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## Beyond National Interests: Identity Conflict and Serbia's Neutrality toward the Crisis in Ukraine

**Abstract.** Many view the crisis in Ukraine as the most dangerous challenge to European security since the end of the Cold War. While almost all other European countries condemned the Russian annexation of the Crimea, Serbia chose to remain neutral. Serbia's decision makers have explained their policy as a rational pursuit of national interests. In this article I argue that this account is incomplete without an analysis of Serbia's various identities. In particular, I suggest that the ongoing crisis in Ukraine has amplified an existing conflict between two powerful collective identity narratives in Serbia: the one of belonging to Europe and the other of brotherhood with Russia. To cope with this internal identity conflict and to reduce the cognitive dissonance thus created, Serbia adopted a neutral policy as a form of avoidance.

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### Introduction

Moscow's annexation of the Crimea, or "Europe's 9/11", as NATO General Secretary Anders Fogh Rasmussen has called it, escalated the tensions between Russia and the West to a level not seen since the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> The Crimean referendum held on March 16, which had 95.5% of the voters support integration with the Russian Federation, was declared invalid by 13 members of the Security Council and 100 UN members in a resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly.<sup>2</sup> The US and the EU immediately condemned Russia's annexation

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<sup>2</sup> Only 11 countries voted against the resolution, 58 abstained, and 24 were absent. See UNGA, Resolution 68/262, adopted on 27 March, 2014: Territorial Integrity of Ukraine. 1 April 2014, available at <[http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/262](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/262)>.

as an act of aggression and a breach of international law. They imposed sanctions on the leaders and businessmen involved and urged Moscow to withdraw its troops from Ukraine. Most other European non-candidate, candidate and potential candidate states have joined in the EU sanctions.<sup>3</sup> Serbia, however, adopted a different policy: it abstained from the voting in the General Assembly of the United Nations and adopted, in the words of Serbia's President Tomislav Nikolić, "a position of neutrality with regards to the situation in Ukraine".<sup>4</sup> How can such a reaction be explained?

According to Serbia's decision makers, neutrality toward the crisis in Ukraine is the most cost-effective way of defending the national interests, related most importantly to the questions of Kosovo, trade, energy security, and EU integration. Although the EU openly criticized Serbia's policy, its rationale went almost entirely unchallenged at home. The key argument advanced in this article is that the account of Serbia's neutrality as a purely rational choice is inadequate, for it overlooks a discursive context that has fostered a powerful domestic resonance while eliminating other policy options as illegitimate. Specifically, I argue that the crisis in Ukraine has amplified an existing tension between two powerful collective identity narratives in Serbia: one of belonging to Europe and the other of brotherhood with Russia. Unable to change either its identity or its behavior, Serbia resorted to *avoidance*, a defensive mechanism used by actors who seek to reduce an identity conflict by selective exposure to information and denial of the dissonance.

The article proceeds in the following order: in the first section I challenge the assumption that Serbia's neutral position can be fully explained as a rational pursuit of national interests. In the second section, I build a case that the neutrality policy resonated so well and seemed the only legitimate option because it was the only viable way out of an identity conflict.

### Rational Pursuit of National Interests?

Can Serbia's neutral policy toward the crisis in Ukraine be explained solely in terms of national interests? According to the conventional rationalist wisdom in International Relations states act by default in accordance with the logic of consequences: they are rational, self-interested, and purposeful actors with fixed preferences and identities, and their actions are driven by national interests. Both realists and liberals share such a view although the former reduce national

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The voting record is available at <<https://papersmart.unmeetings.org/media2/2498292/voting-record.pdf>>. All internet sources were accessed on 21 October 2014.

<sup>3</sup> The only two exceptions are Macedonia and Turkey.

<sup>4</sup> Nikolić: Srbija i dalje neutralna po pitanju Ukrajine, *Blic*, 10 April 2014, available at <<http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/456896/Nikolic-Srbija-i-dalje-neutralna-po-pitanju-Ukrajine>>.

interests to issues pertaining to security, sovereignty, and territorial integrity while the latter have a more flexible understanding that also encompasses economic interests, democracy, and human rights.

On a number of occasions, Serbia's state representatives justified Serbia's neutrality toward the crisis in Ukraine as a rational pursuit of national interests. By remaining neutral to the conflict, Serbia, they argue, will defend its territorial integrity by ensuring Russia's support in the UN Security Council,<sup>5</sup> protect its energy interests by facilitating the implementation of the recently declared nil South Stream project,<sup>6</sup> advance its trade interests by not endangering the Free Trade Agreement with Russia,<sup>7</sup> and achieve these goals without jeopardizing its foreign policy interest of joining the EU.<sup>8</sup> Although this line of argumentation is widely approved in Serbia, I suggest that it is far from uncontroversial from a purely rationalist vantage point, as the benefits of such neutrality do not unequivocally outweigh its costs. Let me examine the arguments in turn.

The first argument is that by remaining neutral, Serbia is protecting its territorial integrity. The logic behind this argument is that if Serbia joined the EU-led sanctions against Moscow, it could lose Russia's support in the UN Security Council over the Kosovo issue. However, by remaining neutral in the face of a blatant violation of the territorial integrity of a UN member state, Serbia has missed a chance to demonstrate its strong attachment to the principle of the inviolability of borders. While addressing Russia's Federal Assembly in an attempt to persuade it to ratify the Treaty on Accession of the Republic of Crimea to Russia, Vladimir Putin made a direct reference to Kosovo:

"Our western partners created the Kosovo precedent with their own hands. In a situation which is absolutely the same as the one in the Crimea, they recognized Kosovo's secession from Serbia as legitimate, arguing that no permission from the country's central authority was necessary for a unilateral declaration of independence."<sup>9</sup>

Instead of rejecting the idea that Kosovo offered a relevant precedent, Serbia remained silent out of fear that an open criticism of Putin's policy could undermine Russia's support in the UN Security Council. It is true that a Russian and

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<sup>5</sup> Tomislav Nikolić: Nećemo priznati Krim, *Večernje novosti*, 13 August 2014, available at <<http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:505301-Tomislav-Nikolic-Necemo-priznati-Krim>>.

<sup>6</sup> Dačić u Berlinu: Srbija prati svoje interese, *SEEBIZ*, 22 August 2014, available at <<http://www.seebiz.eu/dacic-u-berlinu-srbija-prati-svoje-interese/ar-93728/>>.

<sup>7</sup> Naš stav o Ukrajini nije neutralnost, *Vesti*, 5 August 2014, available at <<http://www.vestionline.com/Vesti/Srbija/423742/Nas-stav-o-Ukrajini-nije-neutralnost>>.

<sup>8</sup> Vučić: stav o Ukrajini nepromenjen, *B92*, 1 July 2014, available at <[http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2014&mm=07&dd=01&nav\\_category=11&nav\\_id=871141](http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2014&mm=07&dd=01&nav_category=11&nav_id=871141)>.

<sup>9</sup> Putin: Crimea Similar to Kosovo, West is Rewriting Its Own Rule Book, *Russia Today*, 18 March 2014, available at <<http://rt.com/news/putin-address-parliament-crimea-562/>>.

Chinese veto of Kosovo's independence in the UN Security Council is the last weapon of Serbia's counter-secessionist policy. Beyond that, it has lost much of its usefulness. Most important, in September 2010, Serbia agreed in the UN General Assembly to move the future negotiations on the status of Kosovo from the auspices of the UN to the EU. Ever since, it has been the administration in Brussels and not in New York that has called the shots where Belgrade/Prishtina relationships are concerned, including the conclusion of the Brussels Agreement in April 2013. If Serbia had participated in the EU-backed sanctions, it could have expected some reciprocal measures, but Moscow never threatened a change of its position within the UN Security Council. Even if Russia relinquished its veto over Kosovo in a wider strategic trade-off with the West, which is possible but highly unlikely, Serbia could still count on China's support. In sum, by remaining neutral in the crisis in Ukraine, Serbia cannot realistically hope to achieve much with respect to its counter-secessionist policy; in fact, it may even weaken its credibility as a principled defender of territorial integrity.

The second argument in favor of the neutral policy toward the crisis in Ukraine is related to energy security. The logic behind this argument is that, by joining the EU-led sanctions, Serbia would undermine its current supply of Russian gas, especially in the light of the halted South Stream project. To begin with, like other Eastern and Southeast European states, Serbia is almost entirely dependent on the Russian gas that is currently transported through Ukraine.<sup>10</sup> In the past, unpredictable relations between Kiev and Moscow have been a cause for concern, and the current crisis augurs yet another freezing winter for Europe. For better or worse, however, Serbia's neutral position toward Ukraine will obviously not have even the slightest effect on the evolution of the seriously deteriorating relationship between Kiev and Moscow. It would be equally unrealistic to expect that Russia would halt its exports of gas to Serbia in retaliation for its joining in the EU sanctions. The situation was similar when it came to the South Stream project. In 2008, Serbia sold 51% of its oil industry (NIS) to Russia's Gazprom Neft without a tender and for the amount of €400 million, which the then Minister of Economy Mlađan Dinkić characterized as "humiliating".<sup>11</sup> Further, the two sides agreed to construct a 422 km long section of the South Stream pipeline through Serbia.<sup>12</sup> As the transaction was

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<sup>10</sup> Only 20% of Serbia's gas consumption is provided domestically, 80% is supplied by Russia.

<sup>11</sup> Radovan Ž. MARKOVIĆ, NIS poklon Rusima za podršku, *Blic*, 27 February 2008, available at <<http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Tema-Dana/31960/NIS-poklon-Rusima-za-podrsku/print>>.

<sup>12</sup> Oleg SHCHEDEROV, Putin: Crimea Similar To Kosovo, *Reuters*, 18 March 2014, available at <<http://uk.reuters.com/article/2008/01/25/uk-russia-serbia-idUKL2515142420080125>>; it is interesting that Serbia is the only country in the region with the minority of the stakes (49%) in a joint venture with Gazprom. Information regarding the envisaged structures of the South Stream joint ventures is available at <<http://www.south-stream.info/route/>>.

very favorable for Moscow, it is widely assumed that Belgrade accepted it as part of a wider political trade-off including Russia's support in the UN Security Council.<sup>13</sup> Leaving aside the debate whether the deal was beneficial for Serbia or not, the question remains whether Serbia had been able actually undermine the South Stream project if it had taken Kiev's side and joined the EU-led sanctions. The key to the successful completion of the project had always lain with Brussels and Moscow, not Belgrade. The construction of pipelines in Bulgaria has been suspended owing to the lack of transparency and compliance with European law and, most important, because of the ongoing tensions in Ukraine. Consequently, Serbia's neutral position and its own construction of the South Stream branch, which began very ceremoniously in November 2013, can have only a marginal impact, if any, on the continuing negotiations between Brussels and Moscow. Putin's sudden announcement made in December 2014 that the South Stream is "dead" came as an extremely unpleasant surprise for many in Serbia, somewhat weakening the entire energy security argument in favor of the neutral policy.

The third argument invoked by Serbia's decision makers to defend the neutral policy toward Ukraine is related to the country's trade interests. According to the prime minister of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, imposing sanctions on Russia could endanger Serbia's trade relations with Russia.<sup>14</sup> His deputy in charge of trade relations has even argued that the EU sanctions present a great opportunity for Serbia to increase its exports to Russia.<sup>15</sup> This line of argument is more plausible than the preceding ones, as Russia has indeed responded to EU sanctions with economic countermeasures that restrict the import of agricultural products. This step has already had a negative impact on trade relations between certain member states and Russia. However, the rationality behind this logic, as before, is not entirely unproblematic. To begin with, when political and security interests collide with trade interests, states usually prioritize the former. The EU member states have imposed sanctions on Moscow, in spite of the trade damage involved, in order to protect national security interests that are considered to be more important. Most non-candidate, candidate and potential candidate states followed suit. Even Montenegro, the country with arguably the strongest economic ties to Russia, with 32% of its enterprises un-

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<sup>13</sup> Dušan RELJIĆ, *Rusija i Zapadni Balkan*, ISAC Fond Belgrade, 2009, 29, available at <<http://www.isac-fund.org/download/Rusija%20i%20zapadni%20balkan.pdf>>.

<sup>14</sup> Naš stav o Ukrajini nije neutralnost.

<sup>15</sup> Sankcije Rusiji šansa za povećanje izvoza Srbije, *Akter*, 19 August 2014, available at <<http://akter.co.rs/26-ekonomija/101179-sankcije-rusiji-ansa-za-pove-anje-izvoza-srbije.html>>.

der Russian ownership,<sup>16</sup> has defended the sanctions as a way of protecting its national interest in joining NATO.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, although Russia is indeed an important trade partner for Serbia, its importance should not be exaggerated. Serbia could suffer economically from imposing sanctions on Russia, but the damage would probably be much less significant than is often assumed.<sup>18</sup> Russia is the third-most-important trading partner of Serbia, after Italy and Germany. However, the trade relations are characterized by a huge deficit on the Serbian side of the ledger, amounting to \$ 840 million in 2013. By and large, Serbia imports gas and oil from Russia, and exports women's fashion, socks and apples.<sup>19</sup> Serbia's most important trade partner by far is the EU (62.4% of overall trade in 2013). Trade with Russia is almost eight times smaller (8.3% in 2013).<sup>20</sup> If it is rational for a state to align its foreign policy with its trade, then it would be much more rational for Serbia to align its foreign policy with the EU rather than Russia. Last but not least, if Serbia wants to join the EU, it will ultimately have to abandon its Free Trade Agreement with Moscow and direct its economy toward the EU still more. The idea of exploiting EU sanctions against Russia to increase Serbia's exports to that country has also proven unrealistic. The EU requested all candidate states not to take advantage of possible Russian countermeasures. Serbia heeded the call and promised not to offer extra export subventions for exports to Russia.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the European Commission took emergency measures in August 2014 to compensate farmers of fruits, vegetables, and dairy products who were affected by the restrictive Russian countermeasures.<sup>22</sup> Thus, any damage

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<sup>16</sup> David CLARK / Andrew FOXALL, Russia's Role in the Balkans – Cause for Concern, *The Henry Jackson Society*, June 2014, 10, available at <<http://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Russias-Role-in-the-Balkans.pdf>>.

<sup>17</sup> Crna Gora razočarala Rusiju, *RTS*, 14 April 2014, available at <<http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/11/Region/1575025/Crna+Gora+razo%C4%8Ddarala+Rusiju.html>>.

<sup>18</sup> For example, according to *Informer*, a Serbian pro-government tabloid, Russia's economic retaliation against Serbia would include suspension of the Free Trade Agreement, thus incurring economic damages of up to 1.5 billion Euros. *Srbija između EU i Rusije*, *Informer*, 29 March 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Jasminka SIMIĆ, Ekonomski aspekti strateškog partnerstva Srbije i Rusije, *Novi Vek* 6, February 2014, available at <[http://ceas-serbia.org/root/images/Novi\\_vek\\_\\_br\\_06-J.Simic.pdf](http://ceas-serbia.org/root/images/Novi_vek__br_06-J.Simic.pdf)>.

<sup>20</sup> Republički zavod za statistiku, Spoljnotrgovinska robna razmena Republike Srbije – konačni podaci, available at <<http://webrzs.stat.gov.rs/WebSite/public/PublicationView.aspx?pKey=41&pLevel=1&pubType=2&pubKey=2461>>.

<sup>21</sup> Odgovor Vučića. Poštujemo EU i nećemo dodatno podsticati izvoz u Rusiju, *Blic*, 22 August 2014, available at <<http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/489613/ODGOVOR-VUCICA-Postujemo-EU-i-necemo-dodatno-podsticati-izvoz-u-Rusiju>>.

<sup>22</sup> EU Ready to Support Dairy Sector Hit by Russia Food Ban, *Euractiv*, 22 August 2014, available at <<http://www.euractiv.com/sections/agriculture-food/eu-ready-support-dairy-sector-hit-russia-food-ban-307935>>.

resulting from Russian countermeasures could at least partially be covered by the EU's support.

The fourth interest-based argument in favor of Serbian neutrality vis-à-vis the conflict in Ukraine has been that such a policy does not undermine Serbia's EU membership bid, and perhaps even furthers it. It is true that Serbia's accession negotiations are currently not halted despite Belgrade's refusal to join in the EU-led sanctions against Russia. However, the only reason for this is because Chapter 31, which covers the Foreign, Security and Defence Policy, has not yet been opened. Nevertheless, as accession negotiations continue, Serbia will be increasingly under pressure to fully adopt the political *acquis* of the EU in this area, including EU sanctions and restrictive measures against Russia. In the medium term, the position of Serbia will become untenable if Serbia remains on the path to EU membership.<sup>23</sup>

Even less realistic than the belief that Serbia's neutrality is compatible with EU membership is the idea that by openly flirting with Moscow, Serbia is making its path into the EU easier. Even if such geopolitical calculation motivates the Serbian leadership, there is no proof that it actually yields any results. Serbia's balancing act, which most recently includes the organization of a military parade in honor of Russian President Putin in October 2014, can definitely make headlines in Western Europe, but not necessarily in a good way. Serbia is already a laggard in the process of European integration, and by taking the appearance of a Russian Trojan horse inside the EU, it can hardly enhance its membership prospects.

In sum, Serbia's neutral policy vis-à-vis the crisis in Ukraine cannot be fully explained as purely rational and interest-driven. As this section has demonstrated the logic of consequences used by Serbia's decision makers to legitimize neutrality is far from unproblematic. Neither Serbia's territorial integrity nor its EU membership prospects nor its energy security could be negatively affected by an open alignment with the EU foreign policy on Ukraine. The potential effects upon Serbian trade interests could indeed be negative, but the effect would probably be smaller than is believed. It is therefore clear that under scrutiny, Serbia's policy is not entirely *explainable* from the rationalist point of view. Superficially, the neutrality policy was received very well domestically, being seen as a skilled tactical maneuver, but it also exposed a complete lack of strategic vision. Therefore, for a fuller account of Serbia's behavior as well as the reasons why it resonated so strongly and went virtually unchallenged at home, one must probe deeper, into the underlying politics of identity.

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<sup>23</sup> "Naš stav o Ukrajini nije neutralnost", *Vesti*, 5 August 2014, available at <<http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/423742/Nas-stav-o-Ukrajini-nije-neutralnost>>.

## A Response to an Identity Conflict

To understand Serbia's behavior, I draw on social constructivism, which posits that states act in accordance with the logic of appropriateness: they are reflexive entities whose actions are driven by variable identities. Social constructivists criticize the rationalist conceptualization of national interests for disregarding the cultural context in which such interests are being formed. As Jutta Weldes explains,

"National interests are social constructions created as meaningful objects out of the inter-subjective and culturally established meanings within which the world, particularly the international system and the place of the state in it, is understood."<sup>24</sup>

Further, social constructivists argue that national interests are inextricably linked to state identities. While national interests refer to what states want, state identities refer to who they are. Alexander Wendt aptly explains the connection between the two: "Interests presuppose identities because an actor cannot know what it wants until it knows who it is."<sup>25</sup>

Drawing on these ideas, I make the case that Serbia's neutral position vis-à-vis the crisis in Ukraine can be understood as policy that is identity-driven. In particular, I argue that the crisis has amplified existing tensions between two deeply rooted collective identities of Serbia. According to Alexander Wendt, collective identity "relies on the mechanism of incorporating the Other into the Self in the form of a socially constituted 'Me'".<sup>26</sup> Serbia's geopolitical position between several large empires both during the Middle Ages and in the nineteenth and early twentieth century generated a sense of liminality that persists to date. Contemporary Serbs, including top decision makers, often quote St. Sava (1175–1236), the founding father of the Serbian Orthodox Church, to whom is falsely attributed the dictum that "we are doomed by fate to be the East in the West and the West in the East".<sup>27</sup> I will now describe the two dominant collective identities of Serbia and then demonstrate how the crisis in Ukraine has amplified the tensions between them. I will then suggest that Serbia's neutral

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<sup>24</sup> Jutta WELDES, *Constructing National Interests: The United States and the Cuban Missile Crisis*. Minneapolis/MN 1999, 10.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander WENDT, *The Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge 1999, 291.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>27</sup> For example, in 2010, a group of 200 intellectuals, including former Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica, supported Serbia's policy of military neutrality (adopted in December 2007) with the following words: "By saying that 'Serbia is the East in the West and West in the East', her path, identity and place among the nations was determined. Serbia has never been a member of any military alliance, either Eastern or Western." *Tekst proglašavanja o referendumu o NATO-u*, available at <<http://www.slobodanjovanovic.org/category/politika/page/57/?lang=lat>>.

policy came about as a form of avoidance of the identity conflict and the cognitive dissonance thereby created.

### *Two Collective Identities of Serbia*

Serbia views itself as a European state not only in geographical but also in cultural and political terms. Narratives about belonging to Europe have been inextricably linked with Serbia's nation-building project since its very beginning in the early nineteenth century. To construct a Serbian national identity that was clearly distinct from the oriental Ottoman Empire, nation-builders sought Serbia's European roots in its role as a defender of Christianity during the Middle Ages.<sup>28</sup> Even Slobodan Milošević, who more than anyone else in modern history managed to isolate Serbia from the rest of Europe, used the same narrative. In June 1989, on the occasion of the 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the First Battle of Kosovo, he stated:

“Six centuries ago, Serbia heroically defended itself in the field of Kosovo, but it also defended Europe. Serbia was at that time the bastion that defended the European culture, religion, and European society in general. Therefore today it appears not only unjust but even unhistorical and completely absurd to talk about Serbia's belonging in Europe.”<sup>29</sup>

The overthrow of Slobodan Milošević and his regime in October 2000 was largely interpreted as “Serbia's return to Europe”.<sup>30</sup> All post-Milošević governments set membership in the EU as their most important foreign policy goal. Ever since, domestic debates have been permeated with references to all things good and progressive as “European”, as opposed to “non-European”, a marker of all things bad and backward. Serbia's nationalists too have referred to Europe when defending the principles they hold in high esteem, such as territorial integrity. For example, Serbia's former Prime Minister Vojislav Koštunica (2004–2008) often defended Serbia's claim to Kosovo by insisting that Serbia was an “old European state”.<sup>31</sup> Similarly, in February 2008, only two days after Kosovo had unilaterally declared its independence, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Vuk Jeremić delivered a speech in the European Parliament in which he stated that he was both “a proud European, and an ashamed European”. Proud because Serbia is historically and culturally bound “to a constellation of nations that,

<sup>28</sup> Goran TERŠIĆ, “Nacionalni identitet i zloupotreba ‘drugog’”, *Godišnjak Fakulteta političkih nauka* 8 (2012), 86.

<sup>29</sup> For a full translation of Milošević's speech: Slobodan Milosevic 1989 St Vitus Day Speech, available at <<http://www.slobodan-milosevic.org/spch-kosovo1989.htm>>.

<sup>30</sup> Denisa KOSTOVICOVA, Post-socialist Identity, Territoriality and European Integration: Serbia's Return to Europe after Milošević, *GeoJournal* 61 (2005), no. 1, 23–30.

<sup>31</sup> Vojislav KOŠTUNICA, *Obrana Kosova*. Belgrade 2008, 13, 27, 35, 99, 201, 28.

at the onset of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, [had] reconciled themselves [...]”, but ashamed because certain European countries had accepted the illegal secession of Kosovo, thus undermining “the values that hold up the European construction”.<sup>32</sup>

However, Serbia's identification with Europe is far from uncontroversial. In contrast to other post-communist states that immediately identified themselves with Europe in the aftermath of regime change, Serbia has gone through a somewhat more ambiguous process of collective identification. As Jelena Subotić argues,

“Serbian post-Yugoslav identity has developed in profound isolation from Europe because of Serbia's reputation as the architect of the Yugoslav breakup and the biggest perpetrator of wartime atrocities.”<sup>33</sup>

One of the key reasons behind this identity divergence is the fact that Serbia, over the years, has developed a strong collective identification with Russia.

Serbia has traditionally viewed Russia as its Orthodox brother and international protector. During the past two centuries, Serbia tended to rely on Russia in its foreign policy, whereas Russia mostly viewed Serbia as its principal ally in the Balkans. During the 1990s, Serbia's state officials as well as its citizens saw Russia as their closest ally. At the height of the NATO intervention in 1999, the Parliament of the FRY even decided to join the alliance of Russia and Belarus, which eventually did not take effect. In 2000 Serbia signed a free trade agreement with Russia, a benefit usually limited to countries from the post-Soviet territory.

The fall of Slobodan Milošević brought no significant change to Serbia's identification with Russia. All post-2000 Serbian governments continued to maintain and promote Serbia's relationship with Russia as the country's key partner. Most important, Russia is Serbia's key ally in the UN Security Council, where it continues to oppose Kosovo's independence. As already discussed, Serbia's energy sector is in the hands of a Russian company. In December 2007, Serbia gave up its ambitions to become a NATO member and became the only post-communist country to declare military neutrality. Such a policy has been publicly legitimized as a response to NATO intervention in 1999, but also as a necessity due to Serbia's special relationship with Russia.<sup>34</sup> In 2011, together with Russia's Ministry for Emergency Situations, Serbia established a “humanitarian center” in Niš that could potentially be militarized in the future. Belgrade and Moscow also concluded the Agreement on Strategic Partnership in May

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<sup>32</sup> Vuk JEREMIĆ, Speech of Serbia's Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic before the Foreign Affairs Committee of the European Parliament in Strasbourg, 2008, *KIM Info Newsletter*, 21 February 2008, available at <[http://www.kosovo.net/news/archive/2008/February\\_21/1.html](http://www.kosovo.net/news/archive/2008/February_21/1.html)>.

<sup>33</sup> Jelena SUBOTIĆ, Europe Is a State of Mind: Identity and Europeanization in the Balkans, *International Studies Quarterly* 55 (2011), no. 2, 309-330, 311.

<sup>34</sup> Filip EJDUS, Serbia's Military Neutrality: Origins, Effects, and Challenges, *Croatian International Relations Review* 20 (2014), no. 71, 43-69.

2013. Last but not least, public opinion polls continuously show that Serbian citizens perceive Russia as being by far the closest ally of Serbia in world politics.<sup>35</sup> Although most Serbs are culturally westernized, they maintain a strong emotional attachment to all things Russian, especially Russia's rediscovered global standing under President Putin.

### *Identity Conflict and Avoidance*

Many states in the international system simultaneously hold multiple and often divergent collective identities. Like many other states that were historically located at the intersection of different geopolitical spaces, Serbia too has developed divergent collective identifications over the course of history, one with Europe and the other with Russia. These identities are not in and of themselves mutually exclusive. It is rather the current geopolitical context, characterized by growing tensions between the EU and Russia, that is amplifying the tension between the two collective identities of Serbia. When the crisis in Ukraine erupted, identification with Russia generated a national interest in supporting Moscow, while identification with Europe created pressure to side with Brussels (and Kyiv). The anxiety created by this identity conflict was reflected in the statement by Serbia's president, Tomislav Nikolić, that

"It would be very unpleasant if we were forced to take sides [...]. It would even divide Serbia. Many people in Serbia are Russophiles, while others accept the Western civilization as a better foundation for their lives."<sup>36</sup>

Faced with the identity conflict and cognitive dissonance thus created, Serbia had the choice of three options: *identity change*, *behavior change*, and *avoidance*.<sup>37</sup> Identity change requires time and cannot come about overnight and under pressure. Behavior change is easier but requires a great deal of discursive work. Ever since December 2007, Serbia has been militarily neutral and has maintained good relationships with all the great powers.<sup>38</sup> But now pressure both sides of

<sup>35</sup> Građani Srbije: između EU, Rusije i NATO, *Beogradski centar za bezbednosnu politiku*, September 2012, available at <[http://www.bezbednost.org/upload/document/gradjani\\_srbije\\_izmedju\\_eu\\_rusije\\_i\\_nato.pdf](http://www.bezbednost.org/upload/document/gradjani_srbije_izmedju_eu_rusije_i_nato.pdf)>.

<sup>36</sup> Gordana FILIPOVIĆ, Serbia to Avoid Sides in Ukraine Crisis, President Says, *Helsinki Times*, 13 July 2014, available at <<http://www.helsinkitimes.fi/world-int/world-news/international-news/11195-serbia-to-avoid-sides-in-ukraine-crisis-president-says.html>>.

<sup>37</sup> These three options are derived from the research on cognitive dissonance conducted in the field of social psychology. See Leon FESTINGER, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*. Palo Alto/CA 1957; and Joel COOPER, *Cognitive Dissonance: Fifty Years of a Classic Theory*. London 2007.

<sup>38</sup> The "four pillars" foreign policy was introduced by former President Boris Tadić in 2009. Its key principle was that Serbia's foreign policy should be based on membership in the EU and strategic partnerships with Russia, China, and the USA.

the conflict have increased the pressure on the Government of Serbia to take a stand. Early on, the European Parliament Rapporteur for Serbia, Jelko Kacin, requested that Serbia harmonize its position vis-à-vis the Crimean crisis with the EU, as Montenegro had already done.<sup>39</sup> Ukraine's chargé d'affaires in Belgrade did not hide his disappointment at Serbia's hesitation:

"As a state that has always supported Serbia in the preservation of its territorial integrity in the case of Kosovo, we expected a clear attitude."<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, the US ambassador to Belgrade invited Serbia to rethink its view on territorial integrity.

"Are you consistent? [...] Do you believe that Russia's invocation of Kosovo's example (for the secession of the Crimea) is a convenient analogy? [...] You have to decide."<sup>41</sup>

On the other side, Moscow's ambassador to Serbia, Aleksandar Čepurin, argued that imposing sanctions on Russia would be like "shooting yourself in the foot", something that only a "suicidal politician" would do.<sup>42</sup>

The only viable way out of the internal identity conflict was *avoidance*. According to Amir Lupovici, avoidance is a psychological defensive mechanism of selective exposure to information with the aim of reducing identity conflict. "In such situations", Lupovici explains, the actor "will likely reject new information or redefine the situation in order to protect its identity".<sup>43</sup> Unable to effectuate either identity or behavioral change, Serbia's decision makers resorted to *avoidance*.

From the very outset of the crisis, Serbia's decision makers denied that there was any conflict between Serbia's European ambitions and its friendship with Russia in the first place. For example, only a few days after Russia's annexation

<sup>39</sup> Kacin: EU Expects Serbia to Take Same Stand Regarding Ukraine, *In Serbia*, 21 March 2014, available at <<http://inserbia.info/today/2014/03/kacin-eu-expects-serbia-to-take-same-stand-regarding-ukraine>>.

<sup>40</sup> Serbian Silence over Crimea Disappoints Ukraine, *Balkan Insight*, 28 March 2014, available at <<http://www.balkaninsight.com/en/article/serbia-s-shrugging-over-crimea-dissapoints-ukraine>>.

<sup>41</sup> Neka Srbija odluči gde želi da pripada, 2014. *Politika*, 22 March 2014, available at <<http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Svet/Neka-Srbija-odluci-gde-pripada.lt.html>>. A week later, Russia's Ambassador to Belgrade assured Serbia that Moscow would not change its position regarding Kosovo in the Security Council. Aleksandar V. ČEPURIN, *Ukrajina, Krim i mi*, 2014. *Politika*, 29 March 2014, available at <<http://www.politika.rs/rubrike/Sta-da-se-radi/Ukrajina-Krim-i-mi.lt.html>>.

<sup>42</sup> Ambasador Čepurin za Novosti: Sankcije Rusiji pucanj u Srbiju, *Večernje novosti*, 14 August 2014, available at <<http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/politika/aktuelno.289.html:505390-Aleksandar-Cepurin-za-Novosti-Sankcije-Rusiji-pucanj-u-Srbiju>>.

<sup>43</sup> Amir LUPOVICI, Ontological Dissonance, Clashing Identities, and Israel's Unilateral Steps towards the Palestinians, *Review of International Studies* 38 (2012), no. 4, 809-833, 819.

of the Crimea, Serbia's Prime Minister Ivica Dačić denied that there was any dissonance at all. He said:

"First, Serbia has a traditional friendship with Russia, and nothing can undermine it. Second, Serbia has taken the European path that is very important to us. Our attitude has to be balanced and work in our interest."<sup>44</sup>

President Nikolić was even more straightforward:

"Serbia has its path. That path means that Serbia doesn't want to choose one of the sides and thus put in danger its relation with the other (side)."<sup>45</sup>

Apart from their express denial of any identity conflict, Serbia's decision makers demonstrated a strategy of avoidance in a variety of other ways. For example, early on in the run-up to the referendum on Crimea's "independence", the government of Serbia avoided taking a position through the pretext of being in the midst of its own parliamentary elections. The official statement from 20 March is another clear example of avoidance:

"The new Government of Serbia will comment on the situation in Ukraine and in the Crimea. The caretaker Government does not comment on current political events in the world."<sup>46</sup>

Only a day later, Serbia's Foreign Ministry issued a statement to the effect that "the position of the Republic of Serbia regarding the events in Ukraine is known and unchanged".<sup>47</sup> This too was another instance of avoidance, given that Serbia had no known position on the Ukraine issue.

Internationally, Serbia continued to avoid taking a stance, despite the escalation of the Ukraine conflict and the ensuing international uproar. On 27 March, the General Assembly of the UN upheld the territorial integrity of Ukraine, including the Crimea, and declared the referendum invalid.<sup>48</sup> Serbia is the only European state beside Bosnia and Herzegovina that voted neither for nor against the resolution but instead abstained from the vote. This reaction brought into

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<sup>44</sup> Dačić: Stav Srbije o Ukrajini je krajnje izbalansiran i u našem interesu, *Press Online Media*, 23 March 2014, available at <<http://www.pressonline.rs/info/politika/305081/dacic-stav-srbije-o-ukrajini-i-rusiji-krajnje-izbalansiran-i-u-nasem-interesu.html>>.

<sup>45</sup> Nikolić: niko nas ne pritiska zbog Krima, *Vesti Online*, 25 March 2014, available at <<http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/391405/Nikolic-Niko-nas-ne-pritiska-zbog-Krma>>.

<sup>46</sup> Caretaker Cabinet Has No Comment on EU Sanctions, *B92.net*, 20 March 2014, available at <[http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=03&dd=20&nav\\_id=89716](http://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2014&mm=03&dd=20&nav_id=89716)>.

<sup>47</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, Saopštenje povodom pisanja izvesnih medija o stavu R. Srbije oko Ukrajine, 21 March 2014, available at <<http://www.mfa.gov.rs/sr/index.php/component/content/article/12237-2014-03-21-17-02-08?lang=cyr>>.

<sup>48</sup> United Nations General Assembly, Resolution Adopted by the General Assembly on 27 March 2014, 68/262 Territorial Integrity of Ukraine, available at <[http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/262](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/68/262)>.

question the consistency of the foreign policy of Serbia, itself a very vocal supporter of territorial integrity and a fierce opponent of Kosovo's independence.

Coming under strong diplomatic pressure, the new Serbian Government formulated its policy more clearly on 28 April 2014, when Belgrade openly endorsed the neutral position, all the while reaffirming its ambition for EU membership, its respect for the territorial integrity of all states, and its traditional friendship with Russia. Serbia's representatives continued to make ambiguous statements, such as the following: "Serbia respects [the] territorial integrity of all UN member states",<sup>49</sup> without specifying whether this generality concerned Ukraine or Russia. Serbia's neutrality, while devoid of any substance, was formulated in such an ambiguous way to satisfy all parties in the conflict.

Domestically, the crisis in Ukraine was mostly interpreted as a geopolitical conflict between Europe and Russia in which Serbia should avoid taking sides.<sup>50</sup> In the Serbian media, very few journalists sided openly with either Europe or Russia. As Ivana Dobrivojević pointed out, the bottom line of most of the media reports was that Ukraine was divided between a pro-Russian East and a pro-European West, "without venturing deeper into the historical and political backgrounds of the crisis".<sup>51</sup> The crisis in Ukraine has not been portrayed in the media as an instance of a violation of international law, a military aggression against a UN member, or a forcible change of borders, which Serbia otherwise traditionally opposes in world politics. Instead, it has been framed as a geostrategic contest between the West and the East in which Serbia has no stake. In short, the avoidance of the state of things has been coupled by the societal avoidance to take sides in the conflict that created a deep identity conflict and produced collective anxiety.

## Conclusion

Although Serbia's policy toward the crisis in Ukraine may have limited geopolitical implications, it nevertheless creates an interesting research puzzle. Why did Serbia decide to take a neutral position in the face of a blatant viola-

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<sup>49</sup> Aleksandar Vučić za "Dojče vele": Srbija poštuje teritorijalni integritet svih članova UN, ne terajte nas da budemo neprijatelji Rusije, *Nova Srpska Politička Misao*, 2 April 2014, available at <<http://www.nspm.rs/hronika/aleksandar-vucic-nova-vlada-kao-bajern.html?alphabet=l>>.

<sup>50</sup> Only a fraction of the Serbian population seems to openly advocate an alliance with either Moscow or Brussels. At the most liberal end of the political spectrum, Serbia's neutrality policy was criticized as being anti-European. It was also challenged by the most conservative and pro-Russian camp, whose support for Moscow went beyond mere rhetoric. From the very outset of the crisis, Serbian volunteers (Chetniks) joined the pro-Russia militias on the Crimean peninsula, and some have also joined the separatist paramilitary forces in Eastern Ukraine.

<sup>51</sup> Ivana DOBRIVOJEVIĆ, *The Ukraine Crisis in the Serbian Media* (mid-November 2013 – end of March 2014), Imre Kertész Kolleg Jena, 2014, available at <<http://www.imre-kertesz-kolleg.uni-jena.de/index.php?id=573&l=0>>.

tion of the territorial integrity of a UN member state and in spite of virtually unanimous European opposition? Serbia's decision makers have justified the policy toward Ukraine as a purely rational way to defend national interests. By imposing sanctions against Russia, they argue, Serbia would pay an enormous price in terms of its economic, energy, and national security interests. In this article, I have challenged this argument and shown that this logic is less than compelling. By staying neutral, Serbia not only undermines its own efforts to defend its territorial integrity concerning Kosovo but also potentially endangers its European perspective, while not contributing at all to its energy security.

Instead, my argument is that to understand why this policy was adopted and also resonated so strongly at home, one must probe the underlying identity dynamics of Serbia. In particular, I suggested that the crisis in Ukraine amplifies an existing tension between two collective identities in the country. Unable to change its identity or its behavior, Serbia resorted to a defensive mechanism known in social psychology as avoidance, the goal of which is the denial of the identity conflict and a selective exposure to information about it. Only *ex post facto* was such a policy legitimized as a rational pursuit of national interest.

The longer the secessionist war in Ukraine lasts, the more difficult it will become for Serbia to sustain its current position. For the time being, Serbia's decision makers seem to be far more preoccupied with short-term tactical considerations than long-term strategic ones. Their current ambition is to make use of the country's neutral position to mediate between the two sides during Serbia's rotating OSCE presidency in 2015.<sup>52</sup> It is questionable, however, whether the OSCE itself, let alone Serbia, has the ability to bring the two sides together at a moment when neither side is satisfied with the ceasefire. As soon as the presidency ends, Serbia will have to change its foreign policy if it genuinely wants to continue its EU membership bid. The legitimacy of such a move will most probably be sought in terms of national interests too. However, its effectiveness will hinge on a domestic acceptance that will not easily be achieved without a thorough identity transformation.

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<sup>52</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, Dačić: Srbija nema privilegiju da ne mora da bude u EU, 24 June 2014, available at <<http://www.mfa.gov.rs/sr/index.php/component/content/article/82-2011-06-14-12-04-14/13796---24062014?lang=cyr>>.