

Cognitive dissonance and security policy of Serbia

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Abstract

We often hear about deep political divisions in Serbia. Contrary to this, the April – May 2011 public opinion survey showed that, with regard to several key areas of foreign and security policy, the attitudes of large majority of citizens coincide with the official policy. Firstly, most citizens believe that Serbia should join the EU. Besides, vast majority of citizens believe that Serbia should never recognise the independence of Kosovo. Finally, a prevailing majority of Serbian citizens oppose Serbian membership in NATO and agrees with the policy of militarily neutrality. On the other hand, the survey also showed that citizens are aware that these two attitudes are mutually exclusive; this creates collective ‘cognitive dissonance’. In the absence of any change in foreign and security policy, there are three strategies to overcome the cognitive dissonance: denial, abandonment of one or more dissonant attitudes, and finding new convictions.

Key words: cognitive dissonance, integrations, security, public opinion, EU, NATO

1. Introduction

In Serbia, public discourse is often associated with ‘deep divisions’ that allegedly exist within the Serbian society.² We hear about the divisions into patriots and traitors, nationalists and democrats, Chetniks and Partisans, traditionalists and modernists, or the division into the First, the Second, and the Third Serbia. A thesis about deep symbolical clashes within the Serbian society is present across political, popular (Kovačević 2008), and academic discourse (Čolović/Mimica 1992, Matić 1998, Antonić 2009, Konečni 2009). These discourses on divisions have almost flooded the Serbian pub-

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lic in the past two decades. Although the divisions were mostly only ‘noticed’ and ‘analysed’ in these discourses, they have actually (re)produced them. These discourses did this even when they criticised the very idea of deep societal divisions. In other words, the more was said about different divisions in the Serbian people, the heavier sediment they left as a ‘societal fact’ which is hard to dispute. It would be therefore particularly interesting to make a genealogical overview of the origins of this idea of divisions in the Serbian society. This, however, is not the matter dealt with in this paper.³ Besides, even if we say that these symbolic divisions are the social constructs, this does not mean that it makes them less real.

For the sake of illustration, the existence of many symbolic divisions in the Serbian society impeded the achievement of basic political consensus after the 2000 democratic changes. This is particularly visible in the area of security policy about which the surveys have already been made (Ejdus 2007/8, Brozović 2010). How the citizens of Serbia see the key challenges of security policy, however, was never a matter of systematic academic survey. This will be a task of this paper. The central question in this paper was how well founded in 2011 was the thesis about alleged divisions within Serbian society, at least with regard to security policy. Since the area of security policy can be quite extensive, in this paper it will be reduced to its three aspects – Serbian policy towards the EU, policy towards NATO, and Kosovo policy. Empirical material that will be used in the paper was collected in a field public opinion survey that was, for the requirements of the Belgrade Centre for Security Policy (BCSP), conducted by the Centre for Free Elections and Democracy (CESID). The survey was made on the representative sample of 1,198 citizens of Serbia (without Kosovo) in the period 1 – 7 April 2011. Besides, in the period 25 – 27 May, five focus groups were organised, each of them with eight respondents – two in Belgrade and one in each of Valjevo, Sombor, and Zaječar. The four groups were organised with so-called losers in transition, and, out of them, two were composed of the citizens between 30 and 60 years of age, in Valjevo and Zaječar, and two of the respondents between 18 and 30 years of age (Belgrade and Sombor). The fifth focus group was organised in Belgrade; it was a control group. It was made up of so-called winners in transition, namely the respondents above 30 years of age, with a higher income and better education. Based on the analysis of the findings, a conclusion was derived that Serbia does not have only a political consensus, but a social consensus as well, with regard to these three important elements of security policy. The survey, however, also showed that the citizens of Serbia do not believe that the elements of this consensus

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³ One of the first among them to, according to the information available to the author, speak about the deep divisions in the Serbian society was Dobrica Ćosić. In a lecture entitled “How to Create Ourselves” that he held in 1967 in Kolarčev narodni univerzitet, Ćosić suggested that there existed a deep division between two Serbias – the one personified by Vuk and the other represented by Dositej (Ćosić 1988).

are in mutual agreement, which suggests that a collective cognitive dissonance is in place.

The paper consists of three parts. First to be presented will be the key elements of the cognitive dissonance theory developed by social psychology, and its implementation in the science of international relations. The second part will present the results of the above survey of public opinion about three key goals of foreign and security policy of the Republic of Serbia. This part will demonstrate that the thesis about the existence of deep divisions within the Serbian society and the absence of basic consensus among the citizens is not sociologically founded, at least not with regard to the above three analysed goals of foreign and security policy. Quite to the contrary, the results of empirical public opinion survey clearly show that, when it comes to the Serbian attitude towards NATO, EU, and Kosovo, there is a consensus between the citizens and political elites.⁴ Thirdly, the paper will demonstrate that a contradiction exists not only among the citizens, namely between the citizens and political elites, but also among the convictions shared by their vast majority. In other words, the citizens feel that the strategic convictions with regard to which the consensus has been reached are mutually exclusive, which creates a collective "cognitive dissonance" (Festinger 1957). Starting from the theory of cognitive dissonance, this paper will present possible ways to overcome this state of affairs.

2. Theory of cognitive dissonance

The theory of cognitive dissonance was developed by the social psychologist Leon Festinger in the 1950s. Together with his associates, Festinger was observing the behaviour of the followers of an apocalyptical cult who believed that a cataclysmic flood will ensue on 21 December 1955. Moreover, they expected that, on the eve of the flood, a spaceship will appear out of the space and rescue them. When this did not happen, the followers of the cult 'received a message' in which they were explained that it was only thanks to their diligence and devotion that the supreme deity spared the humankind from ruin. Based on these insights, Festinger made a deduction that people have a strong need to eliminate concurrent existence of knowledge and convictions. He named this condition, which people strive to overcome, 'cognitive dissonance' (Festinger 1956, 1957). Festinger's insights made up the foundations of the cognitive dissonance theory which became one of the most dynamic areas of social psychology, and social science in general (Cooper 2007). Joel Cooper

⁴ The word 'consensus' here means the agreement of vast majority.



defines cognitive dissonance as a state that occurs when “people believe that two of their psychological representations are inconsistent with which other” (Ibid: 6). According to the cognitive dissonance theory, people have a need to eliminate, or at least alleviate, this state of unpleasant tension between different convictions. This can be done by denying that there is any dissonance at all, by changing the behaviour and convictions, or by strengthening the consonant convictions, namely by reducing the importance of dissonant convictions. If the inconsistency occurs between the attitudes and conduct, the theory supposes that there is greater probability that the attitudes will change (Ibid: 8).

Within the science of international relations, the theory of cognitive dissonance was first introduced at an individual analysis level as a framework for understanding the makers of foreign policy decisions (Jervis 1976; Rosati 1995; Finnemore/Sikkink 1998). In recent period, individual authors suggested that this theory is useful at the collective analysis level in the international relations (Sucharov 2005; Lupovici 2011). Amir Lupovici calls the cognitive dissonance that is reached at collective level ‘ontological dissonance’ (Ibid: 6). If the ontological dissonance is not reduced, collective actors come into the state of ontological uncertainty and are either disgraced or humiliated (Steele 2008). Considering that the change of behaviour and attitudes, namely the identity at collective level, is a slow and often demanding process, collective cognitive dissonance is usually diminished by the ‘evasion’ mechanism. This means to either avoid the exposure to dissonant information, leading to its denial, or to put the accent on such information, which increase confusion and ambiguity with regard to the dissonance between existing beliefs (Lupovici 2011:10–11, Zarakol 2010).

The text below will show that the citizens of Serbia, judging by the results of above survey (April-May 2011), suffer from collective cognitive dissonance because of the priorities of foreign and security policy. More precisely, just as their political representatives did it, the citizens too have built a consensus that Serbia should join the EU, that it needs to remain militarily neutral, and that it should never and not at any price recognize the Kosovo independence. The survey also showed, however, that citizens see clearly even that which their representatives largely omit to say, at least in public. They see that, if it wishes to become an EU member state, Serbia will have to renounce its present policy towards Kosovo. Moreover, the citizens support the policy of military neutrality, primarily because of the overall role of NATO in the bombing campaign on FRY and, later, in the Kosovo secession. But it is just as reasonable to presume that citizens know

that NATO is mostly composed of those same states that constitute the EU which they wish their country to accede. Cognitive dissonance that the existence of these mutually discordant beliefs creates in citizens may be overcome in several different ways which will be addressed in the conclusion.

3. Public opinion and foreign and security policy

In the first several years of democratic transition in Serbia, there was no consensus between the strongest political parties about what its security policy should look like. The outlines of this consensus, however, started to appear in the end of 2006.⁵ Today ruling and opposition political parties principally agree on the priorities of official foreign and security policy Republic of Serbia: membership in the EU, military neutrality, and diplomatic battle for non-recognition of Kosovo independence. The question is, however, whether, besides the political, there also exists a social consensus about these critical principles and goals of foreign and security policy. This section will outline the results of the public opinion survey in Serbia, clearly demonstrating that not only political, but also the broader social consensus about above principles and goals of foreign and security policy is in place in Serbia.

Serbia and the European Union

Since the beginning of democratic changes in 2000 to this date, the achievement of membership in the EU has been one of the foreign policy priorities of the Republic of Serbia. On the other hand, until 2008 the consensus about this was absent among the largest political parties, the same as among citizens, since the Serbian Radical Party (SRS), which was the strongest opposition party at that time, was against Serbian integration to the EU. In 2008, however, the Serbian Progress Party (SNS) broke away from SRS-a. According to public opinion survey, not only did the Serbian Progress Party soon become the strongest opposition party but it accepted, in its political programme, a possibility of Serbian EU integration.⁶ With this, for the first time after 5 October 2000, a consensus about Serbia's joining the EU was reached among the strongest political parties in Serbia.

As regards the public opinion, ever since the beginning of the democratisation process in 2000, it was mostly of pro-European proclivity (admittedly, with slight oscillations and with the tendency of

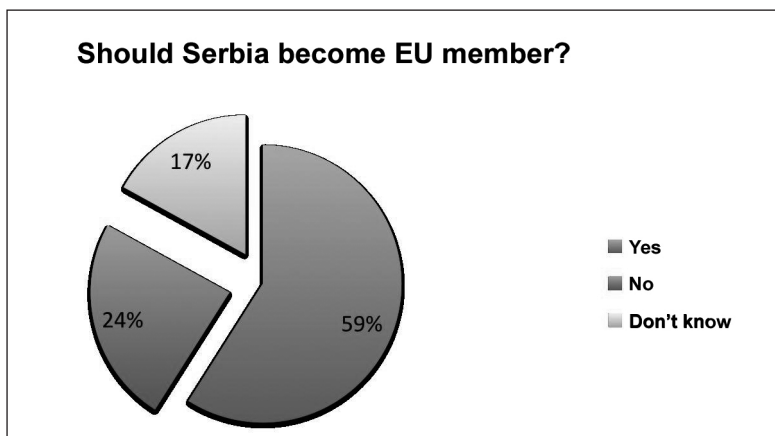
⁵ Critical moments for reaching the consensus were the adoption of the Serbian Constitution in December 2006, the Serbian National Assembly's Resolution declaring military neutrality in December 2007, separation of the pro-European Serbian Progress Party from the anti-European Serbian Radical Party in October 2008, and the adoption of the Strategy of National Security in April 2009.

⁶ The Statute of the Serbian Progress Party <<http://sns.org.rs/??/2010-06-05-00-10-55/statut-srpska-napredna-stranka.html>> 1 October 2011



gradual decrease in support).⁷ According to the BCSP survey conducted in the spring of 2011, only 59.3% of citizens supported Serbia's integration into the EU, which was at that time the lowest percent that was seen since the surveys of this kind are conducted.⁸ In the focus groups, citizens identified the EU with better living standards, enhancement of economy, and general prosperity. The associations they had with regard to this Organisation were both positive (such as: order, diligence, cooperation, export, prosperity, living standards, etc), and negative (e.g., blackmailing, scum, gold-snatchers, hustlers, hypocrisy, subordination, etc).⁹

Graph 1: The citizens' attitude towards the integration of Serbia into the EU



Slightly more men (60%) than women (58.4%) opted for integration into the EU. Moreover, the support to the EU integrations decreased with the fall of the respondents' level of education and financial standing. Finally, the members of national minorities were more enthusiastic about joining the EU (79.7%) than the citizens who identified themselves as the members of Serbian nation (56%). A much larger number of citizens gave positive (47%) than negative (23%) answers to the question whether Serbian integration into the EU would compromise the independence and sovereignty of Serbia. Slightly less than a half of respondents were convinced that joining the EU would enhance the national security (46%), whilst 28% of citizens agree with this statement. In short, a large majority of respondents believe that Serbia should continue its process of European integrations and, in the end, become an EU member state.

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⁷ September 2002 – 68%, December 2003 – 72%, September 2004 – 70.6%, September 2005 – 64%, September 2006 – 69.9%, June 2007 – 69.3%, December 2008 – 61%, December 2009 – 65%. Source: Government of the Republic of Serbia, Office for European Integrations. <<http://www.seio.gov.rs>> 21 September 2011

⁸ In the period May – September, the support continued to decrease, first to 53% in June, and then to 46% in September. Source: <<http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovn/a/aktuelno.69.html:347245-Pada-podrska-prikljucenju-EU>> 1 October 2011

⁹ CESID, Final Report on the Activities of Focus Groups.

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Since the beginning of democratic transition, the number of Serbian citizens supporting the NATO membership has never even drew close to a half.¹⁰ After ten years of almost complete absence of public debate on Serbian accession to NATO, the discussion about this issue was intensified on the eve of ten-year anniversary of bombing campaign against Yugoslavia and Serbia. This, however, did not result in any increase of support to the integration into NATO. According to the BCSP survey, two thirds of the respondents opposed Serbian accession to NATO (66.3%), 18.1% was unable to make up their mind, and only 15.6% was in favour of the accession to NATO. This was actually the lowest level of support to the accession to NATO ever since these surveys have been conducted. Women are far more indecisive (23.9%) than men (12.2%) in respect of the accession of Serbia to this Alliance. The largest share of those opposing the accession to NATO was among the oldest citizens (69.7%), as well as among the wealthiest ones (69.8%). Finally, whilst the members of Serbian nation are in vast majority against the accession to NATO (69.4%), the members of national minorities are of mixed opinion in this respect (41.3% for accession, 42.8% against accession).

How can this be explained when we know that the campaign that was supposed to bring Serbia closer to NATO intensified in 2009?¹¹ There could be three reasons for this. Firstly, ten-year anniversary of the bombing campaign against Serbia has revived the memory of the 78-day long NATO intervention against FRY and, consequently, recharged and promoted traumas and self-victimisation. Theoretical and comparative survey of the policy of the memory of traumatic events suggests that in other communities, too, traumatic feelings do not fade over time but rather intensify (Edkins 2003; Burg 2008). Secondly, the unilateral declaration of Kosovo independence, and its international recognition (Kosovo was recognised by a vast majority of NATO Member States), and the central role that the US played in this process have further encouraged negative attitude of the citizens of Serbia about the Atlantic Alliance. Finally, in March 2011, the international community, headed by NATO, started air strikes against the regime of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya. In Serbia, the news about this 'humanitarian intervention' has fast revived the memory of the 1999 bombing campaign. The impression was that public opinion far better discerned the similarities than the differences between these two interventions. That is why Serbia was among the rare countries in the world in which Muammar Gaddafi still enjoyed enormous support.¹²

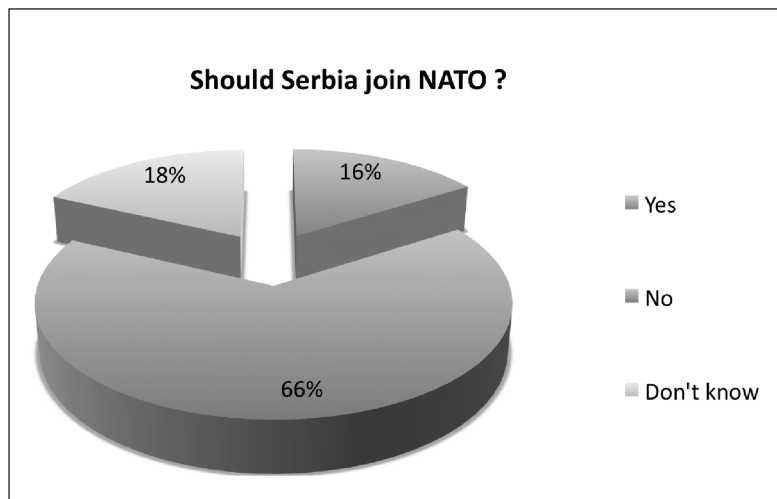
¹⁰ April 2006 – 31%, September 2007 – 26%, September 2009 – 25%. Source: CESID. February 2010 – 20%. Source: Medijum galup <<http://www.vesti.rs/Politika/TNS-Medijum-galup-DS-i-SNS-najjaci.html>> 21 September 2011

¹¹ About the role of the US Embassy in Belgrade in initiating a debate about NATO, see the leaked Serbian diplomatic mail: "Recipe for a NATO Debate – Let Stand 10 Years Then Stir", dated 26 February 2010. Source: <www.cablegatesearch.net> 21 September 2011

¹² Martinović, Iva. „Masovna podrška Gadafiju iz Srbije.“ ("Vast Support to Gaddafi from Serbia") *Danas*, 25 March 2011 <http://www.danas.org/content/srbija_libija_gadafi/3537308.html> 28 September 2011



Graph 2: The citizens' attitude towards the accession of Serbia to NATO



The survey suggests that citizens have a predominantly one-sided picture of NATO. As much as 38.5% believes that this Alliance is only an instrument in the hands of USA, and 22.3% of citizens see this Alliance as a protector of the interest of rich countries. Only 5.7% of respondents see NATO as a defensive alliance of states. In their work in the focus group, the respondents had very negative associations with regard to NATO. This Alliance was mostly attributed the following: aggressor, dictatorship, violence, strong-arm organisation, even SS troops. Moreover, the survey of the opinions of the focus group showed that the citizens do not see a connection between NATO and their current or future security, or between NATO and economic welfare. This military alliance is significant for them primarily because the 1999 bombing campaign. Also, it is indicative that as much as 50.4% of citizens believe that, with the accession to NATO, Serbia would expose itself to a greater risk of terror attack. In line with its scepticism towards the accession to NATO, a vast majority of citizens (64.8%) is of the opinion that militarily neutrality is the optimal national security policy. Men, the elderly, and the uneducated support the policy of militarily neutrality to a larger extent than women, the young, and the educated.

When the respondents were asked specific questions about potential benefits from possible Serbian membership in NATO, however, their frame of mind changed, although not in any extreme measure, and turned in favour of Euro-Atlantic integrations. As much as 31.3% of respondents, for example, believe that the membership in

this military organisation would increase the national security of Serbia. The belief that the integration in NATO would increase the number of FDI's, as it is often underlined by local advocates of Euro-Atlantic integrations, is shared by 25% of respondents. Besides, 29.9% of surveyed citizens believed that, by the accession to NATO, Serbian military industry would be busier than it was before. Finally, as much as 30.2% of respondents believe that the integration into NATO would reduce the danger of attacks from outside. The respondents were most enthusiastic (38%) when they were asked whether the membership in this Organisation would modernise the Serbian Armed Forces. The answers to the question what should NATO do to improve the relationship between Serbia and this Organisation were also interesting. As much as 47% of respondents believe that it would be best if NATO paid for war damages, whilst 16% of them think that NATO should first apologise for having bombarded FRY in 1999. Serbia's accession to NATO, as it is shown in Table 1, would be perceived by the citizens as a political amnesia, selling out, or betrayal.

Table 1: Accession to NATO and the national identity

What would Serbian accession to NATO say about Serbs as a nation?	Percent
Does not know, unable to decide	18.7
That we are smart	5.8
That we have sold ourselves out	20.2
That we have betrayed our ancestors and our history	16.1
That we are weak	10.8
That our memory is short lived	20.9
That we finally have a vision	7.5
Total	100

Serbia and Kosovo

Finally, a large majority of citizens support the official security policy towards Kosovo. Firstly, citizens' attitudes with regard to security threats coming from Kosovo are very similar to those in the official documents. In the *Strategy of National Security* from 2009, Kosovo secession was described as the "largest threat to the security of the Republic of Serbia".¹³ Similarly, according to the BCSP survey, 16.7% of respondents believe that Kosovo secession is major threat

¹³ National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia. *Strategy of National Security*. April 2009: 7.



to national security, whilst as much as 36.4% believe that lower birth rate is the major threat. The number of those who believe that Kosovo secession is the main threat is larger among the respondents of Serbian nationality (17.6%) than among the national minorities (10.2%). The largest number of those who believe that Kosovo secession is major threat to security (22.5%) are among the oldest respondents (60 years or more). The younger the respondents are, the less they feel threatened by Kosovo secession (only 8.7% of respondents with 30 to 39 years of age). It is interesting, however, that this does not apply to the youngest respondents (between 18 and 29 years of age), among whom 17.9% believe that Kosovo is the main threat for national security. Moreover, the perception of Kosovo secession as the major security threat is in positive correlation with educational level (without school – 24%, secondary school – 16%, college – 11%). Among the youngest population of school and university students, however, the percent is somewhat higher (20%).

In the answers to the question what is threatening the security of Serbia from inside, Kosovo is second-ranked (20.4%), after financial over-indebtedness (25.2%). The correlation between social and age structure of respondents and answers to this question is similar to the correlation present with regard to the previously mentioned question. The older and less educated the respondents are, more inclined are they to see Kosovo secession as something that is threatening Serbia from inside. The only exception from this rule is the youngest (18 – 29 years of age) and student population which has more concerns about the secession as internal threat than others.

Table 2: Respondents' educational structure and perception of Kosovo secession

Kosovo secession is an internal threat to the security of Serbia?	
<i>Education</i>	<i>Percent</i>
No school/primary school	27.5%
Occupational school	21.2%
Secondary school	18.7%
College or university	16.5%
School / university student	14.8%
Total	20.2%

Table 3: Respondents' age structure and perception of Kosovo secession

Kosovo secession is an internal threat to the security Of Serbia?	
<i>Age</i>	<i>Percent</i>
18–29 years	18.4%
30–39 years	14.1%
40–49 years	15.6%
50–59 years	19.6%
60 years or more	27.2%
Total	20.3%

When asked what Kosovo declaration of independence of 17 February 2008 means for them, 35.8% of respondents answered that it is a threat to the security of the Republic of Serbia, and 35.9% that it is a threat to the national identity of Serbian people. Only 12% of respondents saw no threat in this. The correlation between social and age structure and the perception that Serbia is threatened by Kosovo unilateral declaration of independence is similar to above correlations. As opposed to the members of Serbian people who believe that this is a threat to the security of the Republic of Serbia (36%) and a threat to the national identity of Serbian people (38%), national minorities are not that unanimous. Among those who did not identify themselves as Serbs, 34% believe that this was a threat to the security of the Republic of Serbia, whilst only 16.7% perceived it as a threat to the national identity of Serbian people.

4. Cognitive dissonance and security policy

It could be concluded from the results presented above that, at least judging by the disposition of public opinion in April and May 2011, ten years after democratic changes, a basic consensus among most citizens and political parties about main orientation of foreign and security policy of the Republic of Serbia was reached. This consensus features three standpoints: Serbia should become an EU member state, should remain militarily neutral, and should never recognise the Kosovo independence. In the past several years the citizens, the same as the government in Serbia, could hear that these standpoints are mutually inconsistent. Thus, for example, it is quite often argued that none of the European post-communist countries became a member state of EU without previously acceding NATO.¹⁴ Besides,

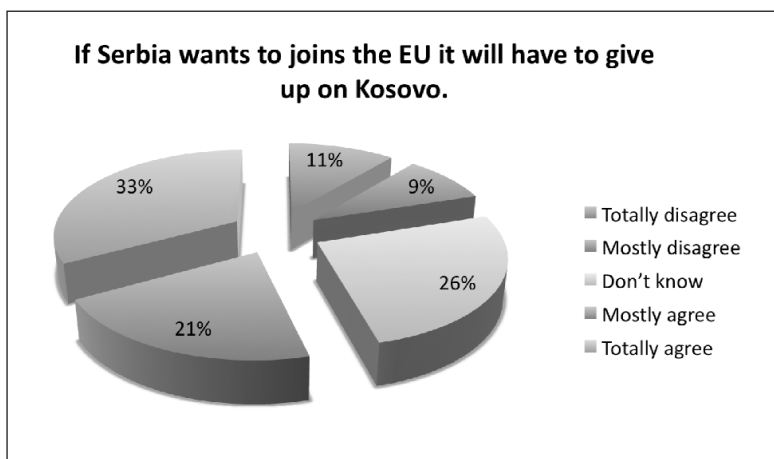
¹⁴ „LDP: NATO prečiča ka EU.“ (LDP: NATO - Shortcut to EU) RTS, 30 October 2010 <<http://www.rts.rs/page/stories/sr/story/9/Srbija/787728/LDP%3A+NATO+p rečiča+ka+EU.html>> 13 November 2011



the warnings arrive from different sides that Serbia cannot accede the EU unless it previously regulates its relations with Kosovo and recognizes Kosovo independence, at least *de facto* if not *de jure*. Such messages arrived from both the international community¹⁵, and individual political parties¹⁶ or analysts¹⁷. The question is how the citizens perceive the relations among these three standpoints that make up a crux of the national consensus about foreign and security policy of Serbia.

It is possible to, based on the BCSP survey, say that citizens are aware that there is an inconsistency between their views of Serbian accession into EU on one hand, and Kosovo policy on the other. It is often speculated in public whether Serbia needs to choose between Kosovo and EU, and whether it would need to renounce its demands regarding the “breakaway” south province. Although a prevailing majority of political parties attempt to reassure the citizens that the policy: both EU and Kosovo is plausible, the BCSP survey showed that most citizens (54%) think that Serbia will need to give up Kosovo if it wants to become a member state of EU.

Graph 3: Correlation between so-called ‘Kosovo’ policy and so-called ‘European’ policy



However, 13% of the population believes that the Government of the Republic of Serbia needs to recognise Kosovo independence if this would lead it to the integration into EU, whilst only 4% is of the opinion that Serbia should do this right away. A vast majority (61%) holds that Serbia should never and not at any price recognise the independence of this territory. If any government does this, 55% of

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¹⁵ In December, Serbian media published a confidential mail in which a French diplomat confirmed that Serbia cannot get back Kosovo and accede EU at one and the same time. “Wikileaks: ne može i EU i Kosovo.” (Wikileaks: It Is Not Possible to Have Both EU and Kosovo), *Kurir*, 8 October 2010 <<http://www.kurir-info.rs/m/vesti/wikileaks-ne-moze-i-eu-i-kosovo-63558.php>> 13 November 2011.

Similar viewpoints could be heard coming from the representatives of the European Commission and the European Parliament. See: „Ren: dobrosusedski odnosi sa Kosovom.” (Rehn: Good Neighbourly Relations with Kosovo) <http://www.b92.net/info/vesti/index.php?yyyy=2008&mm=04&dd=23&nav_category=11&nav_id=295374> 13 November 2011 „Kacin: Srbija može i da čeka Kosovo.” (Kacin: Serbia May Also Wait for Kosovo) <<http://www.naslovi.net/2010-02-06/b92/kacin-srbija-moze-i-da-ceka-kosovo/1531047>> 13 November 2011 „Srbija ne može u EU ako ne prizna Kosovo.” (Serbia cannot Accede EU Without Previously Recognising Kosovo) *Danas*, 27 May 2010 <http://www.danas.rs/danasrs/politika/srbija-ne-moze-u-eu-ako-ne-prizna-kosovo.56.html?news_id=191364> 13 November 2011

¹⁶ „Jovanović: ne može i Kosovo Evropa.” (Jovanović: It Is Impossible to Have Both Kosovo and Europe) *Tanjug*, 6 September 2010 <<http://www.vesti-online.com/Vesti/Srbija/79908/Jovanovic-Ne-moze-i-Kosovo-i-Evropa>> 13 November 2011

¹⁷ „Slecinger: Srbija ne može u EU i da zadrži Kosovo.” (Schlesinger: Serbia Cannot both Integrate into EU and Keep Kosovo.” *Blic*, 28 July 2010 <<http://www.blic.rs/Vesti/Politika/200396/Slecinger-Srbija-ne-moze-i-u-EU-i-da-zadrzi-Kosovo>> 13 November 2011

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¹⁸ Judging by the current situation, it is hard to believe that other circumstances could drastically change. It is extremely hard, although not impossible, to expect any significant change in the positions of the countries which have already recognised Kosovo independence. It is even less realistic to expect Priština to change its position, or a fast change in the balance of power that would favour the countries which did not recognize Kosovo independence.

¹⁹ Other surveys reveal an increasing number of those who see the change of Serbian Kosovo policy as a condition for joining EU. See: <http://www.seio.gov.rs/upload/documents/nacionalna_dokumenta/istrazivanja_javnog_mnjenja/javno_mnjenje_jun_2011.pdf> 1 October 2011. Since 2008 it has become increasingly harder to avoid dissonant information considering that the number of states, particularly EU member states, which recognised Kosovo independence grew continuously. Besides, there was a gradual increase in the number, intensity, and frequency of messages arriving in Serbia from the international community with regard to the need to have Serbian Kosovo policy aligned with the reality in Kosovo.

²⁰ Unilateral embargo of Priština towards Serbia, incapability of the state to prevent the taking over of Jarinje and Brnjak checkpoints, Angela Merkel's messages during her visit to Serbia, putting up the barricades on the North of Kosovo, and the violence that ensued, etc.

²¹ It seems reasonable to suppose that most decision-makers refuse to publicly accept this information, but not because they privately still believe that it is possible to join EU and still continue with current Kosovo policy. The reason for this public denial is most probably a product of combining two things. The first thing is reckoning that such an attitude increases the price of compromise that could be made in future negotiations about future status of Kosovo. The second thing is the fear from being condemned by domestic public as a traitor, considering that Kosovo has a strong symbolical and emotional meaning.

citizens would perceive it as shame and betrayal, and only 13.4% would deem it politically reasonable. These results reveal not only that citizens have opposing views regarding EU and Kosovo, but also that they are aware of this cognitive dissonance.

According to the theory of cognitive dissonance, the tension between inconsistent convictions and conduct creates unpleasant feelings, namely feelings of shame and humiliation. Citizens of Serbia as individuals, as well as the state of Serbia as a collective actor, will have a need to overcome this dissonance to such extent to which the dissonance of these views becomes more obvious. If all other circumstances remain unchanged, the question is how the Serbian public will overcome this dissonance.¹⁸

Considering that the citizens have become aware of above inconsistency, it can no longer be overcome through denial.¹⁹ More precisely, as revealed by the BCSP survey, most citizens have already accepted the dissonant information that Serbia, if it wants to accede EU, must give up Kosovo. It is reasonable to suppose that, despite the ruling elites persistently trying to avoid and deny it, further developments in the second half of the year additionally confirmed this information.²⁰ Key decision-makers in the country, however, did not accept this publicly yet.²¹ The currently prevailing discourse: 'both EU and Kosovo' will, in the measure in which citizens become more aware of the inconsistency between European and Kosovo policy, become less and less a way to overcome the cognitive dissonance.

Since the strategies of denial can no longer offer a suitable response to cognitive dissonance, citizens of Serbia are left two options. First option is to let go of one of the two convictions, either the one with regard to EU or the one with regard to Kosovo. Although main political parties, both those in power and those in opposition, did not abandon the goal to accede EU, in September public support to this goal dropped to the historical minimum of 46%. This clearly indicates what direction the overcoming of cognitive dissonance could take.²² It is expected, however, that Serbia will be awarded EU candidate status in March 2012, which could 'recuperate' public support to EU integrations. After that, majority support to accession could be sustained through periodical making of progress in the EU integration process (e.g., beginning of negotiations, opening and closing individual chapters in negotiations, use of EU structural funds, conclusion of negotiations, etc). On the other hand, if it is impossible to deny the dissonance, or abandon any of dissonant convictions, there is only one psychological mechanism left: a possibility to create new convictions which will shrink the significance of dissonance. A new conviction could be created for this



purpose; namely, domestic elites could accuse EU that, in actual fact, it is not sincere when saying that it wants Serbia in its ranks.

Other important dissonance revealed by the survey is created between the Serbian wish to become a member state of EU and its wish to remain militarily neutral. At first sight, these two standpoints should not be dissonant, even more so if we know that some EU member states are militarily neutral.²³ When one analyses the deeper reasons for which citizens prefer military neutrality, it is clear that it is actually based on the negative image of NATO as such. Let us be reminded, the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia declared military neutrality in December 2007, precisely because of the 'overall role of NATO' with regard to Kosovo, starting from the bombing campaign against Serbia through to the Ahtisaari plan which identified NATO as the 'ultimate governmental authority'.²⁴ The BCSP survey showed that citizens, for identical or similar reasons, believe that military neutrality is preferable. Main reason for negative feelings towards NATO, as it is clearly demonstrated by the results of surveying the focus group, is the memory of the 1999 bombing campaign. The survey likewise demonstrated that citizens see the EU and NATO member states (with the exception of Greece), and some neighbouring countries such as Croatia and Albania, as a threat, whilst they see Russia, China, and Greece as friends. It is, however, possible to suppose that the citizens are aware that memberships in these two organisations overlap and that the same European countries that have bombarded Serbia as NATO member states are at the same time EU member states. The exceptionally negative view on NATO will in future be an additional factor that may influence the citizens to give up their support to the EU integrations. Specifically, a change of the view on EU, which will shift from the positive towards the negative, will diminish both the cognitive dissonance with regard to the view on Kosovo and the cognitive dissonance with regard to the negative image of NATO.

5. Conclusion

This paper analysed the public opinion in Serbia with regard to the priorities of security policy. The paper primarily rested on the findings of the survey that BCSP and CESID conducted in April and May 2011. Several conclusions could be made based on the presented findings.

Firstly, the support of Serbian citizens to EU integrations of Serbia is on a decline. This can be explained by the citizens being disappoint-

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²² The same positions are taken by strongest political parties which announced that, if Serbia is forced to choose between Kosovo and EU, they will choose the first option. See the interview with Tomislav Nikolić: <<http://www.novosti.rs/vesti/naslovna/aktuelno.69.html:337186-Nikolic-Biramo-Kosovo-pre-Evropa>> 1 October 2011. The message of Boris Tadić was similar: <<http://sundaytimes.lk/world-news/10265-serbia-wont-concede-on-kosovo-for-eu-tadic-says.html>> 1 October 2011

²³ Specifically: Sweden, Finland, Austria, Ireland, Cyprus, and Malta.

²⁴ "National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia Resolution on the Protection of Sovereignty, Territorial Integrity, and Constitutional Order of the Republic of Serbia." 26 december 2007

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ed because of economic and social policy of the Government of the Republic of Serbia, whose last European integrations related achievement (at the time of survey) was the December 2009 visa regime liberalisation, and possible suspension of it was increasingly more mentioned on the eve of the survey. Great expectations which the citizens had with regard to the European integrations process did not come true, and the ruling coalition's policy 'both EU and Kosovo' was repeatedly on the edge of ruin. This policy suffered a complete failure in December 2011 when the EU Council did not award candidate status to Serbia, because of its Kosovo policy. It seems reasonable to suppose that all this has reduced the support for membership in EU to even lower historical minimum.

Secondly, the support of Serbian citizens to the accession to NATO is likewise falling. It can be supposed that it has fallen due to current NATO operations in Libya which revived Serbian citizens' memory of 1999 bombing campaign. In accordance with this, large majority of citizens believe that the policy of military neutrality best protects the national security of Serbia. Although only 15% of citizens support the accession to NATO, more citizens believe that, in some ways, Serbia would benefit from the accession to NATO. For instance, 38% of respondents think that the accession to NATO would modernise the armed forces, which is not irrelevant.

Thirdly, the correlation between the respondents' social structure and their answers is mostly what could be expected. Young people, students, and well-educated people are more in favour of security cooperation and integration processes than the elderly, unemployed, and uneducated. As opposed to EU integrations which can be recuperated if the candidate status is acquired, nothing like that can be expected with regard to the accession to NATO.

Fourthly, the survey showed that there is a cognitive dissonance among the citizens, namely the awareness of the existence of discordant and mutually contradictory viewpoints. Thus, a vast majority of citizens believe that Kosovo will never again be an integral part of Serbia, as well as that Serbia will have to recognise the independence of Kosovo if it wants to join EU. Leaning on the theory of cognitive dissonance, developed within the framework of social psychology and within the science of international relations, the paper presented three presumptions about how to overcome this situation. First way is to deny this cognitive dissonance. Considering that most citizens, at least according to this survey, already believe that Serbia will have to give up Kosovo if it wants to become a member state of EU, it is clear that it is highly unlikely that this strategy will work. Moreover, although this was not specifically investigated within the survey, it



seems reasonable to suppose that citizens know only too well that the European countries which have themselves bombarded Serbia as NATO member states are at the same time the EU member states. Accordingly, since denial can no longer be an effective instrument to overcome the cognitive dissonance, only the other two ways are left on our disposal. It can be overcome by abandoning one of inconsistent standpoints. This could be either the abandonment of the standpoint that Kosovo is Serbia, or the abandonment of the goal to join the EU. Bearing in mind the symbolical significance of Kosovo and current consensus of the political elite that Kosovo should never be recognised as an independent state, it can be hardly supposed that this standpoint would be abandoned any time soon. Besides, by rejecting the standpoint that Serbia should become an EU member state, cognitive dissonance is simultaneously being diminished with regard to the viewpoint on Kosovo and with regard to the negative view on NATO. If this strong incentive is weakened in future through the periodic, and well-covered in media, progress in the process of European integrations, and if citizens still support both the pro-European and the pro-Kosovo policy, their cognitive dissonance will need to be resolved in a third way. And this means finding new convictions that could lower the importance of the existing dissonance. One of such viewpoints that could develop in future as the exit from the condition of collective cognitive dissonance, would be that the European Union actually does not want to accept Serbia in its ranks. Since public opinion is often accompanied with the decision-makers' dominant discourse, it would be beneficial if future surveys focused on the way in which cognitive dissonance in foreign and security policy are perceived and overcome by those who shape the policy and make decision in the Republic of Serbia.

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