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ON IMPROBABLE CARROTS: SERBIAN CITIZENS BETWEEN KOSOVO* AND THE ELUSIVE EU MEMBERSHIP¹

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ABSTRACT

Membership in the EU is sometimes presented as a reward for Serbia's eventual acknowledgement of Kosovo's independence. Although membership in the EU has been a strategic goal of Serbian foreign policy, the EU is often perceived as working against Serbian national interests regarding Kosovo's status. Relying on the cognitive dissonance theory, we hypothesize that in addition to a direct negative association between the support for Serbia's territorial integrity and the EU membership, there is also an interactive effect: the association should be moderated by one's opinion on when and whether Serbia will become a member of the EU. These hypotheses are examined using public opinion data based on a large national sample of adult Serbian citizens. The results support the interaction hypothesis: the attitude that Kosovo should remain part of Serbia is a stronger predictor of the (negative) evaluation of the EU among those respondents who do not believe that Serbia will become an EU member in the future.

KEYWORDS: Attitudes, attitude consistency, cognitive dissonance, post-conflict society, Serbia, Kosovo, EU

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* This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UN Security Council resolution 1244 and the International Court of Justice Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

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INTRODUCTION

Literature on protracted conflicts is often focused on the past – whether how past events have influenced current events or how perceptions of the past affect views of the present and the future. Tomlinson (2004) found that the nature of the past relationship was a significant factor in the victim's willingness to reconcile following a broken promise. Noor (2008) developed a theoretical model of reconciliation orientation, which found that forgiveness and subjective evaluation of past violence were precursors to reconciliation orientation. Stein (2008) found that negative perceptions of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission were associated with increased distress and anger, while positive perceptions were associated with forgiveness. These are some of the authors who suggest that the perception of past events is an important factor in readiness for reconciliation.

It is somewhat less often analysed how perceptions of different versions of the future may affect perceptions of the present and the past. It is not difficult to imagine such scenarios. For instance, the perception/belief that reconciliation with the other side in the conflict may be a necessary condition for achieving a desirable version of the future may contribute to a more conciliatory attitude towards the opposed side in the conflict and modify perceptions of the past – e.g., seeing the opponents as not necessarily intrinsically evil. This is an assumption that lies in the 'carrot' part of the 'stick and carrot' approach, where typically agents external to the conflict promise various incentives for the sides in the conflict whose intentions and policies they want to modify (Bemelmans-Vidéc et al., 2011).

What this simple image often ignores is the conflicted actors' perception of the incentives, in particular of the probability that the incentive will be realized. If the promised incentive is perceived as not credible or likely, it may fail to exert any positive influence regardless of how desirable it might be. We believe that the perceived likelihood of a 'desirable future' influences how the public perceives the conflicted agents and policies associated with the conflict and the relevant 'desired future'. One of the mechanisms that drive this association, we propose and examine in this paper, is the human tendency to hold cognitively and affectively consistent attitudes and beliefs. Thus, we use social psychological theory on cognitive consistency (Aronson, 1969; Festinger, 1962; Heider, 1946) to better understand how perceptions of the past and the future, in particular the perceived likelihood of a desirable future, affect attitudes and policy preferences regarding the current protracted conflict.

We focus on Serbia and the protracted conflict concerning the status of Kosovo* and Metohija and the perceived likelihood that Serbia may join the European Union in the near future. In the following sections, we

elaborate on this research problem and derive the hypothesis tested in the analytic part of the paper. We, however, start with a very brief and simplified outline of the protracted conflict in question. Then, we very briefly present the idea of striving for cognitive consistency, and the description of the current study follows.

PROTRACTED CONFLICT CONCERNING THE STATUS OF KOSOVO AND METOHİJA

Kosovo and Metohija is, according to the current Serbian constitution, inalienable part of the Serbian territory. However, Kosovo Albanians declared the independence of the province in 2008². The separatist movement in Kosovo has a long history, erupting to the surface already in 1980. The tensions between the Serbian and Albanian ethnic communities have an even longer history, basically from the Ottoman times when the conversion of the majority of Albanians to Islam transformed the interethnic relationships into a religious conflict as well.

With the Ottoman occupation, the Albanian population started moving into Kosovo, while the number of Serbs started decreasing due to the difficult survival struggle and emigration. At the end of the 19th century, the two ethnic groups were of approximately equal size, but the proportion of Serbs kept decreasing ever since, even though the region had been liberated from Ottoman rule and re-joined Serbia. The growth of the Kosovo Albanian population was partly due to a higher birth rate but also to the immigration of Albanians from Albania. At the same time, the emigration of the Serbian population has kept going. At the moment, there is less than 5% of Serbs located in several 'enclaves' in Kosovo (e.g., Nedeljković & Jović, 1999; Milosavljević & Medojević, 2020).

The peak of the conflict, in terms of violence and human victims, was the NATO aggression on Serbia in 1999. The aggression ended with Serbia signing the Kumanovo agreement, whereby Serbia agreed to remove the military forces from Kosovo, while the final solution of the Kosovo status was left for later negotiations. After the 2008 declaration of independence, many countries recognized Kosovo's independence, but many have not, and Kosovo is not a member of the United Nations yet. At the moment of writing this paper, there are ongoing negotiations regarding the relationship' normalization' between Serbian and Kosovo representatives at the highest level. Although the 'resolution' of this conflict, whatever form it might achieve in the future, may seem unlikely soon, an improvement in the relationships between the conflicted sides

2 It was actually the second declaration of independence announced by the Kosovo Albanian political and paramilitary leaders. The first one was proclaimed in 1990.

seems more realistic, and occasionally some small steps in that direction seem to have occurred.

Although the intensity of the conflicts has been reduced in recent years, the 'Kosovo issue' unsurprisingly remains on the Serbian political agenda, although it is often more symbolic than concerning specific policies. Kosovo has special importance for Serbian national identity: it is the heart of medieval Serbia, the seat of the Patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and the place where the oldest Serbian cultural monuments are situated. Kosovo and the famous Kosovo battle are at the center of national mythology and are central themes of ancient epic poems. Hence, it is important to consider what kind of policies and how they are formulated and presented, may be more or less helpful in bringing about a more conciliatory future.

Not surprisingly, this conflict has not remained without foreign involvement in various ways – the NATO aggression, of course, being the most drastic recent example. At the same time, external actors have also been involved in the post-war era, with the declared aim of building lasting peace and reconciliation. So, the situation we have here consists of the two conflicted sides – Serbia and Kosovo Albanians, and external actors (USA, NATO, EU) who participated militarily on the side of one of the conflicting sides, and since then, are actors who are ostensibly promoting a peaceful reconciliation (of course, this help has a specific agenda, but no need to elaborate on it in details). The puzzle – and opportunity for new insights, is not that the external actors that took part in the conflict now act as post-conflict mediators. What makes this situation peculiar for Serbia is its position vis-à-vis the EU.

Since the EU has actively supported the Kosovo Albanian's secessionism, it would be logical, from the perspective of Serbian nationalist interests, at least as perceived in Serbia, to hold negative attitudes towards the EU (e.g., Antonić, 2012; Jovanović, 2018). However, membership in the EU has also been a part of Serbia's official strategic policy for many years (even for the current rhetorically nationalist government). This is obviously a contradictory position for the Serbian public – to strive for membership in an organization that has acted against its national interests. This puts members of the public in the position of either-or: either one is for the EU and therefore giving up the sovereignty over Kosovo, or one is for sovereignty and against the (future) EU membership. But, a positive aspect of this contradiction, it might be argued, is that the EU could use the promise of the EU membership as a carrot – as a tool to discourage seeing territorial integrity as a fundamental national interest, and in this way contribute to the reconciliation and peace in the Balkans. This expectation could be supported by social psychological research on cognitive consistency, which we briefly discuss next.

THEORY OF COGNITIVE DISSONANCE

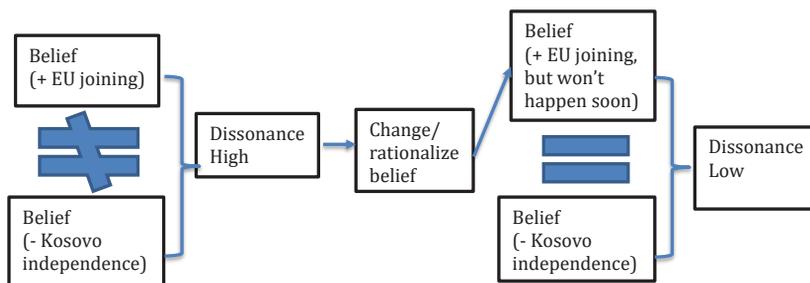
Cognitive dissonance theory is a psychological theory proposed by Leon Festinger (1962), which states that people experience mental discomfort or dissonance when they simultaneously hold two or more conflicting beliefs, values, or attitudes. This feeling of dissonance creates a sense of psychological discomfort or tension, which individuals are motivated to reduce by changing their attitudes or beliefs or by justifying or rationalizing their behaviour (Aronson, 1969; Elliot & Devine, 1994; Elkin & Leippe, 1986; Festinger, 1962). Numerous studies show that cognitive dissonance is related to attitude change. Annu & Dhanda (2020) reviewed the literature on cognitive dissonance and found that it is associated with changes in attitude, while other studies find the dissonance-provoked attitude change is durable over time (Sénémeaud & Somat, 2009). Richard et al.'s (2003) quantitative meta-analysis of 'One Hundred Years of Social Psychology' shows that research generally indicates that there is consistency between people's attitudes and behavior. Yet, they don't list any study that deals with factors that might *moderate* that association, although they generally recognize the importance of psychological moderator analyses.

In terms of our subject of analysis, if someone supports Serbia joining the EU and opposes Kosovo's independence, they may experience cognitive dissonance. To reduce this dissonance, they may either change their attitudes (e.g., develop a negative attitude toward the EU) or justify their positions by rationalization (e.g., that the prospects of Serbia joining the EU are uncertain). Put differently, people strive for balance in their attitudes and beliefs and are motivated to maintain this balance to reduce the discomfort of inconsistency (Heider, 1946). With this in mind, we would expect that attitudes towards Kosovo and the EU are connected – because these issues are, in reality, strongly connected. Those who believe that Kosovo should remain within Serbia are expected to be more critical of the EU – which follows from the structure of the actual conflict. Those who are positive about the EU and in favour of joining it are supposed to be more accepting of Kosovo's independence. Such attitude structure is stable because it is cognitively consistent – the EU is, in fact, promoting Kosovo's independence.

However, being both for the EU and for Serbia's territorial integrity is bound to produce discomfort and pressure to change one of the components in the structure (e.g., the position on Kosovo). This dissonance could be resolved in several ways (e.g., McGrath, 2017). One's attitude can be changed, for example, by adopting a more critical stance towards the EU; new beliefs or the implications of the existing beliefs can be added, for example, by stating that, in the long term, we will all be a part of the same 'territory' within the EU; rationalizing one's position, like stating

that Kosovo is already independent and nothing could be done about it or supporting the EU joining while 'acknowledging' that it won't be any time soon (see Figure 1, for one such illustration).

Figure 1 Beliefs dissonance and its possible resolution



These theoretical possibilities have some clear real-life demonstrations. Sort of the 'carrot policy' of Serbia's future EU membership often propagated in local and European public (promise of the EU future, painted with the 'rosy colours', and in order to maintain balance) make one side of the equation/alternative more preferable, possibly with the aim that the Serbian public will gradually convert the anti-separatist attitude concerning Kosovo. At the same time, part of the public is probably likely to give up the EU membership to solidify their sovereigntist position, but this possibility is not much discussed, perhaps believing in the carrot's (or stick's, for that matter) power. Moreover, this, in theory, a psychologically stressful situation is being observed in public opinion data: the Serbian public is mostly in favour of joining the EU and also in favour of retaining the sovereignty over Kosovo, as we demonstrate below. However, we theorize that these two attitudes may involve more complex relationships than what is usually presented in the literature on cognitive dissonance and focus on one specific scenario of resolving the dissonance.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE OPERATIONAL HYPOTHESIS

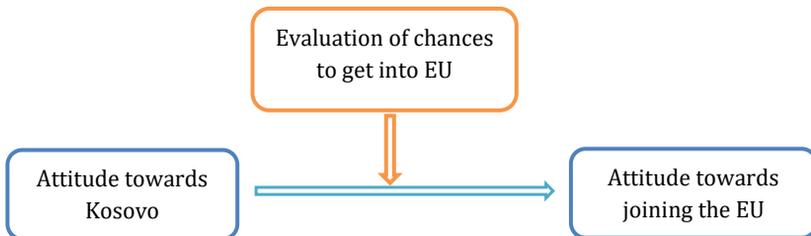
According to the rationalist theory of political behavior (e.g., Downs, 1957; Olson, 1989), the probability of an act (e.g., voting) is directly associated with the (perceived) probability that the action will produce the expected effect (e.g., change in government). This obviously does not have to be limited to assessing the likelihood of outcomes caused by one's actions – it should apply to any future event that could occur with a certain likelihood. If a certain promised future seems very desirable (e.g., membership in the EU), it may also appear to some in Serbia as more or less likely

to happen in the near future. The psychological pressure towards attitude change should be more acute if EU membership is a realistic prospect. If the EU is seen as an unrealistic project or too distant in the future, there is no 'cost' in giving up what is in any way not reachable, i.e., the 'European future'. If the prospect of joining the EU is seen as realistic, the attitudes are more likely to be disjointed, resulting from the activation of various possible psychological dissonance-reduction processes.

Given this ambivalence, we hypothesize that there is an interactive effect here (Figure 2): the association between the attitudes towards the Kosovo issue and attitude towards the EU should be influenced by one's opinion on whether and when Serbia will become a member of the EU. Hence, our main hypothesis is that for those who do not believe that Serbia will be able or accepted to join the EU, the Kosovo and EU attitudes should be more strongly (negatively) connected. Minimizing the prospects of Serbian joining the EU could be, in terms of the theoretical models described above, treated as an added belief that enables one to keep supporting (distant) the idea of the EU joining and opposing Kosovo independence.

The association should be weaker or non-existent for those who believe that Serbia will eventually join the EU. It might, at first, sound counter-intuitive. However, it is what the theory of cognitive dissonance would predict – in a situation when one is concurrently supportive of EU joining and opposing Kosovo independence, the perception of realistic prospects of joining the EU would strengthen the cognitive dissonance and imply the necessity to change the existing beliefs and increase the balance, for example, by rationalizing the belief toward Kosovo ("It is already independent", "we will be united in the EU" etc.) which should lead to a less prominent relationship between the two attitudes. This is, of course, but one possibility of resolving psychological discomfort that we focus on; others are also possible, like developing EU skepticism, which would, in the same way, result in a less intense relationship between the two attitudes.

Figure 2 Interaction model of the relationship between attitudes towards Kosovo and the EU in regard to evaluations of chances of joining the EU



Cognitive dissonance theory is a theory that deals with psychological processes and relationships between psychological elements such as attitudes, values, and perceptions. Various external and internal factors may influence the shift in balance, and processes of re-establishing the balance may involve readjustment and mutual influence of various elements within a relevant attitude structure (e.g., some attitudes might change, some relationships between attitudes might change, causing further readjustments and mutual interactions). We are making a point that it is usually difficult to specify (especially measure) all possible causal processes and their directions.

In the model we are developing here, the attitude towards Kosovo's independence is treated as the independent variable influencing the attitude towards joining the EU, while the perception of Serbia's chance to join the EU acts as the moderator variable. This is not to argue that a change in the attitude towards the EU cannot influence the attitude towards Kosovo's independence. Cognitive dissonance theory implies that such multi-directional readjustment processes are usually at work. For testing our hypothesis about the moderator effect, it is not of crucial importance in which direction the changes in attitudes might have worked while making the respondents' attitudes prior to the moment of the data collection. We don't have longitudinal data or experimental research design. However, for our research question, given our data, it is sufficient to assume a particular structure of the relationships, all the better if it is a realistic assumption. Hence, in light of the brief overview of the issues of Kosovo's independence and EU membership in Serbia, it is reasonable to assume that attitudes towards Kosovo may have a more substantial impact on the EU attitudes than vice versa. First, the Kosovo issue historically much predates even the emergence of the EU, not just the question of whether and when Serbia will join it. 'Kosovo as a historic heartland' is taught to children already in primary school for generations. While territorial integrity is a core national question, membership in the EU is just a question of joining an international organization, i.e., clearly of lesser political weight. For instance, the UK has left the EU, and might rejoin in the future. However, territorial integrity would undoubtedly be treated as a much bigger question. To summarize, the terms 'dependent' and 'independent' variables here are used in a technical sense, not assuming a simple unidirectional influence. The relationship is most likely bidirectional, as well as probably influenced by some third variables beyond the scope of the current research problem.

How relevant this kind of evidence may be for real-life policies? There is no need to be naïve – public opinion is not directly determining actions of political actors – neither in Serbia nor elsewhere, but may have some influence. Thus, the research problem is not of purely academic relevance.

We argue that when deriving political policy implications from cognitive consistency theories, it is important to take into account the perceived probabilities associated with outcomes that are supposed to act as motivators for attitude change. In this particular case (Serbian public opinion and the protracted conflict concerning Kosovo), if the public opinion would strongly shift towards the 'anti-EU patriotic' position, the conflict would seem more likely to remain frozen, as Serbia has no power to re-establish its sovereignty over Kosovo by itself, and there is no credible incentive to change that position. Conversely, a credible and likely incentive might facilitate the shift in the desired direction. A better understanding of the involved social-psychological mechanisms may help the actors choose policies that are less likely to lead to protracted conflicting positions and instead direct their efforts towards more conciliatory, cooperative positions that lead to a more optimistic version of the future.

Hopefully, it should be clear that in this paper, we do not simply derive policy implications from psychological theory. We are also contributing to the development of psychological theory by demonstrating how perceived probabilities associated with contradictory attitude elements interact with or moderate the association between attitude elements. Our main claim tested in this paper is that attitudinal inconsistency is more pressing if it is made salient, and this saliency can be affected by perceived probabilities associated with outcomes implied within the attitude elements. If some elements are perceived as being purely hypothetical, unrealistic, or distant and uncertain, the imbalance is easier to tolerate.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Sample. The hypothesis about the moderating effect of the perceived probability of joining the EU on the relationship between the attitudes towards Kosovo independence and support for Serbia's joining the EU is examined using public opinion survey data based on a large non-random national sample of adult Serbian citizens. The study focused on public attitudes concerning Serbian foreign relations, particularly towards the EU and Russia.

This online survey is based on two sub-samples: 1. Sub-sample based on a non-random internet panel, and 2. 'Internet' sub-sample. The first one was invited to participate in the survey through email messages sent to personal email addresses. The email addresses were collected for an earlier project conducted in 2017, where email addresses were collected from publicly accessible websites based on Serbian Internet domains.

The 'Internet' subsample is recruited through Internet advertising (mostly through social networks such as Facebook) and link sharing. The email sample contains 2272 respondents who provided at least some

valid responses, while 1632 completed the questionnaire. In the Internet subsample, 2,447 respondents started the questionnaire, and 1,701 fully completed it. The reported analyses are based on the merged sample; all analyses were conducted separately on the two subsamples to check for any deviations due to the specific recruitment strategy. The results are consistent across the subsamples in all cases, so we report the results based on the merged sample. In the case of non-probability samples, the literature suggests that applying different recruitment strategies is helpful in reducing potential biases of specific recruitment methods („sample blending”, Elliott & Haviland, 2007; Robbins et al., 2021).

For all respondents, the electronic questionnaire started with information about the project, including information about data protection, confidentiality, and participant privacy. Respondents expressed their informed consent to participate in the research project by clicking to continue past the landing page. All the research procedures, including sampling and data protection, were reviewed and approved by the Ethical Committee of the Institute of Social Sciences.

The employed sampling procedures resulted in a sample that deviates in some socio-demographic characteristics from the Serbian adult population. Gender and region are relatively well represented (the sample includes respondents from virtually all Serbian municipalities). However, the better-educated and urban population is overrepresented. Therefore, all the reported analyses use weights that balance the basic demographic variables – sex, region, and age. The weights are based on the joint distribution of sex, age, and country region, according to the census data from the Statistical Office of Serbia (<https://www.stat.gov.rs/en-us/>).³

It is important to note that these are convenience samples, i.e., non-random samples; therefore, the generalization to the populations has to be taken cautiously. Methodological research suggests that diverse non-random samples can be useful for studying relationships between variables (e.g., Sweetland 1972; Brislin & Baumgardner, 1971; Cornesse et al., 2020).

Variables and measures. The general research problem is analyzed using several indicators of the involved constructs. We use three different operationalizations of the dependent variable (*Support for the joining EU*, *EU disintegration feelings*, and *EU referendum questions*) and two versions of the moderator variable (*Perceived likelihood of Serbian EU membership* and *Perception of the intention of the EU to accept Serbia’s membership*). We want to see how robust the interaction effect is and whether it is sensi-

3 Rural-urban type of residence was not used since the measures available in the survey do not fit the Statistical Office codes. Nevertheless, controlling for this variable does not modify any of the presented conclusions.

tive to specific operationalization of the involved constructs. The main independent variable (statistically speaking) is *Attitudes toward Kosovo/territorial integrity*. We also probe for the general perception of EU policy regarding Kosovo. All mentioned variables are standard Likert-type items, followed by different format scales. More details regarding the variables and measures are provided during the analysis.

RESULTS

The results are presented in two stages. First, we present the basic descriptive results concerning the included variables and some evidence supporting the problem's conceptual setup. Our model assumes that the relationship between the attitude towards Kosovo independence and EU membership should be negative because the public perceives the EU as supporting Kosovo's secession. Hence, we present results that support this claim. In the second stage, after being familiarized with the relevant variables, we examine whether the perceived likelihood of Serbia joining the EU in the near future influences the negative association between attitude towards Kosovo secession and support for Serbia's joining the EU. We opt for a simple analytic approach – analyzing the relevant relationships in two subgroups – one with respondents who believe that Serbia will eventually become a member of the EU and the other one with respondents who believe otherwise. We also provide some graphical illustrations to make the findings more intuitive.

DESCRIPTIVE RESULTS

We begin with the basic descriptive statistics concerning the main variables (dependent, independent, moderator) and the public opinion relevant to conceptualizing the research problem.

THE CONSENSUS THAT THE EU SUPPORTS SECESSION

To prove that the relationship between the public attitudes described in the introduction exists, it is essential to demonstrate that the EU is indeed seen as an involved actor, and involved in a particular manner. In other words, it is important to establish that Serbia's potential EU membership and Serbian sovereignty over Kosovo are indeed seen as mutually exclusive political aims. As Table 1 shows, obviously, and not surprisingly, in Serbia, the EU is not seen as a neutral player concerning the status of Kosovo. Rather, it is seen as an actor promoting a policy that is opposed to what is commonly perceived as being at the core of the Serbian national interest. Approximately 87% of the respondents see the EU as supporting Kosovo's

secession, while just about 4% see the EU as a neutral player. Thus, it is safe to conclude that concerning public opinion in Serbia, attitudes toward Kosovo's independence and the EU are supposed to be negatively related.

Table 1. Distribution of perceived views of the EU policy concerning Kosovo (in %)

| <i>Which of the following best describes the current EU policy concerning Kosovo?</i> | |
|---|--------|
| EU supports territorial integrity of Serbia (Kosovo to remain within Serbia) | 1.1% |
| EU supports Kosovo's secession | 87.2% |
| EU has a neutral position | 4.4% |
| Does not know | 4.7% |
| Refused to answer | 2.6% |
| Total | 100.0% |

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE

Our model explains the level of EU support by one's attitude toward Kosovo's independence. The main predictor variable is the opinion that Kosovo should remain an integral part of Serbia. Table 2 shows that the majority of the respondents moderately or strongly agree with the opinion that Kosovo should remain part of Serbia. However, we can also observe a spectrum of opinions, so approximately 23% moderately or strongly disagree with this opinion. This diversity of opinion is actually a necessary condition for our model: if the opinion was unanimous, there would be no variance to explain.

Table 2. Distribution of the independent variable: Support for Serbia's territorial integrity (in %)

| <i>Kosovo should remain part of Serbia.</i> | |
|---|--------|
| Completely disagree | 13.8% |
| Mostly disagree | 9.8% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 12.2% |
| Somewhat agree | 14.7% |
| Strongly agree | 42.7% |
| Does not know | 3.8% |
| Refused to answer | 3.0% |
| Total | 100.0% |

DEPENDENT VARIABLE

The opinion about Serbia's joining the EU is even more evenly distributed. Table 3 shows the distribution of responses to the main dependent

variable – the support for joining the EU. About 50% of the respondents agree or strongly agree that *Regardless of all conditions, Serbia's joining the EU would, in any case, be better than remaining in the current situation*. Conversely, about 40% disagree or strongly disagree with that statement. It is important to note that only about 8% is undecided, demonstrating that the opinion about the EU is indeed polarized in Serbia.

Table 3. Distribution of the main dependent variable:
Support for joining the EU (in %)

| <i>Regardless of all conditions, Serbia's joining the EU would, in any case, be better than remaining in the current situation.</i> | |
|---|--------|
| Completely disagree | 25.8% |
| Mostly disagree | 14.8% |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 8.0% |
| Somewhat agree | 22.7% |
| Strongly agree | 27.0% |
| Does not know | 1.3% |
| Refused to answer | .5% |
| Total | 100.0% |

To test the model's robustness, we use additional versions of the dependent variables in subsequent analyses. One is the EU disintegration item: *If somebody would tell you tomorrow that the EU broke down, how would you feel?* Another one is the EU referendum question: *How would you vote if there were a referendum next week on Serbia's joining the EU?* Details about these variables are presented in the section with the main results.

MODERATOR VARIABLES

In our model, the opinion on when and whether Serbia will join the EU moderates the association of Kosovo-EU attitudes. Although it is known that the majority of Serbian citizens support joining the EU (see Table 8; also see Bazić, 2019, p. 316), it is clear that many Serbs do not see it as an event likely to occur soon. Less than 9% think EU membership is within reach for Serbia, while nearly 44% think it will never happen (Table 4). Worth noting is also that nearly every fifth respondent is uncertain on the matter.

Table 4 Distribution of the primary moderator variable:
Perceived likelihood of Serbian EU membership (in %)

| <i>In your opinion, whether and when will Serbia become a member of the EU?</i> | |
|---|--------|
| Will become a member until 2025 | 8.78% |
| Will become a member until 2030 | 17.28% |
| Will become a member after 2030 | 10.60% |
| Will never become a member of the EU | 43.63% |
| Does not know | 18.79% |
| Refused to answer | 0.92% |
| Total | 100.0% |

We also analyze the effect of an alternative operationalization of the moderator variable – the perception of the EU's intention to accept Serbia into the EU. Table 5 presents the distribution of this alternative moderator variable. About 22% of respondents think that the EU intends to accept Serbia, while 34% and 40% think that the EU does not intend to accept Serbia or is unsure about it, respectively.

Table 5 Distribution of the alternative moderator variable:
Perception of the intention of the EU to accept Serbia's membership (in %)

| <i>In your view, what is the EU's attitude towards accepting Serbia into the EU?</i> | |
|--|--------|
| EU intends to accept Serbia into the EU. | 22.09% |
| EU is not sure if it wants Serbia's membership | 39.59% |
| EU does not intend to accept Serbia | 33.90% |
| Does not know | 3.43% |
| Refused to answer | 0.98% |
| Total | 100.0% |

Obviously, the opinion on Serbia's likelihood to ever join the EU is not unanimous, which means that variance in this opinion may act as a moderator variable. The evidence on this point comes next.

THE MAIN ANALYSIS

The main research problem is set up as the relationship between three variables. The independent variable is the attitude towards Serbian territorial integrity, i.e., the opinion that Kosovo should remain part of Serbia. According to the conceptual model, this attitude determines the attitude towards the EU, particularly concerning potential Serbia's membership in the EU. The assumption is that this association is negative: the more one supports Serbia's territorial integrity, the more one is skeptical about the

country's membership in the EU. The reason for the negative association is the fact that the EU supports Kosovo's independence.

This relationship, our model proposes, is moderated by the perceived likelihood of Serbia's joining the EU, because it affects the cognitive dissonance provoked by holding the two attitudes simultaneously. We test this relationship using different operationalizations of the dependent variable.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ATTITUDE TOWARD KOSOVO SECESSION AND REGARDING SERBIA'S EU MEMBERSHIP

The main analysis begins with analyzing the bivariate relationship between the attitude concerning Kosovo's independence and the attitude that Serbia should join the EU. Those favoring Kosovo remaining in Serbia are less inclined to support joining the EU. The association is quite strong: $r = -.48$ ($R^2 = .23$, $p < .001$). As expected, the belief that Kosovo should remain part of Serbia goes with the disagreement that „Serbia's joining the EU would, in any case, be better than remaining in the current situation”.

To make the results concerning the moderating role of the perceived probability of Serbia's joining the EU most obvious and intuitive, we conduct regression analyses separately in two subgroups: among those who think that Serbia will actually become a member of the EU (values 1, 2 and 3 of the moderator variable), and among those who believe that Serbia will never join the EU (or they answered that they do not know). We opt for this approach, rather than including the interaction terms, to present the results more simply and intuitively.⁴ In each regression equation, we are controlling for the basic socio-demographic variables: Age, Education, and Type of residence.⁵ Note that we do not display the results for the control variables because their effects are not of concern for the present research problem.

According to the results presented in Table 6, among those who believe in a realistic chance of Serbia joining the EU (Group 1), the results show a significantly weaker association (the slope coefficient) compared to Group 2 with respondents who do not believe Serbia will ever join the EU. Note that the table shows confidence intervals around the estimated regression coefficients, thus showing whether the difference in the slopes is statistically significant.

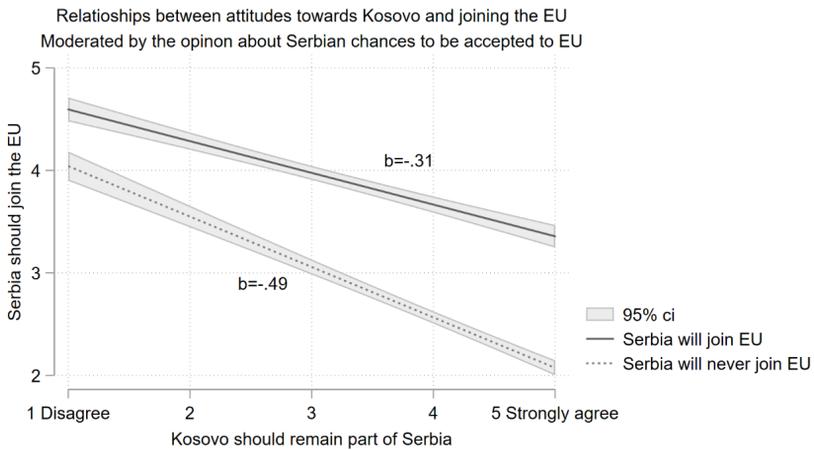
4 We conducted the analyses with the inclusion of the relevant interaction terms, and the results are essentially the same as those presented in the paper.

5 *Age* is measured in years of age; *Education* is operationalized in nine categories, from incomplete primary school to doctorate level; *Type of residence* refers to the level of urbanization of the place of residence (5 categories).

Table 6. Results of the OLS regression analysis in two subgroups

| <i>Moderator: Whether and when Serbia will become an EU member?</i> | R ² | Unstandardized Coefficients | | t | Sig. | 95.0% Confidence Interval for b | |
|---|----------------|--------------------------------|---------------|--------|------|------------------------------------|----------------|
| | | b | Std. Error | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Group 1: Will become a member | .15 | -.29 | .024 | -12.14 | .000 | -.340 | -.245 |
| Group 2: Never will become a member of the EU (& DKN) | .22 | -.49 | .023 | -21.16 | .000 | -.538 | -.447 |

Note: Predictor: Kosovo should remain part of Serbia. Dependent variable: Regardless of all conditions, Serbia's joining the EU would, in any case, be better than remaining in the current situation. Control variables: Education, Type of residence (urbanization), Age.

Figure 3 Relationship between attitude towards Kosovo secession and toward joining the EU, moderated by the perceived probability of Serbia's joining the EU (the graph reports the results without the control variables)

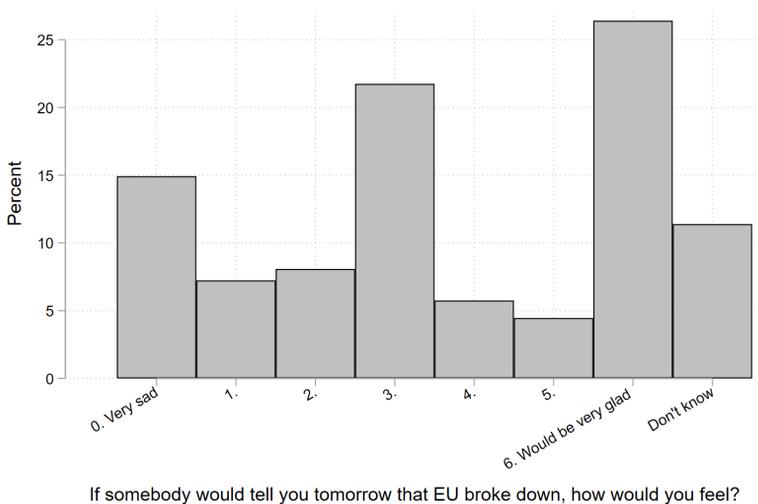
We also provide a graphic illustration to make the results more intuitive (Figure 3). Among the EU-membership skeptics, the evidence reveals a considerably stronger association than the one found among those exhibiting some faith in eventual Serbian EU membership. As our hypothesis suggests, the regression coefficient confidence intervals do not overlap, so we conclude that the association is stronger among those who don't think EU membership is a likely prospect.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ATTITUDE TOWARD KOSOVO
 SECESSION AND EU DISINTEGRATION

We validate the above finding using a different but conceptually equivalent dependent variable and a different mediator variable to see how robust the observed interaction is. In this analysis, instead of the general support for the 'EU future', we look into a more emotional aspect of the attitude toward the EU – how one would feel if the EU broke down or disintegrated.

We can see that the opinion here is quite divided (Figure 4), also suggesting that there is sufficient room for opinion change in both directions – towards and against a more positive attitude toward the EU. This is especially true because relatively many respondents occupy either the middle category (akin to being undecided) or explicitly respond that they don't know what to answer. This variable is, expectedly, positively correlated with the original dependent variable (the zero-order correlation is $r=.51, p<.001$). They are, however, not identical, implying that they capture different but related aspects of the more general attitude toward the EU. In any case, the hypothesis remains the same with this new variable.

Figure 4 Distribution of responses concerning the alternative version of the dependent variable: Feelings about the EU disintegration



Results presented in Table 7 show that among those believing in Serbian EU membership, the association is expectedly positive ($b=.47$). However, it is still somewhat stronger among the EU membership skeptics – $b=.64$. The relevant confidence intervals do not overlap, so we conclude

that the hypothesis is also supported with a different dependent variable (still an indicator of the same more general attitude).

Table 7 Results of the OLS regression analysis in two subgroups with the EU disintegration dependent variable

| <i>Moderator: Whether and when Serbia will become an EU member?</i> | R ² | Unstandardized Coefficients | | t | Sig. | 95.0% Confidence Interval for b | |
|---|----------------|-----------------------------|------------|-------|------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| | | b | Std. Error | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Model 1: Will become a member | .20 | .472 | .035 | 13.57 | .000 | .403 | .540 |
| Model 2: Never will become a member of the EU (& DKN) | .22 | .643 | .032 | 19.91 | .000 | .580 | .707 |

Dependent variable: If somebody would tell you tomorrow that the EU broke down, how would you feel? Predictor: Kosovo should remain part of Serbia. Control variables: Education, Type of residence (urbanization), Age.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ATTITUDE TOWARD KOSOVO SECESSION AND THE EU REFERENDUM

Vote on a hypothetical EU membership referendum is our third instance of the dependent variable. According to the results presented in Table 8, similarly to other studies (e.g., Bazić, 2019, p. 316)⁶, a relative majority of Serbians (if not the absolute majority) would vote *for* the EU membership (although, as we saw earlier, almost everyone believes that the EU is against Serbia's sovereignty over Kosovo territory). Although this is not a representative sample, it is interesting to note that the observed distribution of responses is quite similar to the one found in the recent European Social Survey (ESS) studies in Serbia.⁷

6 See also <https://www.mei.gov.rs/srl/vesti/2689/detaljnije/w/o/podrska-gradjana-evropskim-reformama-i-dalje-na-visokom-nivou/>.

7 ESS studies were based on large scale random samples of adult Serbian citizens. For more details, and the publicly accessible data, visit <https://www.europeansocialsurvey.org/data/>.

Table 8 Distribution of the EU referendum variable (in %)

| <i>How would you vote if there would be a referendum next week on Serbia's joining the EU?</i> | | | |
|--|---------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| | Current study | ESS10 (2021) | ESS9 (2018) |
| For joining the EU | 48.9% | 47.6% | 51.5% |
| Against joining the EU | 36.3% | 36.8% | 28.8% |
| Would not vote on that referendum | 6.7% | 15.6% ^a | 11.6% ^a |
| Don't know how I would vote | 8.1% | n/a | 8.1% |
| Total | 100.0% | 100.0% | 100.0% |

^a In the ESS9 and ESS10 studies, this category also includes those who would cast invalid or blank ballots.

As in the previous analysis, the OLS regressions with a dummy dependent variable (for joining EU vs. against) are conducted in two subgroups of respondents: among those who opine that Serbia will become a member of the EU and among those who think that Serbia will not become a member of the EU (including also those responding that they don't know).

The overall association is positive: Those who think Kosovo should remain within Serbia are more likely to vote against EU membership in a referendum. But, among those in the cross-fire position (believing in the possibility of Serbian EU membership), the association is relatively weak ($b=.06$). It is stronger among those who don't think Serbia will join the EU – $b=.16$. The regression coefficients' confidence intervals do not overlap, suggesting that the slopes are statistically significantly different.

Table 9. Results of the OLS regression analysis in two subgroups with the EU referendum dependent variable

| <i>Moderator: Whether and when Serbia will become an EU member?</i> | R ² | Unstandardized Coefficients | | t | Sig. | 95.0% Confidence Interval for B | |
|---|----------------|-----------------------------|------------|-------|------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| | | b | Std. Error | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Model 1: Will become a member | .10 | 0.059 | 0.007 | 8.70 | .000 | 0.045 | 0.072 |
| Model 2: Never will become a member of the EU (& DKN) | .25 | 0.163 | 0.007 | 21.36 | .000 | 0.148 | 0.178 |

Dependent variable: How would you vote if there were a referendum next week on Serbia's joining the EU? Predictor: Kosovo should remain part of Serbia. Control variables: Education, Type of residence (urbanization), Age.

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE ATTITUDE TOWARD KOSOVO
SECESSION AND THE EU AS MODERATED BY THE PERCEIVED EU'S
ATTITUDE TOWARDS ACCEPTING SERBIA

Finally, we examine the role of an alternative operationalization of the moderator variable. This time, it is the question: *What is the EU's attitude towards accepting Serbia into the EU?* For the interaction analysis, the first group consists of those who believe that the EU intends to accept Serbia's membership, while the second group contains the 'Eurosceptics', i.e., those who either don't think the EU intends to accept Serbia or that even EU is uncertain about accepting Serbia.

In the first sub-group, the association is negative and significant (Table 10): $b = -.36$. In the second sub-group, consisting of those who answered that the EU is uncertain and that the EU does not intend to accept Serbia, the slope is somewhat steeper: $b = -.47$. The moderating effect is not as strong as in the previous analyses, but the slopes are nevertheless statistically significantly different.

Table 10 Results of the OLS regression analysis in two subgroups with the alternative moderating variable

| <i>Moderator: In your view, what is the EU's attitude towards accepting Serbia into the EU?</i> | Unstandardized Coefficients | | t | Sig. | 95.0% Confidence Interval for B | |
|--|-----------------------------|------------|--------|------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| | B | Std. Error | | | Lower Bound | Upper Bound |
| Group 1: EU intends to accept Serbia into the EU. | -.355 | .032 | -11.10 | .000 | -.417 | -.292 |
| Group 2: EU is not sure if it wants Serbia's membership. EU does not intend to accept Serbia | -.470 | .022 | -21.60 | .000 | -.513 | -.427 |

Notes: Dependent variable: Regardless of all conditions, Serbia's joining the EU would, in any case, be better than remaining in the current situation. Predictor: Kosovo should remain part of Serbia. Control variables: Education, Type of residence (urbanization), Age.

DISCUSSION

This paper examines how attitudes about Kosovo interact with views regarding one important international actor involved in the Kosovo conflict, including the 1999 aggression – the European Union. Protracted conflicts, such as the one concerning the potential statehood of Kosovo, are often looked at in terms of the past – what has brought about the current confli-

cted situation and how perceptions of the past inhibit overcoming the conflict. Such conflicts usually remain protracted because of the difficulties of finding a vision of the future that could, at least to some extent, appeal to the involved sides. One reason for this difficulty may be how involved actors are perceived. In the case of Kosovo and Serbia, the EU is one of the key actors, involved both directly (e.g., via participation in the NATO aggression) and indirectly (e.g., by supporting the secessionist aspirations of Kosovo Albanians or through a mediating role).

The effectiveness of the EU efforts has been affected by how the organization is perceived in Serbia. As shown in the introductory analysis, there is a consensus in Serbian public opinion that the EU supports the secessionist side in the conflict. Since most respondents think Kosovo should remain part of Serbia, it is unsurprising that more respondents would feel glad rather than sad if the EU collapsed. It certainly is not a great discovery that respondents who support Serbia's territorial integrity demonstrate a more critical view of the EU. This simply illustrates the tendency towards cognitive consistency as one of the forces influencing attitude formation and change (Aronson, 1969; Heider, 1946; Festinger, 1962).

However, the consistency/dissonance perspective allows posing (and perhaps answering) more interesting questions that could help propose policies that could reduce (or petrify, depending on one's preferences) the animosity among the conflicted sides. The attitudinal structure that connects the Serbian public, Kosovo independence, and the EU is potentially unstable (and therefore amenable to change) because the Serbian strategic aim has been to join the EU for many years. That this is not just a feature of elite politics testify the results (some presented here) that the majority of the public is still *for* joining the EU, even though many of them share the critical view of the EU. Therefore, in this paper, we did not examine just whether those who are for joining the EU are somewhat less insistent on Serbia's sovereignty over Kosovo. We hypothesized that the perception of the likelihood of the Serbian 'EU future' will influence the association between the attitudes towards Kosovo and Serbia's membership in the EU.

The feeling of cognitive dissonance is likely to be particularly pronounced for those who would attempt both to be strongly against Kosovo independence and be for Serbian EU membership – if they think the EU membership is likely to happen soon. If they don't think the membership is a realistic prospect, it is easier to stick to the attitudes structured in an imbalanced way – because one of the 'nodes' is becoming less salient. For those who think EU membership is a realistic prospect, it may disjoint the attitudes concerning Kosovo and EU membership. Statistically, this would be manifested as a moderating effect of the perception

of the likelihood of EU membership on the association between the attitudes towards Kosovo independence and the EU.

We examined this proposition through several operationalizations of the model – using three different measures of the dependent variable (attitude towards the EU) and two versions of the moderator variable (perceptions of the likelihood of the EU becoming a member of the EU). In all four analyses, the hypothesis received clear empirical support. The regression slope is statistically significantly steeper under the 'condition' of a low perceived likelihood of Serbian EU membership. The results unambiguously support the interaction/moderator hypothesis. The attitude that Kosovo should remain part of Serbia is a stronger predictor of the (negative) evaluation of the EU among those respondents who do not believe that Serbia will become an EU member.

Substantively, the paper exemplifies political psychology in practice: social-psychological theory on the need for consistency helps develop a more complex – and more realistic picture of important political attitudes in the context of a protracted conflict. At the same time, the paper contributes to psychological theory by demonstrating how the perceived probabilities concerning some elements of the relevant attitude structure can emphasize or attenuate the presumed dissonance.

On the practical level, the findings could help understand the public that seems to be caught in a vicious circle between a desired goal (EU membership) and implied but unwanted consequence (giving up the sovereignty over part of the nation's territory). As the theory suggests, a way out is changing one of the attitudes (giving up either joining the EU or the sovereignty). Our results show that the perceived probability of Serbia's joining the EU changes the structure by reducing the salience of the preference for EU membership. By making it a distant and uncertain possibility, there is no pressure to attenuate the opinion on Kosovo's independence.

This can have various implications for interested 'policymakers'. For instance, emphasizing the conditionality of the EU membership (and the future membership being ever more elusive) is likely to have a counterproductive effect (e.g., Jelisavljević, 2019; Marković et al., 2021). The more individuals feel that the EU is beyond the reach, the easier it is to maintain a strong sovereigntist position regarding Kosovo. In this way, the situation seems frozen – at least for the Serbian citizens. The 'EU-membership carrot' might lead the donkey in the wrong direction, so to speak.

However, this policy would be welcomed by those interested in encouraging Serbia's insistence on its territorial sovereignty. From this angle, it would be useful to emphasize the insincerity of the EU's promises regarding Serbia's membership. In other words, to solidify the view of the EU as an 'enemy' of the Serbian national interests, it would be easier to

maintain a tough sovereigntist position on the Kosovo issue and keep the anti-EU position. From the angle of those in favor of EU integration, it would certainly be helpful if the EU could somehow appear more friendly and trustworthy regarding Serbia's membership and its policies towards the Kosovo issue. It could be objected to these speculations that political elites make political decisions regardless of public opinion. Still, when the issue in question is widely regarded as crucial, public opinion may be relevant, if not for other reasons but for the self-interest of the involved parties and politicians.

One obvious limitation of the present study is that it is correlational – we provided statistical evidence of the moderating role of the perceived probability of EU membership based on cross-sectional data. Future investigations could use survey experiments and a longitudinal approach to catch possible attitude changes related to cognitive dissonance more directly. Nonetheless, this paper provides evidence on how the perception of the possible future could affect the attitudes about the political past in the context of a protracted conflict.

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APPENDIX

Table 11 Basic descriptive statistics of the analyzed survey questions

| Question | N _{Valid} | Mean | St. dev. | Minimum | Maximum |
|--|--------------------|-------|----------|---------|---------|
| In your opinion, whether and when will Serbia become a member of the EU? | 3512 | 3.85 | 1.81 | 1 | 7 |
| Kosovo should remain part of Serbia. | 3450 | 3.67 | 1.49 | 1 | 5 |
| Regardless of all conditions, Serbia's joining the EU would, in any case, be better than remaining in the current situation. | 4219 | 3.10 | 1.59 | 1 | 5 |
| If somebody would tell you tomorrow that the EU broke down, how would you feel? | 3158 | 3.34 | 2.21 | 0 | 6 |
| How would you vote if there would be a referendum next week on Serbia's joining the EU? | 3086 | 1.43 | .49 | 1 | 2 |
| In your view, what is the EU's attitude towards accepting Serbia into the EU? | 4004 | 2.012 | .76 | 1 | 3 |

Note: All statistics in this table are weighted based on joint distribution of sex, age, and country region in the population of Serbia.