the present Serbian elite seem to have inherited his stance on the ICTY, labelling the court as illegitimate and criticising its verdicts against those associated with Milošević (Stahl 2013, pp 457–458). Notably, this stance was perceptible already at the outset of Serbia's first democratic government in 2000 (Schimmelfennig et al. 2006, p. 80) and is widely shared by society. Polls show that a large portion of Serbs keep considering Radovan Karadžić and Ratko Mladić (both charged with war crimes by the ICTY) as national heroes<sup>11</sup> and widely deny the actuality of the Srebrenica genocide, simultaneously showing little interest/knowledge in the ICTY's activities (Obradović-Wochnik 2013, pp 210–211). Russia, in its turn, actively kindles Serbia's rejection of the ICTY by positing the court should be dissolved due to its alleged anti-Serb partiality. This happened, for instance, when the ICTY in November 2012 ruled to exonerate two Croatian generals previously charged with war crimes (Nelayeva and Semenov 2015, p. 51).

The second identity-based and "emotionally fraught" (Wohlfeld 2015, p. 2) issue heightening Russia's attractiveness in Serbia's eyes is Kosovo, whose loss, in Dulić's words (2011, p. 34; see also Subotić 2011, p. 325), "represents a damaging blow to Serbia, given its place in collective memory and national consciousness".<sup>12</sup> In

<sup>11</sup> Ramet 2010, pp 31–32, <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbs-still-supports-war-crime-defendants>.

<sup>12</sup> In fairness, Serbia is hardly the sole country showing such a conduct. Spain, for instance, also displays resolute reluctance to allow Catalonia to hold a legal independence referendum. However, while in the Spanish official/public discourse this issue is mostly regarded as economic, in Serbia, the Kosovo problem has a clear identity-oriented connotation. As Subotić (2011, p. 326) puts it, "Serbia's emotional hold on Kosovo cannot be explained in rationalist terms, as the territory does not provide any material benefit to Serbia—it is extremely resource poor, is inhabited by a 90% Albanian population that has grown increasingly hostile to the Serbian state, and has always been a drain on already limited Serbian resources".

this vein, Serbian school textbooks present Kosovo as a historically Serbian territory, talking about its “liberation” as a result of a Serbian military operation (Ramet 2010, p. 24). In the first years following the declaration of Kosovo’s independence in February 2008, Serbia was taking a harsh stance on the issue, referring it to the International Court of Justice and widely using diplomatic means to prevent Kosovo’s recognition by new states and its entry into international organisations. At that period, the pledge “to be committed to the preservation of Kosovo and Metohija within the Republic of Serbia” was added to the Serbian government’s official oath (cited in Ramet 2010, p. 25) and Serbian officials—both of the reformist and conservative camps—were elsewhere arguing giving up Kosovo for an EU membership would be unacceptable (Subotić 2011, p. 325; Helsinki Bulletin 2013, p. 4), a position still prevailing in Serbia’s public opinion (IRI 2015, p. 15; BCSP 2017, p. 30).

In mid-2010, however, Belgrade softened its stance, agreeing to embark on normalising its relations with Pristina under Brussels’ patronage, the move usually interpreted in light of Serbia’s desire to enter the EU (e.g. Economides and Ker-Lindsay 2015). In 2013 and 2015, the two countries concluded a number of agreements mostly regulating the position of Kosovo as an international actor and the status of ethnic Serbs in Kosovo. As Serbia’s accession to the bloc seems increasingly more tangible, its leaders apply a progressively softer rhetoric toward Kosovo, especially when talking outside Serbia. To illustrate, in one recent interview to a Swiss magazine, Vučić expressed his desire “to start a new path”, “to openly and fairly discuss the solution of the Kosovo conflict”, yet, regrettably noting that “the Serbs are not yet ready for that”.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, this rhetoric’s sincerity is debatable, given that concerning whatever goes beyond the minimal EU requirements, Serbia still employs harsh measures. In 2015, for example, Belgrade launched a worldwide lobbying campaign to oppose Kosovo’s entry into UNESCO, which finished successfully for Serbs (Lobanov and Zvezdanović Lobanova 2016, p. 135). In January 2017, a Serbian train painted in the colours of the Serbian flag and having the “Kosovo is Serbia” slogan was prohibited from crossing Kosovo’s border, which provoked a determined reaction from Nikolić who announced his readiness to use, upon necessity, the Serbian army to protect Kosovar Serbs.<sup>14</sup>

In 2008, Moscow supported Belgrade’s resolute stance against the Kosovo independence, following which Serbia made several moves in Russia’s favour, such as establishing a visa-free regime for Russian citizens (Moscow replied symmetrically some days later), expressing its “understanding” for the 2008 Russian initiative to conclude a new treaty on European security and voting at the UN General Assembly against the resolution that recognised the right of expellees to come back to Abkhazia. At that period, one author noted on this point: “Vladimir Putin has reason to thank the Western powers: They have allowed him to succeed where Stalin failed, namely in securing Russian political and economic influence in Belgrade” (Reljić 2008, p. 2). Thus far, Serbian leaders have elsewhere named the Kosovo issue as one

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2017&mm=07&dd=31&nav\\_id=101949](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2017&mm=07&dd=31&nav_id=101949).

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-38630152>.

of the main questions determining the Belgrade-Moscow friendship, thanking Russia for supporting Serbian territorial integrity.<sup>15</sup>

However, the rational benefit Belgrade gains from the strategic collaboration with Moscow appears questionable—with this questionableness not being limited to the intuitive notion that such a collaboration is at variance with Serbia's EU integration path. More significantly, the Kremlin's support on Kosovo seems to be somewhat apathetic and mainly limited to criticism of Western policies instead of the elaboration of its own initiatives, an approach to which Lobanov and Zvezdanović Lobanova (2016, p. 134, my translation) refer as “the position of an outside observer”. In view of this, Moscow chiefly takes measures that require no or little active efforts and expenses—for example, vetoing resolutions favouring Kosovo in the UN Security Council (UNSC)—and have no critical influence on the issue's settlement. By withdrawing its troops from Bosnia and Kosovo in 2003, Russia deliberately abstained from being seriously involved in the peaceful settlement any longer, making its further support of Bosnian and Kosovar Serbs principally verbal. Furthermore, Moscow itself seems to treat its position on Kosovo far less affectively than how it is interpreted inside Serbia. In this respect, Petrović (2010a, pp 28–29) notes that Russia's official framing on Kosovo in the mid-2000s accentuated the defence of the *principle of territorial integrity and sovereignty* (for an example, see Simić 2008, p. 7), while inside Serbia it used to be mostly perceived and expounded as the defence of *Serbia*. In a similar vein, Simić (2008, p. 7) points to the fact that throughout the 2000s, Russia possessed its self-interest in supporting Serbia's territorial integrity, given the presence of separatism inside Russia (in Chechnya), the overall background of the progressively increasing Russia-West confrontation as well as the Kremlin's desire to demonstrate that its policies and interests in the Balkans were no longer as weak as in the 1990s. Moreover, the wide recognition of Kosovo's independence by Western states allowed Russia to deem the principle of territorial integrity as facultative, getting a free hand in the post-Soviet space: in February 2008, the Russian Foreign Ministry announced a change in Russia's position on Abkhazia and South Ossetia in light of Kosovo's declaration of independence<sup>16</sup> and on 11 March 2014, the Ministry recognised Crimea's succession from Ukraine, directly citing Kosovo as a precedent proving its legitimacy.<sup>17</sup> All in all, Moscow seems to conceive of the Kosovo issue more from the perspective of the Russia-West confrontation than in terms of its bilateral relations with Belgrade. In this vein, the Kremlin somewhat opposes the EU-led Serbia-Kosovo normalisation process, sometimes resorting to overt criticism of Belgrade's “softness”. For instance, commenting on his country's stance on Serbian territorial integrity, Russia's former ambassador in Belgrade Aleksandr Konuzin said<sup>18</sup>:

<sup>15</sup> E.g., see Helsinki Bulletin 2013, p. 4; <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/putin-wishes-vucic-luck-in-serbian-presidential-election-03-27-2017>.

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.vedomosti.ru/library/news/2008/02/15/mid-rf-v-svete-situacii-v-kosovo-rossiya-izmenit-poziciyu-po-abkhazii-i-yuzhnoj-osetii>.

<sup>17</sup> [http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/ua/-/asset\\_publisher/ktn0ZLTvbbS3/content/id/71274](http://www.mid.ru/en/web/guest/maps/ua/-/asset_publisher/ktn0ZLTvbbS3/content/id/71274).

<sup>18</sup> [http://www.b92.net/eng/insight/tvshows.php?yyyy=2012&mm=09&nav\\_id=82233](http://www.b92.net/eng/insight/tvshows.php?yyyy=2012&mm=09&nav_id=82233).

We [Russians] cannot be more Serb than Serbs. For that reason, when under outside pressure—which, by the way, has not relented to this day—Belgrade changed its previous position completely and asked us to support its new stance, there was nothing left for us to do but to satisfy that plea. Although, for us, from this point in time, I can tell you, that was completely unexpected. Russia—Serbia’s sole strategic partner—was faced with a *fait accompli*! That was not in line with relations of a strategic partnership that we strove to build.

The third such issue is NATO, the alliance which Serbians perceive as an adversary, being the region’s only nation that does not want to join it. Indeed, in 2011–2017, from 56 to 74% of Serbians were opposing their country’s membership in NATO (BCSP 2017, p. 25). By contrast, in 2016, 47.3% of Montenegrins<sup>19</sup> and 73% of Macedonians (IRI 2016) wanted their countries to enter the alliance. Serbians’ rejection of NATO is usually attributed to the 1999 bombing of Yugoslavia, despite that throughout that campaign, the alliance kept underlining that its target was the Milošević regime and not Serbian people (Stahl 2013, p. 460). Moreover, researchers argue that the Serbian political elite mostly share the negative perception toward the alliance and, similarly to the Serbian public, treat it as an identity issue (e.g. Subotić 2011; Stahl 2013). The same seems to hold for Serbian intellectuals: even liberal scholar Vojin Dimitrijević calls the bombings “unreasonable”, for they exacerbated the already widespread anti-Western sentiments in Serbia (2009, p. 44).

Serbs’ unacceptance of NATO has been inextricably parallel to their emotional attachment to Russia, which manifested itself most demonstratively in April 1999, when the country’s Parliament voted to one-sidedly accede to the Union of Russia and Belarus. Nowadays, Serbia and Russia are the only Eastern European states where the majority of citizens regard NATO as a threat.<sup>20</sup> Serbian officials tend to assure their Russian counterparts that Serbia has no intention to enter NATO, a move which would transgress Russia’s “red line” (Torralba 2014, p. 6). Few joint Russia-Serbia events do without highlighting their contemporaneous opposition to the alliance: to illustrate, during his visit to Belgrade in 2014, the then speaker of the Russian Parliament Sergey Naryshkin visited the monument of those killed by the 1999 NATO bombings, vigorously stressing in his speech that the “NATO aggression angered Russian society” (*ibid*, p. 3).

On this point, however, two concerns may be raised. First, while the Russian government and society indeed in the 1990s treated Yugoslavia more empathetically than Western powers, Russia still was generally adhering to the West’s line, supporting ICTY formation in 1993 and not vetoing economic sanctions in the UNSC in 1992–1994 and 1998. During the 1999 NATO campaign, Russia’s support of Yugoslavia appears to have been, in the words of Nelayeva and Semenov (2015, p. 48, my translation), “of rather symbolic importance”. Indeed, not only had Moscow failed to prevent the bombings, but also it teamed up with the West to compel Milošević to

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.gov.me/en/News/157178/Latest-opinion-poll-47-3-of-citizens-support-Montenegro-s-NATO-accession.html>.

<sup>20</sup> [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2017&mm=02&dd=13&nav\\_id=100498](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2017&mm=02&dd=13&nav_id=100498).



surrender: the plan jointly elaborated by Russian Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin and Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari served as the basis for UNSC Resolution 1244 sanctioning the deployment of international military forces in Kosovo.

Second, it remains debatable whether rejecting NATO serves Serbia's security interests, given that, as Petrović (2010b) fairly notes, Serbia shares common objective security threats with its neighbouring states, all of which have joined or want to join the alliance. Furthermore, for Serbia, NATO's significance is also linked to the fact that the alliance's Kosovo Force is accountable for protecting Serbs in Kosovo, an idea that Serbian officials overtly express, emphasising the magnitude of not reducing the forces' size. (Torralba 2014, p. 6). Moreover, the parallel increase in Belgrade's cooperation with the CSTO, a military alliance comprising a number of post-Soviet states, involves the country into the security issues of the region Serbia has little, if anything, to do with. Additionally, especially in the 2000s, Serbia's emotional unacceptance of NATO tended to somewhat *exceed* that of Russia: according to Gligorijević (2010), fearing to raise Moscow's concern, Belgrade was reluctant to cooperate with NATO, showing "ideological misperceptions" and "emotional judgements" (*ibid*, p. 95), whereas Russia itself at that period was enjoying a formal strategic partnership with the alliance, pragmatically collaborating with it. This, however, seems to have changed in the current decade: while Russia-NATO cooperation has come to naught in light of the Ukrainian crisis, Serbia has intensified its collaboration with the alliance, having conducted in the twenty-first century in total 197 events of NATO and 370 operations jointly with NATO in contrast to solely 36 military events with Russia (Movchan 2017, pp 5–6). This appears to further widen the gap between emotionality and rationality in Serbia's approach to the alliance.

## 6 Trauma and Victimisation

Serbs' disinclination toward the West and their parallel affection to Russia appear partially consequential of the trauma the nation experienced back during the five-century-long Ottoman control of the Balkans. At that period, the feeling of isolation along with the need to preserve their national identity induced Serbs to adhere closer to their families, prioritising collectivist values over individualist ones (Ristić 2007, pp 191–192) and, consequently, traditionalism over liberalism, for the former is more effective for preserving the unity of a group, be it a family or a nation (Bianchini 2011, pp 99–100). Dulić argues that this type of collectivism, deeply rooted in the Serbian mentality, favours affective and impedes critical thinking, vastly resembling what Edward Said named "Orientalist attitude" consisting in "the self-containing, self-reinforcing character of a closed system, in which objects are what they are because they are what they are, for once, for all time, for ontological reasons that no empirical material can either dislodge or alter" (quoted in Dulić 2011, p. 26).

The trauma seems to have two major implications on the contemporary Serbian identity, both of which are conducive to its revulsion at the West and attraction to Russia. First, in the absence of a Serbian state under the Turkish rule, the primary bulwark of the national identity was the Orthodox Church, which shaped a sense of



organic unity, or “symphony”, between the Serbian state, church and people (Ristić 2007, pp 191–192). The “symphony” is mirrored in the contemporary political process: as Đorđević (2009, p. 268; see also Bianchini 2011, p. 94) puts it, “the state is more interested in clericalization than the Church itself”, arguing that regarding the Kosovo issue, “these interests are intertwined, and not at all easy to establish when the state determines the SOC [Serbian Orthodox Church]’s position on Kosovo, and when the opposite happens: the Church determines and dictates state politics at such important historical moments” (for details, see section 9 below). Second, the occupation period cultivated the nowadays widespread sensation of Serbs as victims of international injustice which, following Stojanović (2011, p. 229), “starts from the premise that, despite its own historical righteousness, ‘the people’ were the historical victim of all the neighbors, and even some more distant peoples”. Dulić (2011, p. 26) argues that the victimisation “has informed Serbian nationalism, which is strongly characterized by the theme of conspiracy against Serbs”.

In the 1990s, the deep sense of victimisation among Serbs contributed well to the success of Milošević’s traditionalist rhetoric and the popular support of his involvement in the Bosnian war. Perhaps ironically, at that period, this sense gained further strength as a consequence of a decade-long international isolation and economic sanctions, when the country was being treated, in Bianchini’s words (2011, p. 78), as “the ‘pariah’ of the ‘European family’”: the West’s coercive measures backfired, raising Milošević’s domestic popularity. Simultaneously, the isolation produced a sense of claustrophobia among those who disagreed with Milošević: as Bianchini (*ibid*, p. 83) puts it, “[a]lthough mostly underestimated by the transatlantic societies, these components of the Serbian society have been notable in number and consistency (while politically divided) throughout the 1990s: however, since the isolation concerned Serbia as a whole, they did not understand why they had to suffer from a punishment connected to a policy they never supported”. As a result, Serbs came out of the 1990s with mixed feelings, conceiving of EU membership “as the only available way out from a distressed sense of enclosure”, simultaneously possessing “a high degree of self-reliance” (*ibid*). The fact that nowadays most Serbs tend to deny the Srebrenica massacre and have difficulty in naming at least one Serbian army’s crime in the Bosnian war, while being capable of easily recalling several crimes others perpetrated against Serbs at that period (Ramet 2010, p. 35), perfectly illustrate the extent to which victimisation is rooted in the Serbian society. Another apt illustration of this phenomenon is the dominant public attitude toward EU integration, according to which, as Stahl (2013, p. 463) puts it, “Serbia deserves EU membership per se and the EU is conspiratorially hindering Serbia’s overdue accession”.

## 7 Relations with Russia and Accession to the EU

Serbia is a unique EU candidate whose official ideology, while setting EU membership as the country’s strategic goal, postulates that its foreign policy rests on four pillars, namely the EU, the US, Russia and China (Żornaczuk 2015, p. 1). This doctrine reflects a general perception among the Serbian political elite that Russia, like the EU, is the country’s strategic partner, a close collaboration with which should be

kept even where/when it runs counter to Serbia's primary strategic goal. In recent years, this has manifested itself along a number of lines. First, Belgrade has been steadily increasing its collaboration with Moscow on petroleum and gas, while the EU, conversely, has been seeking to minimise its energy dependence on Russia. In 2008–2011, the Serbian government sold 56.15% of its shares of NIS, the country's national oil and gas company that possesses two oil refineries, to the Russian state-owned enterprise Gazprom Neft. At the same period, Belgrade also agreed to take part and invest in the South Stream, a project of a gas pipeline from Russia to the EU.

Second, since the very outset of the Russo-Ukrainian crisis, Serbia has been determined not to join EU sanctions on Russia, despite Brussels' continuous requests to express solidarity and bring the country's foreign policy in balance with that of the bloc. Yet, the most of the region's other EU candidates joined the sanctions: notably, even Montenegro did so, in a risky move for a country for which Russia at that time was the main source of FDI, accounting for about 30% of them (Central Bank of Montenegro 2015, p. 108). Importantly, identity-based motives seem to have determined a substantial part of Belgrade's decision, which is evidenced by its official justifications given by Serbian officials. Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić, for instance, noted that "Serbia will not join any sanctions on Russia, as that state is not just our friend and economic and political partner but a state that never imposed sanctions on Serbia"<sup>21</sup> and, in like manner, Nikolić said<sup>22</sup> that "Serbia will not endanger its morality by any hostility towards Russia".<sup>23</sup> Remarkably, Belgrade not only fails to show solidarity with Brussels, but also appears to be willing to capitalise on the bloc's confrontation with Russia, although this seems to be reputationally detrimental to Serbia's EU aspirations. After in August 2014, Putin introduced a food export embargo against the countries that had imposed economic sanctions on Russia, Vučić assured EU officials that Serbia would not use the embargo in order to boost re-export, going as far as warning Serbian farmers they could "end up in prison" for such actions.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, as early as in March 2015, the Russian Federal Service for Veterinary and Phytosanitary Surveillance (Rosselkhoz nadzor) suspected that Serbia was re-exporting Polish apples to Russia. In the following year, Serbia became the largest supplier of apples to Russia, selling 185 times (!) as many apples as on an average year for 10 years before 2014.<sup>25</sup>

Third, alongside with its rapprochement with NATO, Serbia cooperates with Russia in the military sphere. In 2013, Moscow and Belgrade signed bilateral

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-stays-neutral-towards-ukraine-crises-dacic>.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/16/vladimir-putin-russia-serbia-alliance-military-parade>.

<sup>23</sup> This compares with Macedonia, the other EU candidate which rejected to join the sanctions as well, yet, citing the grounds unrelated to its ties with Russia. Skopje's reasoning was that penalising Russia for a violation of the international law would be unfair, since Greece, an EU member state, also breaks international norms by blocking Macedonia's accession to NATO and the EU, facing, however, no punishment from the bloc for that, <http://old.balkan.eu.com/skopje-reserved-eu-sanctions-russia/>.

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.euractiv.rs/english/7679-serbia-will-not-encourage-food-exports-to-russia->.

<sup>25</sup> <https://newsworld.co/the-serbian-apples-found-polish-taste/>.

agreements on military cooperation and strategic partnership and since then, Serbia has held the status of Permanent Observer in the CSTO. In November 2014, during the peak of the Ukrainian conflict, the two countries organised a joint military exercise for the first time in 8 years and have held such exercises regularly ever since. Remarkably, the exercises tend to be met with discontent from Serbia's neighbours: in August 2016, for example, Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović overtly expressed her concern<sup>26</sup> over the upcoming "Slavic Brotherhood" exercise that was about to be conducted in Serbia a month later.<sup>27</sup>

The special relations Belgrade enjoys with Moscow impede Serbia's EU integration success. At the most basic level, it concerns the highly pro-Russian rhetoric of the Serbian political elite. In this respect, one EU member state's diplomat recently said about two Serbian ministers that they "often go a little farther in their declarations of love to Russia, which worries officials in Brussels".<sup>28</sup> Also, because Serbia systematically refuses to support EU official decisions regarding Russia, the country demonstrates the smallest rate of alignment with the bloc among its candidate countries: according to the recent progress reports, in 2016, Montenegro and Albania aligned with 100% of relevant EU declarations and Council decisions, Macedonia with 73%, while Serbia with only 59% (European Commission 2016a, p. 84, b, p. 80, c, p. 80, d, p. 78).<sup>29</sup> In response, the EU tends to slow down Serbia's integration pace due to its concern that Moscow may use Belgrade as its "Trojan horse" in the bloc (Lobanov and Zvezdanović Lobanova 2016, p. 138).<sup>30</sup> This notwithstanding, the EU has yet to punish Serbia, which some scholars attribute to Brussels' apprehension that excessive pressure might further strengthen the Russia-Serbia

<sup>26</sup> <https://www.total-croatia-news.com/item/13433-serbia-to-hold-military-exercises-with-russia-just-30-kilometres-from-croatia-s-border>.

<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, that exercise was taking place simultaneously with NATO's exercise in neighbourly Montenegro, in which Serbia itself and all its neighbours were taking part, <http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/727622/Russia-and-NATO-hold-military-exercises-in-Montenegro-and-Serbia>.

<sup>28</sup> [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2017&mm=08&dd=14&nav\\_id=102059](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2017&mm=08&dd=14&nav_id=102059).

<sup>29</sup> Noteworthy is that when relations with Russia or the three above-mentioned identity-sensitive issues are not involved, Serbia generally complies with EU demands even when it comes to problems of high salience: as the country's foreign Minister Ivica Dačić said in May 2015, "[w]e [Serbs] back all EU decisions except sanctions on Russia" (quoted in Wohlfeld 2015, p. 2). For instance, Serbia's handling of refugee crisis has been very positively appreciated by EU officials (e.g. Lilyanova 2016; <http://serbianmonitor.com/en/politics/30300/migrants-serbia-acceptance-illegal-immigration-smugglers/#.WasMgchJbIU>), while even inside the bloc, the crisis has provoked considerable controversies between and resistance of some of its member states.

<sup>30</sup> It seems, however, debatable how legitimate this concern is. Just prior to being elected as President, Nikolić spoke in favour of Serbia being the "backbone of Russia in Europe", <https://www.sns.org.rs/en/novosti/vesti/we-want-serbia-supporter-russia-eu>. However, in a more recent period, Serbian officials have tried to somewhat dissociate themselves from Russia. To exemplify, in July 2017, the country's minister of European integration Jadranka Joksimović said: "We are Serbs, we are not 'little Russians', nor are we a 'Trojan horse' for Russian interests in the EU", <http://www.seio.gov.rs/eng/news/440/189/335/details/jadranka-joksimovic-we-are-not-russian-trojan-horse-in-europe/>. Also, some authors doubt whether Serbia will be capable of furthering Russian interests once it enters the bloc, given that small states' weight in EU decision-making process is limited. Đukić (2015, p. 32), for instance, reminds that Bulgaria also used to promise to be Russia's voice in the EU, but this hardly seems to have happened.

friendship (*ibid*). On this point, it is notable that expressing solidarity with the EU's foreign policy is not *formally* obligatory for its candidate states; however, EU relations with Russia, especially concerning the Ukrainian crisis, is what the bloc considers to be a crucial dimension of its foreign affairs, solidarity on which is strongly desirable: in the words of Michael Roth, German Minister of state for Europe, “[i]n such matters there can be no ‘neutral position’ for a state that wants to be part of Europe” (cited in Wohlfeld 2015, p. 6). The bloc's critical standpoint on Serbia's support of Russian foreign policy has systematically manifested itself in multiple official documents adopted since 2014: to illustrate, the EU Parliament's recent resolution summoned Serbia,

in line with the requirements of its candidate status, to progressively align its foreign and security policy with that of the EU, including its policy on Russia; considers the conduct of joint Serbia-Russia military exercises regrettable; is concerned about the presence of Russian air facilities in Nis; regrets that in December 2016 Serbia was one of 26 countries that did not support the resolution on Crimea at the United Nations calling for an international observation mission on the human rights situation in the peninsula (European Parliament 2017).

## 8 Russia's Attractiveness—and Russian Policies: History and Contemporaneity

Serbian domestic discourse commonly justifies (and perhaps reinforces) Serbs' positive attitude to Russia and Russians by reference to historical arguments: as explained by Altagić (2015, p. 115, my translation),

[t]his conception has been dominant for the last 300 years of the long and complex political cooperation of Russians and Serbs.<sup>31</sup> Russian military, political, financial and educational support of Orthodox Serbs in their fight for the liberation from the yoke of the Ottoman empire in eighteen and nineteen centuries as well as the cultural and spiritual closeness of the two nations nowadays remains the foundation for Serbs' empathy toward Russians and the basis of Russia's image as a “defender”, “elder sister”, “saviour of Serbia, Serbs and the Orthodox spirit”, etc.

Notably, a narrative grounded on this conception is widespread among the national political elite and tends to be utilised as a rationale for Serbia's foreign policy orientation even by those politicians that have the reputation of being pro-Western (e.g. Konitzer 2011; Subotić 2011; Đukić 2015). This narrative is also widely

<sup>31</sup> Noteworthy is that in different historical periods in the fifteenth-nineteenth centuries, Serbs' dominant perception of Russia rested on diverse ideas—of Moscow as “the Third Rome”, of the Russian tsar as “the great Orthodox emperor” and of Russia as the leading force of aroused Slavism—all of which stem from their national identity (Jovanović 2010, p. 17).

exploited by Russian officials both on formal and informal occasions: to give a telling example, in his last interview as an ambassador, Konuzin said<sup>32</sup>:

It seems to me that during the years that I spent in your country, I learned about the character and mentality of its people fairly well—they are bright representatives of the Slavic tribes. I would like to wish to Serbs that they recapture the faith in their own strength, that they find inspiration in the examples set by their heroes and their history, that they strengthen their national unity around the idea of building a new Serbia—that they guard every inch of their Serb land, which was safeguarded and left as a legacy by their ancestors. Russia will always be your closest friend.

The rationality of this discourse and its usage, however, can be put into question from two perspectives. Firstly, and most intuitively, historical references, even if well-justified, may successfully lay the foundation for amicable ties between ordinary people, however, they tend to fail to account for contemporary (geo-)economic and (geo-)political realities and thus, can hardly serve as a reasonable base for a state's foreign policy. One can agree with Đukić (2015, p. 33) that the rationality of “bask[ing] in the old glory of Serbian-Russian relations” at present is impugnable, even if Russia's “great historical role in the Balkans” (*ibid*, p. 32) and its particular importance for Serbia in the past are admitted.

Secondly, studies show that the history of Russo-Serbian relations has been far more complicated than what the above-mentioned narrative is able to comprise: as Konitzer (2011, p. 104) puts it, “Russia's and Serbia's shared diplomatic history provides a more heterogeneous set of legacies than suggested by the underlying assumption of an unalloyed ‘historical friendship’”. Decades/centuries ago, the Russian Empire indeed managed to successfully create the reputation of the patron of Slavic Orthodox Balkan nations, making its mark on the majority of their fateful events. Yet, scholars note that Russia mostly assisted them when this was beneficial for Russia itself: for instance, both when declaring war on the Ottoman Empire in 1877 and starting mobilisation against Austria-Hungary in 1914, Russia had territorial pretensions to those states, while officially using the pretext of defending Balkan Slavs (Bulgarians in 1877, Serbs in 1914) against aggression (for details, see Jovanović 2010; Timofeev 2010; Konitzer 2011). Furthermore, Russo-Serbian relations have experienced several periods of cooling. In 1878–1903, Russia deliberately focused its attention on Bulgaria, leaving Serbia under Austria-Hungary's influence (Jovanović 2010, p. 16). Likewise, in the interwar period, when the two states enjoyed very limited relations due to their ideological polarity, the Soviet Russia/Union had no intention to “patronise” Yugoslavia: on this point, Timofeev (2010, p. 22) tellingly notes that “the USSR's neutrality was not interrupted even after the lightning destruction of Yugoslavia by the Wehrmacht in 1941”. During the Cold War, the two states mostly had partnership relations<sup>33</sup>—as Wohlfeld (2015, p. 2)

<sup>32</sup> [http://www.b92.net/eng/insight/tvshows.php?yyyy=2012&mm=09&nav\\_id=82233](http://www.b92.net/eng/insight/tvshows.php?yyyy=2012&mm=09&nav_id=82233).

<sup>33</sup> Except for the 1948 Tito-Stalin conflict which, however, was a personal dispute between the two leaders and cleared up after the latter's death.

notes, “Serbia’s collective memory of this period is free of negative experiences”—yet, researchers primarily view their cooperation at that period as pragmatic rather than identity-laden. For instance, as Reljić (2008, p. 2) puts it,

[t]he Soviet Union was the Eastern hegemon, while Yugoslavia was one of the pioneers of the Non-Aligned Movement. There was no mention of fostering “spiritual links” or other special sentiments; on the contrary, the Yugoslav People’s Army, which long remained the fourth-largest military force in Europe, trained hard in the defense of both its western and its eastern borders.

Yet, even if faulty, historical analogies appear to be a more powerful rationale Belgrade might use to justify its balancing between Brussels and Moscow than, for instance, material motives. Serbia does not seem to benefit much from its free trade area with Russia, established in 2000. Indeed, Russia’s impact on Serbian trade is comparatively insignificant and is declining even further: from 2013 to 2016, Russia’s share in Serbia’s exports fell from 7.3 to 5.3%, in imports—from 9.2 to 7.9%, while the EU’s respective shares rose from 62.8 to 66.1% and from 61.8 to 63.1%.<sup>34</sup> On top of that, the EU is Serbia’s by far largest donor: in 2000–2015, the bloc allocated €3 billion to the country, which 4.5 times exceeds €679 million, the contribution which the US, Serbia’s second largest donor, made over the same period.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, the EU is also Serbia’s largest source of FDI: the bloc’s annual FDI to Serbia in 2005–2015 exceeded those coming from the rest of the world more than two times.<sup>36</sup> The sole significant benefits Serbia has managed to gain are thanks to the re-export of agricultural products from the EU to Russia, however, its effect is temporary and potentially hurtful to the country’s reputation in the EU. Furthermore, as Russian economist Andrei Movchan (2017, p. 5) notes, Moscow cooperates with Belgrade primarily where it pursues its own self-interest (be it the construction of a Russian humanitarian base or the restoration of a Serbian railway, linked to a bilateral agreement on gas pipelines), simultaneously showing little interest in supporting Serbian export to Russia. Lastly, Russia does not reward Serbia’s loyalty in the way as how it does with its other friends: on this point, it is notable that Serbia pays more for Russian gas than even some EU members that have no special relations with Russia (e.g. Austria, Italy), not to mention Russia’s traditional allies in the post-Soviet space.<sup>37</sup>

Additionally, in Serbia, Russia seems to play its own game, pursuing its own interests which stem from its present geopolitical confrontation with the EU. In this vein, Moscow tries to exploit and inflame Bosnian Serbs’ nationalism and disappointment in official Belgrade. To exemplify, in July 2015, Russia supported the call for a referendum on whether Bosnia’s national court has authority over the autonomous Serb region of Republika Srpska, launched by the region’s President Milorad

<sup>34</sup> <http://europa.rs/serbia-and-the-eu/trade/serbia-total-exports/?lang=en>; <http://europa.rs/serbia-and-the-eu/trade/serbia-total-imports/?lang=en>.

<sup>35</sup> <https://europa.rs/eu-assistance-to-serbia/?lang=en>.

<sup>36</sup> <https://europa.rs/serbia-and-the-eu/trade/fdi-in-serbia/?lang=en>.

<sup>37</sup> <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-gas-how-much-gazprom/25442003.html>.

Dodik. That move was in discordance with the Serbian government's official position which disfavoured the call (Bechev 2015, p. 3). Occasionally, in its policies toward Belgrade, Moscow resorts to strong/unfriendly measures which, however, appear less coercive than its policies in the post-Soviet space, Russia's "special zone of interest". Among the recent instances of such measures are the above-mentioned discontinuation of the South Stream, the 2015 warning to ban the import of Serbian fruit on the (perhaps, well-grounded) suspicion that they were from the EU and the diminution of gas supply to Serbia by 30% a few days after Putin visited Belgrade in 2014. Officially, the last was done due to Serbia's unpaid \$200 million debt, yet, unofficially, it was largely interpreted as Moscow's desire to penalise Belgrade for the then ongoing investigation aimed to assess the lawfulness of the purchase of NIS by Gazprom Neft in 2008 (Torralba 2014, p. 11). Also, not officially opposing Serbia's EU path (as Russian officials directly state elsewhere<sup>38</sup>), the Kremlin still supports Serbia's alternative media which promote anti-NATO and Eurosceptic sentiments (Atlagić 2015, p. 117),<sup>39</sup> let alone the fact that Russian officials tend to describe the West's treatment of Serbia as unfair and biased and, while expressing Serbia's EU integration aspirations "with understanding", they present it as something Serbia does somehow involuntarily, proceeding from situational material needs.<sup>40</sup> In a recent interview, Rogozin accused Americans of "sowing the seeds of hostility" in the Balkans, arguing that Montenegro's NATO membership is against Serbia and describing the West's alleged dislike for Serbia as chronic and stemming from the fact that Serbs are perceived as "the Balkan Russians".<sup>41</sup>

Serbians generally seem to reason about politics emotively, expressing somewhat indifference about ongoing foreign affairs. In 2016, for instance, half of the respondents could not name a single EU integration-related event happened in 2015, only 9% recalled the conclusion of a new agreement with Kosovo and 19% the opening of the first chapters at the EU membership talks (Lobanov and Lobanova 2016, p. 132). This mindset seems to favour Russia, giving that country a considerable—and sometimes seemingly exhaustless—preference over the EU. In Serbia, Russia tends to be loved by default, independent from and irrespective of what it does: perhaps the most telling evidence of this point is that in 2014, 47% of Serbians were naming Russia the greatest provider of development aid to Serbia, while in reality, 89.49% of the contributions were coming from the EU and the US, whereas Russia's aid was not even mentioned in statistical statements (Szpala 2014, p. 3). Remarkably, such a perception of Russia truly seems to spring from Serbs themselves: while noting a

<sup>38</sup> E.g., see [http://www.b92.net/eng/insight/tvshows.php?yyyy=2012&mm=09&nav\\_id=82233](http://www.b92.net/eng/insight/tvshows.php?yyyy=2012&mm=09&nav_id=82233); [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=05&dd=06&nav\\_id=90217](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=05&dd=06&nav_id=90217).

<sup>39</sup> Commentators note Russia's growing media presence in Serbia, which seems identical to everywhere, nonetheless, in Serbia, the Kremlin-financed Sputnik news agency arguably enjoys a particularly high popularity both due to the already auspicious favourable public opinion as well as the fact that it is better financed and hence, has wider opportunities than most local media, [http://www.b92.net/eng/insight/opinions.php?yyyy=2016&mm=10&dd=24&nav\\_id=99494](http://www.b92.net/eng/insight/opinions.php?yyyy=2016&mm=10&dd=24&nav_id=99494).

<sup>40</sup> [http://www.b92.net/eng/insight/tvshows.php?yyyy=2012&mm=09&nav\\_id=82233](http://www.b92.net/eng/insight/tvshows.php?yyyy=2012&mm=09&nav_id=82233), [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=05&dd=06&nav\\_id=90217](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=05&dd=06&nav_id=90217).

<sup>41</sup> [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2017&mm=06&dd=26&nav\\_id=101635](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2017&mm=06&dd=26&nav_id=101635).



gradual growth of Russia's presence in Serbia through government-financed NGOs, foundations and mass media (Varga 2016, pp 186–187), researchers argue that it would be wrong to completely impute Russia's positive image to its intentional activities, pointing to the fact that the analogous presence of the West in Serbia far exceeds that of Russia (e.g. Atlagić 2015, pp 116–117).

Remarkably, in Serbian domestic discourse, Russia enjoys a position of *the* country, has a special status: in this respect, Jovanović (2010, p. 13) argues that narratives about Russia are present “at the level of dominant social stereotypes/myths, which have been present in the Serbian culture for two centuries now and which have become part of collective mentality”. According to him, Russia is treated as “a symbol with a functional value exclusively in the Serbian political speech and ideological battles” with even those disliking Russia and/or having little knowledge about Russia using that country as a point of reference in their reasoning (*ibid.*, p. 14). In their turn, Russians apparently attribute smaller importance to Serbia, the evidence of which can be found both at the governmental and social levels. Today's Russian Foreign Policy Concept makes no mention of Serbia among Russian foreign policy dimensions, while giving consideration to several states which Moscow traditionally considers as insignificant, for instance, Australia and New Zealand.<sup>42</sup> This seems to be an apt illustration for the argument of Nelayeva and Semenov (2015, p. 54, my translation) that for the Kremlin's foreign policy, Serbia is currently a “sleeping resource”, a country which is “on the periphery of its interests”. Furthermore, in 2004, merely 18% of Russians had special empathy to Serbs, while 69% considered them as just a European nation (Antonenko 2007, p. 12). Analogously, in a poll annually conducted since 2006, where Russian citizens are asked to name five countries they regard as their country's closest friends, Serbia's result has never exceeded 8%.<sup>43</sup> Hence, one can agree with Konuzin that historically, “according to the opinion of many Serbs, Russia was a Serbian strategic partner, although the significance of Russia as a strategic partner was not the same for all of them” (quoted in Petrović 2010a, p. 39).

Another notable point is that strong emotional bonds ensure the persistence of Russia's attraction in Serbia even in the cases of negative bilateral interaction. Illustrative of this point was the very moderate reaction Vucić showed in answer to Russia's unilateral decision to stop the South Stream project in December 2014.<sup>44</sup> Calling it “not good news for Serbia”, Serbian PM regrettably noted that “[w]e [Serbs]

<sup>42</sup> [http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/official\\_documents/-/asset\\_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248](http://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/official_documents/-/asset_publisher/CptlCk6BZ29/content/id/2542248).

<sup>43</sup> <https://www.levada.ru/2017/06/05/druzya-i-vragi-rossii-2/>.

<sup>44</sup> This happened because Bulgaria had suspended its activities on the pipeline due to Gazprom's failure to satisfy the terms of the EU Third Energy Package concerning the separation of energy generation and supply. In response, Putin cancelled the project, blaming the European Commission for allegedly hampering the pipeline's construction. His justification, however, seems hardly convincing, given that the Kremlin had been perfectly familiar with the Third Energy Package's requirements while initiating the South Stream. Considering this, a more compelling explanation of the Kremlin's move is that suggested by Wohlfeld (2015, p. 3) who believes that “economic crisis in Russia meant that it was simply no longer able to afford the largely politically driven project—and that economic concerns had significantly higher priority over friendship”.

have been investing in South Stream for seven years and we in no way contributed to that decisions, it is obvious that we are suffering because of a clash between big [countries]”.<sup>45</sup> Incidentally, the majority of the main Serbian media responded similarly: they employed stricter rhetoric about Russia solely for a short period of time and soon came back to their wonted way of news coverage, directing all their criticism toward the EU (Wohlfeld 2015, p. 4). Noteworthy here is how different were Brussels’ and Moscow’s behaviours toward Belgrade: while the Russian ambassador simply suggested the Serbian government ask the European Commission for compensation (*ibid.*, p. 3), the EU extended its helping hand to Serbia, offering that country an inclusion in the bloc’s energy union, loans for energy projects and an assistance in constructing the Sofia-Dimitrovgrad-Nis gas interconnection (Žornaczuk 2015, p. 2).

Perhaps realising its pre-existing advantage, Russia especially concentrates on an affective rather than a rational domain in its activities in Serbia, which manifests itself across various areas. In international fora like the UN, Russia mostly advocates those interests of Serbia which are identity-laden and which tend to be concomitant with Serbia-West contradictions (e.g. voting against the recognition of the Srebrenica genocide and Kosovo’s membership in UNESCO). The same holds true for Russia’s economic aid, much of which is devoted to its “spiritual” dimension: in 2012, for instance, Moscow allocated \$2 million on the restoration of damaged Orthodox monasteries in Kosovo.<sup>46</sup> The two states’ leaders often participate in each other’s events having great emotional connotation and, remarkably, they are frequently unique in such participations: in October 2014, for example, Putin was a guest of honour at the Belgrade Military Parade commemorating the 70th anniversary of Belgrade’s liberation from Nazis, while Nikolić was the only EU member/candidate leader who attended the Victory Parade in Moscow on 9 May 2015. Conducive to the reinforcement of emotions are the personalities the Kremlin appoints to represent Moscow in Belgrade. Konuzin, for example, was nicknamed a “Serb ambassador to Serbia”, for the tone, presentation and content of his messages were especially strong in conservatism and anti-Westernism, sometimes being hardly compatible with the role of a diplomat. The Serbian Helsinki Committee (2013, p. 3) describes him as “a diplomat who never withheld his criticism of the government he was accredited with”, who “admonished Belgrade relentlessly as if he thought the greater part of Serbia understood him better than its own government”.

Incidentally, that Russia picks up events having strong affective implications and receiving substantial public attention and media coverage seems to strengthen Russia’s positive image even in the cases when the country’s objective contribution/role appears minor. While, as was argued above, the Russian support of Yugoslavia in 1999 hardly had any decisive impact on the NATO campaign, many remembered forever how the then Russian Premier Yevgeny Primakov U-turned his plane when he learnt that NATO’s bombing had begun. Equally memorable was the unexpected

<sup>45</sup> <https://sofiaglobe.com/2014/12/04/south-stream-cancellation-causes-flurry-of-reactions-in-south-eastern-europe/>.

<sup>46</sup> <http://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/639308>.

occupation of the Pristina airport by Russian forces before NATO managed to deploy its troops there. Among more recent instances is the flood that occurred in Serbia in May 2014, to which Moscow reacted fast, providing humanitarian aid and sending rescue teams, the catchy image of which the Serbian media used to depict Russia-Serbia “brotherly” ties. The EU, in turn, responded by allocating €60 million directly plus raising €995 at a conference of international donors (Torralba 2014, p. 3), the reaction which was more considerable in scale, but less eye-catching in emotional terms. Also, in recent years, Russia has been particularly active in helping Serbia to fight forest fires, which tends to receive emotional appeals even from the liberal Serbian media: to illustrate, the Serbian independent news agency B92 recently published a news report on this topic, pathetically entitled “Any large fires in Serbia would be put out by Russians”.<sup>47</sup>

## 9 The Church Factor

In Serbia, the actor that appears to perhaps most actively repulse the West and favour Russia is the Serbian Orthodox Church, the influentiality of which should not be neglected both due to the above-mentioned sense of state-church “symphony” among Serbs and the fact that it is the most trusted institution in the country with the popularity rate of 74%.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, most Serbians regard being Orthodox as a significant quality for a genuine citizen of Serbia (Pew Research Center 2017, p. 12) and consider “Orthodox brotherhood” to be one of the main two reasons (along with Russia’s ability to confront the West) why keeping strong ties with Russia is supposedly to Serbia’s best interest (IRI 2015, p. 24). The Church is notorious for its hard-edged stance on Serbia-West problematic issues, in which it enjoys popularity among radical conservative groups and rarely seeks to dissociate itself from them (Đorđević 2009, p. 279). The most exemplary of such issues is Kosovo, the Church’s position on which some scholars describe as “blindness to the real state of affairs” (*ibid*). The Church actively uses the Kosovo question to ignite radicalism, emotionally portraying Kosovo as “the holy Serbian land”, “Serbian Jerusalem”, “the holy land we [Serbs] will never renounce” and “the cradle” of Serbia (Đorđević 2009, p. 270; Bianchini 2011, p. 94), spurning talks of the Serbian government with the Kosovar authorities as a national betrayal (Đorđević 2009, p. 279). Importantly, the Church also describes Kosovo as “the canonical territory of the Serbian Orthodox Church” which may have a strong affective effect on religious believers and is generally an accurate depiction, yet, in reality, as Đorđević fairly notes, “the state borders and the borders of the SOC’s canonical territory are not the same, and they have never been the same” (*ibid*). To justify its viewpoint, the Church primarily resorts to historical facts which scholars describe as correct, but one-sided, focusing only on the importance of Kosovo for Serbs and disregarding that for other nations (*ibid*, pp

<sup>47</sup> [http://www.b92.net/eng/news/society.php?yyyy=2017&mm=07&dd=21&nav\\_id=101875](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/society.php?yyyy=2017&mm=07&dd=21&nav_id=101875).

<sup>48</sup> <http://pasos.org/trust/2016/main.html>.

272–274).<sup>49</sup> Narratives of this sort dominate the Church’s official position, although certain bishops tend to be more moderate (*ibid.*, p. 277; Bianchini 2011, p. 94).

Furthermore, the Church is a strong proponent of closer ties with Russia, a position that it propagates using Milošević- and Nikolić-style emotional rhetoric particularly at the meetings with Russian religious and state officials: as, for instance, Serbian Patriarch Irinej once told Russian Patriarch Kirill,

the Serbian Orthodox Church makes enormous efforts to persuade the Serbian authorities to maintain ties with Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. I often remind them the words of Nikola Pašić, famous Serbian politician of the first half of the 20th century, who said that we need to tie our small boat of the Serbian Orthodox Church to the ship of the Russian Orthodox Church<sup>50</sup> (for other examples, see Barišić 2016, pp 106–107).

Kirill, in his turn, generally shares all critical remarks about the Serbian government made by his Serbian counterpart, believing that “the political leadership of Serbia is lacking for this adherence to principles”, and “it should lend an ear to the voice of the Serbian Orthodox Church instead of ignoring it”.<sup>51</sup> In recent years, he has visited Belgrade on a regular basis and had meetings not only with the local clergy, but also Serbia’s high-ranked officials, expressing an attitude practically identical to that of the Russian government, that is, the unacceptability of Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence, the illegitimacy of the 1999 NATO operation, the presence of deep historical and spiritual ties between Russia and Serbia, etc. (Barišić 2016, pp 116–119).

## 10 Alternative Explanations

Before giving concluding remarks, it is worth reviewing the competing analytical explanations of what drives Serbia to be friends with Russia. All of them, however, appear at worst blatantly wrong and at best relatively compelling in explaining *single actions/events*, but insufficient to shed light on the *entire picture*. Some authors (e.g. Szpala 2014, pp 1–2; Żornaczuk 2015, p. 1; Varga 2016, p. 194) portray Serbia’s amicable policies toward Russia as somewhat involuntary, involving a great deal of Russian coercion and/or chiefly springing from Serbia’s energy dependency on Russia. While such accounts, as the discussion above shows, certainly contain a grain of truth, they still apparently underestimate the degree of free will in Serbia’s conduct. First, especially collated with Putin’s policies in the post-Soviet space, his coercive measures against Serbia seem rare in time and limited in strength. Whereas the Kremlin does not challenge Serbia’s EU choice provided that Belgrade does not intend to join NATO, in 2012–2013, Russia was strongly resisting Armenia’s and

<sup>49</sup> Perhaps ironically, this seems to somewhat coincide with the Serbian government’s approach to Kosovar Albanians: to illustrate, while claiming the whole Kosovo to belong to Serbia, the government registered solely Kosovar Serbs as voters at the 2006 Constitutional referendum (Stahl 2013, p. 459).

<sup>50</sup> <https://mospat.ru/en/2013/07/17/news88605/>.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

Ukraine's aspirations to conclude EU association agreements. In Armenia's case, that eventually resulted in Putin pushing that country into the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union and in Ukraine's case in Russia annexing its region (Crimea) and inflaming a war in another one (Donbas). Second, in Serbia, both public opinion and all major politicians steadily support cooperation with Russia, which starkly contrasts with, for instance, contemporary Moldova or the pre-Euromaidan Ukraine with their politicians and societies being clearly divided into sizeable Western and Russian camps (Bucataru 2015; Polyakov 2015). As for Serbia's contingency on Russian gas, it should be noted that first, the Serbian government does not seem to have tried to reduce it and second, such a contingency does not prevent a good deal of EU members (e.g. Poland, Germany, the Baltics) from taking a hard stance on Russia.

Equally unconvincing seem the accounts pointing to the primacy of Serbia's instrumental motives in its friendship with Russia. Arlyapova (2015, p. 33) regards Russo-Serbian relations as "rational and pragmatic", arguing that their main driver is an economic collaboration rather than a historical proximity.<sup>52</sup> Yet, this appears to fail to take account of the above-described trends in the evolution of Russia's image in Serbia and the fact that it is exactly history, religion and culture that are commonly emphasised in the Serbian discourse about Russia. Furthermore, as was shown above, for Serbia, its trade with Russia is of comparatively minor importance, strategic economic benefits from this cooperation are questionable, while reputation costs are high.

According to Bieri, what drives Belgrade toward Moscow is that "Putin's Russia is more amenable to the Western Balkans elites and their self-interest in retaining power than the EU" (Bieri 2015, p. 3, see also Wohlfeld 2015, p. 3). This fairly accounts for the close connections that much of the Serbian elite have in Moscow, however, it hardly explains why Serbia still seeks EU integration instead of, for example, participating in EU-led initiatives just formally without assuming legally binding responsibilities (similarly to the conducts of Belarus and Azerbaijan in the Eastern Partnership). A more moderate and correct formulation of this argument can be found in Szpala (2014, p. 5) who, when talking about Moscow's allies in Serbia, mentions not the national elite in general, but only "the oligarchs who have built their position by undertaking unlawful actions and using their political ties".

Torralba (2014, p. 8) believes that balancing between Brussels and Moscow puts Belgrade in a unique position the Serbian government could use to endeavour to reconcile the two sides—for instance, in the Ukrainian conflict. In fairness to Torralba, Nikolić once indeed casually mentioned the possibility of such a mediation.<sup>53</sup> Moreover, Serbian officials elsewhere express their discontent with the increased

<sup>52</sup> This idea, incidentally, is sometimes directly voiced by Vučić. To illustrate, in October 2015, he told Russian PM Dmitry Medvedev that "Serbia will remain a friend of Russia for rational reasons", <http://tass.com/world/832166>. Likewise, addressing the Serbian Parliament in July 2017, he said Serbia wants to be Russia's friend in order to cooperate economically rather than "because of Pushkin and Dostoevsky", <https://eadaily.com/ru/news/2017/07/07/serbiya-druzhit-s-rossiey-ne-iz-za-pushkina-a-iz-za-gaza-i-investicij>.

<sup>53</sup> <https://nahnews.org/143763-prezident-serbii-glav-stran-es-i-rf-nado-zaperet-v-odnoj-komnate>.

EU-Russia confrontation (e.g. Varga 2016, p. 194)—apparently, for it is progressively shrinking the room for Serbia’s “sitting on two stools”. Yet, again, there seems to be no evidence that Belgrade has seriously pursued this goal and acted accordingly, unlike Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko who, taking advantage of his friendly ties with both Putin and Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, organised peace talks between them in Minsk in 2014–2015, which consequently helped him enhance EU-Belarus ties as well. On this point, one can agree with Đukić (2015, p. 33) that currently Serbia is a “watershed” rather than a “bridge” between the West and the East, despite that the latter notion is popular in Serbian domestic discourse.

Finally, Torralba (2014, p. 7) also argues that in formulating its foreign policy doctrine, the Serbian government seems to follow the positioning of Tito’s Yugoslavia and its non-aligned status during the Cold War. On the one hand, a certain influence of inertia in contemporary Serbia’s foreign policy should not be completely ruled out. To exemplify, Vučić explicitly referred to Tito when proposing a free-trade area in Western Balkans, praising him for excelling at linking Balkan nations to each other.<sup>54</sup> Moreover, given that the idea of neutrality enjoys considerable popularity among Serbians<sup>55</sup> and they still deem Tito the best leader their country has ever had,<sup>56</sup> one may suppose Vučić conducts Tito-style policies to gain more popularity. On the other hand, one should not neglect significant differences between today’s Serbia with the former Yugoslavia. First, the invariable emotional stresses of Russia’s particularity in Serbian domestic discourse appear at odds with the above-discussed Yugoslav pragmatic *realpolitik* approach to the Soviet Union. Neither is today’s policy of Serbia toward the West identical to that of Tito, given its status as an EU candidate state and regular military trainings with NATO forces. Second, in terms of geostrategic importance and capabilities, contemporary Serbia is hardly equal to the former Yugoslavia which was the leader of the Non-Alignment Movement and whose stability was “of decisive importance for maintaining the status quo in Europe” (Reljić 2008, p. 2). Importantly, Serbian leaders themselves appear to have the same vision: Vučić, for instance, elsewhere presents Serbia as “a numerically and territorially small country” which is ready “to do everything to never be on the list of the countries that were today being sent to hell by the American president” so as to survive in a dangerous world.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> <https://www.politico.eu/article/q-and-a-with-aleksandar-vucic-serbia-prime-minister-president-election/>.

<sup>55</sup> In 2017, for example, 59% of them supported keeping the policy of neutrality (BCSP 2017, p. 36) and 51% argued Serbia should abstain from supporting any side in the Ukrainian conflict (*ibid.*, p. 23). In 2015, 61% considered Serbia to be neither a Western, nor an Eastern state (IRI 2015, p. 26).

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/vucic-still-less-popular-than-tito-11-16-2016>.

<sup>57</sup> [https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2017&mm=09&dd=20&nav\\_id=102357](https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2017&mm=09&dd=20&nav_id=102357).

## 11 Discussion

The article has demonstrated that in the post-Milošević period, Serbia has largely treated its relations with Russia as an *identity* issue with the country's approach to them having been mostly *emotionally*-driven rather than deemed in terms of instrumental cost–benefit calculation. Moreover, if considered in parallel with Serbia's approach toward the EU, this case study represents a curious situation, where one actor (Serbia), when determining its foreign policy orientation, finds itself in a position between a side to which it perceives a strong emotional attraction in the practical absence of rational motives to cooperate (Russia) and another side which it perceives as almost a polar opposite (the EU). This situation is probably best summed up by Serbian sociologist Srećko Mihailović who calls Serbia “a country whose heart is in the East and its pocket in the West”, noting that “[w]here emotions are concerned, Russia has the advantage, whereas reason is on the side of the Western countries”.<sup>58</sup>

This configuration of motives makes Serbia a particular case among countries balancing between different (often competing) powers. Some countries navigate between other powers chiefly for instrumental benefits: for instance, Kazakhstan's “multi-vector” foreign policy is usually regarded as a mere attempt to pragmatically capitalise on the comparative advantages of the EU, Russia and China (e.g. Patalakh 2018). In other cases, countries manoeuvre between two diverse identities, each of which appeals to substantial parts of their population: to illustrate, Ukraine's straddling between Russia and the EU in 2010–2013 was mostly due to the country's identity being split between the pro-Russian East and the pro-EU West (Kropatcheva 2014). Against this backdrop, Serbia's balancing between a strong affective attachment on one side and considerable instrumental gains on the other is peculiar.

If viewed without a linkage to the EU, Serbia's approach to Russia can serve, following Chidley's (2014, p. 154) constructivist framework of alignment, as an illustrative case of “alignment for identity” (as opposed to security-driven alignments, traditionally considered by neorealists). Also, if viewed as a “special relationship” case (see Oppermann and Hansel 2016, pp 3–4 for more details on the concept), Serbian-Russian relations may add to the IR literature on this concept. Indeed, while the US-Israeli special relationship is mainly based on the *instrumental benefits* both sides receive from it (Bar-Siman-Tov 1998), Germany's special relationship with Israel is primarily grounded in *morality*, in the country's perception of historical responsibility towards Jews for the Holocaust (Oppermann and Hansel 2016), Serbia's special relationship with Russia mostly rests on a *sense of identification* and an attendant affective attachment.

An important peculiarity of this case study is that it focuses on emotion and identity as foreign policy determinants, proceeding from the theorisation of states as *groups of people*. Indeed, while the general argument that affect may play a key role in interstate friendship is not new, existent studies on this topic (e.g. Eznack 2013;

<sup>58</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/survey-serbias-heart-is-in-the-east-pocket-in-the-west/>.



Eznack and Koschut (2014) center solely on *decision-makers'* emotions. Likewise, Gvalia et al. (2013), arguing that Georgia's foreign policy is largely defined by its state identity, explicitly consider only its political elite's views on it.

Importantly, the study provides opportunities for speculation about further tendencies in Serbia's foreign policy. First, thanks to emotions, Serbia's affection to Russia is long-lasting with little dependence on Russia's current level of development. By contrast, whether Serbia finds the EU to be an attractive partner hinges more strongly on the bloc's present success and objective (in the first place, socio-economic) accomplishments. Second, to maintain this attraction, Brussels needs to regularly reinforce it by intense deliberate activities (public diplomacy projects, material aid, etc.), while Moscow is able to widely capitalise on the emotional ties created by the preceding generations of Russians and, hence, the activities the Kremlin has to undertake nowadays generally need not be as expensive and intensive as those of the EU. Moreover, in the long run, if the EU falls into a deep crisis or if Russia's socio-economic development significantly enhances, Belgrade is likely to voluntarily drift towards its traditional ally.

Yet, speculating on the shorter-term dynamics of Serbia's conduct necessitates assessing the current strength of emotional and pragmatic forces among the Serbian society and political elite. Some analysts argue that the affective component is of particular importance in Serbian politics. For example, Dimitrijević (2009, p. 44) fears that support for EU integration in Serbia is "shallow" and "can thus be annulled by any stronger emotional experience". Đorđević (2009, p. 267) posits that Serbs are especially obsessed with historical references, a feature which he, however, regards as common for the whole region, arguing that "the Balkan nations 'produce' much more history than they are able to digest". Toporov considers Russo-Serbian partnership to rest on "the Serbs' irrational love for Russia", stating that "[u]nlike the Russian and Serbian leaders, the Serbian voters are not pragmatics or cynics but idealists".<sup>59</sup> Finally, Jovanović (2010, p. 13) imputes affective reasoning to the national political culture in general, contending that "[t]he suppression of the rational and the domination of an emotional attitude to politics is one of the serious constant features and faults of the Serbian political mentality". On close inspection, nonetheless, it appears that these analysts somewhat overrate the role of emotions in Serbian political life and in fact, Brnabić's recent statement that should Serbia face a strict choice between Russia and the EU, the country will eventually opt for the latter,<sup>60</sup> reflects both the above-described opinion polls results and the country's foreign policy in the recent past (e.g., in the cases of ICTY and NATO with which Serbia, after some resistance, eventually began to collaborate) as well as in more distant history. Indeed, while Serbia may have long wanted to align with Russia on the basis of identity,

mundane considerations of geography, along with historical economic disparities between the East and West, places Serbia in a situation where the bulk of its

<sup>59</sup> <https://eadaily.com/en/news/2017/04/05/why-havent-millions-of-serbs-voted-for-vucic>.

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.euractiv.com/section/enlargement/news/brnabic-if-forced-to-choose-serbia-would-pick-eu-over-russia/>.

economy remained linked to “the West”, whether in the form of the Habsburg Empire, Germany, or today’s EU (Konitzer 2011, p. 109).

Serbia’s present-day policy of balancing seems to mirror how the country currently perceives the strength of the rational and affective forces. On the one hand, the EU’s rational attractiveness is high enough to keep Serbia on a European track despite the growing sense of enlargement fatigue inside the EU and a series of crises the bloc has been lately undergoing (for details, see Patalakh 2017), but too weak to induce Serbia to totally relinquish its stance on the sensitive issues of its national identity (Russia, NATO and Kosovo). Concurrently, the country’s emotional attachment to Russia seems sufficiently strong to ensure Belgrade’s friendliness towards Moscow despite Brussels’ pressure and the Kremlin’s occasional coercive measures, but too scanty to encourage Serbia to voluntarily fall into the Russian orbit without palpable material benefits.

Lastly, one may argue that if Serbia enters the EU, emotional attachment to the West is likely to develop in the Serbian mentality over a long horizon. In social psychological terms, nonetheless, this is possible, but not necessary, for research shows that proximity correlates both with strong attraction and strong repulsion (Finkel and Baumeister 2010, p. 432). Otherwise stated, there are always higher odds that you will love or hate someone who is close to you or with whom you often deal; here everything depends on the experience of bilateral interaction in each concrete case. Under the present conditions, a boost in the EU’s attractiveness for Serbia hardly seems likely, for attraction is known to correlate with dyadic reciprocity, that is, someone can be expected to be *particularly* liked by someone he/she *particularly* likes (*ibid*, pp 429–430). Currently, Brussels may be providing more material assistance to Serbia than Moscow, but the bloc treats Serbia in the same way as it treats any other EU candidate. By contrast, Russia is perceived in Serbia as the country which was *most actively* standing for Yugoslavia in 1999, which *most actively* supported Serbian independence aspirations during the Ottoman rule and which *most actively* stands by Serbia on Kosovo and ICTY issues.

### Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** I, Artem Patalakh, declare that I have no conflict of interest.

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