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MASTERARBEIT / MASTER'S THESIS

Titel der Masterarbeit / Title of the Master's Thesis

Between East and West:
Examining the Impact of the Ukraine Crisis on Serbia's Relationship
with Russia and the EU through the Lens of Strategic Narratives

verfasst von / submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad / in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts (MA)

Wien, 2023 / Vienna, 2023

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme code as it appears on
the student record sheet:

UA 066 824

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt /
degree programme as it appears on
the student record sheet:

Masterstudium Politikwissenschaft /
Political Science

Betreut von / Supervisor:

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Dedication

I dedicate this thesis to my late grandfather, my mother and my brother.

Posveta

Posvećujem ovu tezu svom pokojnom deki, svojoj majci i bratu.

Abstract

Serbia has long been balancing its position between Russia and the European Union (EU). This balancing act reached a dead-end in the wake of the Ukraine war, since Serbia, a candidate country for EU membership, refused to align its foreign policy with EU's sanctions against Russia. This led the EU to require its candidate to rethink its actions, warning the country of possible negative outcomes for its EU integration should it resist to comply. Such radical rhetoric of conditionality resulted in a significant drop in Serbia's support for EU integrations, reaching record low levels in the aftermath of the war. In contrast, the traditionally strong support for Russia has remained solid even during the Ukraine war. Against this backdrop, this thesis examines strategic narratives projected by Russia and the EU and their reception in Serbia.

Seit langem versucht Serbien zwischen Russland und der Europäischen Union (EU) zu balancieren. Dieser Versuch geriet im Zuge des Ukraine-Kriegs in eine Sackgasse, da Serbien als EU-Beitrittskandidat, sich weigerte, seine Außenpolitik an die EU-Sanktionen gegen Russland anzupassen. Dies führte dazu, dass die EU von Serbien verlangte seine Außenpolitik zu überdenken und warnte das Land vor möglichen negativen Folgen für seine EU-Integration sollte Serbien sich weiterhin weigern, die von der EU verlangten Anpassungen vorzunehmen. Diese radikale Rhetorik der Konditionalität führte zu einem erheblichen Rückgang der Unterstützung für die EU-Integration und erreichte einen Rekordtiefstand in Serbien. Im Gegensatz ist die traditionell starke Unterstützung für Russland auch während des Ukraine-Krieges stark geblieben. Vor diesem Hintergrund werden in dieser Arbeit die von Russland und der EU geschaffenen strategischen Narrative und ihre Rezeption in Serbien untersucht.

List of abbreviations

CPY	Communist Party of Yugoslavia
EC	European Commission
EEC	European Economic Community
ENP	European Neighborhood Policy
EU	European Union
HJD	High Judicial Council
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
MEP	Member of Parliament
MS	Member State
NSPM	New Serbian Political Thought
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
SAA	Stabilisation and Association Agreement
SAP	Stabilisation and Association Process
SPC	State Prosecution Council
UN	United Nations
US	United States
WB	Western Balkans
WFD	Westminster Foundation for Democracy

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1. Introduction

Since the Ukraine crisis started on the 24th of February, numerous leaders of the European Union member states have jointly introduced sanctions against the Russian Federation and have severely condemned the country's invasion of Ukraine. However, Serbia is one of the very few countries that has not followed suit and still fosters diplomatic relations with Russia. In the light of these events, Serbia's accession negotiations with the EU have been brought into question, as the country's actions are not aligned with European Union's core values. Although Serbia has been doing the balancing act between 'the East', represented by Russia, and 'the West', regarded as a collective of European Union member states and the USA, the Russian invasion of Ukraine shook up Serbia's foreign policy landscape and brought the country at its wits' ends to choose a side and clearly determine the path it wants to go in the future. Due to Serbia's geopolitical position, the country is regarded as an important strategic partner for both sides, namely European Union and Russia. For this reason, both power holders argue their own cause and endeavor to keep Serbia on the one or the other path. In order to achieve this, both actors employ strategic communication mechanisms. This thesis aims at examining the narratives told by both sides and their formation, projection, and perception among Serbian population. The final objective of this thesis is to juxtapose the two narratives, conduct a comprehensive discourse analysis and investigate why Serbian population seems 'to lend a sympathetic ear' to Russia's narrative rather than to the one of the EU. The assumption that this thesis pursues to argue is that the rising support in favor of Russia over the EU among Serbian population lies precisely in the narratives the two power holders have employed towards Serbia. While Russia's main arguments rest on stories of brotherhood, support, partnership, common culture and religion, the EU speaks in figures and rests its case on monetary and material aid. Next to this, this thesis will try to show that Russia's narratives towards Serbia have been rather unified and have followed the same course of a story about brotherhood between Serbians and Russians, while the EU has shifted its narrative from scold, criticism, and reproach in the aftermath of the Ukraine crisis, to a significantly more positive narrative several months into the war. All of this has taken its toll on the public opinion and support for the EU among Serbian population which marks the lowest records in the last ten years. As this thesis will argue, the opposing narratives between the EU and Russia lie within

the core message conveyed in their narratives. Conclusively, it appears that Serbian people demonstrate wholehearted support for the Russian narrative, and accordingly display a gradual decline in support for the European cause. This ratio can be metaphorically seen as scales of justice – the more the Russian scale weighs, the lighter the European scale gets.

This thesis is structured in five chapters. While the second chapter offers a broad overview of relevant literature for a deeper insight into the core topic of this thesis, the third chapter introduces the chosen theoretical framework of strategic narratives. As strategic narratives represent a smooth transition from soft power to a more targeted, strategic communication for achieving political goals, this theory appears to be suitable for the purpose of this thesis. The following chapter on methodology introduces discourse narrative analysis that represents a handy tool for the stated purpose. This chapter is followed by a comprehensive background section that deals with the relations between Serbia and the EU and Serbia and Russia respectively. In order to understand the complexity of the issue, the background chapter of this thesis will be split into two broader thematic fields that will eventually lead to a comprehensive analysis of the narratives and therefore shed light on Serbia's position on the crossroads between the East and the West. The first thematic field will look at Serbia's developments on its European path. For this cause, developments on a five-year basis will be briefly mentioned, namely from 2011, 2016 and 2021, followed by the events of the Ukraine war in 2022. This thesis will first look into the 2011 preliminary opinion by the European Commission on Serbia's membership and its estimated efforts of the reforms Serbia needs to carry out. Secondly, the European Commission's report on Serbia from 2016 will be examined to show how successful Serbia has been in fulfilling EU's requirements in the first five years, while the report from 2021 sets out European Commission's opinion on Serbia's advancement before the outbreak of the Ukraine war. The following subchapter will briefly elaborate on the aggravating events initiated on 24 February 2022 as Russia started waging war against Ukraine. The second thematic part of the background chapter concerns a contextualization of the Serbian-Russian relationship. The two countries have historically fostered good relations with one another, primarily due to religious and cultural bonds. This chapter will look at four pillars of contemporary Serbo-Russian relations, namely the NATO strikes in 1999, the Kosovo question, Serbia's reluctance to introduce sanctions in 2014 and finally the 'Putin factor'.

Serbia has been successfully balancing its East-West position for decades; however, times of crisis call for drastic measures and it seems that Serbia is currently facing pressures from both sides to choose which way it wants to go in the future. Subsequently, by referring to the previous five chapters, the following, sixth chapter will analyze the formation of narratives told by the European Union and the Russian Federation to and about Serbia. Next to this, having introduced the narratives both actors employed to win over the public in Serbia, this section will also draw a comparison between the projection of the respective narratives among Serbian population. Finally, by conducting a comparative analysis of the mentioned strategic narratives, this paper will attempt to answer why Serbian people seem to opt for the Eastern power player rather than the European Union.

2. Literature review

There is a number of scholars who did research on Serbia's peculiar position between the East and the West. However, due to the relevance and timeliness of the Ukraine crisis, there has not yet been much scholarly work published on the influence the war has had on Serbia's balancing position. This chapter reviews the main strands of literature that this thesis relates to, namely the theory of conditionality, followed by the theories on the relationship between Serbia and the EU as well as between Serbia and Russia. What this thesis endeavours to contribute is a potential explanation why conditionality, as a traditional policy tool of the EU, does not seem to yield effective results. Next to this, the thesis will try to explain why the support of Serbian citizens for the EU, which offers a political framework and prospects for a viable economic improvement, seems to be overshadowed by a strong proximity the Serbian population cherishes towards Russia. By doing so, this thesis offers a case study on the effectiveness of strategic narratives in practice, especially against traditional policy tools, like conditionality.

When examining the accession negotiation process of the EU, a vast majority of scholars cite conditionality as the primary *modus operandi* (Richter & Wunsch 2020, Trauner 2009, Domaradzki et al. 2021, Bianchini 2007, Mladenov 2014, Milenkovic 2018). As Vita (2017) explains, conditionality is a "long-standing EU policy tool" (Vita 2017: 116). This conditionality policy refers a set of rules and certain prescribed behaviours that the state governments, that is countries aspiring to join the EU, have to adopt and implement in their national policy in order to be awarded in the form of EU accession (Vita 2017). Goss (2012) reiterates that conditionality, that is the tight relation between a prospective benefit and a certain condition that must be met in order to get it, has been the main motor of EU's enlargement policy (Goss 2012).

According to Vita, conditionality emerged as part of EU external policies, as this was the area where conditionality was deemed necessary and in which it has been developing ever since (Vita 2017). This benefit of EU accession is generally open to all European countries under defined conditions. The accession criteria are also known as the 'Copenhagen Criteria' and broadly include "a stable democracy and the rule of law, a functioning market economy and the acceptance of all EU legislation, including of the euro" (EU Online 2022/ Steps towards Joining). In a more detailed manner, the

'Copenhagen criteria' are categorized in three broader fields: political criteria, economic criteria and ability to assume the obligations of membership, which contains 35 chapters of *acquis*¹ (EC Online 2022/Conditions for Memberships). While political criteria encompass democracy, public administration reform, rule of law, human rights and the protection of minorities and regional issues, and international obligation, the economic criteria refer to the existence of a functioning market economy and the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union. As conditionality represents EU's major instrument in enlargement affairs, Vita (2017) identifies three conditionality packages. The first one was developed in 2003, as the EU launched its European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) with the aim to bring the EU and its surrounding countries closer, connecting each other by common benefits (Vita 2017). The second package Vita (2017) outlines concerns the 2005 Global Approach to Migration and Mobility, a cooperation with third countries in the field of migration. Conditionality was applied here in the form of migration compacts – the better the country performed in this field, the more support they received. The third conditionality reflects the 2008 economic crisis, known as Euro crisis, where seven member states (MS) entered full bailouts (Vita 2017). Out of the three forms, the first two, namely neighborhood policy and migration conditionality applied to Serbia as well. As Goss informs, the need to place conditions on candidate countries is directly related to countries' historical developments and specificities (Goss 2012). In other words, the focus on conditions for accession were born out of necessity, especially in the aftermath of the Yugoslav wars and the Kosovo war. These violent conflicts brought greater attention to conditionality as the only remaining legal remedy that could ignite democratic changes in the former Yugoslav countries. As Goss notes, the remainder of the old Yugoslav regime, especially Serbia, has a heritage of corruption and injustice that has its foundation in ancient group hostilities. In Serbia, this is to be traced back to the nationalist regime of Slobodan Milošević and the Balkan wars that followed. As Goss remarks, Serbia was declared culprit for the bloody conflicts after the wars terminated. Due to this, the reform of Serbia appears to be the "final political and humanist challenge for Europe" (Goss 2012: 173). Since the country sank into instability, state corruption, tensions between different ethnicities and a long technological and financial stalemate, the EU perceived strengthened political

¹ The *acquis* is the body of common rights and obligations that is binding on all the EU member states (EC Online 2022: *Acquis*)

conditionality as the only strategy to bring Serbia closer to the EU and its principles: should Serbia rise above the post-war heritage, it will create conditions that qualify for a successful EU accession. However, due to the standstill of Serbia's accession negotiations, this thesis will attempt to show that rather than conditionality, it is the new soft power of strategic narratives that delivers desired results in the sphere of international politics.

A comprehensive study regarding Serbia's prospective membership to the European Union (EU) was published in 2009 by Petritsch et al. This work's primary goal is to analytically explain why Serbia's rash accession to the EU would benefit not just the country itself, but the whole Western Balkans. Already in 2009, Petritsch et al. claimed that the EU undoubtedly has the experience, the means and adequate methods to assist Western Balkan's accession to the EU. However, the main question the authors posed here concern the political will of the Union to do so (Petritsch et al. 2009). As the authors explain, there is no "explicit political commitment by the EU promising full membership eventually" (Petritsch et al. 2009: 12). Petritsch et al. cite Hans Swoboda that "[w]ithout the Balkans, European integration is far from complete, and this is particularly true of Serbia" (Petritsch et al. 2009: 13). Despite this, the practical commitment to engage with the accession process fully remained back then, and is still up to date, pending. As authors perceive it, Serbia would greatly benefit from the process of EU integration due to the chance to experience an identity shared by all ethnic groups that reside in Serbia, beyond the ethnic self-understanding Serbian identity (Petritsch et al. 2009). As Juddah stated more than a decade ago, Serbia, the largest of all the Western Balkan states, "matters because what it does now and in the next few years will be crucial for everyone in the region" (Petritsch et al. 2009: 13). In other words, if EU needs consolidated democracy and stability in the region, Serbia needs to be part of the deal.

However, another question comes up and it concerns the content which Serbia itself has to offer to the EU. Vlahutin poses a rhetorical question which Serbia would matter in this context, as the country's multiple legacies have left a mark and have multifaceted impact on the social and economic status in the country, all of which needs to be considered (Petritsch et al. 2009: 12). Additionally, next to the question of legacy, the authors stress another specificity that needs to be taken into account with regards to Serbia, which refers to a conspicuous dichotomy concerning the percentage of

Eurosceptics and Europhiles. Moreover, according to Vuletic, the inclination towards the EU displays a trend far from stable (Petritsch et al. 2009: 12). However, what the main argument already in 2009 was, is that the Kosovo question remained and still is the largest obstacle to Serbia's EU accession. As the authors write, the case of Serbia cannot be reduced to *acquis*, but the bigger picture needs to be taken into account, since "it would be hardly acceptable [...] for the EU to consent to a second Cyprus-type problem among its Member States" (Bieber & Altmann). By relating to these major points, this thesis will show that the problems outlined in Petritsch et al's book seem to persist up to date.

Regarding the Serbian-Russian relationship, it can be said that literature on this topic is twofold. On the one hand, some define the Russia as being Serbia's patron (Vukasovic & Stojadinovic 2023; Peno & Vasin 2020) and focus predominantly on the common historical ties, Slavic language, Orthodox religion and therefore tell a story of how a great protector Russia has been to Serbia throughout history. On the other hand, there is a number of scholars who perceive this relationship critically and argue that Russia has done nothing but care about its own interests and securing influence in the Western Balkans (Bogusław 2021, Zakem et al. 2017, Petrović 2010, Aghayev 2004). Regardless of the perspective one adopts; one thing is certain – Serbia and Russia have been cooperating for over a century now. More precisely, in 2018, Serbia has celebrated 180 years of diplomatic relations with Russia (Kovacevic 2019: 415). These 180 years safeguard a number of events that have established Russia as 'the big brother' of Serbia and have cemented cultural and historical ties between the two countries. Most of the literature concerning this topic seems to regard the following major events as crucial for explaining the current close connections between the two countries. These events date back to the First Serbian Uprising in 1804, the subsequent Second Serbian Uprising, World War I and World War II (Jelavich 1991).

In connection to this, according to Vukasovic & Stojadinovic (2023), the pan-Slavic traditional friendship between the two countries rests in the establishment of Russia as the protector and the patron of Serbia in the Ottoman Empire. This notion rests on, as hinted, a representation of Russia as a "powerful elder brother" of its "smaller and weaker sibling" (Vukasovic & Stojanovic 2023: 129). Being constructed as the patron, Russia obtained and has kept a special status in Serbia. This protection was also extended in cultural and religious terms, as the "shared Byzantine heritage" (Vukasovic

& Stojadinovic 2023) added another layer to the picture of Russian patronage, namely the country's establishing itself as a protector of the Orthodox people in the Balkans. Due to this dominant, emotionally laden presence of Russia throughout Serbian history, the idea of political closeness between the countries was built on the myths of traditional bonds, common histories, and a long-lasting friendship, all of which resulted in the image of Russia as the protector of Serbia in the 19th century (Vukasovic & Stojadinovic 2023). Adding to this, the authors stress that the strength of a political myth lies precisely in its capacity to be regarded as common sense, resulting in a normalization of the myth as a fact. Vukasovic & Stojadinovic (2023) further argue that, while Serbia's actual identification with the European Union appears to be the primary goal of all governments in Serbia since the 2000, Serbia casts a shadow on the truthfulness of its intentions due to the close emotional attachment to Russia. Pertaining to the 19th century political myths, which seem to be present up to date, it will be argued that strategic narratives account for their sustainability on the current international scene.

Conversely, Zakem et al. (2017) identify Russia as a threatening factor in the Western Balkans, especially in Serbia. As the authors argue, there are several sources of instability which have contributed to the already existing vulnerability in the region. As the authors estimate, the Western Balkans became a significant actor in the game of power between the West and Russia, which is why Russia decided to intervene and turn the existing vulnerabilities to its advantage. According to Zakem et al., Russia's tools for spreading its influence primarily concern the spread of disinformation, exploiting national sentiment, historical narratives of Western maltreatment; cultural, religious, and political influence, perception of economic influence, energy dependence, military cooperation, and intelligence gathering. As for the first tool, the authors argue that Russia uses disinformation as means of taking advantage of the vulnerable media environment in Western Balkan countries. As they state, the news revolving in the Balkan media, especially in tabloid news, are deprived of objectivity and truthful reporting, but rather contain "a grain of truth" (Zakem et al. 2017) and base their stories otherwise on speculation and conspiracy theories (Zakem et al. 2017). In turn, this leaves the audience doubting the quality of news reporting in the Balkan countries in general, which makes the region susceptible to Russian narratives. Next to vulnerable media environment, the nationalist sentiment is turned into an instrument

for shaping bilateral and multilateral alliances. One example of this exploitation is reflected in Russia's full backing of the referendum in Republika Srpska in Bosnia. Furthermore, Zakem et al. list the constant emphasizing of the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 as a prime example of the "West's bad intentions towards the Slavic people of the Western Balkans" (Zakem et al. 2017: 15). In contrast to 'West's bad intentions', Russia celebrates cultural and religious bonds and cooperation with Serbia. Another aspect that will be integrated in the analysis is the political influence that Russia exerts owing to a close relationship with Serbia's President Vucic (Zakem et al. 2017). Such a close relationship is further solidified by energy dependence, military cooperation and intelligence gathering between the two countries.

A similar perspective can be found with Petrovic (2010) in his seminal work "Russia Serbia Relations at the beginning of XXI Century". The author provides a rather critical view of Russian intentions in Serbia. According to him, the traditional praise of the Serbo-Russian relationship and its internal structures are based "on emotional and irrational grounds" (Petrovic 2010: 5). For this reason, Petrovic calls for a more rational, objective analysis of Russia's foreign policy in Serbia. Although Zakem et al. list several tools Russia employs to exert influence in Serbia, Petrovic argues that the country does not offer a political framework to Serbia like the EU does. Petrovic lays emphasis on the claim that Russia primarily seeks its own interest in the energy and economic sector rather than offering its 'weaker sibling' a sustainable political framework. This thesis will reflect on each of the aspects these authors suggest and will analyze them within the framework of strategic narratives.

3. Theoretical Framework

In today's ever-changing world, communication seems to play a crucial role. In this setting, the traditional dichotomy between soft and hard power does not seem to account for modern communication mechanisms. While hard power relates to military and economic means, political values, culture and foreign policy make up the concept of soft power, as set out by Joseph Nye. However, the novelties in investigating communication mechanisms within the realm of international affairs led scholars to shift their attention from this traditional dichotomy between hard and soft power towards concepts that are more flexible.

3.1. From Soft Power to Strategic Narratives

Nye's conviction that the concept of hard power was insufficient to shape the world after the events that occurred in the post-Cold War era gave birth to the idea that "power rests on attraction as well as coercion" (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 3). Nye therefore defines soft power as "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment" (Nye 2008: 94), while suggesting that a country's soft power rests on its "resources of culture, values and politics" (Nye 2008: 94). Nye continues by explaining that relying solely on hard power does not constitute the road to success, but rather that clever power strategies make use of both soft and hard power. He further emphasises the mightiness of soft power by arguing that it was precisely soft power that was crucial to winning the Cold war, as the aim was to win "hearts and minds" in order to achieve political aims. In Nye's contestation, power is a game in which the behaviour of others can be influenced in three ways, namely by threat or coercion, inducement and payments, and attraction that makes others want what you want. Relying on this conviction, Nye finds that a country may be successful in its political aspirations if it succeeds in inspiring other countries to follow suit rather than forcing and coercing them into an undesirable action (Nye 2013: 94). As soft power's inherent ability is to restructure the choices and inclinations of others, Nye puts it in a nutshell by asserting that "[i]f I can get you to want to do what I want, then I do not have to force you to do what you do not want [emphasis kept]" (Nye 2013: 95). As already touched upon, Nye believes that in international politics, the resources which generate soft power largely dwell in the values an entity or a country puts forward in its culture, the actions it undertakes within

its internal practices and policies and in the very fashion it regulates its relations externally. Moreover, Nye perceives public diplomacy as a tool which governments can use to draw other countries' attention, whereby the concept of a country is not in any case restricted to the government of the given country, but rather focuses also on winning the sympathies of the public (Nye 2008). The channels through which this attention drawing can be achieved include, among others, broadcasting and subsidizing cultural exchanges; however, should the contents of a country's culture, values and politics not be appealing to others, the very principle upon which soft power functions is overdue and thus no soft power can be produced (Nye 2008).

3.2. Strategic Narratives

According to Roselle et al, "strategic narrative is the soft power of the 21st century" (Roselle et al. 2014: 71), as the concept of strategic narratives was born out of a related starting point as Nye's conception of soft power in 1990 (Roselle et al. 2014). Miskimmon et al. (2013) argue in their book that both the formation and projection of a narrative in a communication environment can assist in explaining the dominant power constellations within international politics. They continue by explaining that three main points underpin this argument. The first argument puts human relations under the spotlight and stresses the importance of the influence these relations exhibit on the world dynamics and human behaviour. The second argument rests on the strategic use of narratives, while the third and the final one lays emphasis on the communication environment and its crucial importance for the very manner in which the narratives are being communicated. Having said this, the authors offer an exhaustive definition of strategic narratives as follows:

Strategic narratives are a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors. Strategic narratives are a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate. They are narratives about both states and the system itself, both about who we are and what kind of order we want. The point of strategic narratives is to influence the behavior of others (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 3).

The importance of the communication environment was stressed previously, and adding to this view, Salmon (2010) argues that narratives are in part “hardwired into humans” (Salmon 2010: 31). Roselle et al. (2013) claim that the reason why culture, values, or policies - jointly termed soft power resources - may be appealing and attractive to others is due to their fitness within an already existing or developing personal narrative. Due to this, strategic narratives speak straight to the formation, projection, and reception of ideas in the international system (Roselle et al. 2013: 74).

3.2.1. Formation, Projection and Reception of Strategic Narratives

In order to account for the formation of strategic narratives, it is necessary to comprehend actors’ strategic goals and types of communication (Miskimmon et al. 2013). These include rethinking concepts such as agenda setting, legitimation, diverting attention, securing acquiescence, enhancing popularity and mobilization, and these can be set out to be communicative goals. These goals can furthermore be long-term or short-term and, conditioned by the desired outcome, actors can employ different communication tools to achieve their goals. Miskimmon et al. (2013) list persuasion or argumentation and representational force or coercion as two predominant communication tools for achieving political goals. Persuasion, which is akin to argumentation, is frequently associated with reaching an agreement owing to communication processes over time (Risse 2000). Krebs and Jackson note, however, that although persuasion can well take place in the international arena, it is not such a frequent occurrence (Krebs and Jackson 2007: 36). Thus, their work focuses predominantly on the impact that rhetorical coercion can create. They define rhetorical coercion as a strategy that proves successful when “the claimant’s opponents have been talked into a corner, compelled to endorse a stance they would otherwise reject [...] Rhetorical coercion is a political strategy that seeks to twist arms by twisting tongues” (Krebs and Jackson 42). Moreover, Bially-Mattern argues that in times of crisis or political disruption, the representational force’s main ability is to address an actor’s subjective thoughts and by doing so compel the target to adhere to narratives the representational force put forward (Bially-Mattern 2005: 97). Therefore, representational force is regarded as most commonly employed type of communication in volatile and insecure times.

Next to communication instruments, the question of feasibility and fitness of a narrative needs to be addressed. George, who acknowledges the significance of the domestic environment and policy legitimacy, argues that actors must at first assure other actors that a certain policy is both feasible and desirable on a normative level (George 1989). Subsequently, if policies can be regarded as adequately fitting within an acknowledged narrative and thereby address issues that should be described and actions that ought to be undertaken and as well are feasible, then political legitimacy can be obtained (Miskimmon et al. 2013). Miskimmon et al. suggest that political actors' broader long-term goals are associated with their goal of positioning themselves as 'the good' players over a longer period of time within the international arena. Drawing on the notion of soft power as introduced at the beginning of the chapter, this idea is akin to the highlighted notion of getting others to "want what you want" (Nye 2008: 29). The successfulness of a narrative is thereby measured by the actor's ability to create narratives that attracts foreign audiences as well. Subject to the kind of influence an actor wishes to exert, be it short or long-term, actors employ different media outlets and tailor their expectations accordingly. As mentioned before, long-term goals usually make use of strategic narratives to embellish their position in the international arena. Public diplomacy is therefore, according to Hayden (2012), part of this category.

With regard to projection of narratives, Miskimmon et al. argue that the projection of narratives in a "new media ecology" (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 10) at the same time poses a challenge and an opportunity for actors. In this new media ecology as the authors name it, the advancement of communication technologies has broadened the quantity of individuals that communicate publicly. Brown (2005) notes that such diverse and advancing communication setting alters and reshapes the kinds of communication strategies that work in a given context. Due to this, actors ought to consider the environment in which they project their narratives and rethink ways their messages may be challenged or contested (Miskimmon et al. 2013). The authors continue by explaining that new social media have made greater interconnectivity possible and thus have altered the timing of information. This means that communication is not limited anymore to the communication-audience one-sided relationship, but rather the audience itself can become an actor by commenting, liking, intertwining images, information and narratives (Miskimmon et al. 2013).

Finally, as for the reception of the narratives, Miskimmon et al. suggest that in the new media ecology, whereby the term media in their interpretation encompasses environments, actors, and technologies, actors are compelled to adjust to the altered media landscape. International relations as a discipline must also explore ways to elucidate new patterns of communication that emerged through the new media as well as for the contemporary forms of virtual and actual publics and communities emerged through this new type of communication (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 12). In order to identify the influence a narrative exerts on its audience, it is necessary to analyze their attitudes, opinions and behaviour in a twofold manner – before and after the narrative reached the audience in question (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 12). Explaining effects demands having comprehensive knowledge of the ways the given audience gathers and internalizes news and information regarding politics, the way the audience attributes credibility to a certain source or medium, and the manner the audience engages in a discussion about narratives with their closest circle of friends, family and colleagues in a non-political context. Next to this, according to Miskimmon et al., it is necessary to take into account the most common media outlets the audience is exposed to, and, more importantly, account for the cultural context that drives an audience to favour one narrative over another. The final layer consists of the analysis of the political context itself in which leaders create different narratives tailored to target the given audience (Miskimmon et al. 2013).

3.2.2. Actors in Strategic Narratives

Actors take up a central role in the concept of strategic narratives. Understanding actors in such a context greatly focuses on the idea of identity, which is a concept central to the study of international relations, particularly to constructivism (Miskimmon et al. 2013). While the early constructivist literature concerning the role of state identity suggests that state identity is the main factor influencing foreign policy and international relations, in the aftermath of the Cold War, such a perspective developed and constructivism accepted that identities “are complex and multifaceted and must be (re)constructed over time” (Checkel 2004: 240). As Miskimmon et al. (2013) write, their focus on actors corresponds partially to the attention constructivist literature pays to structure. To support this claim, Barnett critiques constructivism for focusing too much attention on ideas and culture and thereby neglecting the agency of actors in the

international realm (Barnett 1999). Bially-Mattern adds that identities are “social constructions” (2005: 9) that are always in process and are not natural facts. Upon this background story, Miskimmon et al. suggest that narratives “set out who the actors are, what characterizes them, what attributes they possess, what actions they take and what motivates them” (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 32). They claim further that the environment in which the actors are set within influences them as much as they influence the environment and repeatedly emphasize that in such a context, political actors can employ different narratives to achieve strategic goals and impact other actor’s behaviors (Miskimmon et al. 2013). For this reason, the concept of strategic narratives perceives states as actors and echoes the multifaceted character of narratives which states as actors can make use of. The manner in which this is to be done depends utterly on the way the state sees itself and its role in the international arena – and these roles can vary from being a great power, rising power, ally, enemy and others (Miskimmon et al. 2013). Having criticized constructivism for its predominant focus on structure, yet not utterly neglecting its importance, Miskimmon et al. suggest that the narratives themselves structure behaviour even in cases where actors do possess agency. Therefore, the concept of strategic narratives fills in the gap between the perspective with a focus on agency and the one that focuses on structure (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 33). In addition to bridging the agency/structure gap, narratives address another important issue which pertains to the role of collective versus individual identities. While psychologists have long been examining the identities of individuals, Miskimmon et al. allege that these can greatly differ from collective identities but might also be related to them. According to Clunan, collective identity can be defined as a “set of ideas that are generally accepted by any group of actors as defining what their collectivity is and the general rules under which it operates” (Clunan 2009: 28). Additionally, Leavy notes that the technique by means of which these collective identities emerged in the first place, and subsequently further reshaped and bolstered, is precisely one of the strategic narratives (Leavy 2007: 12).

Drawing upon the differentiation between collective and individual identities and the reconciliation between agency and structure, the authors propose the following classification of prominent actors pertaining to the post-World War II international order. These include unipole/hegemon actors, great powers, normal powers, rising states and weak states/rogue states (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 35). The overriding theme

is that each of these actors exhibits certain features, is associated with specific attributes, and is expected to behave in a certain fashion according to the category it falls under. Firstly, hegemon actors encompass players within the international arena who are attributed a great deal of liberty regarding their actions and represent the least constrained power players. It is suggested in the volume that the United States come closest to the theoretical picture of a hegemon. Secondly, the great powers category caters to those who reject the idea of the unipolarity of a single hegemon within the international arena but do accept that the international system is shaped by great powers. Great powers include actors that have been central to the international system after World War II. This category caters to those who reject the idea of a single unipole but do accept the fact that there are mighty state actors that structure the system. Lake phrases it as follows: „[s]tatus shapes the behavior of states, with great powers expected to act differently from other states, and, especially, to be involved in more alliances, more conflicts, and more conflicts further from their home territories” (Lake 2009: 84). As Oates illustrates, US and Russian responses to terrorism by their leaders, media, and audience, exert a greater degree of similarity to each other than to British responses (Oates 2006). As Miskimmon et al. (2013) argue, these similarities in responses can be explained through each state’s idea of what is expected from them within the international system. Furthermore, the authors emphasize that it is precisely this notion that great powers are expected to behave in particular way that gives prominence to narratives. Thirdly, Miskimmon et al. outline normal powers as another prominent actor in the international arena and argue that this notion was mostly used to reference Russia during and after the Soviet Union collapsed. Authors note that Russia had two main narratives, the communist one and the one focusing on the state as the primary actor, but that it depicted itself in both as a great power. In the communist narrative the leaders stressed the clash between economy and systems, while the second narrative which focused on the state rather than on the economy conformed to the broader international narrative and the functioning on the international system. Normal great powers, therefore, are part of the international negotiations and pursue validation from other actors across the international system (Miskimmon et al. 2013). Next to Russia, which is depicted as a *normal* great power, the notion of great powers is subsequently mostly employed in cases of China and Germany.

Finally, the last category pertains to weak and rogue states. Weak states, according to Rotberg, encompass

[...] a broad continuum of states that are inherently weak because of geographical, physical, or fundamental economic constraints, basically strong, but temporarily or situationally weak because of internal antagonisms, management flaws, greed, despotism, or external attacks, and a mixture of the two. Weak states typically harbour ethnic, religious, linguistics or other intercommunal tensions that have not yet, or not yet thoroughly, become overtly violent (Rotberg 2003: 4).

As for the latter, narratives depict rogue states as threats which do not adhere to the rules of the international system, usually by engaging with nuclear weapons. Litwak echoes that such a designation as a rouge state is “demonizing a disparate group of states” and as such “significantly distorts policymaking” (Litwak 2000: 9).

3.3. Components of Narratives according to Burke (1969)

Next to the classification of different power and less powerful actors in the international arena, it is necessary to take a look at Burke’s (1969) components of narratives in order to be able to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the narratives revolving around Serbia’s twofold position and balancing between the European Union and Russian influence. Roselle (2014) sets out the main features Burke elaborates on in his seminal work on narratives in literature, situates and tailors them to match the framework of international relations. These aspects include actors, setting/environment/space, conflict or action and resolution or suggested resolution. Although the majority of these was mentioned indirectly in the previous part, this part aims to provide an overview of the essential features and elaborate closer on their semantics.

As for the first component, actors are those who have agency and they are not merely limited to states, but can as well include non-state actors, non-governmental organizations and multinational corporations. It is precisely the new media ecology that accounts for a variety of new actors, as it was previously mentioned. The environment relates to the question of the stage, what does it constitute and what action is taking place. The setting in international relations can take up different stagings, varying from

representing the world as intrinsically intertwined and globalized with a sharp focus on cooperation on the one hand, or staging the state of affairs in the world in a rather dichotomous manner, consisting of friends and enemies. Similar to actors, the environment feature is prone to assumptions, assertions and underlying principles, which in turn directly impact the possible prospects for conflict resolution or taking action. Conflict or action concerns reactions, actions, and responses to other actors' undertakings and the resulting interactions. The key word here is temporality, as narrators usually tailor their stories to address past, present, and future outcomes. Additionally, Roselle contributes that this might also be reflected in the way danger is classified and identified, as well as by whom and how this particular insecurity should be defied (Roselle et al. 2014: 76). The last feature of narratives according to Burke's classification concerns resolution and suggested resolution. What makes narratives appealing is their power to present a solution to an ongoing conflict. Applied to the international arena, narratives have the power to stress how important and necessary international cooperation is in order to jointly fight the dangers and those who disrupt the established international order, like those who use chemical weapons, for example. In doing so, the narrative reinforces the stigmaticity of using nuclear weapons and thus greatly hinders the use of military force by one single party.

4. Methodology

The final analytical chapter of this thesis will examine the narratives revolving around Serbia's position between East and West. More precisely, it will investigate the narratives told by Russia and by the European Union with regard to Serbia and the latter's hesitancy to choose a side. Embedded in the theoretical framework of strategic narratives, this analysis will be conducted by means of discourse analysis. The time frame this analysis will cover ranges from the beginning of the Ukraine war, that is February 24, 2022 concluding with May 2023.

As Carvalho writes, the label 'discourse analysis' encompasses a variety of research approaches and perspectives. Although all approaches share a unifying underlying idea that "the work of deconstruction and reconstruction of texts can give important indications about issues like the intentions of the author of a text or utterance, politically dominant ideologies, or the potential impact of an advertisement on a certain audience" (Carvalho 2000: 3), there is no standard method on how to examine texts under the discourse analysis framework. The method under the umbrella term 'discourse analysis' this paper will employ is narrative discourse analysis. Narrative discourse analysis has been, according to Carvalho, imported into different social sciences from literary studies. This approach consists of two main parts – the story and the discourse, while together they make up a story told by means of discourse (Carvalho 2000). Next to the method's focus on the chronological sequence of events, narratives in the view of discourse analysis are characterized by a temporal sequence, are bound together by an "organizing principle" (Carvalho 2000: 10) and are usually tied to a certain setting, offering complication as well as a resolution of an event (Carvalho 2000). As narrative discourse analysis reads the text as a whole and it refrains from splitting the structure into smaller, loose parts, but rather attributes meaning to the entirety of the text in question (Carvalho 2000). For this reason, narrative discourse analysis looks at characters, settings, actions, and outcomes as integral parts of its analysis. Owing to this, it was necessary to provide a rather comprehensive background on the relationships between Serbia and the EU and Serbia and Russia, as narratives under both the theoretical framework of strategic narratives as well as narrative discourse analysis are embedded in the historical and cultural context the three actors share with one another. Finally, the objective is to compare narratives told by the two blocs and examine whether there are differences in their approach, whether are they opposing,

or do they indeed pursue the same goal. In addition to this, this thesis will investigate whether the narratives have changed since the outbreak of the war, as at the point of writing this thesis, the conflict has been going on for a year and four months. As narrative discourse analysis reads the text as a whole, this thesis will focus on conveying the core message both power blocs express towards Serbia, and these will be examined within the framework of strategic narratives. The particularities this thesis looks at include therefore actors, actions, setting, the core story, and the discourse. While story refers to the actual events in a narrative, discourse refers to the way the story is presented in a narrative.

Media that will be taken into account range from Serbian over Russian to European media outlets. Euractiv and European Western Balkans will be incorporated for examining the formation of EU narratives, while Sputnik and RIA Novosti (*РИА Новосту*) will be considered for looking into the core of Russian narratives formation, as chapter 6 will illustrate. The former media outlets comprise a set of trustworthy European news agencies and provide statements and interviews made by EU officials which are essential for the goal of this thesis. The two selected Russian media are both governed and managed by the Russian state, which is why they present a direct insight into the told by the state officials. It is also important to note that non-Russian media outlets, such as BBC, Alternative TV and K1, will be incorporated for the same purpose because these outlets provide video footage of interviews and live speeches delivered by Russian officials.

As for the reception of the EU and Russian narratives in Serbia, a larger number of media outlets will be taken into account. According to a survey conducted by the Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability (CRTA) in Serbia in 2022, which was the 2018 OSCE Democracy Defender Awardee, the majority of citizens in Serbia still primarily consume news through television (60%), followed by internet portals (40%). The same is confirmed by the UK Government's Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) public opinion poll conducted in Serbia (2023). The official broadcasting channel of Serbia – Radio Televizija Srbije (RTS) appears to be the most watched TV channel (41%), followed by Pink, N1 and Prva. Blic ranks top among the most consumed internet portals (19%), accompanied by N1, Nova, Danas, Kurir, Novosti and Telegraf. Due to the degree of consumption of these TV channels and

portals in Serbia, this thesis will take the majority of them into account when examining how the aforementioned narratives are perceived in Serbia. An overview of the media outlets and the respective power actor, together with the number of news items extracted are found in the table below:

Table 1 Overview of media outlets employed

Outlet title	Number of news items	Actor
Euractiv	5	EU outlets
European Western Balkans	2	
Sputnik	5	Russian outlets
RIA Novosti	2	
RTS	2	Serbian outlets
N1	2	
Blic	2	
Novosti	2	
Telegraf	2	

The given articles are selected as prototypes of the narrative each of the actors creates. In each of the outlets, it was searched for the key word “Serbia”. Among the obtained results, the ones relating to the topics this thesis covers were incorporated. The reason why there is such a scarce number of some of the outlets lies in avoiding repetition, as a plethora of articles in the given outlets conveys the same message as the prototype articles selected but reports on different occasions.

5. Background: Serbia's Relationship with the EU and Russia

In order to fully grasp the complexities of the Russia-Serbia-European Union triangle, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of the relationship between Serbia and Russia, as well as Serbia and the EU to understand the current state of affairs and the dynamics between these actors. Following a brief history of Serbia's negotiations with the EU, this chapter looks at the contemporary events that care for tight bonds between Russia and Serbia.

5.1. Serbia's Path to the European Union

Serbia was granted candidate country status in 2012, while its accession negotiations commenced in January 2014, when the First Intergovernmental Conference with Serbia was held. One year before Serbia was granted the candidate status, namely in 2011, the Commission provided an opinion on Serbia's application for accession. The report stated that the Western Balkan countries taking part in the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) and Stabilisation and Association Process (SAP) earn the status of potential candidates for the EU and emphasized that "the future of the Western Balkans lies in the European Union" (European Commission/Opinion on Serbia 2011: 2).

The 2011 Commission's assessment further evaluated Serbia as a parliamentary democracy that has since 2008 enhanced its efforts to make the parliament substantially effective in its legislative activities. The report noted that Serbia adhered to the conditions of the SAP as its cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) reached a "fully satisfactory level" (European Commission/Opinion on Serbia 2011: 9). Next to being part of SAA and thus SAP, Serbia also signed the Interim Agreement in 2008, an agreement on trade and trade-related matters (European Commission/Opinion on Serbia 2011: 2). The focus of the negotiations was on the conditions under which a candidate country is to adopt, implement, and enforce the EU *acquis communautaire*, divided, as mentioned, into 35 thematic chapters or six clusters according to the new methodology. These clusters include fundamentals (1), internal market (2), competitiveness and include growth (3),

green agenda and sustainable connectivity (4), resources, agriculture, and cohesion (5) and external relations (6) (Ministry of European Integration 2022).

In 2011, the Commission regarded Agriculture and rural development (Chapter 11), Judiciary and fundamental rights (Chapter 23), Justice, freedom and security (Chapter 24), and Financial control (Chapter 32) as critical areas for Serbia to reform. It is, however, precisely these chapters 23 and 24 that sustain the core elements for a country to be considered in line with European values and standards. According to Falke and Czauderna (2014: 21), the EC has followed the recently developed approach with regard to opening the chapters. They state that according to this approach, the EC initially opens negotiations chapters on Judiciary and fundamental rights (Chapter 23) and Justice, freedom, and security (Chapter 24), as these will most likely be the last ones to be closed. The reasoning for this step is, as Falke and Czauderna (2014: 21) write, that previous negotiation procedures have proved Chapters 23 and 24 to be the most challenging and demanding for countries to fully close and that it takes time for the reforms to virtually come into effect. Additionally, the authors claim that a stalemate in implementing reforms within the scope of Chapters 23 and 24 might result in a suspension of all accession negotiation talks, which is termed the “disequilibrium clause” (Falke and Czauderna 2014: 21). The case of Serbia precisely exhibits this claim in practice.

Furthermore, in 2014 O’ Brennan argued that the EU’s enlargement process with the Western Balkans proved to be “uneven and unsatisfactory” (O’ Brennan 2014: 221), and this appears to hold up to date. As he explains, the process was already in 2014 on ‘life support’ and ‘flat lining’ (O’ Brennan 2014: 221). As the author argues, the ‘enlargement fatigue’ has become a conspicuous trend associated with the Western Balkan countries, although the process itself is not foreign to the European community. Szolucha (2010) defines the phenomenon as “hesitance or unwillingness to grant EU membership to new states as expressed in the interplay of ‘wideners’ and ‘deepeners’ in the context of an upcoming or just finalized enlargement round” (Szolucha 2010: 5). This concept, therefore, expresses negative views of expansion and tendencies within the EU to either halt or slow down the accession process. In the case of Western Balkans, it includes normative as well as interest-based objections that result in the view that the EU has already exhausted its enlargement capacities (O’ Brennan 2014). Applied to the Western Balkans, O’ Brennan argues that the EU embarked upon a

trajectory of continuous placing of additional burdens and conditions on candidate countries and ever-frequent interventions by the Member States into their domestic policy in order to “protect the integrity of the accession process” (O’ Brennan 2014: 223). Moreover, O’ Brennan claims that the increased conditionality in the case of WB countries lies precisely in EU’s experience and ‘lessons learned’ from the eastern enlargement in 2004 and 2007, as Bulgaria and Rumania joined the EU. Due to this, ‘europeisation’ largely remains ‘shallow’ in the Western Balkans making room for formalities, minor objectives and technocratic reforms instead of focusing on sustainable and transformative change (O’ Brennan 2014). However, both stronger and enhanced conditionality and enlargement fatigue will be considered as one of the primary aspects for the current ‘East’ preference and the sinking support for EU integrations in Serbia.

In order to complete necessary reforms as foreseen by SAA and SAP, Serbian government established bodies that would deal with the EU accession process, namely the Coordination Body for the European Union Accession Process, the Council of the Coordination Body as well as the Negotiating Team of the Republic of Serbia (MEI Serbia Online). As *acquis*, or the negotiation chapters amount to 35, a negotiation group was established for each of the given chapters. To deepen the process, Serbia also formed the Ministry of European Integration in 2017, a body that is in charge of state administration affairs and related professional tasks which concern Serbia’s EU accession (MEI Serbia Online). Having established these entities, one would have expected prolific results in the next five years after receiving the candidate status; however, the reality appears to be different.

5.1.1. Serbia’s Progress Evaluation – 2016

According to the EU Delegation to Serbia Online (2022), Chapter 35 on normalization of relations with Kosovo was opened in December 2015. Seven months later, in July 2016, Chapters 23 and 24 were opened. However, the concerns voiced in the 2011 Commission’s opinion seem to have persisted in the following five years, as EC’s 2016 report on Serbia will show.

As Dragojlov (2020) notes, peacebuilding processes that ought to stablish regional stability are put forward as the most important element of the SAA and SAP. Given the history of violent clashes, the security question in the Northern Kosovo is considered to be the primary accession condition for Serbia (Dragojlov 2020), followed by chapters 23 and 24. In connection to this, Hajrullahu makes a general note that international and national politics in the Western Balkans are characterized by myopia-like symptoms (Hajrullahu 2019). On the frozen conflict between Serbia and Kosovo, Hajrullahu stresses that both countries impede one another to advance in their European integrations. On the one hand, Kosovo demands official recognition from Serbia, as China and Russia stand behind Serbia's right to territorial integrity. Consequently, Kosovo cannot be considered for EU membership as long as its statehood is contested. On the other hand, Serbia also needs to resolve the disputed Kosovo question, as chapter 35 outlines, for it to show willingness and readiness to cherish neighbourly relations with surrounding countries in accordance with European values. Indeed, as Hajrullahu notes, Serbia's failure to recognize Kosovo persists in being the primary obstacle out of all other acquis chapters in the country's relationship with the EU.

As for the remaining two critical chapters, Serbia has failed to induce any major improvement in the most important chapters, namely those that concern Judiciary and fundamental rights (23) Justice, Freedom and security (24). What is more, the report states that the areas of the judicial system, prevention and fighting corruption, and fighting organized crime remained more or less intact as five years ago. Thus, the justice reform process still required more effective implementation and consolidation, especially regarding the independence and effectiveness of the judiciary. As the report further states, the national anti-corruption strategy seemed to particularly fall short of its virtual implementation. Due to this, corruption remained ubiquitous in a number of areas and thus persists as a critical issue for the country, which is why Serbia was required by the Commission to keep track of investigations prosecutions and final convictions in corruption cases in the next period, especially in high-level corruption cases. Although Serbia has marked an important milestone in the area of freedom of expression by electing the first homosexual Prime Minister, Ana Brnabić, Serbia still needed to promote and ensure equality and integration to the individuals belonging to groups that face the highest degree of discrimination. These groups include primarily

Roma, LGBT persons, persons with disabilities, and other socially vulnerable groups (EC/Report on Serbia 2016: 54).

With respect to political criteria, Serbia exhibited merely a slight progress. While the EC's report on Serbia in 2016 displays an increased involvement of all stakeholders in the accession process, including civil society, it still calls for further improvement in the area of co-operation between independent bodies and the authorities (EC/Report on Serbia 2016: 4). Although the report evaluates these areas as "having reached some level of preparation" (EC/Report on Serbia 2016: 4), it still expresses the need to solve issues of an unbalanced distribution of tasks, the absence of a free legal aid system, and the necessity for Serbia to provide its institutions with an "overall strategic picture" (EC/Report on Serbia 2016: 4) in regard to the criminal landscape in the country. Furthermore, Serbia seems to respect fundamental human rights, according to the report; however, it needs to apply this approach across the entire country, with a particular emphasis on the protection of minorities (EC/Report on Serbia 2016: 4).

As for the economic criteria, Serbia seemed to be on a moderate path toward a functioning market economy (EC/Report on Serbia 2016: 5). Although clear results in terms of economic growth and reduction of imbalances are conspicuous, the EC urges Serbia to enhance its fiscal consolidation due to the large governmental debt (EC/Report on Serbia 2016: 5). In spite of noticeable improvements, Serbia still needs to boost its investment activity to be able to keep up with the market forces within the Union (EC/Report on Serbia 2016: 5).

Next to problems that concern national policy, in 2019 scholars point anew to the "enlargement fatigue the EU shows while being humbled by internal challenges" (Hajrullahu 2019: 107). As he notes, the enlargement fatigue is paradoxically combined with EU's self-perception of being the key player in the Western Balkans, aware of its duties and obligations (Hajrullahu 2019). Moreover, critics repeatedly argue that the voiced commitment to the region, which was formally put forward at the mentioned Thessaloniki Summit in 2003, was not accompanied by an actual address of the causes of the political deterioration and rising polarization in the societies in the Western Balkans. While the Berlin Process, launched in 2014, welcomed initiatives to increase regional cooperation, as Fouéré notes, it failed to highlight the failing democratic standards and the missing rule of law in the respective countries. While

Fouéré argues that a more forceful and consistent agency of the EU could have initiated a change, this agency was largely absent and resulted in a stalemate (Fouéré 2018). According to Fouéré, this is especially the case with Serbia and Montenegro, as the EU perceives them as frontrunner candidate countries. The author additionally states that this idleness motivated other external actors who are interested in the WB region, especially Serbia, to continue “[their] nefarious soft power actions” (Fouéré 2018: 4) to regain influence in the region. These encompass primarily Russia and China. In a nutshell, due to EU’s lack of leadership in the WB countries, the Union left the door open both for member states to put forward their own national agendas with regard to the EU’s enlargement policy as well for other international actors outside the EU to re-establish their influence in the region (Fouéré 2018). Even though Fouéré’s article was published in 2018, this trend persists to present days.

Due to these reasons, as Radić Milosavljević writes, the very SAP process that provided the framework for candidate members to advance in their European integration has lost credibility (Radić Milosavljević 2019). As she notes, like in the case of countries of Central and Eastern Europe that assumed membership in 2004 and 2007, respectively, the process was supposed to be a support mechanism for a comprehensive transformation of post-war states into democratic systems with a functioning market economy. Yet again, unlike countries of Central and Eastern Europe, the countries of the former SFRY had direct legacy of the interethnic wars and dissolution into separate states, which in turn added another element to the accession process in the case of Western Balkan countries, namely the element of stabilization (Radić Milosavljević 2019). Although it can be said that, besides occasional disagreements and political incidents, peace has been relatively maintained in the Western Balkans, there is no conspicuous proof that this peace is due to the stabilization process of the EU (Radić Milosavljević 2019). What Radić Milosavljević remarks is that this process has not been clearly defined from the very beginning, but rather spontaneously adapted and defined to cater to given circumstances. Radić Milosavljević writes that the conditions within the SAP became not only a prerequisite, but also a burden to Serbia’s advancement in its European integrations. Next to this, Radić Milosavljević grades these conditions as “unilaterally and spontaneously created” (Radić Milosavljević 2019: 3), which resulted in a vicious circle of each member state interpreting them in their own manner, making the SAP a never-ending process (Radić Milosavljević 2019). It appears that candidate counties are held in a

semi-dependent position via the EU through the stabilization process, while in turn, this semi-dependent position allows the EU to intervene in domestic policy of its candidate countries even before they formally joined the EU (Radić Milosavljević 2019).

5.1.2. Serbia's Progress Evaluation – 2021

Since being granted candidate status in 2014, 22 out of 35 chapters have been opened, two of which have been provisionally closed (*EU Delegation to Serbia Online 2022*). In 2021, the EC stated that Serbia is expected to enter the EU by 2025 but has also described this perspective as “extremely ambitious” (European Parliament Facts Sheets on the European Union 2021: 4). More precisely, the European Parliament Facts Sheets on the European Union (2021) state that Serbia has not opened any new chapters for almost two years up to the 14th of December 2021, when it opened Cluster Four on *Green Agenda and Sustainable Connectivity*. Among the 21 Chapters that have been opened so far, only Cluster 1 on Fundamentals and aforementioned Cluster 4 make up the only two clusters that have been fully opened, while the remaining 12 chapters have not been reviewed yet.

The 2021 EC Report clearly reiterates the skepticism voiced earlier that Serbia's prospective membership of the EU planned for 2025 is “extremely ambitious” (European Parliament Facts Sheets on the European Union 2021: 4). As the report informs, the most critical chapters, encompassed in the Fundamentals cluster, are still not brought to a satisfactory level. Rather than satisfactory, the EC finds “some level of preparation” for both areas and notes merely “limited progress” (EC/Report on Serbia 2021: 18). The report indicates insufficient protection of the judiciary against potential political influence and insufficient track-keeping regarding war crimes cases. In order to tackle these obstacles, Serbia needs to put efforts to bolster the autonomy of the judiciary and the prosecution. Further amendments to laws regulating the High Judicial Council (HJD) and the State Prosecutors' Council (SPC) are necessary in order to enable these institutions to defend judiciary independence without being obstructed. Additionally, the whole justice sector is in need of an utterly new strategy and a new management system that is able to conduct necessary measurements of the efficiency and effectiveness of the justice system (EC/Report on Serbia 2021: 20). As for Chapter 24, Serbia is required to increase its activities against corruption and organised crime and amend the existing criminal code. As Serbia adopted a revised action plan for Chapter 24 in 2020, all “indications of delays” are actually evaluated

against deadlines set by the country itself (EC/Report on Serbia 2021: 43). This stagnation in the area of fundamental prerequisites becomes even more conspicuous when realizing that it has been almost eight years up to date since Chapters 23 and 24, as deemed the most crucial ones, were opened.

While Olivér Várhelyi, European Commissioner for Enlargement, praised the opening of *Cluster Four* as a sign of Serbia's commitment to EU membership (European Western Balkans Online 2022), Gasper Dovžan, the State Secretary of the Slovenian Presidency, stressed that Serbia's weak points are evident and that these require additional efforts and reforms in order to comply with the EU law. These additional efforts, according to Dovžan, and in accordance with the overall progress, need to be invested in the areas of judicial independency, the fight against corruption and organised crime, as well as in domestic procedures in war crime trials (Radio Slobodna Evropa Online 2022), as the report itself outlined. Furthermore, although Serbia continuously puts effort to achieve a cross-party census on reforms necessary to be able to comply fully with European standards, political polarisation persists. The EC calls on Serbia to actively include all actors in implementing measures as instructed by the Union. Next to political polarisation, inflammatory language is still being consistently used during parliamentary debates between all parties included. Thus, it is crucial to transform hate speech into a prolific political dialogue (EC/Report on Serbia 2021: 6). Serbia seems to be stable in respecting fundamental rights; however, human rights institutions still need bolstering and a higher degree of independence. Within the realm of freedom of expression, journalists still seem to be exposed to verbal violence by high-level officials, and this verbal violence is frequently accompanied by threats and physical violence. Reports from media associations add to the gravity of the situation by citing hate speech and smear campaigns against journalists by high-profile leaders (EC/Report on Serbia 2021: 6).

Within the area of economic criteria, contrary to the political criteria, Serbia seems to have received an affirmative note overall. The report describes Serbia as "moderately prepared/at a good level of preparation in developing a functioning market economy" (EC/Report on Serbia 2021: 7). Finally, pertaining to Serbia's ability to assume the obligations of EU membership, the country is generally praised to have put in a lot of work in aligning with the EU acquis.

As the Opinion of the EC in 2011 already hinted, Serbia does indeed need to carry out considerable efforts to be a competitive candidate country. Three out of four chapters contained in the Fundamentals cluster were evaluated as critical when the country officially obtained candidate status in 2012. These areas seem to remain challenging up to date, a full decade later. Although the EU paints a picture of Serbia as a country that displays at times limited, at times moderate, and at times a good level of preparation of the three Copenhagen criteria and stresses Serbia's commitment to the European path, the core issues seem to be highly demanding to tackle for Serbia's government. As long as overviews of current state of affairs do not substantially differ from Commission's opinion on Serbia's prospective advancement in 2011, it seems that Serbia still has a long way to go to on its European path.

Additionally, when evaluating Serbia's progress in 2021, it can be concluded that EU's policy of conditionality as the key instrument in its enlargement affairs has not yielded prolific results in the case of Serbia. Next to this, as Radić Milosavljević (2019) argues, due to EU's prioritizing of political stability, its policy also started to show negative side-effects such as support for non-democratic practices and authoritative regimes. Yet again, despite this stalemate, it appears that refraining from a prospective EU membership appears to be a highly unlikable scenario. Radić Milosavljević also argues that such a situation actually caters to political elites in the respective countries who use this promise of prospective 'europeanisation' as an excuse to cover up the poor economic and political situation in the country (Radić Milosavljević 2019). This is officially, indeed, the case also in 2023, as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of the Republic of Serbia officially states European Integration and accession to the EU as "the national interest and strategic commitment of the Republic of Serbia" as well as that "the European values are the same ones which the Republic of Serbia supports and strives to refine" (Foreign Policy MFA Serbia). Therefore, joining the EU is perceived as a stimulus to further bolster European standards in the country. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs also cites the EU as the primary trade and investment partner of the country, thus also as the major factor contributing to Serbia's economic stability (Foreign Policy MFA Serbia). However, this apparently firm preference for the European cause altered its course as of February 2022.

5.1.3. Ukraine War

The two presented reports inform about Serbia's progress on each of the aquis and reiterate the importance of Serbia improving its judicial and legal system, as well as freedom and security constrains. Since February 24, 2022 the reporting of the EU concerning Serbia changed abruptly. On this date, the Russian Federation invaded Ukraine. As Kasińska- Metryka and Pałka- Suchojad (2022) write, Russian aggression formally began in February 2022, but it was merely a result of accumulated past events international community did witness but has not taken any measures of precaution. With February 24, 2022, world's dynamics assumed a completely different shape.

Ukraine gained independence from Russia in 1991. Ever since, Ukraine coped with a number of challenges concerning state building, its interior and foreign policy (Prokop 2022). Resting on the right of self-determination, a country's independence implies its autonomy to decide on its security policy as well. This sector proved to be of crucial importance for the Ukraine state due to difficult neighborly relations with the Russian Federation. The events of February 24, 2022 were preceded with a chain of events in 2013/2014, the annexation of Crimea, and the escalation of tensions in eastern Ukraine (Prokop 2022). As Prokop states, the reasons for the ongoing conflict lie with Ukraine's volatile foreign policy and Russia's imperialist approach to the territories of the former USSR and the underlying desire to re-establish its imperial status (Prokop 2022).

Ukrainian multi-vector policy dates back to Ukraine's first president Leonid Kravchuk. This period, 1991-1994, was characterized by a lack of coherent and clear foreign policy, while primarily cooperating with the Russian Federation and balancing relation with Western powers. A major shift occurred during the Orange Revolution in 2004, as the pro-European candidate Viktor Yushchenko was elected president (2005-2010). Once his mandate expired, the pro-Russian candidate who initiated the Orange Revolution, Viktor Yanukovych, steered Ukraine's foreign policy towards Russia. Being a pro-Russian candidate, Yanukovych distanced himself from signing an association agreement with the EU, which led to a series of protests of Ukrainian population known as *Euromaidan*. The protest resulted in overthrowing Yanukovych and stepping away from a close cooperation with Russia. Shifting Ukraine's foreign policy towards Euro-Atlantic structures was perceived as an imminent regional threat by Russia, which is

why Russia altered its mechanisms of control over Ukraine. This shift encompassed use of military forces resulting in violent annexation of Crimea, followed by conflicts in eastern Ukraine in the Donetsk and Lugansk areas. Tensions reached its peak on February 24, 2022 as Russia invaded Ukraine (Marples & Mills 2015).

The ongoing war has changed international dynamics. The world split into countries who vigorously condemned Russian act of aggression towards Ukraine, and those who voiced support to invaded Ukraine, yet stayed loyal to the aggressor and continued fostering good diplomatic relations with Russia. One of these countries is Serbia. Although Serbia backed the UN resolution against unlawful actions of the Russian Federation, it remained the only European country, next to Belarus, that has not introduced sanctions against Russia (BBC News: Andric 2023). One day after the outbreak of the war, Serbian President Vucic stated clearly that Serbia “honestly regrets” the ongoing aggression but has no intention of altering its foreign policy towards Russia (BBC News: Andric 2023). The Ukrainian ambassador to Serbia, Volodymyr Tolkach, told BBC press that he feels good in Serbia in his official function as ambassador, and as such, he understands that Serbia is energetically dependent on Russia and why it refuses to introduce sanctions, but that people under attack and flying bombs in Ukraine do not see eye to eye. One year later, in February 2023, Serbian officials still consider Belgrade as standing firmly on the Russian side despite international backlash against Serbia’s foreign policy. The European Union reacted swiftly by means of introducing joint packages of sanctions against Russia, calling for unified foreign policy of all member states. The EU strongly condemned Russia’s aggression against Ukraine and stood united in its goal to provide Ukraine with humanitarian, political and military support (European Council 2023). Standing outside of this unified picture, Serbia appears to be the ‘black sheep’ among candidates for membership to the EU. To illustrate the extent of disappointment with Serbia’s decisions, the following chapter offers summary of the 2022 EC report on Serbia and highlight its main benchmarks.

In connection to this, Heather Grabbe attempted to provide a brief explanation to why is the enlargement process by far more difficult than it sounds and what is influence does Ukraine crisis have on enlargement impetus. In a political discussion held at the Institut für die Wissenschaften vom Menschen (IWM) Vienna, Grabbe argued that the

enlargement is largely defined by two questions: who is in charge of the EU enlargement process and whether there is geopolitical or a security imperative (Grabbe 2022).

As she argues, the critical moments that were decisive to take new countries refer to geopolitical or security imperatives which overrule a myriad of issues in favor of non-accession. Grabbe argues that the Western Balkan region has stopped being a security problem to the EU, which is why the enlargement process has long been at a stalemate (Grabbe 2022). Even with conditionality as a tool at hand, there was no impetus to overcome the resistance against enlargement. Looking back at the 1999 and Baltic countries, 2003 Thessaloniki Summit which took place because of the war in Macedonia and the following Ohrid Agreement, over 2005 allowing Bulgaria and Rumania to join together due to fear of increasing Russian influence especially in Bulgaria, there has ever since been no security imperative up until 2022 and Ukraine war. She argues that all the crucial events connected with EU's enlargement are tightly causally tied to a geopolitical and security issues that needed to be solved swiftly and which overshadowed resistance against enlargement. She explains that resistance has always been there, as previously pointed, as it is risky for EU to embrace new members, which is why Serbia's accession and WB enlargement has long been stuck. Next to this, she remarks that the accession process of the EU has become "incredibly bureaucratic and complex" (Grabbe 2022: 34:58) with a large number of conditions and veto points, amounting to more than 100 veto points for every single of the 27 EU member states. Moreover, Grabbe states that *acquis*, especially the crucial chapters 23 and 24 of the Fundamentals, are not defined in a clear and precise manner on key issues. Consequently, this implies that member states can with ease argue that conditions as set out in the given chapters are not met, as it is difficult to distinguish and measure how there are to be met in the first place (Grabbe 2022). Due to this, Grabbe argues that Ukraine crisis is a 'game changer' as now there are both security and geopolitical impetus present, and the stakes for enlargement are, for the first time since 2003, high, which might turn out to be beneficial for the EU Western Balkans enlargement process. Like in 2005, the EU cares about containing Russian influence in the region, this time through Serbia. Reflecting on the EU's conditionality mechanism, she claims that this tool fails to provide prolific results as it helps catalyze domestic reforms provided the rewards for doing so are also visible and tangible to the

population, not to the government. For this reason, Grabbe advocates empowering reformers and cites this as the “fairy dust of the accession process” (Grabbe 2022: 38.08).

5.2. Serbia and Russia – More than Friends?

As mentioned before, in 2018 Russia and Serbia celebrated 180 years of diplomatic relations, counting the 185th year of successful diplomatic cooperation this year. The following events essential for understanding the complexity and the deep-rooted relationship between Serbia and Russia are reflected in the period between 1991, in the aftermath of the dissolution of both Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, and the period from the 2000s until today. Although both systems started breaking down at approximately the same time, the path to the final dissolution was utterly different. While the Soviet Union’s split-up went relatively peacefully, the disintegration of Yugoslavia embarked on a series of full-scale wars throughout most of the 1990s (Kay 2014: 10).

At the onset of the Kosovo war, which was terminated by the NATO airstrikes, according to Kay’s research of public opinion in Serbia in 2014, the vast majority (78%) of the Serbian population firmly believed that Russia would come to Serbia’s aid should the country be bombed (Kay 2014: 12). However, Russia’s personal interest of not intervening with NATO by far transcended the brotherhood of the two countries (Kay 2014: 15). Yet again, once Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, Russia refused to recognize it, for it called upon Serbia’s territorial integrity. This undertaking once again revoked the image of Russia as the protector of Orthodox people in the Balkans as established decades ago. This chapter will take a closer look at the background of the four aforementioned factors in chronological order.

5.2.1. NATO Air Strikes in 1999

NATO’s 78-day long bombing of Serbia was initiated in March 1999 with the aim to protect the Albanian population in Kosovo (Schulte 2013). These events occurred under Slobodan Milosević’s rule and were designed to internationally isolate the then Serbian president and withdraw Russian support of the regime (Schulte 2013). One

year before the NATO bombings took place, Milosević travelled to Moscow to seek additional support from the then President Yeltsin. According to Russian Duma, Russian politicians were very loud in their support for the Serbs in the Kosovo territory (Duma 1998), siding with Serbian authorities (Radeljić 2017). Russia did agree that there needs to be a mutual solution found, however, it constantly attempted to undermine Kosovar delegation, describing it as illegitimate (Radeljić 2017). As Latawski and Smith (2018) write, within the framework of NATO-Russian dialogue regarding to the Kosovo question, Russia perceived NATO to be biased against Serbians and likely to be preparing a setting in which Serbians would be to blame for any failure within the dialogue. A wrong move would be, in Russian terms, anticipated by the NATO as a pretext to launch the airstrikes. As Weller notes, some western observers even perceived Russia not only as being partisan in favor of the Serbians, but also as acting as the country's de facto representatives at the Rambouillet conference in Paris (Weller 1999). As the talks seemed to lead to a dead-end, the United States made it clear that the NATO reserved the right to launch airstrikes without consulting Russia, the UN, or anybody else (Latawski & Smith 2018). As the prospect of bombing Serbia was becoming more and more tangible, Russia's opposition to NATO's intentions became louder (Latawski & Smith 2018). Such an opposing stance culminated when the airstrikes were launched, as the then Russian president severed most of its institutional ties with NATO. However, regardless of the vast media coverage pushing for a "breaking off links with the West" (Latawski and Smith 2018: 96), in reality, according to Latawski and Smith (2018), Russia's actions were carefully thought through and did not lead to any drastic consequences. Russia did, however, reiterate its standpoint as Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov stated that "Russia does not intend to take any [military] countermeasures with respect to NATO" (Latawski & Smith 2018). The reasons for such a "limited disruption of relations" (Latawski and Smith 2018: 98) concerned economic and security factors. According to the authors, Yeltsin's government was not able to afford, in the literal sense of that word, to undertake any actions which might imperil financial and economic support from the western countries and western institutions such as International Monetary Fund (IMF). According to the official newspaper of the Soviet government, Izvestia, Russia also felt impotent to reverse the course of action, as "there was nothing Russia could do to stop the bombings anyway" (Izvestia 1999: 9). Finally, Kremlin, despite the official opposition to NATO's campaign, agreed to support

Milosević's opposition and urge his overthrow. This was a successful undertaking, as Milosević stepped down immediately after meeting with the Russian Foreign Minister (Schulte 2013), once again demonstrating the influence the Russian leadership has on Serbian politics. Opposite to the belief of Serbian citizens that Russia would assist the country should the bombing begin, Russia's support with this regard turned out to be rather diplomatic than practical. k

5.2.2. The Kosovo Question

Next to the NATO airstrikes, the resilience of Serbians to accept the loss of "the cradle of Serbian medieval statehood – Kosovo and Metohija" (Ponomareva 2020: 159), represent the second most important event that complicates Serbia's East-West position in favor of Russia. In the aftermath of the 1995 Dayton Agreement, the dominant view in Russia was Serbia's territorial integrity was not to be challenged as Russia mirrored the Kosovo question with its domestic successionists concerns, namely with Chechenya (Radeljić 2017). According to Proroković (2020), Russian influence has increased in Serbia since 2006, and this influence has been built precisely on the 'Kosovo policy'. Ever since, Russia continued its foreign policy narrative and has firmly defended Serbia's territorial integrity referring to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244. By doing so, Russia vehemently opposed any sort of independence with respect to Kosovo that Serbia would not allow. Having Russia's support, Belgrade did not seem to defuse tensions with Prishtina after 1999. Rather than this, the Kosovo question became more contested than ever since it declared independence in 2008. As Petrović (2010) elaborates, ever since 2007 it became rather evident that the Kosovo question would end unfavourably for Serbia's territorial integrity, which is why the Serbian leadership has ever since endeavoured to prevent, or at least decelerate Kosovo's independence. In order to achieve this, Serbia urgently needed overt support from permanent members of the UN Security Council, and it did receive it precisely from Russia. Russia used its privileged position within the UN and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) to prevent the acceptance of Kosovo's independence on the international scene. In this regard, Russia took another step further as it requested the advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice to assess the legal grounds for Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence (Petrović 2010: 7). This subsequently led to Serbia

declaring Russia as one of the pillars of its foreign policy. Another important step in the relations between the countries was made as they established a common strategy whose substantial part pertains to a “common appearances on the international level” (Petrović 2010: 6) as well as “the coordination of their positions in the fields of politics, energy and economics” (Petrović 2010: 7).

After this 2008 ‘turn to Moscow’, it seems that Serbian people have restored the eternal, deeply rooted trust in Russia as the ‘savior’ and the great international power Serbia could always rely on. Yet again, as Petrović claims, “these commendations, wishes and activities, were rather based on emotional and irrational grounds [while] at the same time, scientific and rational arguments about Russia’s role and position were practically ignored” (Petrović 2010: 5). Furthermore, one of the main points Petrović argues is that Russia’s main objective was to re-establish itself in the Balkan area, and, due to past events of NATO bombing of Serbia, Serbia seems like the ideal candidate for safeguarding Russian influence in the region. In this view, Serbia and Russia have established tight relations in the economic and energy spheres, as Serbia enjoyed strong political support from Russia and Russia was mostly seeking to enhance and re-establish its economic and energy objectives in the Balkan Peninsula. To achieve this, Russian Gazpromneft bought 51% of the Serbian oil industry NIS and initiated the building of the South stream pipeline passing through Serbia’s territory (Petrović 2010: 6). By doing so, Russia obtained a monopoly over Serbia’s fuel market by controlling 82% of the total oil processing sector (Szpala 2014). In 2013, the joint strategy about common appearances of the two countries was updated by signing the *Declaration of Strategic Partnership between Serbia and Russia*. This declaration extended the scope of the agreement in 2007 by encompassing all areas of cooperation, including politics, economic, culture, trade, technic and education (Deklaracija strateškog partnerstva Srbije i Rusije 2013: 2). In the following year, according to Szpala, Russian gas made up 98.8% of Serbian gas consumption (Szpala 2014). Furthermore, although the project South stream pipeline was never fully developed, at the time when the two leaders held talks about it, it had a considerable effect on the position Russia occupied among Serbian leadership and common people.

Although Russia’s role in Serbia’s economy is negligible in areas other than the energy sector, the country has successfully dealt with securing soft power in Serbia for over a

decade now. As Shapiro (2018) notes, there has been a number of Russian institutions established in Belgrade, like branch offices of *The Russian World* organisation and representatives of the *International Fund for the Unity of Orthodox Nations* in 2005. Next to these, the *Russian institute of Strategic Research* and the *Gorchakov Public Diplomacy Fund* are also located in Serbia (Shapiro 2018). As mentioned in the methodology part, next to such institutions that spread Russian ideology and values, Russian media outlets like Sputnik Serbia and RT considerably contributed to securing Russia's position in the country, representing a direct tool for conveying narratives told by the Russian government to Serbian population. Due to such a strong 'soft power presence' of Russia in Serbia, a survey conducted in 2014 reported that 47 percent of Serbs believed that Russia is the largest supplier of developmental aid to Serbia, when in reality, the US and EU provided 89.49% of the developmental funds (European Integration Office 2014: 19).

5.2.3. Ukraine Crisis in 2014

The third series of events relevant for the East-West dichotomy when it comes to Serbia's foreign policy commenced also occurred in 2014. This year can be regarded as an introduction to the full-blown conflict that took place in February 2022 when Russia invaded Ukraine. Namely, in 2014, the concept of 'Ukraine war' referred solely to Russia's annexation of Crimea and the conflict over Donbas area between Ukrainian Armed Forces and two territories populated by Russians – Donetsk and Luhansk. These events, which have been at focus of the international law ever since, resulted in a series of bans on food imports on Russia from European countries (Nelaeva & Semenov 2016), while at the same time Serbia was amidst its EU accession negotiation process. As Nelaeva and Semenov (2016) state, although EU integration was declared a priority in Serbia's foreign policy, the economic turmoil, the contested Kosovo question, and "nation building issues" (Nelaeva and Semenov 2016: 57) raised the likelihood of Moscow's increased influence in a variety of state matters from the very beginning. Moreover, as Bliefsky noted, contacts between the two capitals have indeed intensified since 2014 (Bilefsky 2014), while at the time other European countries were concerned with introducing a variety of bans against Russia. Indeed, as Proroković (2020) notes, the EU and the NATO significantly changed their policy towards Russia due to the escalation of the Ukraine crisis in 2014, launching a number

of initiatives to politically condemn Russia. Serbia, however, was already in 2014 an exception and represented the only European country that refrained from introducing sanctions against Russia (Proroković 2020). As Nelaeva and Semenov (2016) argue, Serbia thus maintained close relations with both the West and Russia, and in turn, both powers sought to influence Serbia's foreign policy choices due to the country's geographical position 'at the heart of Europe'. In a nutshell, Russia, although unable to prevent Serbia's accession negotiations with the EU, was still mighty enough to represent a counter-hegemon within the political landscape of Serbia. This event can also be regarded as the introduction to Serbia's ever more ambivalent and contested position between the two powers.

5.2.4. The 'Putin Factor'

The fourth factor that can be identified as pillar of Russophilia in Serbia reflects the 'Putin factor' (Proroković 2020). As Proroković writes, this 'factor' persists in Putin being "a global phenomenon" (Proroković 2020: 200) despite a number of negative reports by the majority of western countries. What is more, Putin appears to be Serbia's top-ranked political leader (Bloomberg 2022). As Proroković explains, this absolute preference for Putin is practically reflected in the belief that he is doubtlessly the most important politician of the modern world and that his political decisions and moves are inviolable (Proroković 2020). Next to historical reasons mentioned before, there is the 'cult of the leader' present in contemporary Serbo-Russian relations, leading to the perception of Putin as the 'savior' and a true statesman among Serbian population. To prove how deeply Russophilia is anchored in Serbian society, Proroković mentions an example of a place called Adzinci that decided to change the name to *Putinovo* in November 2018. Next to this, in Banstol, residents named the Temple of the Blessed Mary to *Putin's Church*. For the reference, this church is dedicated to the Serbs fallen during the Yugoslav wars. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that in the very center of Belgrade T-shirts with the inscription "Serbs and Russians – brothers forever" can be bought.

Another uplift in the partnership followed as Russia and Serbia additionally intensified and expanded their military cooperation. This cooperation is reflected in ample military equipment, such as aircraft donations, armored patrol vehicles and tanks, all of which

Russia justified as a necessity to ensure Serbia's military neutrality (Ikodinović 2019). As Russian Major General Sergez Lipovoy stated, being Moscow's ally in the Balkans, Serbia needs constant protection since it is surrounded by air bases of NATO in its neighboring countries. Prorokov (2020) also notes that both quantity and quality of Russian military aid have not reach such extents since the First Serbian Uprising (Prorokov 2020), while Russia's sophisticated aircraft has only once been transferred to another country's territory for the purpose of military exercise, and it was in Serbia in 2019. Finally, it can be concluded that Russia is perceived Serbia's patron "in terms of politics, historical image, collective confidence and individual dignity" (Prorokov 2020: 200), all of which contributes to the final, overtly positive attitude of Serbian citizens towards Russia and its leader.

6. Strategic Narratives in Practice

Serbia has been trying to balance its position between the two powers since the 2000s. Contemporary relations between Serbia and Russia, and Serbia and the EU are most definitely a sum of previous events and tensions that occurred in the past two decades. The situation has been sharpened already since 2014, in the aftermath of the Crimean crisis and has escalated in February 2022 with Russian invasion on Ukraine. As Ponomareva (2020) explains, Belgrade's chances of retaining its international status and actively building a sovereign democracy depend critically on the political wit of successfully balancing between two power arenas, namely EU and Russia. The story does not merely revolve around two ideologically opposing power centres and values generally attributed as 'western' or 'eastern', but there are rather several events that highly influence the preference for the former or the latter. Ponomareva (2020) writes that the clash between these power actors over Serbia has been accumulating over time, as Serbia is regarded as the most significant state in the Western Balkans and central to the Euro-Atlantic integration strategy (Ponomareva 2020). This chapter will analyze the narrative told by the Russian leadership and the EU according to the categories presented in the theoretical chapter by Miskimmon et al. (2013) with regard to formation of strategic narratives of both actors.

6.1. Formation of Russian Strategic Narratives

February 24, 2022 brought about an abrupt change in the Russia-Serbia-EU triangle. The balancing act became enormously difficult – the whole world watched via different media outlets the course of the war and countries were firm in their decision by which 'side' they would stick. The EU officials called for a unanimous European strategy and a joint response in form of sanctions against Russia. However, Serbia distanced itself from introducing sanctions to Russia. Rather than adhere to the European plan, at the onset of the war, due to the close historical ties based on culture, language, and Slavic ethnicity as explained before, Serbian people felt the urge to support their "big brother" the same way Russia supported its vastly smaller partner when 'the West', lead by NATO, bombed their country in 1999. In order to paint the picture of the atmosphere among Serbian population, some of the people's opinions state the following: "I

remember what they wrote about Serbs during the wars. We were portrayed as animals. As it wasn't true then, it's not true now what they say about the Russians" (Agence France-Presse Online). This juxtaposing of the 'two histories' adds another layer to the relationship and brotherhood between Russia and Serbia, and, as this chapter will attempt to demonstrate, this narrative is the leading story in the book of Serbo-Russian brotherhood.

Concerning the formation of the Russian narrative in Serbia, as the theoretical part already implied, it is necessary to identify and comprehend actors' strategic goals and types of communication, in this case of that of the Russian leadership. As according to Miskimmon et al. (2013) these include agenda setting, legitimization, diverting attention, securing acquiescence, enhancing popularity and mobilization, this chapter will try to argue that the Russian narrative regarding Serbia includes all of these communicative goals.

6.1.1. Agenda Setting

Agenda setting is identified as targeting the identification of control strategies exerted by governments or powerful stakeholders on the output of the media that, in turn, hold the power to influence the public opinion (Damstra et al. 2018). In this case, Russia was compelled to tell a story to a country that has historically had a highly positive attitude towards the narrator. As polls show, before the outbreak of the war, in 2021, the average note for the quality of Serbo-Russian relations was 4,02, whereby 5 is the highest grade (Institute for European Affairs 2021). When asked about the future of Serbo-Russian relations, the vast majority of 72% replied "yes", 17% remained sustained, while mere 11% answered "no" (Institute for European Affairs 2021). In such a hospitable atmosphere, agenda setting did not seem to pose a challenge, as the true task was simply to preserve the already positive picture in Serbia.

6.1.2. Legitimation

Following agenda setting, legitimization is listed as another goal within strategic narratives. Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov stated that "the West is planning a nuclear conflict" and is "convinced that war plans are being prepared against

Russia, that talks are being held on the possibility of starting a nuclear war” but that “Russia is not talking about that, but NATO and Ukraine are” (Sputnik March 04, 2022). Lavrov added that “[i]t is clear that the third world war can only be nuclear. However, I want to draw your attention to the fact that we will not allow any provocations to throw us off balance” and that “the topic of nuclear or World War III was needed by the West to maintain Russophobia (Sputnik March 04, 2022). A few days later, Vasily Nebenzya, Permanent Representative of the Russian Federation at the United Nations, stated that “Ukrainian armed forces are actively preparing a provocation with the usage of chemical weapons” (Sputnik, 14 March 2022) and concluded that “should these provocations turn into reality, God forbid, do not say that we didn’t warn you” (Sputnik March 04, 2022).

Delivering the Victory Day speech commemorating the Soviet victory over Nazi Germany in 1945, Putin told the crowds that “the special military operation in Ukraine was necessary and has been provoked by the West”, adding that his forces in eastern Ukraine are defending the motherland (BBC News: Russia’s Putin blames West May 9, 2022):

In the international relations, Russia has always been for the system of equality. In December last year, we suggested to have a security agreement with the EU to find a fair compromise in the interest of everyone, but this was in vain. They did not want to hear us since they had completely different plans. They were preparing a punishing operation in Donbas to intrude on our historical land. In Kyiv, they were saying they might get nuclear weapons and the NATO started exploring the lands close to us. This became an obvious threat to our country and borders - everything was telling us that there was a need to fight the fascists. We saw how they started to develop military infrastructure through constant supplies of most modern military equipment; the danger was growing every day and Russia acted in the only way possible for an independent, sovereign, and strong country.

These stories found resonance in Serbia. As Panasytska (2022) writes, as the invasion commenced in full-scale, the narrative of support and protection for Russia continued in Serbia. The headlines such as “*Ukraine started a war against Russia*” (Informer 2022); “*Ukrainian troops shelled the maternity hospital*” (Novosti 2022); “*Ukrainians are provoking by preparing to use chemical weapons*” (Sputnik 2022) overwhelmed

Serbian written and digital media. The Russian narrative thoroughly puts the blame for the outbreak of the war on the US and NATO, and headlines such as “*Ukraine is a victim of NATO’s plans to break Russia*” (Novosti, February 27, 2022) aid this narrative. Furthermore, Pečat’s (2022) article ‘*Why Russia had to react?*’ writes about the “forced military operation of the armed forces of the Russian Federation against the NATO-Nazi regime in Ukraine” (Pečat Online 2022). Additionally, numerous portals and media write about the ‘Russian Fortress’ project. The Serbian newspaper *Telegraf* published that the Russian Fortress “built by Putin will become the greatest power on the planet [...] and the military intervention in Ukraine is the first step towards the creation of the Russian World, which Putin has already talked about” (Telegraf 2022). The text continues that “if Russia manages to bring Ukraine under its control militarily, then it has taken a historic step, which means a complete break with the West for decades to come” (Telegraf March 04, 2022).

By doing this, the Russian narrative in Serbia becomes justified, as Russia is not the aggressor, but a defender of its people. Russia frames its actions as legitimate, in accordance with international law and the principle of its territorial integrity, and continuously claims it is the West that tries to manipulate this narrative and present Russia as the aggressor and the culprit. As *tagesschau* informs, it is not mentioned anywhere in the news that these attacks most probably never took place and were staged in order to justify the upcoming invasion on Ukraine by Russia (Siggelkow 2023). In this way, Russia manages to legitimize its actions, as they present themselves as keepers of the endangered Russian people in Ukrainian areas populated predominantly by Russians and protectors of its own territorial integrity against provocations made by the West, primarily pointing to the NATO and its ally, the EU.

Furthermore, Willy Wiemer, German politician who was Vice-President of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly during the bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY), explained for newspaper *RIA Novosti* the reasoning behind this legitimization and why it is successful. He stated that:

“[t]he violent transformation of NATO, which occurred due to the Alliance’s aggression against the then Federal Republic of Yugoslavia in 1999 paved the way for the current situation in Ukraine [...] With the armed attack on Yugoslavia, the

United States returned war to Europe. However, they did not stop there. In the following years, they attacked numerous states and fought against them, until their complete destruction. The American government adheres to the legal position that its war actions against the FRY at that time were a precedent in terms of international law [...] Any other country could invoke the American approach in this regard and “wave” it as a justification for its own aggression” (Stanojević 2022).

According to Wiemer words, it is NATO’s actions that provide pretext and legitimization for Russian aggression. The fact that in 1999 the UN Security Council and other relevant international organizations were completely bypassed by the NATO in order to conduct airstrikes on Belgrade and the organization ‘got away with it’ further implies that any country aiming to commit such atrocities might defy the principles of international law by ‘waving the NATO bombing of Belgrade’ as a justification. In other words, the rhetorical question poses itself – *if they could do it, why can’t?* and the Serbian population seems to understand Russia’s acts as a sort of a payback to ‘the West’ for the actions in 1999.

6.1.3. Securing Acquiescence

As shown in this chapter, it appears that the narratives told by the Russian leadership through its state-owned media outlet Sputnik vastly concern topics of the USA and NATO, the EU and Serbia, as these are the main points for achieving the desired outcome with the strategic narratives they employed. Brey (2022) reached the same conclusion in a survey he conducted for *Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom*. According to him, the central Russian narrative concerns discrediting ‘the West’ and reinforcing connections between Serbia and Russia. He further stated that the narrative that the Kremlin constructs in Serbia is “absolut und auf ganz breiter Front salonfähig” [absolutely socially acceptable on a large scale – *translated by the author*] (Brey 2022, no page number). Moreover, in a case study Brey published two years ago, he stated that journalists working for Sputnik in Serbia actually get paid by Russia and receive their paycheck directly from Moscow (Brey 2021). This adds another layer of explanation why the Russian narrative in Serbia is presented the way Russian leadership prefers also in Serbian outlets; especially when taking into account the fact that the majority of domestic Serbian media outlets inform the public about the same or similar news as Sputnik does. Here the Serbian president comes

into play, as the vast majority of domestic Serbian media, approximately 80%, is controlled by the state. In simple words, it can be inferred that the Serbian media will present to the public news that Russia wants them to with implicit, covert support of President Vučić, as he is the one making decisions about what information and how will be projected to the public. Metodieva (2019) offers another explanation for such state of affairs. According to her, local media outlets in Serbia tend to replicate the Russian *Sputnik* and its content because “the countries of the Western Balkans have vulnerable media ecosystems that are highly conducive to disinformation operations, which has become even more profound on the onset of the Ukraine war (Metodieva 2019).

Next to exploiting the vulnerable media ecosystems to secure acquiescence, Russian narrators are also physically present among Serbian people and ensure that their target audience also sees and hears the narrative they want to spread in an informal context. In an interview for Alternative TV (ATV) located in Banja Luka, where the Serbian population of Bosnia and Hercegovina live, Maria Zakharova looked back on the NATO bombing:

Vietnam... In any case, it is inhumane brutality. Inhumane brutality. I call upon everyone who is watching this interview, if they don't block this show on your website or internet, please go online and type in “USA in Vietnam – napalm”, “What is napalm”, and take a look what happened with **children**, civilians... They didn't make up for any of the **children's tears**, and, using the words of Dostoevsky - there was **a galaxy of children's tears**.

In this part of her interview, Zakharova tells a story about the inhumane actions conducted by the USA as an introduction and transition to the story of Belgrade bombing by NATO in 1999. For the context, napalm is a “hideous, jellied gas burning at 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. It didn't just kill you; it tortured you. It has a complete reference to the gas they used in the concentration camps” stated Mark Greenside for the Public Broadcasting Service in the USA (Greenside n.d.). Given this context, her introduction is a powerful narrative laden with empathy for the perished children. Zakharova then continued her story and looked back at Belgrade bombing (Zakharova 2022):

And now, Belgrade. For me, it is a **personal story**. I don't have roots there, cousins, or any blood relationship with any Balkan country. But I have friends there. We went to school together, and after the summer vacation, they brought photographs and stories of what had happened there. For me, it was all very vivid, and in 1999, as the world watched how a **civilized** country, the USA, with the help of **civilized European countries** bomb civil objects and civilians in the center of Europe, and it all lasted more than two months. For me, the world ceased to be the same. What is worse than the bombing of Belgrade with **depleted uranium**? The country was poisoned for many years, up to ten years [...] And not only are **children being born ill**, but the food is also poisoned, the land and so on. And there are **no voices** from the public, **public rebellions** of **legal organizations**, which would give **grants from the European Union** to solve this or that problem, how to provide any compensation to the people in trouble, how to treat them and so on. No "Angelina Jolies [plural]" fly to Belgrade and hold the hands of children who are born sick because their parents were poisoned. **That's not interesting**, there's no such thing. There is no Hiroshima and Nagasaki either. If you go to Japan, try to find a Japanese person who will tell you that they were bombed by the Americans. It is more likely that they will say that they were bombed by the Soviet Union" (Zakharova April 2022).

After introducing the narrative of cruelty and inhumanity concerning the USA, she continued with a *personal story* regarding Belgrade bombing. Here, it is less about the cruelty of the act and war techniques, but it is more about *friendship* and her personal compassion as a member in front of the Russian government for the events from 1999. Additionally, she employs irony to when referring to the USA and the European Union as civilized countries, implying that no civilized country could be capable of undertaking such *inhumane* actions. Next to covertly describing 'western countries' as uncivilized, Zakharova reminds the public that there was no reaction, no voices from any European institution calling for humanitarian aid, for justice, or any kind of financial help when Serbia suffered the air attacks. The underlying idea behind her narrative seems to be an implicit juxtaposition to reactions of world, here especially Western countries, to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. European countries and the USA stood up against Russia and all levels of 'western infrastructure' were employed to aid people in Ukraine, or on a national level, to help refugees integrate in a new setting. All of which, in her words, never occurred in 1999. She draws another parallel by referring to Angelina Jollies in plural, thereby addressing the events of October 2022, as Angelina Jolie visited the central railway

station in Lviv to welcome the internally displaced Ukrainians. By making such a statement in a plural form, Zakharova actually points to a number of celebrities who publicly expressed their support for Ukraine, and who, as she reiterates, never uttered a word of support for the events in Belgrade. Again, children are a point she refers to, since the depleted uranium has left irreversible consequences on the country in total, on its population, land, soil and thus on the country's youngest ones. If they are not the ones born ill, they are left with a poisoned land as a heritage from 1999.

As of June 2022, as Bloomberg informs, even 51% of Serbs stated they would reject the EU membership in a vote, while 34% said yes. Next to this, Putin was elected the Serbia's most favored world leader as close ties remain tight (Savic 2022). This serves as a solid proof that the Russian narrative, especially the communicative goal concerning securing acquiescence was highly prolific and had found fertile ground in Serbia.

6.1.4. Enhancing Popularity and Mobilisation

At the Ceremony of Presentation of the Letters of Credence, held on September 20, Putin reinforced that:

Within the framework of international law, relying above all on Resolution 1244 of the UN Security Council, we will continue to provide **Serbian friends** with comprehensive support in preserving the **legitimate rights** and interests of Serbia, protecting its state sovereignty and territorial integrity (Putin in Bogodvid 2022).

He also pointed out that "Russia and Serbia are linked by strategic partnership relations based on the tradition of friendship, cultural, spiritual, and historical closeness of brotherly nations" (Bogodvid 2022). Putin added that he regularly meets with President Vučić both in person and over telephone conversations to solve key issues and agree on mutual solutions and cooperation. Next to stressing the close and friendly relationships the two presidents have, Putin stated that "[w]e appreciate the desire of our Serbian friends to lead a balanced, independent policy in the international arena and we will continue to work together on deepening the political dialogue, expanding cooperation in the economy, science, cultural and humanitarian sphere" (Bogodvid

2022). As Kisić (2022) argues, narratives told by the two authority figures and projected through the media “deploy the imperial ambitions of both Russia and Serbia” (Kisić 2022). She argues that the former’s objective is the restoration of Russia’s global power, while the latter aims at the unification of Serbian territories (Kisić 2022). It is the Russian president Putin that has created the narrative, while Vučić is the one reinforcing it. Another juxtaposition that the Russian narrative puts forward is the need to ‘protect Russian people in Ukraine’, while Serbia has the same task with ‘protecting Serbian people in Kosovo’. The picture of the two ‘worlds’, the Russian and Serbian one, is being colorfully painted by the Russian leadership, and is simultaneously accompanied by negative conceptual framework regarding the EU and especially NATO.

Furthermore, on September 30, 2022, in his historic speech following the ceremony of accession of four new territories to Russia, Vladimir Putin said that:

Today we are fighting for a **just and free path**, first of all, for ourselves, for Russia. For dictatorship and despotism to remain in the past forever. I am convinced that countries that built their policy on suppression of other cultures or any type of exclusion, are in its essence **criminal**. We need to turn this **shameful page** (Putin in Sputnik 2022).

Here, the Russian president presents himself and his leadership as the good guys, fighting the unjust and unfree systems. He adds that dictatorship should remain in the past, although Russia has been a target of criticism for its authoritarian regime within the international arena. In line with the narrative told by Zakharova, Putin calls every other country, and here implying the West, criminals, just like Zakharova previously described the USA as *inhumane*. Playing with emotionally laden narratives, Putin refers to such systems and societies as *shameful*, which as such need to be put to an end. He added that “a breakdown of the Western hegemony is irreversible. Nothing will ever be the way it was. The battlefield that fate and history called us to is a battlefield for our people, for the great historical Russia” (Sputnik 2022).

Having gradually built a sense of justness and rule of law, with this sentence, the Russian leader overtly expressed the primacy of the *Russian World* over ‘the West’,

as mentioned before. With such a strong statement, Putin interpellated the listeners, the audience and entire countries and nations that are prone to such an ideology. Moreover, he states that it is 'fate' that has called Russia to conduct a 'special military operation' on Ukraine, it was not an act of their free will. This battlefield became an ideological arena for the historical clash between 'East' and 'West', while Russia presents itself as taking up the role of the defender of its people, not an aggressor. Telling a narrative of freedom, international law, justice and territorial integrity to a country that has an emotionally laden history with regard to each of the topics seems like a lucrative method for enhancing popularity and mobilizing public opinion to stand by their side.

Additionally, Russia also did not spare words to praise its conspicuously smaller partner and 'little brother'. Maria Zakharova delivered the following statement:

[We] know how much strength Belgrade needs to continue cooperating with us - of course, in the interest of its country - under **the fiercest pressure** from Washington and Brussels and their friends, who are doing their best to drag Serbia into their anti-Russian front. Their goal is not to stabilize the region, but to **break the political will of the Serbian leadership** and force it to join the regime of sanctions against Russia" (RIA Novosti Online February 12, 2023).

The Press-Secretary of the President of the Russian Federation Dmitrij Peskov confirmed and reinforced this narrative on February 12, 2023, by stating that "[we] understand very well how unprecedented, harsh and illegal oppression, contrary to the norms of international law, is being exerted on many sides, including on Serbia. Especially on Serbia" (Radio Sputnik March 14, 2023). He added that "I highly appreciate the position that Serbia has been taking until now, I understand that the conditions are changing, but I will solve the most pressing issues within the framework of our partner's trustful dialogue with our Serbian friends" (Radio Sputnik March 14, 2023).

In these narratives, both Zakharova and Peskov highlight two things. On the one hand, they make references to the unprecedented, harsh, illegal pressure that is being exerted on Serbia by western countries due to the country's sustained relationship with Russia. In this case, both narrators implicitly criticise the European Union and attempt

to demonstrate to its target audience, here Serbian people, that regardless of the size differences between the countries, support from a small brotherly country is highly appreciated by such a large country like Russia and will thus not be neglected. On the other hand, they both reference the narrative of trust, loyalty in difficult situations, and unbreakable friendship between the two Slavic countries. By constantly expressing appreciation and reiterating their support for internationally, Russia seems to succeed in reaching Serbia's population and creating a feeling of relatedness with the narrative they construed. The creation of this feeling of relatedness is another successfully employed mechanism of enhancing popularity and securing support among Serbian people.

6.1.5. Diverting Attention

With regard to diverting attention, it appears that Russia successfully employs this communicative goal complementary to other previously analyzed narrative mechanisms. In a State of the Nation address on February 21, 2023, Putin defined the expansion of NATO and new European anti-rocket defense systems as provoking Russia, for the objective of the West is 'infinite power' (Putin in BBC News February 21, 2023):

A year ago, in order to defend our historical lands and to liquidate the threat that came up with the neo-Nazi regime after 2014, we decided to conduct a special military operation. We settle the task we're facing step by step. Since 2014, Donbas has been fighting to prove the right to live on its own land and speak its native language; fighting without surrendering in an environment of blockade, constant threat and hatred that was coming from the Kyiv regime while **waiting for Russia to come for assistance**.

He then used the occasion to divert attention to the West and blame the US and the NATO for being the 'real aggressors' (Putin in BBC News 2023: President Vladimir Putin accuses Ukraine and West of starting war):

All the time when Donbas burning and blood was shedding, when Russia was sincerely aspiring a peaceful resolution, **they were playing with people's lives**, and they were playing by 'dishonest cards'. That's a disgusting way of fraud and deceit. **It's known**,

they've destroyed Yugoslavia, Iraq, Libya in the same manner. They can never clean themselves from that disgrace. Honour is not for them; faithfulness is not for them. During the centuries of colonialism, hegemony, dictatorship, **they got used to spitting at the entire world.** [...] Ukraine and Donbas have become symbols of a total lie, a principalist lie. We stick to our position that the modern world must not discriminate between the so-called civilized countries and everyone else. We need honest partnerships that would exclude any exclusivity, **to say nothing of the force.** We are open to a constructive dialogue with the West. We were insisting that Europe and the entire world require an equal security system. For many years we've been proposing to our western partners to discuss this, to work on its implementation, but in response we got unintelligible or hypocritical statements. That's about words, but there are practical steps, the expansion of NATO towards our borders. [...] They continued their campaign of the terror. It was quite contrary to the UN Security Council Resolution, but everyone was pretending that nothing was happening. **I want to repeat that it was them who are guilty and culpable for the war, and we are using force to stop it.**

Although Russian officials make use of every opportunity to excoriate the West, discredit their undertakings and decisions, and portray them as culprits for the aggression taking place in their own backyard, this address offered a direct, explicit and overt accusation that 'the West' is the main perpetrator, while Russia stands for understanding, assisting and defending its own people and its own lands. Using a very specific language such as 'spitting at the entire world' and 'destroying Yugoslavia, Iraq and Libya', Putin's narrative is laden with intense statements that speak to audiences where Russophilia dominates. It can be said that this method was most prolific when the Serbian population was also most sensitive and susceptible to such a narrative, namely a few days before Serbia marked the 24th anniversary of the NATO aggression on Belgrade. Approaching March 24th 2023, the Russian leadership took the opportunity to again remind the world of the gruesome events of March 24, 1999 and lend its full support to Serbia. Maria Zakharova stated that

NATO carried out an act of aggression, the principles of international law were violated, and lawlessness transformed into law [...] Russia will always stand by the Serbian people. **We** went through a lot of trials together, **we** fought against a lot of things **together**, as we continue to do today. For us, this position is not only a matter of principle, but is based on **historical facts**. Some things are fundamental for us and cannot be forgotten [...] We consistently support Belgrade, which stands for

sovereignty and territorial integrity in the fight for a part of its country - Kosovo and Metohija. We insist that the Kosovo problem, which is crucial for Serbs, be solved on **the basis of international law** within the framework of Resolution 1244 of the UN Security Council (K1 Info March 23, 2023).

Zakharova addressed the suffering and deprivation that NATO aggression had caused, adding again that the depleted uranium contaminated a large territory in Serbia, which has since lead to an increased number of diseases among Serbian population. In connection to this, she pointed out that “[t]he height of cynicism was the recent announcement by London that it was ready to deliver ammunition with depleted uranium to the Kyiv regime” said Zakharova, noting that Great Britain could first try this weapon on the island and feel, as she stated, “the entire spectrum of its deadly consequences” (K1 Info 2023). Making a brief reference to the aggravating health consequences the NATO air strikes has ever since had on Serbia, she simultaneously criticises the intentions of Western countries with regard to planned ammunition deliveries and weapon supplies to Ukraine through the lens of crimes committed in Serbia.

In April 2022, as set out in this chapter, Zakharova referenced the NATO bombings as a pretext for the personal story of empathy, brotherhood and support on an individual level, thereby also reminding the public of the health consequences of depleted uranium. However, on March 22, 2023 the airstrikes from 1999 were an instrument to emphasize, once again, the similarities between the two histories and the inclusive “we” on a country level, but this time with the aim to divert attention from the events happening on the ground. The Ukraine crisis is secondary, while the primary story Russian leadership tells is the one where the ‘notorious West’, the only and the actual initiator of the Ukraine war, is now also planning to supply Ukraine with depleted uranium and so leave irreversible consequences on one more country.

As this chapter has shown, the Russian narrative rests on two grounds. The first one represents the historical friendship, supportiveness, and loyalty the countries have shown for each other in challenging situations. The second one relies on actions undertaken by the NATO in cooperation with the European Union, ranging from NATO air strikes in 1999, to 2008 Kosovo’s declaration of independence up to the still ongoing tensions between Belgrade and Pristina. As this chapter set out, narratives told by the

Russian leadership can be categorized according to Miskimmon et al's (2013) communicative goals within the framework of the formation of strategic narratives. While diverting attention seems to compliment other communicative goals, namely agenda setting, legitimation, securing acquiescence and enhancing mobilization, the latter appear to be overtly present and conspicuously identifiable. The following chapter will investigate whether narratives told by the European Union encompass the same range of communicative goals with regard to formation of strategic narratives.

6.2. Formation of EU's Strategic Narratives

Narratives of the European Union will also be analyzed in reference to the categories presented within the framework of strategic narratives, namely agenda setting, legitimation, securing acquiescence, enhancing popularity and mobilization and diverting attention. Contrary to the narratives of the Russian Federation, it seems that the European Union did not hold onto one unified narrative throughout the first year of the Ukraine war, but that it rather shifted from sheer criticism and conditionality to a more friendly, supportive narrative. As the EU did not adopt a consolidated attitude towards Serbia and its actions or non-actions, this chapter will also examine the shift in the narrative of the EU through time to prove the influence of strategic narratives over conditionality.

The overarching issue and the primary cause for the disruption of relations between Serbia and the EU lies precisely in Serbia's reactions, or better said, in Serbia's idleness to act against Russia's aggression against Ukraine. The EU has been gradually introducing restrictive measures against Russia ever since March 2014. The reason for this initial measure package is the mentioned illegal annexation of Crimea and Sevastopol. As of February 23, 2022, the European Union responded to the recognition of Ukrainian areas Donetsk and Luhansk and Russian command in these "oblasts", so-called areas, with an extended sanction package against Russia. After February 24, 2022, as Russian aggression against Ukraine progressed, the EU decided on a massive restrictive measure against the aggressor. These restrictive measures concerned placing a large number of individuals and companies under sanctions, aiming at weakening and destabilizing Russia's economy by means of depriving the country of crucial technologies and markets. The ultimate objective of the

sanctions imposed is to limit Russia's capacity to fight the war it started (European Commission 2023). In order to achieve this goal, the European Union called for joint actions across Europe, including candidate countries for accession to the EU, i.e. including Serbia.

6.2.1. Agenda Setting

Scholars writing for European Council of Foreign Affairs argue that the EU agenda setting with regard to Serbia consists of four pillars: (i) to contain Russia and China, (ii) normalize relations between Serbia and Kosovo, and (iii) protect the sovereignty of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Ruge 2023). The narratives of the EU towards Serbia focus on these broader goals with a stark focus on solving the Kosovo question and containing Russia's influence, portrayed within the framework of the Ukraine war. The idea is that Serbia should make conspicuous progress especially with regard to Russia and Kosovo in order to advance in its European path. However, these goals have not, so far, resulted in success. The narrative the EU created in the aftermath of the Ukraine war is characterized by criticism, reproach, and allegations regarding Serbia's membership, Serbia's future and consequences due to its foreign policy and political conduct. The agenda setting since February 2022 can therefore be seen as a corrective narrative with the aim to shake up the Serbian political elite and make them rethink their foreign policy in these aforementioned aspects.

As Trkanjec writes for the Euractiv, European lawmakers condemned actors who stood with Russia and supported the country at the onset of Ukraine war (Trkanjec 2022). Thus, it comes as no surprise that the EU was not content with Serbia's lack of reaction to Russia's aggression and with Serbia's unwillingness to impose sanctions against Russia. Member of the Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs Committee in the European Parliament Vladimír Bilčík published on his twitter account in February that the onset of the Ukraine crisis is a "watershed moment for the Western Balkans, too" (Bilčík 2022) and that Serbia's decision not to adhere to the unified measures against Russian aggression is "a defining foreign policy decision for much broader relations between the EU and Serbia" (Bilčík 2022). Already in March 2022, due to Serbia's continued reluctance to align with the EU foreign policy and join the sanctions package, several EU officials voiced their discontent loudly and clearly in a form of a letter to the

European Commission. This letter required the EC to temporarily halt EU's accession negotiation process and it was signed by members of the parliament, who are all members of Renew Europe fraction. Klemen Grošelj published the official letter on his Twitter account requesting a "temporary freeze" should Serbia choose to "ignore the call to join the EU's common position" and requested the withholding of the EU financial support to Serbia (Grošelj 2022). The letter by the MEPs Klemen Grošelj, Ilhan Kyuchyuk, Petras Auštrevičius, Malik Azmani, José Ramón Bauzá, Nicola Beer, Bart Groothuis, Urmas Paet, and Ramona Victoria Strugariu states that Serbia is "displaying a dangerous drift towards authoritarianism that is starkly at odds with its parallel quest to join the European Union" (Grošelj 2022). The MEPs argues that the Serbian leadership has failed to fulfil its obligations as a candidate country in several areas, amongst which the refusal to impose sanctions on Russia is put under the spotlight. Although the letter expresses understanding and awareness of the MEPs that Serbia is substantially economically, socially, and culturally tied to Russia, it shows no understanding for strengthening relationships with the Russian leadership, especially in the area of military and technical cooperation. These actions speak about Serbia's significant regression on its path of true democracy, rule of law, human rights, media freedom and freedom of expression, according to MEPs (Grošelj 2022). Due to ever closer ties with Putin's regime, the letter stresses the possibility of Serbia becoming a clone of Russian authoritarianism, following the Russian model. News have as well reported that Serbia had doubled its offer on flights between the Russian and Serbian capital in order to assist its 'big brother', since all EU countries and Schengen Area have introduced a ban for Russian aircrafts in their airspace (Schengen Visa News Online 2022), all of which added resonance to MEP's voice of wariness and distrust. In the light of these events, Grošelj (2022) states that:

Serbia has every right to follow Putin's model if it wishes to do so, but it must be clear about its intentions and **stop pretending** to have serious EU membership aspirations. Serbia is free to decide in which direction it wants to go, **but it cannot continue to be considered as a trustworthy interlocutor** and cannot continue to benefit from pre-accession financial assistance until it has made up its mind (Grošelj 2022).

By making statements about Serbia not being "trustworthy interlocutor" and that it needs to "stop pretending to have serious EU membership aspirations", Grošelj reinforces the narrative of criticism the EU officials have had towards Serbia. The

signatories aimed at pressuring Serbia to reach a decision swiftly, a decision that has been pending for over a decade, which concerns choosing either the West or the East. Yet, Serbian leadership has managed to balance the two countering powers and resist the pressures to change the course of its foreign policy in the 'Eastern' or the 'Western' direction, and it did not seem willing to alter its balancing course in the wake of Ukraine war. Later in 2022, this proposal did not seem to reach a consensus in the European Parliament, as 523 MEPs supported Vladimir Bilcik's Report on Serbia, 78 voted against the report, while 34 remained undecided (RTS Online 2022). In the 2022 Report on Serbia, the EC officially supported further accession negotiations with the country, whereby it is requested that Serbia ought to align its foreign policy with the EU and give up on Russia (RTS Online 2022).

Soon after this, German Chancellor Olaf Scholz stated clearly that Serbia must decide which path it wants to go – whether it wants to join the EU or foster a close relationship with Russia (Henley 2022). During a press conference in Belgrade, Scholz emphasized the importance of a unified Europe and consolidated measures to help Ukraine combat Russian aggression. Scholz added that the European Union expects that the measures, that is sanctions against Russia, must be supported by all candidate countries for EU membership (Nienaber & Savic 2022). Serbia perceived Scholz's statements as "decisive, clear and strict" towards the country itself and its next steps (Nienaber & Savic 2022). Furthermore, as The Guardian informs, German officials stated that the Serbia-EU relations are complex, interwoven with "light as well as shadows" and that Serbia's actions with regard to Russia are "certainly part of the shadows" (Henley 2022). The officials also looked back at the Serbo-Russian agreement on a unified foreign policy which was signed by Serbia's foreign minister Nikola Selaković and his counterpart in Russia, Sergei Lavrov. The officials expressed surprise and disappointment due to such actions and asserted that Serbia will be fully supported by the European Union, particularly by Germany, should it opt for the European path. However, should Serbia choose Russia, it will have "ensuing consequences", according to The Guardian's reporting (Henley 2022). In other words, it appears that EU officials, here represented by Germany, warned the EU candidate country that its foreign policy will have a direct, irreversible consequences on its accession negotiations with the EU should it continue to support Russia. The narrative

of the EU officials was therefore predominantly expressed in a reproachful tone laden with criticism that Serbia is grossly misaligned with the EU's joint policy against Russia.

Besides disputed relations with Russia, the EU officials also frequently addressed the tensions between Serbia and Kosovo and called for normalization of relations and dialogue between Belgrade and Pristina. Josep Borrell, the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and the Vice-President of the European Commission, states that the people in the Western Balkans want to look ahead, live in democracy and by the rule of law in societies that offer equality for everyone (Borrell 2022). He reiterates that Serbia's aspiration to become a member of the EU is "not a far-fetched dream" (Borrell 2022) and that he, as well as the entire EU leadership, support Serbia's candidacy to EU (Borrell 2022). He highlights that Western Balkans are part of Europe, and that they "are certainly not a chip to be used by Putin in his imperialistic dreams" (Borrell 2022). Yet again, Borrell stresses the importance of normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo, stating that this step is necessary in order to continue accession negotiations, which have been at standstill. He subsequently adds that the Ukraine war altered the picture and shed new light onto Serbia's negotiations with the EU, emphasizing that it is a "defining moment in the European history" (Borrell 2022). He briefly explains that ever since the war broke out, the EU had to cope with crisis management, threats, violence, and inflation, instead of focusing on making the Union a better and more pleasant place for the people in the region. This is why, in his view, Serbia needs to take measures to advance in its European path (Borrell 2022):

It is now the time for Serbia and Kosovo to agree on the Implementation annex, which is an integral part of the Agreement and share a clear understanding on *how* to put in place their provisions. The EU is not a simple note-taker nor is it a party in the Dialogue: we are and remain the facilitator in this dialogue. The EU is the eventual home for Serbia and Kosovo. I will continue to work tirelessly towards eventually reaching a comprehensive agreement on normalization of relations that is acceptable to EU member states, is in line with international law and the European *acquis* and contributes to regional stability. The agreement on the table is an important step towards that objective. This is the time for the leaders of Kosovo, Serbia and of the entire Western Balkans to show courage, and to **demonstrate** shared **responsibility** for the success of the EU accession process of the region. "The task of the leader is to

get their people from where they are to where they have not been”, one of my seasoned colleagues said. The task of the leader is also to deliver the quality-of-life people want, I would add, the quality of life, which the membership in the EU brings (Borrell 2022).

In this part of his speech, Borrell draws a comparison between the two ‘paths’ Serbia needs to decide between. On the one hand, he indirectly criticizes Russia for being imperialistic and makes a comparison between the two ideologies – western and eastern. It expresses that while European values are in line with democracy, rule of law and human rights, Russia uses other nations as ‘chips’ for achieving its imperialist goals. Rather than giving up on Serbia, Borrell explicitly welcomes Serbia’s candidacy, however, only if the country manages to resolve two burning issues – recognize Kosovo’s independency and cut ties with Russia and thus align with EU’s joint sanctions package. Borrell embodies the EU’s policy and its requirements in a technocratic manner, focusing on principles and rules, and asserts its listeners that the EU can deliver the life standard which Serbia and its neighboring countries aspire for. This is, yet again, only possible through conditioning. Although Borrell addresses this topic in a rather neutral way, the underlying message is that Serbia needs to recognize Kosovo as soon as possible in order for both actors to make progress on their long-desired European path.

The narratives presented cover the initial phrase of the Ukraine crisis and indicate the attitude the EU officials have adopted towards Serbia. As shown in this chapter, the EU has perceived Serbia’s international political conduct negatively and has disapproved of its actions. The voices of distrust among EU officials were rather unanimous, although to a different degree. As strategic narratives include several mechanisms of gaining and containing support of target audience, it can be argued that the EU, overall, has not employed them at the onset of the war; but that it rather focused on conditionality. However, it can also be noted that a shift between the narratives of the EU officials is visible when comparing their initial reactions on Serbia’s foreign policy moves to the narrative that they projected several months later. The EU officials appear to have realized that the policy of conditionality and ever-lasting burdening of candidate countries has had an adverse effect on EU’s enlargement policy, which appears to be the reason they shifted to a more strategic narrative. In each case, EU’s agenda setting with Serbia ultimately rests on two pillars: (i) making Serbia rethink introducing sanctions to Russia and (ii) bringing the Kosovo dispute to an end. The difference is

merely exhibited in the way the EU approached the respective issues, namely by means of conditionality in the aftermath of the Ukraine war and by employing strategic narratives few months later.

6.2.2. Legitimation

Rather than conditioning Serbia, some months after the war broke out, the EU officials, like their Russian colleagues, turned to a narrative of support, understanding and cooperation. The President of the European Council, Charles Michel, addressed the Serbian president with “dear President Vučić, [...] **my dear friend Aleksandar**. Thank you for your warm welcome and thank you for your **great hospitality**” (Michel 2022).

Michel called the Serbian president ‘a friend’, praising the hospitality, a narrative strongly opposed to the one of disapproval and judgment of Serbia’s actions at the onset of the war. Next to this, Michel stressed again that the EU is not giving up on Serbia, but is rather highly supportive of the Serbian cause:

My first message today is to reaffirm our **full commitment to Serbia’s accession** negotiations to the European Union. [...] We want to enhance our dialogue and deepen our cooperation to promote peace, stability, and security. The challenges we face today require new ways of thinking and new ways of working. We need to **speed up EU integration**, and we must create new incentives for reform. **We want to deliver concrete benefits for all Serbian citizens and for all our partners in the region.** That means already starting integration now – during the accession negotiations – rather than waiting until they are fully completed.

He made remarks on the drastic consequences the war has had on the energy sector across Europe, highlighting that the EU supports Serbia-Bulgaria gas initiative in these terms and will generously help the country diversify its gas supply (Michel 2022).

In October 2022, during her visit in Belgrade, the president of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, also gave a positive outlook on the relationship between Serbia and the EU (van der Leyen 2022):

I am very glad to be at this **very special place**, which I think shows the profound bonds we do have and our great cooperation. Today, we are watching the **progress** of the interconnector between Serbia and Bulgaria. It is great to see that this important project is taking shape. Indeed, you have just mentioned the funding that is coming from the European Commission and the European Investment Bank. It is round about 80%. And what we want to see is not only gas flowing from Bulgaria to Serbia, but this project will be one step further to bring us closer to each other. It will open Serbia's gas market for diversification. It will improve Serbia's energy security. And it will be important to see that we are very much looking forward to having this project now completed in hopefully one year. So we will press on both sides – I know that it takes two to tango, in this project, too – so that we are on time, because it is needed. We need to diversify our gas supplies. We see that dependency that is too much focused on Russian gas is not good. We have felt it bitterly during the last months. So the diversification away to reliable suppliers is paramount for us (von der Leyen 2022).

In the opening part of the speech, van der Leyen talks highly about the cooperation between Serbia and the EU, praises progress that has been made in the energy sector, and reiterates her support and hope in which the future of the EU is seen with Serbia as its member. Van der Leyen also touched upon the dependency on Russian gas, implying that Serbia has, as every other European country, struggled with energy supplies. What is indirectly being here being implied here is that Serbia also had to face the same repercussions due to the energy crisis and has not actually benefited from the support it voices for Russia. Van der Leyen, additionally, equalizes the urge for gas independency from Russia and equalizes Serbia's position with other EU countries which have introduced sanctions. Moreover, she legitimizes the presence of the EU through prospective projects the EU has with Serbia. In her view, the gas project will bring Serbia closer to the EU and to European values, which is what the country is officially aspiring for. The rebuke and reproach from the previous months are in no way part of van der Leyen's and Michel's supportive address of legitimizing why the EU is important and what prospective projects and eventual membership would bring to Serbia.

With the same intention, Olivér Várhelyi, EU Commissioner for Neighbourhood and Enlargement, also has a positive note on Serbia's European integrations in December (Várhelyi in EuroNews December 2022):

Major reforms have been delivered, like the referendum on the court system, a major amendment of the constitution in relation to the judiciary, and the Programme for Media Freedom. **If Serbia goes faster on the rule of law area, we should be able to move faster with them on accession negotiations as well.**

In addition to confirming what Grabbe notes about the necessity of a security impetus, Várhelyi also states that the Ukraine war showed a clear reinforcement of the need to enlarge the EU, adding that enlargement is necessary if Europe wants to create long-term peace, security, and prosperity. He adds that "if the region surrounding is not part of the European Union, it is clear that the vulnerabilities of these regions will only increase" (Várhelyi in EuroNews December 2022). He further comments that, due to these reasons, the EU needs to keep the WB partners "fully involved and included in our debates" (Várhelyi in EuroNews December 2022).

Applying this stance on Serbia, Várhelyi stated the following (Várhelyi in EuroNews 2022):

Serbia is in a peculiar position in comparison to other countries of the Western Balkans. Don't forget that Serbia still has to finish a dialogue on the Belgrade-Prishtina dialogue to get to an agreement on the modalities of the coexistence. And this is why **vulnerabilities in Serbia are much higher when it comes to exposure to Russia. One should not forget that Serbia is our ally, and we should treat Serbia as our ally.** Serbia has been voting with us throughout the UN General Assembly votes condemning Russia for all the acts carried out in Ukraine. To me, this is a very strong political message. When it comes to sanctions, we will have to see progressive alignment, but I am very hopeful this will also come. **We first need to see how we can provide security and stability guarantees for Serbia long-term.**

Várhelyi also refers to the growing Euroscepticism in the WB countries, especially in Serbia, saying he is not surprised by this as the previous commission had originally been opposed to enlargement and had effectively, "turned its back" on the Western Balkans and its neighborhood, something which he described as "major political mistake" (Várhelyi in EuroNews 2022).

This interview confirms the stated conspicuous shift in the EU narratives on Serbia. Rather than conditionality and overt criticism that has revolved around Serbia in the first months of

the conflict, the EU officials appear to change their rhetoric to a tone of understanding and cooperation. Other than lecturing Serbia for its foreign policy, the EU attempts to safeguard its sinking influence by praising progress achieved so far in terms of *acquis*, Serbia's condemning Russia in the UN General Assembly and addressing it as an ally, all of which was overshadowed by the sharp disapproval of Serbia's foreign policy. Additionally, another important fact is the acknowledgement that the EU was also at fault by 'turning its back' on the Western Balkans and not recognizing Serbia's difficult position at the crossroads between Russia and the EU. By doing so, the EU legitimizes its presence and thereby stresses the necessity for cooperation and trust between the Union and Serbia.

Following the positive trail, the European Union's Home Affairs Commissioner Ylva Johansson also praised Serbia's handling of migration, a day after Serbian authorities rounded up nearly 700 migrants and moved them to reception centers. During her visit to Serbia, she stated that her aim was to "show the EU's commitment to strengthen our partnership with Serbia, to support Serbia and especially its effective management of the borders shared with EU" (Johansson in InfoMigrants 2023).

6.2.3. Securing Acquiescence

While the EU attempts to legitimize its presence by praising Serbia's progress, showing understanding and expressing its full commitment to Serbia's accession negotiations, it also endeavors to secure acquiescence by emphasizing its monetary capacities and the willingness to invest and aid Serbia in times of hardship.

In this regard, Michel delivered a positive outlook on the project Science and Technology Park, arguing that this is an excellent example of EU investments contributing to the future of Serbia. He mentioned that investments in research, innovation and Serbian start-ups means investing in Serbian people, while Serbian projects become EU's common projects and Serbia's future EU's common future (Michel 2022). He claimed that the EU is the leading investor in the region and reiterated that EU's Economic and Investment Plan for the Western Balkans mobilizes up to 30 billion euros for investments across all sectors, such as transport, energy, or digital (Michel 2022). Interestingly, these EUR 30 billion account for one-third of the GDP of the whole region (Várhelyi in EuroNews December 2022).

During van der Leyen's speech in Belgrade, the Commission president provided an overview of the material and financial help the EU intends to grant to Serbia. Van der Leyen announced that the EU provides EUR 165 million in grants for immediate support at Serbia's disposal, including for supporting vulnerable families, vulnerable households and vulnerable businesses, small and medium enterprises; the grant should help them cope with the high energy prices (van der Leyen 2022). She further emphasized that such a grant does not pose a long-term solution and that boosting investment is what Serbia needs. To help the latter cause, the European Union provides Serbia with another EUR 500 million in grants for investments in infrastructure, which poses one of the burning issues Serbia needs to cope with (van der Leyen 2022). Furthermore, van der Leyen addressed another important pillar of any society, viz. children and their wellbeing. The EC president announced financial support for building a new energy efficient University Children's Hospital in Belgrade, which should be completed by 2025.

In this manner, the EU narrative attempts to secure support from the Serbian population by subsidizing the social and the health care system. Knowing that these systems are crucial for a functional society, the EU aims to come closer to Serbia's population by aiding the vulnerable segments of society and by helping sustain the health care system. A possible interpretation of van der Leyen's objective is to raise awareness among Serbian people how essential and necessary these subsidies and grants are, and that the EU cares about the well-being of Serbia's citizens. Proudly speaking in figures, the EU relies on technocratic aid as its main argument for Serbia to choose 'the West'. As shown previously, both Borrell and van der Leyen address themes of a better future, rule of law, democracy, and functional society governed by the law, and point to the EU as the only relevant player and as a safe haven that instills all of these values, which the Serbian population, in their view, aspires for. Ultimately, it seems that van der Leyen's figure speaking aimed at securing acquiescence, with the narrative being that the EU offers precisely what Serbia, in their view, needs.

Moreover, van der Leyen pointed to Russia as the one and only cause of the economic crisis and inflation that has struck Europe:

This energy crisis stems from the atrocious war that Russia is leading against Ukraine. And this war is redefining the security landscape of our entire continent. So it is for the

European Union of utmost importance to invest even further in our Western Balkan partners – more than ever before because these investments are investments for the future. **They are investments in peace.** They are investment in the stability, in the prosperity of our shared continent. **And let me assure you that the European Union is and will remain Serbia's most important political and economic partner** (van der Leyen 2022).

By stating this, van der Leyen attempted in an indirect manner to present concrete goals, materialize EU's support to Serbia in figures, and address the overarching objective for everyone, viz. peace. Van der Leyen held a speech of progress, cooperation, interdependency between Serbia and the EU and future achievements. What is more, van der Leyen sent a message of the primacy of the EU in both political and economic spheres. Thereby she also undermined the role Russia plays in these spheres and with certainty 'assured' Serbian leadership that the EU is their most significant political and economic partner. In other words, the EU offers prospects for a stable partnership and financial grants for the well-being and advancement of the Serbian society. She addressed pillars of any functioning society and announced investments in these areas, namely infrastructure, social welfare, and child health care. By reiterating numbers and figures, von der Leyen main arguments rested on material support, executive projects, and modernization. Moreover, by pointing to Russia as the main culprit for the crisis the world currently is impacted by, van der Leyen attempted to simultaneously enhance the popularity of the EU by comparing the benevolent EU to the maleficent Russia in the international arena.

Van der Leyen concluded her speech by addressing Serbian people and calling for their active participation. She stated that "[t]he Serbian people have to be heard. When we are talking about shaping the future of the European Union, you belong to it, we want to hear you" (van der Leyen 2022). In this manner, van der Leyen addressed the people and not the government, as well as called for the people to have a say and to be heard and not just the country's leadership. So far, the EU narrative has been oriented towards the government and high-level officials on a legal and political level, but the country's population has by far been neglected in their address and debates with the political elite. Due to the lowest support for the EU ever in Serbia, the officials attempt to cater to the people and care for an acceptance of EU's cause based on rational, financial, and technocratic grounds.

Building on the monetary packages van der Leyen set forth, Varhelyi, together with the Serbian President Vučić announced in March 2023 that the EU will give Serbia a non-repayable grant of €610 million, considerably more than van der Leyen informed about. Additionally, this grant represents the largest amount of financial support Serbia has ever received (Euractiv 2023) and it is intended to finance the fast railway from Belgrade to Niš. Varhelyi stated during this occasion that “[he] is glad to be in Serbia again, and this project can change reality not only for Serbian citizens, but people in the entire region” (Euractiv 2023). He repeated that the EU is preparing another energy help package for the Western Balkans, out of which approximately €150 million would be distributed to Serbia to help overcome the upcoming winter and dire consequences of the energy crisis (Euractiv 2023). To continue this trend of affirmation and positive outlooks on mutual cooperation, Austria’s EU Minister Karoline Edtstadler stated during a press conference in Belgrade with Tanja Miscevic, her counterpart in Serbia, that the European Union is not complete without the Western Balkans (Swaton 2023). Edtstadler stressed, however, that Serbia should join EU sanctions against Russia. As the goal of the ministerial meeting was to discuss steps necessary to put the EU enlargement process into motion in the wake of the ongoing Ukraine war, Edtstadler told the press that “[we] want a strong and united Europe in which Serbia is also a member and defends the values of the European Union together” (Swaton 2023). During her visit, Edtstadler commended the stable bilateral relations between Austria and Serbia and emphasized that Austria is a major investor in Serbia, with over 400 Austrian companies creating 22,000 jobs in the country, while the trade volume reached a record high of € 1.93 billion last year (Swaton 2023). To wrap up the narrative of positivity that aims at enhancing popularity among Serbian population, van der Leyen reiterated again in March 2023 that “[t]he future of Serbia is in the EU, and further important steps need to be taken on that path” (Jelisavac 2023).

6.2.4. Enhancing Popularity and Mobilization & Diverting Attention

What this chapter aimed to show is the turbulent flow of the EU narratives towards Serbia since the outbreak of the Ukraine war. As shown in the first subchapter, initially the vast majority of EU officials took an uncompromising stand towards Serbia’s reluctance to introduce sanctions against Russia and conditioned the country to choose a side – it could be either the EU or Russia, a balancing act was strongly

condemned and frowned upon. However, few months into 2022, the narrative of the EU officials started shifting to a significantly more positive tone by highlighting progress Serbia has made so far, its cooperation and importance for the EU and the region, therefore stressing the urgency of enlargement in such uncertain times. It can be therefore argued that the EU commenced employing strategic narratives upon a failed policy of conditionality in order to attempt 'redeeming' its position in Serbia and influence the public opinion in the country towards a positive stream with regard to the EU membership. On the one hand, the EU attempts to legitimize and reinforce its position in Serbia by complimenting its progress, understanding its peculiar position and admitting mistakes conducted in the past. On the other hand, the Union attempts securing support for EU integrations in Serbia with planned investments and monetary aid. However, the EU does not seem to apply the mechanisms of enhancing popularity and diverting attention, as its primary goal appears to be keeping the existing support and regaining trust in the European integrations which Serbian population seems to be losing. While the agenda remains the same, what matters is how the story is portrayed and delivered to the audience. The EU still reiterates the necessity to solve the Kosovo question and disapproves of its cooperation with Russia, but sees a solution to this not in conditionality, but rather in strengthening its own position in Serbia by employing strategic narratives.

6.3. Analysis: Reception of EU and Russian Narratives in Serbia

As already outlined in the theory on strategic narratives, when analyzing the projection of strategic narratives, it is necessary to take the new media ecology and altered ways of communication in the international arena into account. Since the previous chapter on formation of strategic narratives also indicates the media outlets in which the narratives were projected, this analysis chapter will focus only on the reception of the EU and Russian narratives in Serbia.

As mentioned in the theoretical chapter, the reception of narratives requires examining attitudes, opinions and behaviours before and after the narrative reached its target audience (Miskimmon et al. 2013: 12). For this purpose, this chapter will first look at the public opinion polls conducted in Serbia regarding attitudes towards the EU and Russia before and after the war broke out. Next to the temporal aspects, the theory on strategic narratives stresses the importance of obtaining comprehensive knowledge about the audience in question, the historical setting and the manner in which they internalize news and information in the realm of politics. For these matters, the background chapter briefly introduced the main stages of both Serbia-EU as well as Serbia-Russia relations, in order to account for the cultural context and current state of affairs in the Serbia-Russia-EU triangle. The following chapter illustrates the reaction of the audience to the narratives presented in the previous part of this thesis.

6.3.1. Reception of EU Narratives in Serbia

Generally, Serbian leadership seems to react twofold in ongoing situation, as every positive statement towards Russia implies an indirect negative message directed to the EU, which additionally complicates Serbia's position. As a reaction to the reprimanding narrative of the EU and proposal of MEPs to temporarily halt Serbia's accession negotiations, Serbia's interior Minister Aleksandar Vulin stated for newspaper Politika that the country needs to rethink European integrations. He added that

“[i]f president Vucic were to hold just one speech in which he expresses doubt and concerns with regard to European integration process, I guarantee that the level of

support for the EU would be even lower than for NATO institutions, and you know very well how unpopular NATO is among Serbian population. **What European Parliament is doing is the best way to tell us that we should not be part of the EU.** First it was the Hague, then recognition of Kosovo, leave Republika Srpska, and now it's about introducing sanctions to Russia (Politika: Vulin 2022).

Vulin also added that, should the resolution be adopted, it would not have any significant impact on Serbia, but it would represent a clear political signal that the EU does not want Serbia's membership. He concluded that "[the EU] measures the degree of our love for the EU by the degree of hatred for Russia. If you love Europe, you have to hate Russia. I don't want to hate Russia; I don't want to hate anyone. I have the right not to lose one single friend and I do not take part in your arguments" (Politika: Vulin 2022).

Later in 2022, Serbian President Vučić also commented on the MEPs attempt to cease Serbia's further negotiations with the EU, the president said that he is glad that the resolution was not adopted and thanked MEPs who voted against it. He also emphasized that "Serbia won't beg anyone for anything" (RTS: Vucic 2022) and that while it is important for Serbia to remain on its European path, it is equally important that the country has its freedom to think of its vital national interests (RTS: Vucic 2022). Serbian population seems to mirror this attitude of growing disinterest for EU integrations, as the following part will set out.

When looking at the survey conducted by the Ministry of European Integration (MEI) in Serbia from August 2021, 48% of the respondents stated that they see Serbia's EU membership as a good thing, 23% perceived it as a bad thing, while 27% remained indecisive (MEI Serbia: 2021). When asked whether they would vote in favour of Serbia's accession to the EU should there be a referendum, 57% of the respondents said they would, 30% would be against it, while 12% would not take part in the referendum at all (MEI Serbia: 2021). Moreover, when looking at the previous surveys conducted by the Ministry of European Integration in Serbia, the results up to 2021 indicate a relatively steady positive attitude towards Serbia's membership to the EU. The quote of pro-European votes since 2016 up to 2021 differed merely in 1-5%; the same can be said for Eurosceptics. Interestingly enough, 52% see the 'policy of constant conditioning and blackmailing the EU applies towards Serbia' as the main

obstacle to Serbia's membership to EU. However, even 82% believe that fundamental reforms that the EU requires Serbia to put in place should be conducted regardless of the country's membership to the EU. Other reasons, such as 'objective obstacles', incompetence of domestic leadership and 'people's mentality and unwillingness to change' follow suit with 12% each. Among benefits of Serbia's EU accession, the Serbian population lists better life (25%), better reputation of Serbia (18%) and access to EU funds (17%), while 19% see prospective membership as more administrative obligations, higher prices and taxes (MEI Serbia: 2021). However, the survey shows that in 2021, Serbian population had a pessimistic outlook on the future of the EU. While merely 18% believe the EU will overcome current problems but that it will change the way it functions, the majority (41%) thinks the EU will face even greater problems and that it is more probable that it will completely close itself off, or even fall apart (MEI Serbia: 2021). Regarding the degree of informativeness about Serbia's EU accession negotiations, only 28% are well-informed. Additionally, half of the respondents have heard about EU-funded projects but predominantly in the area of environmental protection (21%). Within the financial sector, 41% see the EU as the largest donor to Serbia since 2000, followed by China (34%) and Russia (11%). Moreover, the majority of Serbian citizens (27%) perceive Switzerland as a country model they would like to live in. Norway takes the second place (23%), Germany the third (18%), while merely 9% see the Russian state model as a preferable system (MEI Serbia: 2021).

The following analysis concerns public opinion in Serbia regarding EU from 2022, after the Ukraine war broke out. For the sake of comparison, this part will also include figures representing the differences in attitudes towards the EU in Serbia between years 2021 and 2022. As Dartford informs on *Euronews*, the support for EU integrations in Serbia is waning and has reached record low levels (Dartford 2022). A poll conducted in 2022 by *Institut Public de Sondage d'Opinion Secteur* (IPSOS), a French multinational market research and consulting agency in Serbia, reveals that 44% of participants are not in favour of Serbia's accession to the EU, while 35% see this positively:

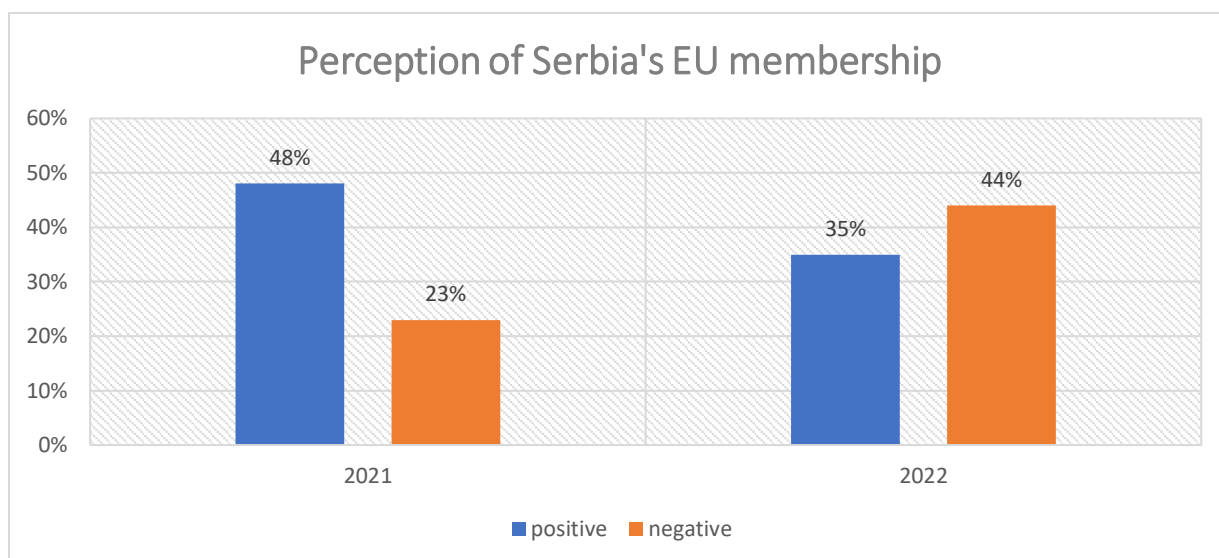


Figure 1 Perception of Serbia's EU membership (MEI Serbia 2021 & IPSOS 2022)

According to the 2022 survey, the majority of respondents who perceive EU membership negatively stated that they are not seeing any positive sides of prospective membership and named 'dictatorship, conditions and blackmail of the EU towards Serbia' as the second-ranked reason (MEI Serbia 2022).

Accordingly, the percentage of respondents who believe reforms required by the EU should be conducted regardless of the EU dropped considerably:

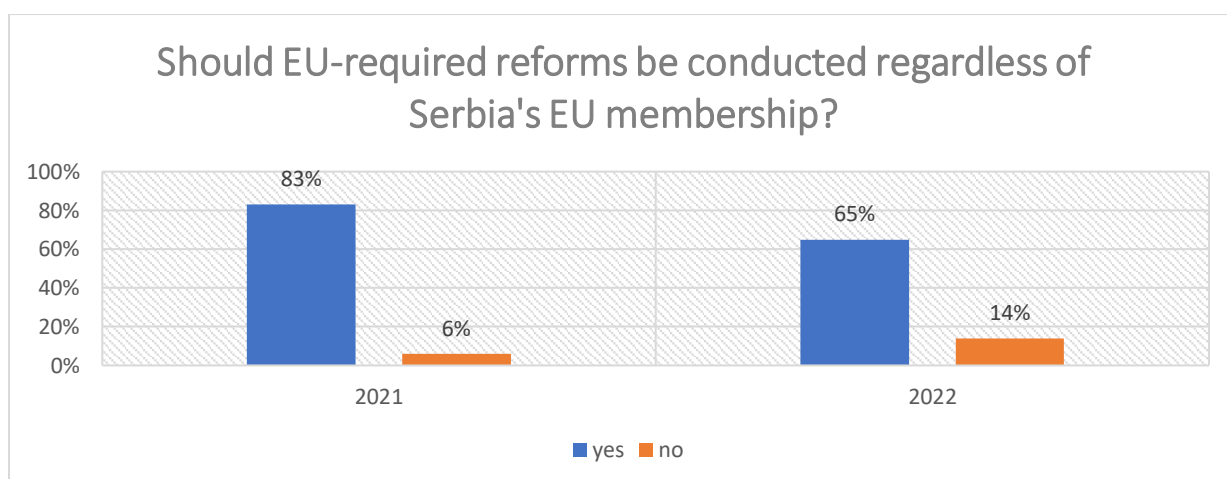


Figure 2 Are EU-required reforms necessary regardless of the EU membership? (MEI 2021 & 2022)

With regard to potential benefits of the EU membership, citizens still consider more employment possibilities, the ability to travel within the EU and a better future as the top three benefits (MEI Serbia 2022). The trend remained the same concerning

citizens' familiarity with EU-funded projects: the majority (67%) has not heard of any EU funded projects in Serbia, while the remaining 33% cited environmental protection as the main focus of EU funds (MEI Serbia 2022).

When looking at financial aspects more broadly, the survey shows interesting results. Even 83% do not know how much money Serbia approximately receives from the EU annually, while 5% believe this amount reaches up to € 100 million. When asked who they think is the biggest donor of financial aid to Serbia, the respondents seem to have altered their attitude with regard to monetary help in favour of Russia. 12% less people deem the EU as the main donor, while in turn this percentage has risen regarding Russia by 7%:

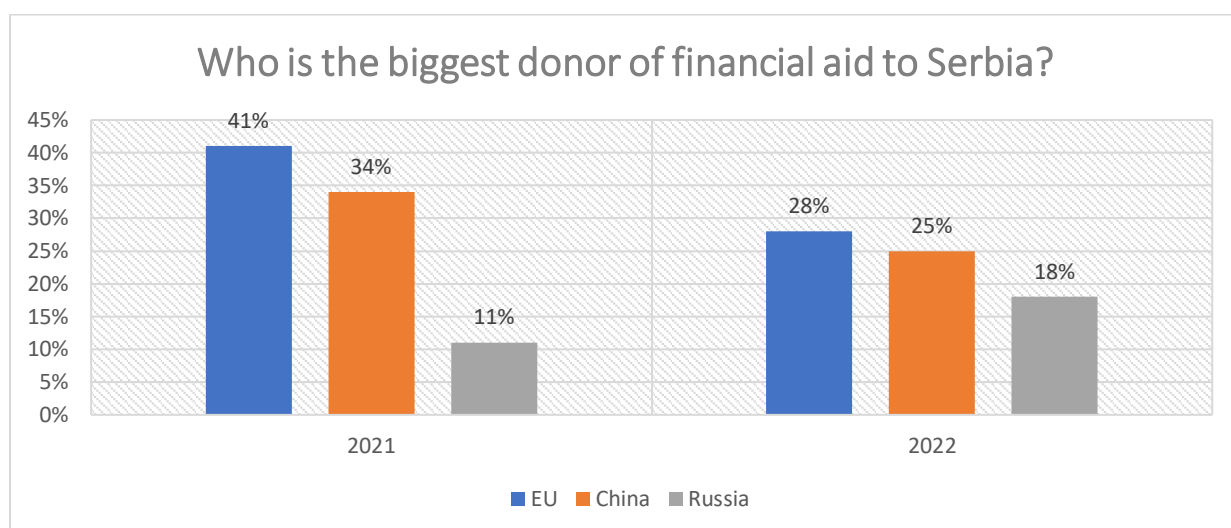


Figure 3 Who is the biggest donor of financial aid to Serbia? (MEI Serbia 2021 & 2022)

However, the most interesting information in the 2022 survey concerns the actual assessment of realization of international non-reimbursed development aid to the Republic of Serbia in the period 2000-2016. The 2022 MEI report states that the EU is the absolutely predominant donor of non-reimbursed financial aid with 2,960 million euro for the period since 2000-2016. This makes up even 56% of all international non-repayable monetary aid to Serbia. What is even more interesting is that the USA occupy the second place with 695.56 million euro, which amount to 14.1% of total aid, while China is listed at the very last place with 31.40 million euro which translates into 0.6%. Interestingly, Russia is nowhere to be found on the list, meaning that Russian subsidies made up a negligible amount of financial assistance to Serbia between 2000-2016 (MEI Serbia 2022):

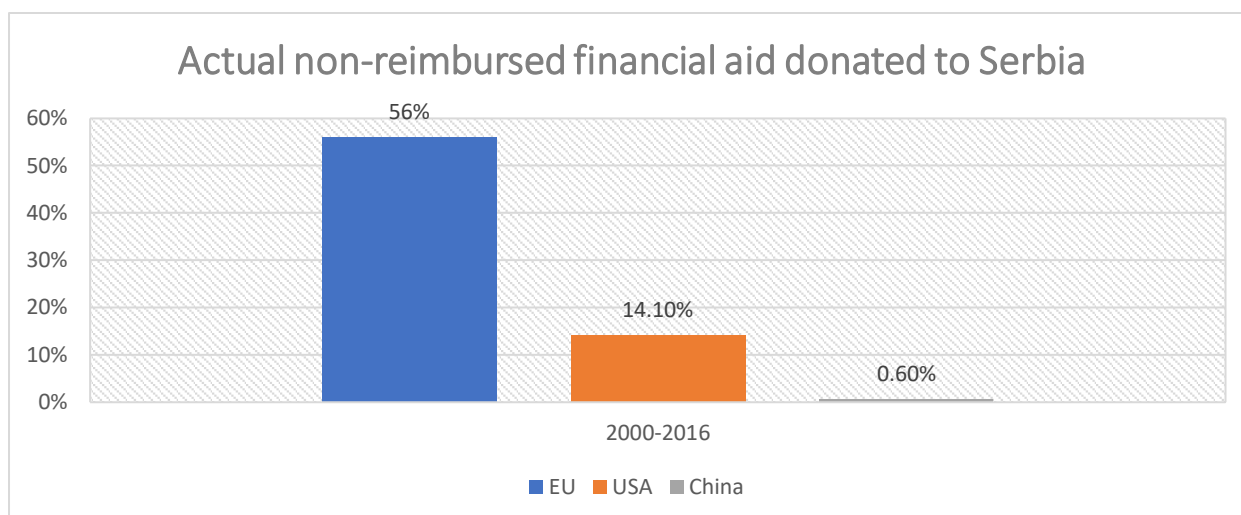


Figure 4 Actual non-reimbursed financial aid donated to Serbia (MEI Serbia 2022)

6.3.2. Reception of Russian narratives in Serbia

As for the Russian narratives, several public opinion polls conducted in 2021, 2022 and 2023 will be consulted. Overall, the 2021 survey indicates a predominantly positive attitude regarding the relationship between Russia and Serbia. 36.2% of respondents rate this relationship as excellent, 37% believe the relationship is very good, while merely 1.1% of the respondents perceive this relationship to be very bad (IEA 2021). These results, similar to those with the EU, have been rather stable since 2018 and have not indicated any drastic shifts in the way Serbian population perceives Russia. 72% of respondents believe that the relationship between Russia and Serbia will only be better in the future, while 11% are sceptic about this. Citizens are mostly informed about news in Serbo-Russian relations through television and Internet portals (IEA 2021), which confirms the overall trend of consuming news predominantly through TV in Serbia. Interestingly enough, as many as 87% of respondents have never been to Russia and the majority believes that the president Vučić is mostly responsible for maintaining good relations with Russia. Additionally, 83% believe that Russia is Serbia's friend, while only 2% do not share this view. However, out of 18% who would leave Serbia, the vast majority aimed at one of the member states of the EU (12%), while only 2.9% would migrate Russia. This survey also confirmed the belief of Serbian citizens that the EU is the largest donor to Serbia, followed by China and Russia ranking third.

Due to the timeliness and relevance of the topic, a larger number of independent, external surveys can be found on measuring attitudes of Serbian population towards Russia in the course of 2022. Thus, reports concerning public opinion in Serbia towards Russia since February 2022 include the 2022 report of the IEA, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy's survey (WFD), which is an executive Non-departmental Public Body sponsored by the Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office, and a report by an independent newspaper in Serbia.

When looking at the 2022 IEA report, the overall average grade remained the same with 4.03 out of 5:

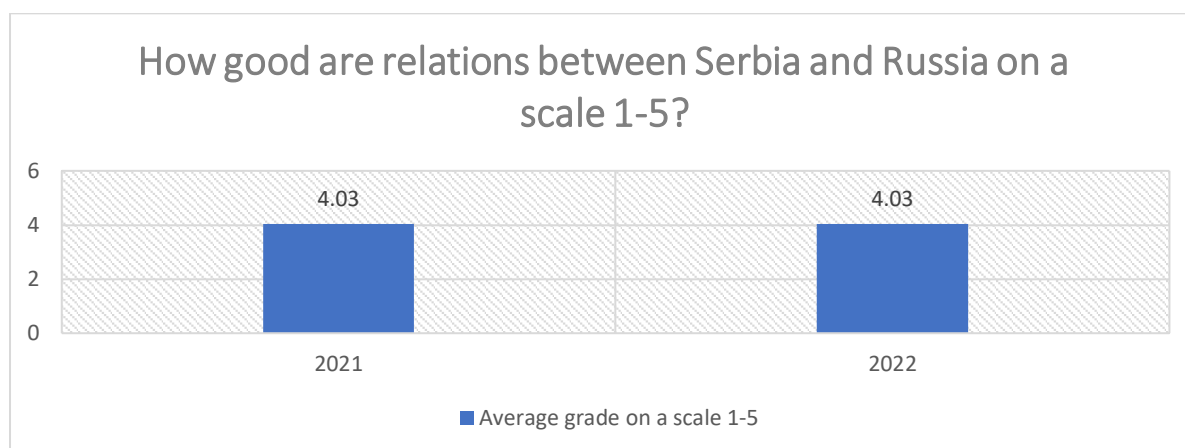


Figure 5 How good are relations between Serbia and Russia on a scale 1-5? (IEA Serbia 2021 & 2022)

However, answers on a very similar questions also indicate a rather interesting trend:

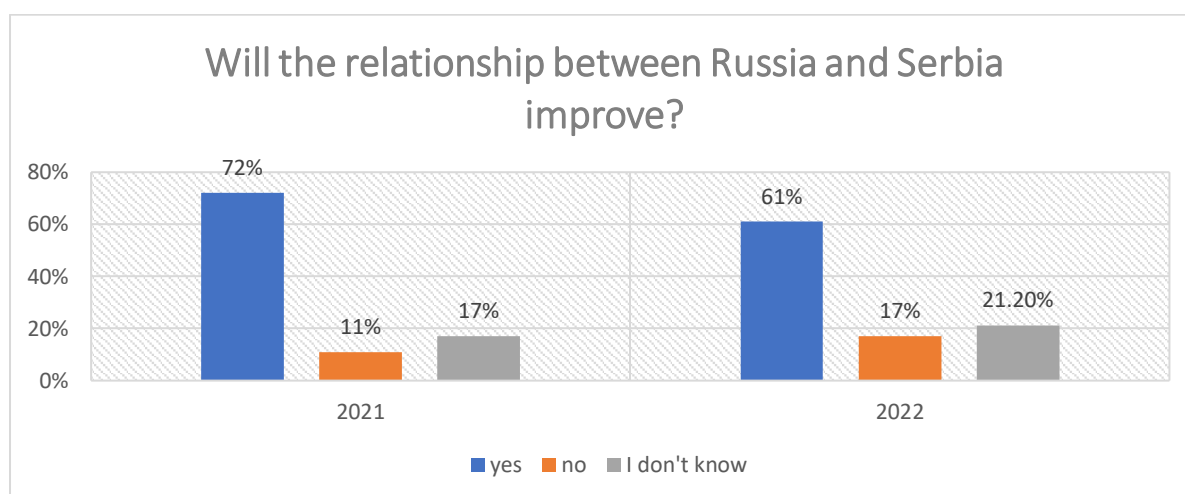


Figure 6 Will the relationship between Russia and Serbia improve? (IEA Serbia 2021 & 2022)

In Figure 6, a slight change is noticeable, as 11 percent less respondents believe the relationship between Russia and Serbia will improve. It is interesting to note that out of these 11 percent only 5 percent of the respondents changed their positive view of Russia to a negative one. Similarly, a slight decrease is also visible with regard of perceiving Russia as a friend or an enemy:

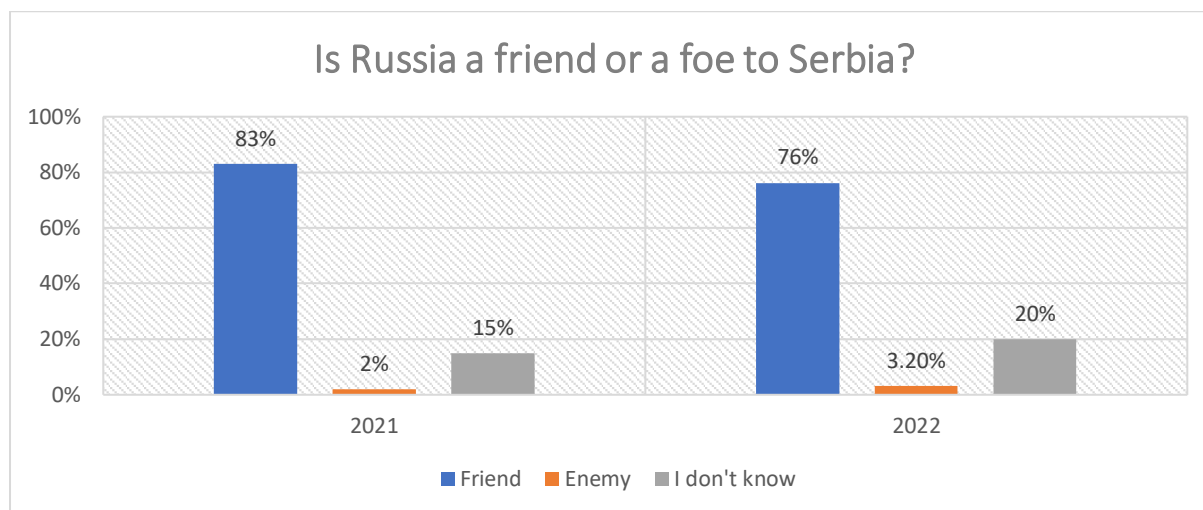


Figure 7 Is Russia a friend or a foe to Serbia? (IEA 2021 & 2022)

After the war, 7% less Serbian citizens believe that Russia is a friend. However, the graph shows that this difference is not visible with regard to people who deem Russia an enemy (as this has risen by only 1%), but rather regarding those who are indecisive whether Russia is a friend or an enemy. Therefore, it can be said that the overall trend of good relations and positive outlooks remained untarnished by the war.

As to be expected, the number of people who have not been to Russia since the war broke out remains the same (85.5%). Vučić is still perceived as the one politician that is mostly responsible for maintaining good relations with Russia (53.3%). When asked upon plans for future, in 2022, the percentage of Serbian citizens who would leave their home country also remained relatively the same (15.2%). Out of these 15.2%, the percentage of people who intend to emigrate into the EU also remained relatively stable with a slight decrease of 1.90% since 2021, while the percentage of people who would leave for Russia declined from 2.90% to 1.30%:

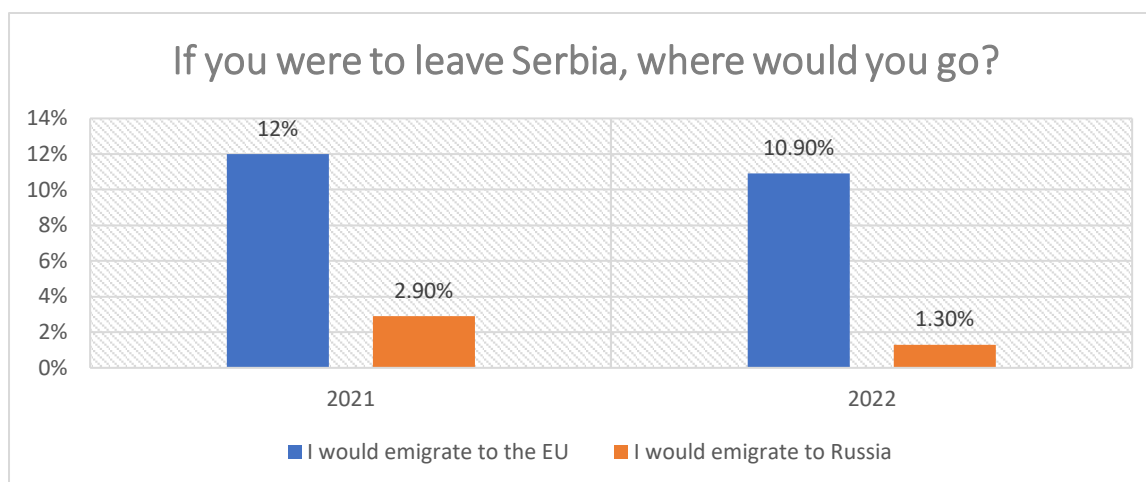


Figure 7 If you were to leave Serbia, where would you go? (IEA Serbia 2021 & 2022)

The EU member state that is primary stated as a potential country to emigrate remains Germany (29.6%), while Spain, Italy and Austria follow with approximately 7% each (IEA 2022).

Moreover, the 2022 IEA survey indicated that the absolute majority of 75.6% of citizens stood firmly behind the attitude that Serbia should not introduce sanctions against Russia. A survey conducted by an independent political magazine *Nova Srpska Politicka Misao* - NSPM (New Serbian Political Thought) in May 2022 confirms this trend. NSPM cites that 82.1% are against imposing sanctions, while 49% of Serbians justify Russia's actions (RTS: Vukadinović 2022). Vukadinović, the NSPM editor, stated that 68.7 percent blame NATO for the conflict in Ukraine, 7.4 percent blame Ukraine, while merely 5.6 percent see Russia as the villain (RTS: Vukadinović 2022). Additionally, this chapter consults a public opinion poll conducted by WFD in February 2023, an entire year after the Ukraine war broke out. WFD reports that in 2023, the overall support of Serbian population in favour of Russia remained stable (WFD Serbia 2023). The strong affinity of Serbian people towards Russia is shown best in their justification of the country's aggression against Ukraine also in 2023. According to WFD (2023), 43.1% of respondents said they believed that the attack was justified, while 36% felt there is no explanation for Russia's actions. Therefore, it can be said that the affirmative attitude of Serbians towards Russia is deeply anchored in Serbia's society as the percentage of people who justify Russia's actions appears to be stable throughout the whole year of the war. Additionally, the number of citizens who strongly oppose imposing sanctions on Russia remained stable in 2023 as well (WFD 2023):

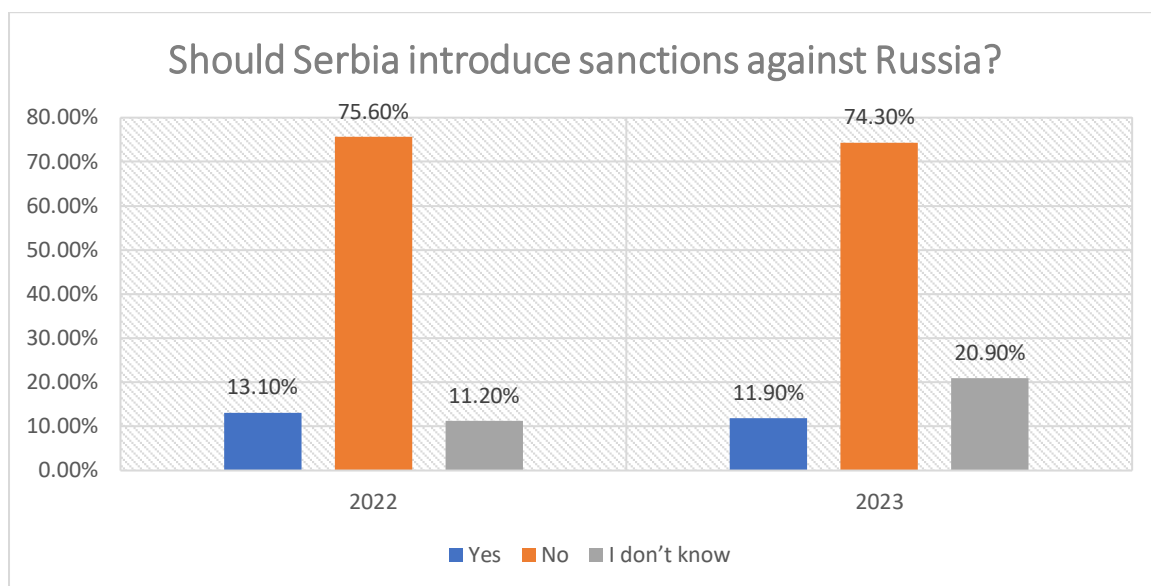


Figure 8 Should Serbia introduce sanctions against Russia? (IEA 2022 & WFD 2023)

As represented in the graph, the vast majority of Serbian throughout the whole year of war were firmly against introducing sanctions and thus deteriorating relations between their home country and Russia. What is more, a full year after the war, the remainder of respondents appear to be predominantly undecided (20.9%), while merely 11.9 percent believe imposing sanctions on Russia would be a good move. Furthermore, as the support for the EU is waning, 42% of citizens in Serbia perceive Russia as the most reliable international ally, while the EU follows with merely 25.8% (WFD 2023). Interestingly enough, considerably more people believe that Serbia belongs to the East (28.1%) than to the West (17.3%), while the majority actually believes Serbia does not belong to either the West or the East (42.6%).

6.3.3. Comparative Analysis between EU and Russian Narratives

The presented graphs and data from public opinion polls show, in sum, a very clear picture of the current state of affairs regarding Serbia's relations with the EU and Russia. While positive attitudes of Serbian citizens towards Russia have not diachronically changed in light of the Ukraine crisis, the support for Serbia's EU membership has fallen to historically low levels. Such a situation is greatly frowned upon among the international arena, and Serbia's leadership finds itself in a dead-end of its long well-balanced twofold foreign policy.

Building on the example of EU and Russia's narratives about Serbia in light of Ukraine war, this thesis aims at proving that the political influence strategic narratives, as a modern form of soft power, can manifest internationally. As shown before, the hotspots of this East-West crossroads in Serbia concern three main stories: NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, the disputed question of Kosovo's independence, and currently Serbia's reluctance to impose sanctions on Russia. While reflecting on Russo-Serbian common history, orthodox religion, Slavic language and culture, Russia awakes memories of NATO's gruesome acts in 1999, condemns 'the West' for witnessing NATO's unlawful air strikes over Serbia in silence and reaffirms its overt support for Serbia to present days. As for the Kosovo question, on the one hand, 'the West' poses normalizing relations with Kosovo and recognizing its independence as a prerequisite for progressing with European integrations. On the other hand, ever since 2008, when Kosovo unilaterally declared independence, Russia has been supporting Serbia's territorial integrity and vetoed Kosovo's accession to a number of international organisations. Lastly, set into motion already in 2014, the Ukraine war in 2022 triggered the third hotspot that has resurrected the previous two. Already in 2014, Serbia refused to join sanctions package against Russia and has remained firm in this decision. After 2022, Serbia followed the same path and vehemently opposed any disruptions of relations with Russia over EU demands. This has initiated an avalanche of highly intense relations in the EU-Serbia-Russia triangle and resulted in a dynamic political landscape with regard to Serbia's prospective EU membership.

Generally, Serbia's accession negotiations with the EU have long been at standstill. The EU's relations to Serbia before the war broke out rested on requests for reforms, conditions, requirements, and most importantly, a final solution to the Kosovo question in terms of recognition of independence, which the Serbian population strongly opposes. While it is evident from the EC reports on Serbia that the country has had difficulties meeting the 'Copenhagen criteria' in almost a decade of the process, there is a number of external factors that have made this process even more complex.

As explained in the background chapter, the 'disequilibrium clause', as Falke and Czauderna (2014) termed it, can be seen as one of the reasons why Serbia's EU accession negotiations show limited progress. The authors argue that this clause

presupposes opening of Chapters 23 and 24 first, as these are the ones that countries mostly have difficulties coping with. Yet again, they also suggest that a stalemate in implementing these reforms might result in a suspension of all accession negotiation talks, which is precisely what happened to Serbia. This clause also goes hand in hand with claims that the whole SAP process appears to be a burden to Serbia's advancement rather than a guide, resulting in a vicious circle in which each member state interprets the terms of the agreement in their own manner. Moreover, these country-specific features of the process are additionally burdened by the general enlargement fatigue, which became conspicuous with the Western Balkan region. Due to these reasons, the majority of Eurosceptics in Serbia cite "EU's constant conditioning and blackmailing" as the main reason for their negative view of the Union. Consequently, such a setting left space for different power actors to establish and reinforce their position, like Russia has been successfully doing for over a decade through a number of Russian cultural organisations in Belgrade.

As shown before, the EU's agenda with Serbia pertains to normalization of relations with Kosovo and retaining Russia's influence in the Western Balkans. In such an atmosphere and in the aftermath of the war, the already technical narrative of the EU greatly deteriorated and ranged from harsh criticism and reproach to attempts to cease or temporarily halt Serbia's accession negotiations should Serbia further defy introducing sanctions to Russia. However, although the agenda remained the same, what did change few months into the war is the way the EU addresses these issues. Overcoming its inefficient policy of conditionality, the EU attempts to legitimize its presence in Serbia through rhetoric of friendship, hospitality, and the EU's overt desire to have Serbia in the Union. Next to this, the Union also tries to legitimize its actions by praising Serbia's progress, admitting mistakes, and acknowledging the enlargement fatigue that took its toll on Serbia. Furthermore, while the EU endeavours to secure acquiescence by focusing on investments, its monetary power and financial aid it has intended for Serbia, the Union lacks narratives to enhance its popularity and divert attention. This is partly also due to the EU's waning support among Serbians, which is why the Union is now more focused on re-establishing a positive narrative of partnership, trust and attempts to 'amend' and persevere its position in Serbia. Although the EU leadership changed its rhetoric to strategic narratives few months

after the war, the graphs indicate that these efforts seem to be diminished and overshadowed by the previous policy of conditionality.

Russia, on the other hand, has set its agenda very clearly from the beginning and did not stray from its core narrative. Their aim was a rather simple task, as they set out to preserve the overtly positive attitude Serbian people have traditionally cherished towards Russia. The country legitimized its actions by arguing that it had made efforts to reach a constructive dialogue with 'the West' long before the war commenced, and that it was 'the West' that ignored these attempts. Russian leadership also fared well in securing acquiescence, as they reflected on the NATO bombing as their personal story, a story of compassion and mutual support, thereby juxtaposing the reactions of 'the West' to the events of 1999 in Serbia and of 2022 in Ukraine. This comparison is laden with strong emotions which lay emphasis on the international silence in which the air strikes were conducted over Serbia, as there were 'no voices, public rebellions, or legal organisations', not to mention 'EU grants to help the cause'. Russian leadership also enhances its popularity by acknowledging the efforts Serbia is currently undertaking internationally to preserve good relations with Russia, thereby praising their 'strong political will' to defy 'fiercest pressures' from the West. This narrative is additionally reinforced by claiming that the Russian way is the right one to follow, as they fight for 'a just and free path' against 'shameful criminals'. Finally, Russian officials succeed in diverting attention from its own actions by pointing to the NATO and 'the West' as the true perpetrators and aggressors, while representing themselves as saviours of its own people who are under attack of the NATO allies. Pointing to 'the West' as villains who 'play with people's lives' and have also destroyed Yugoslavia before, Russian leadership diverts attention from the fact that they commenced the war by justifying its use of force to stop 'the actual culprits'. Another layer of diverting attention was employed also with regard to the NATO bombing of Serbia, but this time not to secure acquiescence, but rather to instrumentalize the anniversary of the air strikes to once again point to the unlawful actions of NATO and stray attention away from its own acts of aggression. Knowing that Serbian people will be most vulnerable and susceptible to such a narrative ahead of the NATO bombing anniversary, Russia turned the commemoration of NATO aggression into a mechanism of diverting attention.

When juxtaposing the two narratives, one of friendship and brotherhood, and the other of conditionality and technocracy, Serbia's population doubtlessly opts for the former, as clearly visualised in the graphs above. Especially data collected in 2023 reiterate how strongly and consistently Serbia stands behind Russia and opposes 'swapping' Russia for the EU. However, besides unwavering support for Russia, polls also indicate a highly intriguing trend which concerns citizens' intentions of leaving Serbia and country preferences in this regard. While the vast majority of people who would leave Serbia would go to one of the EU countries, predominantly Germany, merely 1.3% of Serbian population would live in Russia. The same is reflected in the results regarding the country model Serbian citizens would like to live in. Respondents cite Switzerland, followed by Norway and Germany, while Russia's country model was perceived as a preferred one by merely 9 percent of respondents. Another interesting observation lies with the fact that Serbian people do not have a slightest idea of the amount of financial aid granted to Serbia by the EU. The majority of people do indeed rank the EU as the primary donor of non-repayable financial aid, believing it amounts to €100 million, China and Russia following second and third respectively. Additionally, more than a half of Serbian citizens are not familiar with EU-funded projects, and those who are predominantly cite investments in 'environmental projects'. However, the actual data collected by the Republic of Serbia show that this is a highly distorted picture. The EU is the absolutely dominant donor with a massive amount of € 2,960 million in the period 2000-2016, which accounts for 56% of total international grants. The USA follows with 14.4 percent, while China ranks lowest, with merely 0.4 percent share of the total financial aid. What is interesting is the fact that Russia is not even to be found on the list, although citizens in Serbia throughout years believe that Russia is the third largest donor of non-repayable financial aid. Another observation worth commenting on is the fact that the percentage of people who rank Russia as the third biggest donor has risen in comparison to the last year before the war. Due to Russia's strategic narratives, it seems that the citizens subconsciously inferred that Russia would also in practical, monetary terms demonstrate its brotherhood to Serbia. However, as shown, this is by far an extremely distant reality, especially when taking into account the amount of grants the EU intended for Serbia in October 2022.

Moreover, as the analysis has shown, the Russian narrative has been consistent and coherent ever since the war broke out with regard to Serbia, while the EU changed its

strict, harsh rhetoric throughout time and commenced applying mechanisms of strategic narratives few months later. The analysis outlines that all mechanisms of a successful strategic narrative have been employed by the Russian leadership, while the EU officials neither had a consistent story, nor were all mechanisms put in place once they started making use of strategic narratives. The outcome appears to be more than conspicuous, as support for Russia has remained stable throughout the whole year of the war, while the number of opponents to EU integrations in Serbia has never been higher. This observation only confirms the power of strategic narratives to 'conquer' its audience if all aspects are applied.

In summary, it can be said that the vast majority of Serbians do not have a realistic picture of both Russian and EU's assistance to Serbia. While citizens in Serbia doubtlessly consistently believe that Russia is their greatest international ally, figures speak the opposite in favour of the EU. Also, Serbian citizens seem to predominantly opt for the EU with regard to better job opportunities, higher life standard and personal development, while Russia cannot compete with the EU in any of these areas. Yet again, although Serbian citizens seem to choose the EU over Russia in practical and financial terms, Russia appears to absolutely beat the EU with regard to loyalty, friendship and partnership. Speaking in metaphors, it appears that the hearts of the Serbian population are turned towards Russia, but their wallets to the West (CRTA 2022). This reaffirms the powerfulness of strategic narratives when employed fully and consistently, and Russia appears to have mastered it in reference to Serbia. Contrary to the technocratic nature of the EU's functioning and requests, Serbian citizens opt for a rather romanticized narrative. In a game of emotions and rationality, Russia seems to be the convincing winner.

7. Conclusion

Serbia has been long balancing its position between East and West, fostering relatively good relations with both power actors. However, the 2022 Ukraine war brought about an abrupt change in these dynamics, bringing a dead-end of the country's twofold policy. Although the EU demanded that Serbia aligns its foreign policy with the EU's sanctions packages against Russia, Serbia remained reluctant to do so. By defying EU's warnings, Serbia counts as one of few countries that has not introduced sanctions against Russia in the wake of the Ukraine war. There are ample reasons for this, viz. common culture, Slavic language and Orthodox religion, ties between the countries dated back to the 18th century and Russia's positioning as the protector of Orthodox people in the Balkans. Next to international agreements that embody this, Russia aided Serbia in times crucial for Serbia's freedom and independence, such as the First and the Second Serbian Uprising, followed by World War I and II. Contrary to this, the EU has from the very beginning lacked explicit political commitment to Serbia's accession. When taking into account contemporary events, the EU and Russia continue to have an utterly different starting position in Serbia. While Serbia's contemporary relationship with Russia rests on diplomatic support the country has provided to Serbia in times of political turmoil, the EU embarked on a never-ending stabilization process as a pre-stage to the regular accession process. Followed by the overall enlargement fatigue of the EU, Serbia's political leadership failed to come to grips with conditions of the SAP and with the virtual implementation of Copenhagen criteria.

The contemporary East-West crossroads in Serbia primarily concern three major events: the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, the disputed question of Kosovo's independence, and finally Serbia's reluctance to impose sanctions on Russia. Reflecting on the importance of these events for the current state of affairs and the formation of strategic narratives, this thesis looked at public opinion polls in Serbia before and after the war broke out in order to examine the impact the Ukraine crisis has had on Serbia's East-West preference. While Russia employed consistent and coherent narratives to preserve its traditionally positive picture in Serbia, the EU has drawn harsh criticism and employed rhetoric of conditionality, stating that Serbia's foreign policy with Russia might most likely endanger its accession negotiations. However, upon realizing that such rhetoric did not deliver the desired results, the EU

altered the way it addressed Serbia and started employing strategic narratives. Throughout the first year of the war, public opinion polls in Serbia indicate an unwavering support for Russia and the lowest preference for EU integrations ever, all of which proves the political influence of strategic narratives. While Russia builds its strategy on the story of emotions, brotherhood and common history, the EU relies on its monetary power and rational factors of promising better a future and a higher life standard. However, it appears that EU's long-stalled negotiations, the policy of conditionality and never-ending requirements appear to overshadow its current attempts and place a considerable constrain to the resonance of its strategic narratives in Serbia.

In summary, this thesis is a story of a successful and a less successful strategic narrative of two power actors who have great interest in securing their position in Serbia due to the country's geographical position. Metaphorically speaking, the actors embody 'the heart' – Russia, and 'the brain' – the EU, as these represent their narratives in a nutshell. On the one hand, Russia's strategic narratives are tailored to address immaterial, non-monetary sentiments of brotherhood and centuries-long loyalty. On the other hand, EU's arguments rest on rational, technocratic, and material aspects, such as grants, investment and economic advancement.

To conclude, making a reference to Alfred Adler's famous quote, Serbia appears to follow its heart, but also take its brains with it.

8. References

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