

THE CHALLENGES OF 'SITTING ON TWO CHAIRS'. TESTING SERBIA'S NEUTRALITY POLICY IN THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

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Abstract

Since 2007, Serbia is considered to promote a model of foreign policy based on maintaining an equal distance between Brussels and Moscow. This strategy became more evident after the annexation of Crimea in March 2014, when on the one hand Serbia supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine, and on the other hand it abstained from voting the UN resolution which was meant to reaffirm the territorial integrity of Ukraine and did not impose sanctions on Russia. These contradictory decisions were followed by numerous other political events that required Serbia's clear-cut positioning in the Ukrainian conflict in 2015 and 2016. The paper assesses the impact of the conflict in Ukraine to be found in the main discourses around Serbia's foreign policy of 'sitting on two chairs' between its European perspective and maintaining its close ties with Russia, as viewed by elites in the period between 2014 and 2016. First, the paper explores the various meanings attached to Serbia's military neutrality in scholarly and policy debates. Next, it looks at how those meanings have been enacted in discourses and practices along the first three years of the Ukrainian crisis. The conclusions discuss the paradoxes of Serbia's positions, pointing towards the 'politics' of the neutrality policy as revealed in the discourses that surrounded the Ukrainian crisis and various East-West divides that it triggered.

Keywords: EU; Europeanization; foreign policy; neutrality; Russia, Serbia

1. INTRODUCTION

“If the Ukrainian crisis lasts longer, Serbia will have to pick a side. Ukraine has had a policy of sitting on two chairs for more than 20 years, which almost led to the collapse of the state. In a long-term perspective it is certainly dangerous to sit on two chairs.”

Boris Varga, (Radio Sloboda Europa 2014)

In the field of European security, the two ideological blocs labelled as ‘East’ and ‘West’ were thought to have been demolished at the same time with the Berlin Wall back in November 1989 (Jović 2014; Krastev 2015). In 2019 we celebrate 30 years since that iconic moment, so it is high time for many historical revisions and evaluations on how the Post Cold War security architecture has evolved in these last three decades. The symbolic demolition of the Wall was equalled with the end of the East-West division, marking a new dynamic of the Post Cold War period. But more than 25 years after, the Ukrainian conflict has brought the East (this time represented solely by Russia)-West relations to the edge of confrontation for the first time since the end of the Cold War. In other words, the Ukrainian crisis worked as a trigger for the revival of a ‘New Cold War’ rhetoric in international affairs (Ciolan 2016). Moreover, those deep divides have appeared not only in the Russia-West relations, but also in the European space at large, most evidently affecting relations between the EU and the Western Balkans (Reuters 2016).

In this context, it is intriguing to investigate the ways in which a country, both geographically and geo-strategically positioned ‘in-between’ those two antagonising blocs, can preserve a self-declared policy of neutrality when faced with the Ukrainian crisis (UN General Assembly Resolution 68/262 / 2014) and more explicitly with a blatant breach of international law and territorial integrity

- the annexation of Crimea. In this context, Serbia's position in the strained relations between Russia and the West is of particular interest for research. The main aim of the paper is to assess the impact of the conflict in Ukraine to be found in the main discourses around Serbia's foreign policy of balancing between its European perspective and maintaining its close ties with Russia. As such, the study takes Crimea's referendum from March 2014 as a turning point in testing Serbia's policy of neutrality as it was perceived by elites.

Since 2007, Serbia tried to promote a model of foreign policy based on maintaining an equal distance between Brussels and Moscow. Immediately after the annexation of Crimea, Serbia supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine. But at the same time, it abstained from voting in the UN vote that was meant to reaffirm the territorial integrity of Ukraine (De Luney 2014; Klion 2014). Although Serbia was criticized by the EU for this move, the country succeeded in maintaining its close relations with Russia in the last three years. In the view of many analysts, this episode is illustrative of Serbia's current 'balancing act' in foreign policy: forging a closer relationship with the EU on the one hand, while maintaining strong ties with its so-called 'historic ally' Russia on the other. In this context, the majority of analyses point towards the fact that, as the crisis between Russia and the West over Ukraine deepened after 2014, this balancing act became more difficult to sustain for Belgrade's leadership (De Luney 2014; Klion 2014). Most recently, Montenegro's decision to join NATO in 2017 - and Macedonia's readiness to discuss removing the remaining obstacles to accession - put Serbia's doctrine of military neutrality under growing pressure. In other words, neutrality is not that 'neutral' anymore.

In the current article, the metaphor chosen for describing Serbia's foreign-policy dilemmas portrays Belgrade as 'sitting on two chairs' (Radio Sloboda 2014). The aim thus is to explore the particular ways in which Serbia's policy of neutrality has been put to test by the events on Ukraine. Using Serbia as a case study of a neutral country confronted with a situation of conflict, which required a clear-cut foreign policy positioning, the analysis focuses on the context, specificities and discursive claims that have characterised its foreign policy in the period 2014-2016. In response to external pressure to take a clear standpoint on the issue, Serb leaders explained their 'in-between' position as a result of their

policy of neutrality that does not allow them to take any sides in a conflict. I was particularly interested to explore by means of discourse analysis, which are the recurrent justifications for Serbia's actions in relations to the EU and Russia and how they are framed by experts' narratives. So the study raises the following questions: what does neutrality mean in the particular case of Serbia and how did it manifest along the last three years of the Ukrainian crisis?

For answering these inter-related questions, it is, however, important to look beyond a simple dichotomy of compliance and non-compliance with one side or the other (as the proponents of the 'New Cold War' thesis claim). Instead of looking at effectiveness and impact of Serbia's policy of neutrality in terms of its diverging yet complex security interests, a constructivist approach would rather critically reflect on the way Serbia's choices or alternatives in foreign policy decision making were framed in public discourse (not only by officials, but also reproduced in expert and academic analyses).

The study focused on the instrumentalization of clichés about Serbia's constant 'in-betweenness' (inherited from Tito's time and Yugoslavia's role in the non-alignment movement) and the constant indecisiveness between closer ties with Russia or/and the West which are the basis of its policy of neutrality. The most important challenge would be actually to question exactly this particular analytic framework - why should Serbia be faced with this strict choice in the form of 'either/or' and its foreign policy to be always judged in those antagonistic and simplistic terms? As such, the study takes Crimea's referendum from March 2014 as a turning point in testing Serbia's policy of neutrality as it was perceived by elites.

The article is organised as follows: first, the paper explains the analytic model used in the research, then it explores the various meanings attached to Serbia's neutrality in scholarly and policy debates. Next, it looks at how those meanings have been enacted in discourses and practices along the first three years of the Ukrainian crisis. For this purpose, the paper opted for conducting an interpretive discourse analysis.

2. ANALYTIC FRAMEWORK

The recent 'narrative turn' in International Relations Theory has greatly improved our understanding of how narratives influence state policy choices. A constructivist analysis usually looks at how international actors reveal their identity in the international arena in discursive interactions with other actors. There are notable constructivist authors who contributed to this topic, showing in a wealth of evidence-based studies 'the instrumentalization' of certain political contexts in order to legitimate foreign policy decisions. Jelena Subotić, for example, provided an interesting approach to foreign policy analysis especially in its case study of Serbia's change in foreign policy behaviour regarding the disputed status of Kosovo (Subotić 2016, 610-627). She argues that state narratives can and do guide and influence contemporary policy decisions, showing how myths are often mixed with objective facts in order to legitimate a certain view on international politics. This 'meaning-making' process reduces political space or debate and conflict into an area which can be fully controlled by the state apparatus that invokes that legitimating mechanism. In other words, justifying policy narratives are a form of state control over the 'symbolic' space of public opinion.

In a constructivist understanding, the meaning of a country's policy of neutrality in international affairs is given by the contextual elements. Political events, and various relations of powers and asymmetric encounters determine the exact content and practices of neutrality. Neutrality is thus understood as a result of interaction between a diverse set of actors. As such, it inextricably depends on the social perception and recognition of various stakeholders that are directly or indirectly involved in the process of 'meaning making'. Foreign policy narratives are often based on the ways in which direct observers of an international event look to the past to make sense of the present. International conflicts usually create a symbolic space for the promotion of various interpretations of political events, that interact in dynamic ways with their opinions and their stereotypes about domestic politics, foreign policy and a country's subjective history.

As methodology, the study applies Dvora Yanow's method of interpretive policy analysis (Yanow 2006, 5-26) to various types of foreign policy discourses. This implies a 'back and forth' reading between 'policy or agency artefacts' as conveyers of meaning and 'context'. As such, the study provides a discourse analysis on Serbia's justifications for its 'neutral' position in the Ukrainian conflict. From an interpretative point of view, the way in which policy alternatives are being framed in a public discourse is crucial for determining a certain policy decision and for promoting a dominant perspective on a certain policy issue (Yanow 2006). Those elements directly influence policy practices. Based on those premises, the analysis developed in three stages:

The first phase of discourse analysis aimed at distinguishing the main patterns of Serbia's positioning in the Ukrainian conflict. The desk research focused on gathering major public statements of state representatives (the president, the prime minister and the foreign policy minister and, in some cases, other relevant political figures) as they were enacted in correlation with the main political events in Serbia between 2014-2016. In the second phase, I focused on the main reactions to those legitimization discourses and I selected expert analysis and opinions from relevant think tanks and media outlets that have covered the topic. In this stage, the analysis looked at how those events were framed in official discourses. And in the end, for the triangulation of the main interpretations, as indicated in Yanow's model, I conducted field research in-depth interviews with experts from Belgrade to complement the main discursive patterns that described Serbia's continuous balancing between EU and Russia. The main question that guided my field research interviews was: "Was the Ukrainian crisis a trigger for any shift in Serbia's foreign policy?" The last stage of final interpretation of the findings focused on how different actors perceived those moments in order to illustrate how a neutral country's positioning in a conflict can be challenged by the influence of powers involved/or interested in influencing the conflict.

3. CONTEXTUALIZING SERBIA'S POLICY OF NEUTRALITY

Neutrality or the 'policy of neutrality' is a foreign policy position wherein a state intends to remain outside of conflicts and not to take sides with countries that are directly engaged in a conflict. The concept bears both political and legal connotations, that had changed in time (Bring 2013, 21-27). In 2007, Serbia declared itself as a "neutral state" through the 'Resolution of the National Assembly on the protection of sovereignty, territorial integrity and constitutional order of the Republic of Serbia', but until today, no strategy on how it should be applied has been presented in any official state document. Therefore, the political and legal implications of this notion for Serbia remains open. Different other countries declared neutral, like Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Ireland, Switzerland or more recently Moldova and Turkmenistan. The main dissenting view about this policy is that it primarily served peacetime purposes, including domestic politics, and that it would not have worked in a war or an open conflict. Since Switzerland was declared as neutral in 1815, different approaches have emerged, ranging from "active neutrality" to "Cold War neutrality" (Bring 2013, 21). The main problem is that the concept of neutrality is very broad. This is an argument to tackle the subject by focusing mainly on the *politics* inside Serbia's policy of neutrality. For that purpose, one needs to explore the main features of Serbia's neutrality.

One important element is its positioning regarding NATO. It is well-known that Serbia is the only country in the Balkans that is neither a NATO member, nor a candidate to join. The majority of states in Serbia's vicinity are now already members of NATO – Romania, Bulgaria, Albania, Croatia and – most recently – Montenegro. But Serbia's relations to the West is complicated mainly because of the NATO intervention and the bombing of Serbia and the Western support of Kosovo independence. All this goes in favour of Russia, which has in the recent years intensified its interest in the Balkans. The key narrative that has been used to justify this policy is the trauma of NATO intervention in 1999 and the ensuing secession of Kosovo, but also the close relationship with the Russian Federation. Another important element is the fact that Serbia has been also heavily criticized and stigmatized by the West for its role in the wars for the dissolution of

Yugoslavia. This created a supplementary stimulus for analysts to focus on the main reasons behind Serbia's decision to be 'neutral'. Serbia's neutrality on events in Georgia and Abkhazia (2008) and most recently in the Ukrainian conflict (2014-2016) was often analysed as an instance of its ambiguous foreign policy alignment between Russia and the EU. The status of Kosovo and its unilateral declaration of independence in 2008 have been presented as the main factors determining Serbia's foreign policy over the past decade. On the same note, Russia's rejection of Kosovo's declaration of independence and its veto at the UN Security Council, along with its request of an advisory opinion on the legality of this action by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) back in 2010, were considered the two main actions that facilitated Serbia's rapprochement with Russia. Those elements were connected with the fact that, from 2008 on, Serbia and Russia have increasingly cooperated by coordinating their positions on international issues and by signing a series of agreements covering economic, strategic and foreign affairs issues. But as an official candidate for EU membership from 2012, Serbia is expected to gradually to align its foreign and security policies with the EU, particularly since accession negotiations were opened in January 2014. Several analysts interpreted Serbia's acts of balancing in recent years as a pragmatic policy, pointing towards the fact that it "seems to be exploiting uncertainties in order to maximize its gains in its negotiations with both sides" (Montes Torralba 2014). But this duality is seen by many as incompatible with the policy of neutrality, and many experts advocate for abandoning this ambiguous position and for a clear choice by Serbia for either one side or the other.

Already in 2014, scholars raised this fundamental question – Why did Serbia decide to take a neutral position in the face of a blatant violation of the territorial integrity of a UN member state and in spite of virtually unanimous European opposition? Ejdus has argued that the ongoing crisis in Ukraine has amplified an existing conflict between two powerful collective identity narratives in Serbia: the one of belonging to Europe and the other of brotherhood with Russia (Ejdus 2014). He explains that to cope with this internal identity conflict and to reduce the cognitive dissonance thus created, Serbia adopted a neutral policy as "a form of avoidance". Ejdus argues that "the ongoing crisis in Ukraine has amplified an

existing conflict between two powerful collective identity narratives in Serbia: the one of belonging to Europe and the other of brotherhood with Russia. To cope with this internal identity conflict and to reduce the cognitive dissonance thus created, Serbia adopted a neutral policy as a form of avoidance" (Ejdus 2014, 342). The reasons why Serbia feels connected to Russia relies on very strong symbols, which are dominating in media discourses in the last years: "the common Slavic identity, the shared anti-NATO stance that is firmly anchored in the Serbian consciousness as a result of the humiliating 1999 bombings, and Russia's current 'fraternal' support on the Kosovo question" (Ejdus 2014, 362). At the same time, Đorđević showed that "Russian oligarchs' businesses, backed by the state, have penetrated a number of Balkan economies and the Kremlin has come to exert considerable influence in these countries. Now, the Ukraine crisis has transformed the strategic calculus for the European Union, which has thus far been the dominant partner for Balkan governments. The side-effect of accepting Russian investment is increasing energy dependence and strengthening of shady business models that undermine both EU and NATO accession in the region" (Đorđević 2014). By examining competing linkages/leverages, Nelaeva and Semenov acknowledged the importance of the interplay between powerful actors in determining Serbia's foreign policy decisions (Nelaeva & Semenov 2016). In the literature it was also proved that neutrality does not appear much compatible with the Common Security and Defence Policy – CSDP (Litavski 2012.). Torralba discussed "the ambiguity of Serbia's position" and also argued that "Serbia's behaviour seems to be driven by the logic of maximizing its gains and using Russia as a way of maintaining the EU's interest in enlargement" (Montes Torralba 2014). Radeljić argued that "post-Milošević Serbia has been seriously affected by the presence of and continuous debates about the politics of alternatives. Such a trend has been closely associated with the divisions that characterize the representatives of the political elite expected to deal with and resolve crucial questions that will determine Serbia's future" (Radeljić 2014).

All those analyses point towards the fact that Serbia's position in the Ukrainian crisis was contrasting with the expected position of an EU candidate country – alignment with EU foreign policy including economic sanctions. Although the

EU showed some understanding for this Serbian position (Balkan Insight 2015), it clearly stated that Serbian foreign policy will have to follow European in order for Serbia to become full member of the EU. All in all, it was argued that especially after 2014, Serbian neutrality is not seen only as a tool to remain outside military alliances (namely NATO), as initially, but it became also a tool not to interfere in the conflict between the EU and Russia concerning the crisis in Ukraine by preserving the *appearance* of neutrality. All those arguments from the literature clearly point towards an “asymmetric neutrality” (Nya Tider 2016) and the next section aims to identify its features in the chronology of events that marked Serbia’s foreign policy between 2014 to 2016.

4. ‘SITTING ON TWO CHAIRS’? SERBIA’S FOREIGN POLICY AFTER THE ANNEXATION OF CRIMEA

a. Major challenges in 2014

The year 2014 can be considered as a turning point in international relations and it remains a year with strong impact on Serbia’s foreign policy. It was a very challenging year, abundant in uses and misuses of historical memory. First, there was the centenary of the beginning of the First World War, which erupted in the Balkans. Second, following the May parliamentary elections, it brought a brand new institutional reshuffling in Brussels and the EU appointed its new leadership for the next 5 years. And third, there was the spread of violence, insecurity and political turmoil in Ukraine, that reached its peak with the illegal annexation of Crimea and the current destabilization in Eastern Ukraine.

As a result of the European Council decision in June 2013 (to open accession negotiations with Serbia), on 21 January 2014, the 1st Intergovernmental Conference took place, signalling the formal start of Serbia’s accession negotiations. Just one month after, the turbulences in Crimea started. On 18 March 2014, the Autonomous Republic of Crimea and the City of Sevastopol were illegally annexed by the Russian Federation. Till this day, EU’s position

remained the same in condemning the annexation of Crimea as illegal (EEAS 2017, 17) The EU candidate countries Montenegro and Albania have immediately aligned themselves with the EU Council Decision 2014/151/CFSP implementing Council Decision 2014/145/CFSP concerning restrictive measures in respect of actions undermining or threatening the territorial integrity, sovereignty and independence of Ukraine, but not Serbia (European Council 2014).

The referendum in Crimea in March 2014, but mainly the legitimizing claims in Vladimir Putin's speech in front of the State Duma on 18 March, in which he drew the parallel between Kosovo and Crimea, placed Serbia in a difficult position. Moreover, Serbia was in the middle of its electoral campaign. The Treaty on Accession of the Republic of Crimea to Russia was signed between representatives of the Republic of Crimea (including Sevastopol, with which the rest of Crimea briefly unified) and the Russian Federation on 18 March 2014 to lay out terms for the immediate admission of the Republic of Crimea and Sevastopol as federal subjects of Russia and part of the Russian Federation. It was ratified by the Federal Assembly by 21 March. Just three days after, on 24 of March 2014, ceremonies were held across Serbia but also at the memorial at Strazevica, to remember the victims of the NATO campaign to drive Serb forces out of Kosovo (Balkan Insight 2014). Three days after that event, on 27 March 2014, Serbian deputies did not take part in the UN General Assembly vote on a resolution on Ukraine's territorial integrity, which proclaimed Crimea's joining Russia invalid (United Nations 2014).

After the parliamentary elections in April 2014, Aleksandar Vučić's Serbian Progressive Party won 158 out of 250 seats in Parliament and formed a ruling coalition with the Socialist Party of Serbia. Consequently, on 27 April 2014, Vučić officially became the Prime Minister of Serbia. EU reacted promptly, with its foreign affairs chief Catherine Ashton visiting Serbia just the next day after the forming of the new Serbian government (on 28 April). This visit was followed by the one of Štefan Füle, EU Commissioner for Enlargement on 5 May 2014 in order to show support for the country's European accession process. In the beginning of May 2014, Belgrade received also the visit of Sergey Naryshkin, Chairman of the State Duma, who is on the list of EU and American sanctions.

He was welcomed by President Tomislav Nikolić, gave a speech at the Serbian National Assembly and at the University of Belgrade focusing on the good relations between Serbia and Russia. He expressed gratitude to Serbia for refusing to back the anti-Russian resolution and for not backing down before pressures that aimed to have sanctions adopted for Russia which are, as he said, completely illegal (Milić 2014).

A week after those visits, Serbia was hit by continuous, heavy rainfall, commencing on 13 May. States of emergency have been declared in parts of Bosnia and Serbia after the heaviest rain and worst floods in the region for more than a century (Reliefweb 2014). This natural disaster had its own geopolitical twist. The Russian authorities have sent at least three humanitarian aid convoys to victims of May 2014 floods. The EU also reacted promptly, and created the EU Assistance for Flood Relief in Serbia Programme. Compared to all other donors, the European Union provided the largest assistance for the flood relief in Serbia with EUR 30 million from the Instrument for Pre-accession (IPA) 2012 (European Commission 2015). Even faced with this difficult domestic problem, Serbia's geopolitical 'double game' continued. Despite EU's money, images of Russian humanitarian convoys have received extensive coverage in the mainstream media (Szpala 2014). Analysts observed that during the floods in Serbia the image of Russian soldiers rescuing victims was used by the Serb media to exemplify the close relations between the two countries (B92 2013).

Next, Prime Minister Vučić's June 2014 visit to Washington, DC and on 8 July 2014, the Serbian prime minister visited Moscow (Kremlin 2014a). Many considered this a preparation for Vladimir Putin's visit in Serbia from later that year, in October 2014. This was followed by the visit of US Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs, Victoria Nuland on July 14, 2014, who visited Belgrade and reaffirmed America's public commitment to supporting Serbia's aspirations towards EU membership (InSerbia 2014). Then, at the end of July 2014, Aleksandar Vučić informed the society and the members of Serbian parliament that the country was in a really difficult situation. He emphasized that it is the parliament who needs to decide whether to follow the European Union and impose new sanctions on Russia or not. Vučić mentioned on that occasion that Serbia could not survive another round of gas price increases and

although membership in the EU is Serbia's foreign policy objective, it needs to pursue its own national interests above all (Milić 2014).

Further on, in an interview for CNN in August 2014, the Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić, reiterated that his country "supports and respects the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Ukraine and Crimea as a part of Ukraine." He added that at the same time, however, Serbia "did not" impose sanctions against Russia (CNN Amanpour 2014). With this occasion he also referred to the ceremonies that are taking place across Europe to mark 100 years since the outbreak of World War I: "As you know, a Serbian guy triggered that First World War, Gavrilo Princip," Prime Minister Vučić said. "That's the reason that ... we are striving for peace ... not to cause any more problems; not to be a part of the problem, but to be a part of the solution" (CNN Amanpour 2014).

Soon after, the Juncker's Commission was just forming and they also tackled the subject of Serbia's position. On 30 September 2014 Johannes Hahn, at that time the EU's neighbourhood and enlargement negotiations commissioner-designate, declared that Serbia needs to carefully consider its refusal to support EU sanctions against Russia if Belgrade hopes to join the European Union. Hahn made the remarks to the European Parliament during a hearing on whether to confirm his appointment as enlargement commissioner. Hahn told the European lawmakers that if Belgrade "is moving towards accession, the signal will have to be the right one" on sanctions against Russia (Radio Free Europe 2014a).

On 16 October 2014 Putin visited Belgrade and attended a military parade on a scale that has not been seen in the region since the Cold War (BBC News 2014). Ahead of his visit to Serbia, on 15 October 2014 Vladimir Putin gave an interview to the leading Serbian daily *Poltika*. He mentioned both the 2013 Interstate Declaration on Strategic Partnership between Russia and Serbia, and also the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Centre in Niš has taken part in disaster response operations in the Balkans on several occasions. He also outlined that Russian rescuers helped to evacuate people during the severe floods in May the same year (Kremlin 2014b). He finally underlined that "Serbia has always been and still is one of Russia's key partners in southeast Europe. Our nations are united by centuries-long traditions of friendship and fruitful cooperation. Their development is fostered by common interests in such spheres as politics, the

economy, culture and many others” (Kremlin 2014b). This was Serbia's biggest military parade since the Yugoslav era to commemorate the 70th anniversary of the liberation of Belgrade by the Red Army. With this occasion Vladimir Putin received Serbia's highest honour from his counterpart, Tomislav Nikolić. The award of the Order of the Republic of Serbia is a token of Belgrade's desire to maintain its ties with Moscow, even though it formally opened negotiations to join the European Union in January. This reaffirmation of Russian-Serbian ties, at an event to celebrate the alliance in two world wars, had been heavily commented in the media.

Serbian-Russian close ties continued. On 14 November 2014 the first-ever joint Serbian-Russian military exercises have been held at the Nikinci military testing ground outside Belgrade. Under the 2010 agreement, Russia and Serbia opened a joint centre in the southern town of Niš, about 100 kilometres from the border with Kosovo, with the stated purpose of responding to natural disasters. On November 10, the website of RT (formerly Russia Today) posted a story on the drill, complete with a video showing Russian armoured personnel carriers being airdropped into the testing ground from an Ilyushin Il-76 cargo plane (Radio Free Europe 2014b).

Only a few days after that, on 20 November 2014 Johannes Hahn made his first visit to Belgrade. The newly designated European Commissioner for Neighbourhood Policy and Enlargement Negotiations' trip was marked by support for the process of Serbia's accession to the EU, and to the reforms on that road, while Hahn expressed understanding for the sensitive issue of Serbia's alignment with the EU's decisions on Russia (Poznatov 2014).

The last month of this troubled year brought a new game-changing news that directly affected Serbia's foreign policy narrative – in December 2014 Moscow abruptly terminated the South Stream natural gas pipeline project (Reuters 2014). The abandonment of the South Stream project was perceived as “a blow to poor Eastern European countries like Bulgaria and Serbia – through which the pipeline would run – both for the construction jobs that the work would mean for their economies and for the energy transport fees they hope to reap from the finished pipeline” (Szpala 2014) The abandonment of the project has astonished the Serbian government and challenged the strategy for the

development of the energy industry in co-operation with Russia. The disappointment in Belgrade is even larger because it is commonly believed that Serbia sold the main refinery company (NIS) to Russia below market price in exchange for the construction of South Stream, since its construction would have secured Serbia a strategic role in the region.

Looking at this panorama of events that succeeded during the entire year 2014, one may interpret the various statements and symbolic gestures both towards Russia and the West as inconsistencies in Serbian foreign policy, not compatible with its proclaimed 'neutral' position.

b. Subsequent Challenges for 2015 and 2016

In the fall of 2011, Switzerland and Serbia had teamed up and successfully campaigned for a "double chairmanship" of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) for the years 2014 (Switzerland) and 2015 (Serbia). Yet, at that time, the two countries that activated the neutrality policy could not have imagined that under their 'tandem chairmanship', the OSCE would play a central role in the biggest geopolitical crisis in Europe since 1990. In the Ukraine Crisis, the OSCE 'resurrected', as it suddenly played a leading role after having almost lapsed into irrelevance in the years before. Because of the OSCE's bridge-building and dialogue facilitating role in the Ukraine Crisis, the 2015 Serbian Chairmanship is particularly important for offering a special dynamic and space of affirmation of Serbia's foreign policy balancing acts and it deserves a special attention. Already in November 2014, the OSCE Secretary General Lamberto Zannier declared he expected Serbia to be a constructive

1 The Conference for Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE) was created to serve as a bridge between East and West – a confidence building project during a period of heightened Cold War tensions. Over time it transformed from a Conference to an Organization, developing its own *acquis* of principles and commitments, institutional arrangements, and a sophisticated toolbox, which includes field operations and autonomous institutions. Today, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) is the world's largest and most inclusive regional security organization under Chapter VIII of the Charter of the United Nations (UN).

factor in tackling the Ukrainian crisis (B92 2014) Serbia's experience and position was considered to be very important in resolving the Ukrainian crisis.

In January 2015, Serbia took the helm of the OSCE. Its chairmanship meanwhile had become rather delicate politically due to Serbia's position in the "border lands" between Russia and the EU in the shadow of the Ukraine Crisis. As Foreign Minister Dačić said in June 2015: "Serbia has chosen the path of neutrality, which in a way constitutes the continuation of the policy held by Yugoslavia" (Wohlfeld 2015). There was even more symbolic burden placed on Serbia by the fact that in 2015 OSCE marked the 40th anniversary of the Helsinki Final Act and 25th anniversary of the Charter of Paris. In connections with those symbolic anniversaries, leaders stressed the critical role that the OSCE is playing in facilitating the political process and de-escalating tensions in Ukraine and the cooperation of the troika formed by Serbia, Switzerland and Germany. The OSCE has gained importance as a mediator - namely in developing the Minsk protocol. This put a lot of international attention on Serbia.

On 15 January 2015 the Serbian Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić outlined the priorities for the 2015 Serbian Chairmanship of the OSCE in Europe at the first Permanent Council meeting of the year in Vienna. He pledged to seize the opportunity given by the 57 participating States "to rebuild trust and confidence in order to create a positive agenda for the future, according to the motto of the Serbia Chairmanship" (OSCE 2014). Dačić called on the representatives of the OSCE participating States to join forces in these very difficult times for the Euro-Atlantic and Eurasian regions and for global security. "The peace process is essential. Dialogue and compromise, peaceful resolution of disputes, confidence-building, solidarity, responsibility and co-operation were never this important" (OSCE 2014). At the same time, in January 2015, Serbia agreed to deepen cooperation with NATO through an Individual Partnership Action Plan. This dual position was considered by some analysts as "Serbia's asset in the Ukraine crisis". The head of OSCE Zannier stated that: "Having good relations with everybody helps - Belgrade [is able] to play the role of an honest mediator," said OSCE Secretary General Lamberto Zannier. "A neutral country

always gets complaints from both right and left – but it also creates a space for a contribution” (Deutsche Welle 2015a).

The official position of the OSCE is clear and straight-forward – “the illegal annexation of Crimea by the Russian Federation represents a breach of one of the principles of the Helsinki Final Act – the respect for territorial integrity. The destabilizing activities by separatists, tolerated by or actively promoted by the Russian Federation violate OSCE commitments”(OSCE 2017). In many public statements, OSCE press releases stated that key principles and norms of the OSCE have been seriously undermined. Nünlist & Svarin (2014) analysed how Western insistence on these values resulted in antagonizing Russia and other post-Soviet states. This polarization is easy to be observed also in the case of Serbia public narratives. In addition, the Western reaction to the crisis in Ukraine put the Serbian Chairmanship of the OSCE before a dilemma. The two authors argued that the organization now has to decide whether to cling to common values established in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act and reaffirmed in Paris and Astana in 1990 and 2010 respectively, risking to antagonize Russia and other authoritarian OSCE members, or to serve again, like during the Cold War, as an inclusive cooperative security dialogue forum for both democracies and authoritarian regimes. Due to the so-called ‘historical Slavic ties’ with Russia, many in the West feared that Serbia's chairmanship to the OSCE would advance Russian interests.

Those events were counter-balanced by other pro-Russian allegiances. The participation of Serbian military units in the military parade in Moscow on Victory Day 9 May 2015, Russia's celebration of the end of WWII. What was especially striking, was the presence of Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić. Besides this, in September 2015, Russia, Belarus, and Serbia conducted a military drill called “Slavic Brotherhood” on Russian territory. The European Commission criticized Serbia for this drill, saying that the country was sending a wrong signal and that it was not acting according to the EU accession process. Since 2015, Serbia has an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) with NATO, and in the autumn of 2015 Serbian troops participated in a NATO-led drill. Another example of Serbia-Russia cooperation was during the period of Kosovo's campaign to become a member of UNESCO. In the autumn of 2015,

Serbia launched a counter campaign to stop Kosovo from becoming a member of UNESCO which also proved as another example of Serbia-Russia cooperation. This campaign was focused on the condition of the Serbian Orthodox cultural heritage and Russia supported this campaign. Much to the relief of Serbia, Kosovo was not accepted, and Russia was thanked for its support (New York Times 2015). This was yet another example of Serbia-Russia cooperation.

Another relevant event of this period was the migrant crisis and Serbia's role in managing the 'Balkan route'. During the 2015-2016 European migrant crisis, Vučić strongly aligned himself with the policies of the German Chancellor, Angela Merkel, and publicly praised German migration policy. Vučić also stated that Serbia will cooperate with the EU in solving the migrant stream going from the Middle East to EU member countries through the Balkan route, and that Serbia will be ready to take some portion of the migrants. The two important "Ischinger reports" on the lessons of the Ukraine Crisis for the OSCE and on the implications of the Ukraine Crisis for European Security pointed towards the fact that "Serbia's active neutrality policy between Russia and the West was strengthened by Serbia's responsible leadership during the OSCE chairmanship" (OSCE 2015). Dragan Simeunović, a political science professor at the University of Belgrade: "Not only does the country nurture good relations with both parties to the conflict, but it also has experiences of its own, namely the violent breakup of the former Yugoslavia and the secession of the former southern province of Kosovo, resembling the current situation in Ukraine." (Deutsche Welle 2015b) But this view is not shared by Dušan Reljić, an expert on Southeast Europe based in Brussels who stated: "Small states such as Serbia, which faces its own challenges in the areas of domestic and foreign policy – Kosovo coming to mind – as well as economic difficulties, are unable to contribute much to the solution of global problems, even when they hold the rotating presidency of the OSCE." (Deutsche Welle 2015b)

In 2016 there were also other political events that promptly triggered a series of reactions from in Serbia from both sides, the Russian Federation and the West. On 11 January 2016, Russia's Deputy Prime Minister, Dmitri Rogozin announced Moscow's intention to arm Serbia with sophisticated weaponry,

including S-300 surface-to-air missiles (Huffington Post 2016). Belgrade's decision to deepen military cooperation with Russia caused controversy in Brussels, as Serbia in recent months has taken tangible steps towards accession to the European Union. Serbian president Tomislav Nikolić has insisted that Serbia's strengthened alliance with Russia will not compromise its EU membership aspirations. At the same time, Serbian parliament ratified on February 12, 2016 an agreement that grants NATO a freedom of movement in the Serbian territory and gives all its members diplomatic immunity. With this agreement Serbia, without formally rejecting its policy of military neutrality, raised actively the level of cooperation with NATO.

On March 4, 2016, Serbian President, Tomislav Nikolić, dissolved the parliament, scheduling early elections for April 24. In the 2016 parliamentary elections, Serbia continued to balance its Western ambitions against long-standing ties with Russia (Stratfor 2016). The snap parliamentary elections in April 2016, resulted in a number of parliamentary seats for nationalistic, anti-European, and extremely Russophile political parties from the opposition, who were not represented in the Serbian legislature after the last two elections in 2012 and 2014. The ruling coalition around Vučić's SNS has obtained 48.25% of the vote (SEE News 2016). Vučić's ruling SNS has retained majority in the parliament, although won less seats than in 2014 Parliamentary elections. The coalition around SNS has won 131 seats, 98 of which belong to SNS. During Vučić's first mandate, Serbia has continued to expand its economic ties with Russia, especially by increasing Serbian exports to Russia. Despite those elements, he is perceived as a dedicated pro-European leader.

The Serbian parliamentary snap elections held on 24 April were centred around consolidating the incumbent Prime Minister's position and the strategic goal of taking the country forward toward full EU membership. Despite the heightened political rhetoric, EU has proven to be a key incentive and attraction. Negotiations were transparent in December 2015. The government's plan is to fulfil all the required conditions by 2020 (Express UK 2016).

5. LOCAL EXPERTS' PERCEPTIONS ON SERBIA'S ROLE THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

Serbia's ambiguous position in the Ukrainian crisis was the main element analysed by the interviewees from Belgrade. Out of many different elements, the respondents pointed towards the Kosovo-Crimea comparison which in their view has touched several sensitive 'hot spots' between the unsettled elements between Serbia and the West regarding the final status of Kosovo. Overall, the informants confirmed that this comparison is controversial from the Serbian point of view, especially because most of the EU countries are supporting Kosovo, but not supporting Crimea's secession. "This is fact an uncomfortable comparison because this reference to Kosovo, which, again, was pretty much against the principles of international law, and a precedent was set and this precedent it's being now used by different countries around the world, most notably by President Putin, of course. So I see it more as a political thing (Interview with M.S. 2016).

The discursive pattern which unravels the 'uncomfortable comparison' was also present in several positions of the interviewees. For example, it was argued that "Russia's position is intriguing because it tries to show the limits of Western actions as forms of external intervention. They are using the case of Kosovo to legitimate the independence of Crimea or the taking in military intervention of Russians. Because you can see it in both ways" (Interview with M.O. 2016)

There are both similarities and huge differences between the situation of self-determination in Kosovo and in Crimea. But which of them are predominant? Who actually benefits from the Kosovo-Crimea parallel? Based on possible answers to these intriguing question, various scholars, journalists, influential experts in foreign affairs and international law either confirmed or condemned Russia's attempt to legitimize its actions in Crimea. We analysed a selection of this contributions to the debate because we considered their arguments relevant for a broader understanding of the legitimization mechanisms developed by Russia in Ukraine. Because Serbia has an interest in supporting Ukraine and opposing the secession of Crimea, and Russia annexed Crimea, but opposes the

independence of Kosovo and backs Serbia in the UN Security Council, this tension and the paradoxical position of Serbia in the dispute was the main element analysed by the interviewees from Belgrade and Prishtina.

Other relevant issue mentioned in almost all interviews with Serbian experts was the topic of the Serbian foreign fighters who went to fight with the Pro-Russian rebels in Donbass. "The number of Serbs fighting in Ukraine may be no more than 100, but their alleged exploits are widely reported. Mr. Vučić calls them mercenaries who are "harmful" to Serbia." (Interview with A.J. 2016) This issue was very present on the Serbian public agenda in the last months, especially when some visible public persons were arrested and will be prosecuted for that. In this context, people expressed clear critical views towards the issue, part of a wider phenomenon, connecting it also with their enrolment in ISIL, not just in the paramilitary groups in Eastern Ukraine.

Part of Serbian respondents consider that the whole 'precedent' argument is a form of rhetorically constructing 'the precedent', distorting the facts only for them to fit with the reality that would justify Russia's interests. Other, however, argued that in fact Putin was building on a pre-existent 'relativisation of international norms' created by the West when the 'sui generis' clause was invoked for the case of Kosovo. „That is the definition of a precedent – it creates other possibilities for invoking the precedent" (Interview with Z.S. 2016) The informants from Serbia, and especially the one from Kosovo drew attention also that the double standard approach which Putin uses to accuse the West is in fact replicated to the case of Crimea. „But if his arguments would be valid, that would also imply that Russia should recognise Kosovo as an independent state." (Interview with L.K. 2016)

Several respondents pointed towards the ambiguity of Russia's arguments when invoking Kosovo as one of the most slippery elements of this Kosovo-Crimea debate. They referred to the mix of real facts with stretched politicized interpretations. "Russia's insistence is against the facts, against logic and against its own interests. Since Russia does not accept that Kosovo is in fact independent, if it were a precedent it would be a bad one from the Russian point of view." (Interview with L.K. 2016)

Referring to the interpretation of the historical facts for their use as legitimacy devices, some Serbian interviewed confirmed that the symbolic arguments still work in the Balkans as well. The view that 'Crimea is special for Russia easily appeal to the minds and the hearts of people in Serbia when it comes to the importance of Kosovo. The recurrent mentioning of the 1389 Kosovopolje battle being the most obvious example in this regard. Nevertheless, several informants also drew attention to the fact that these types of 'emotional' arguments of the past cannot replace international regulations. "Its 21st century. You cannot use historical arguments of this kind to challenge borders. History should not be invoked to justify changing borders, especially not after the horror of the WW2. You can always manipulate with history". (Interview with Z.S. 2016).

It was also underlined that "Everywhere, around the globe, when you need some arguments, it is easy to take them from history. When you need to prove something else, you choose other events from the history" (Interview with J.M., 2016) However, one respondent highlights also that "Serbian politicians have abused the Kosovo narrative. And what are the results? You have Serbia as it was in the XIX century. Those methods and those discourses proved inefficient on long term." (Interview with A.B. 2016)

When asked to comment on Russia's rhetoric referring to its duty to defend all Russians citizens wherever they live, several Serbian respondents made a parallel with the previous use of this argument also in the Balkans. "This was the essence of the Milošević doctrine at the end of 80's. He was saying that it is their duty to protect all Serbians wherever they are. And then he took all the rights of Albanians living in Kosovo." (Interview with L.K. 2016) Most Serbian informants contested the power of this type of rhetoric "I don't think that this type of legitimating arguments could revive some secessionist projects in the western Balkans, at least not for the moment. The only country which could use this argument of 'protecting its own citizens is Serbia. But that's not realistic. And plus, Serbian nationalism is very different than the Russian one." (Interview with M.O. 2016) The example of Milorad Dodik from Republika Srpska (BiH) has been mentioned for several times as the principal exponent of this way of thinking "But he had his own agenda. And we should be aware of the fact that Russia affords this type of behaviour, that Serbia cannot afford.

Plus, the presence of the international organizations and missions, of the EU and NATO in the Western Balkans cannot allow for that type of revisionist behaviour” (Interview with M.K. 2016)

What was the role of the Kosovo-Crimea parallel in Serbia’s manifestation of its policy of neutrality in the Ukrainian crisis? The action to invoke a ‘precedent’ in order to either contest or sustain the right to self-determination should be understood as an action of ‘cropping’ parts of history and abruptly ‘paste’ them in the present. This construction of the ‘precedent’ is motivated by either narrow, domestic political gains or even international benefits. In other words, invoking a ‘precedent’ in order to contest an international norm that serves a very narrow political goal of a country against the interests of another country is a political form of de-contextualizing history. Thus, the principle of self-determination, creates a lot of symbolic and political space for international actors (especially great powers) to discursively build a ‘precedent’ in order to justify their claims for the expansion of their territories. The contradictory perspectives focused on the legal arguments of secession point towards the ‘relativisation’ of international law and its subsequent politicization.

When discussing the reasons why this parallel was invoked by Putin, several informants have supported the comparison and have underlined the dangerous impact of the precedent that the Kosovo independence has set. Others considered that the comparison was initially made by a skilful politician (Putin) who has had the same approach previously, so it should be discussed mainly as a political tool or a ‘diversion’ from the real issues taking place in Ukraine. This group of informants considered this parallel as a purely political instrument used by Russia in its confrontation with the West, part of bigger policy of speculating the ‘weaknesses’ of the West. In this case, it was easy for Russia to deepen especially the divisions inside the EU, where the Kosovo issue remains controversial (with the 5 countries which do not recognize Kosovo). “There are many others situations when countries have breached the international law, not just Kosovo. So its clearly a political statement often used by Russia, even before the events in Crimea” (Interview with M.K. 2016)

There were a series of respondents who considered this topic relevant for the future decision of EU and Serbia in foreign policy towards Russia for the next

years. But also others who considered the topic less relevant, and recommended that it should be treated as a purely rhetoric mechanism used entirely in Russia's interest, so Serbia has nothing to gain out of it. "But it's Putin perspective, you know, it's not our view. You don't have official positions towards that issue. And actually there is no debate about Ukraine. There is a debate, but in small expert groups. (...) This comparison is a Putin topic. Not the topic of our government." (Interview with A.B. 2016) This perspective tries to dismiss any legal or historical in-depth analysis of the comparison between the cases, arguing that Putin uses this parallel strictly for political purposes. They would also argue that this argument of the 'precedent' is not new at all. "He already invoked this in 2008 with Georgia, and that was about military intervening against the Georgian troops. So I don't see it as something exceptional in this case." (Interview with A.B. 2016) This ambiguity leads to difficult positions towards the issue – "The two cases are different in the form, but the substance is the same. Its still the self determination claim. They are both breaching international law." (Interview with M.O. 2016) Moreover, an expert also underlines the fact that the comparison is elusive, eliminating by purpose important elements of the situation: "Russia deliberately failed to mention the peace talks that took place over Kosovo before the NATO bombing, the drastically different position of Kosovo Albanians in Kosovo than those of Russians in Crimea, best illustrated by several mass graves of civilians, or the peace process under the auspices of the international community after the NATO bombing. All of these factors make comparisons between Kosovo and Crimea impossible." (Interview with M.O. 2016)

Experts also expressed fears that "Crimea could become in itself a precedent: "the way in which Crimea broke away is very dangerous for the Western Balkans because it creates space for the further disintegration of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Republika Srpska), Serbia (Sandžak) and Macedonia (the western part of the country), something that is rarely mentioned in Serbia" (Interview with J.M. 2016)

Others think that there are other topics in the debate which gained prominence and it is misleading to focus too much on this comparison: "I think this topic has medium relevance for Serbian foreign policy. It's not completely irrelevant, it's

not at the moment and even in 2014 it wasn't the most important topic so it's definitely not something that is shaping Serbian foreign policy in any kind of important matter (Interview with M.K.2016). Most respondents referred with a critical tone to "Belgrade's indecisiveness in the Ukrainian conflict" and often highlighted its dependence on Russia. Moreover, it was added that the 2014 Russian annexation of Crimea gave Serbia an opportunity to 'reward' Russia for its resolute support for Belgrade's position on Kosovo and this was mentioned as one of the main drivers of Serbia's neutrality policy in the Ukrainian crisis.

Table no. 1

No.	Name	Date	Location
1.	A.B.	06.05.16	Belgrade
2.	A.J.	12.05.16	Skype interview
3.	M. K.	11.05.2015	Belgrade
4.	L.K.	22.05.16	Skype Interview
5.	M.K.	06.05.16	Belgrade
6.	J.M.	04.05.16	Belgrade
7.	I.N.	05.05.16	Belgrade
8.	M.O.	05.05.16	Belgrade
9.	M.S.	12.05.16	Skype interview
10.	Z.S.	07.05.16	Belgrade

Source: the author, based on research interviews with experts in Serbia's foreign policy conducted in 2016

6. CONCLUSIONS

Since the end of the Milošević regime in 2000, experts continue to ask whether Serbia has finally chosen between the EU (the West) and Russia. Many analysts have focused on Serbia's somewhat 'ambiguous position' of constantly balancing between the EU and Russia. This foreign policy decision became contentious in March 2014, when, despite having recently initiated negotiations to join the EU, Serbia has declared itself neutral concerning EU sanctions against Russia over the Ukraine crisis.

In this context, the article tried to avoid offering a precise answer to this question, but rather it tried to critically reflect on the way the question itself is being posed. The argument of this paper builds on the constructivist premises that point towards the crucial role of actor's perceptions and justifications of various other policy options are hidden under the concept of 'neutrality' when confronted with a series of facts on the ground (both in Serbia's domestic and policy narrative) between the period 2014-2016. As such, the analysis tried to unpack the main interpretations surrounding Serbia's foreign policy positions as depicted in public narratives (documents, public statements and expert and scholarly analyses).

The main assumption at the basis of this article was that Serbia's foreign policy (its priorities, objectives and tasks) are directly connected with the elites' perceptions on the country's neutrality, which is constantly redefined in various contexts. The impact of the conflict in Ukraine was assessed in the context of Serbia's discursive balance between the bid for European integration and strengthening its relations with Russia in elites' attempt to promote certain meanings of how Serbia should act in a certain situation. The aim of those concluding remarks is to discuss the paradoxes of Serbia's positions, pointing towards the 'politics' of the neutrality policy as revealed in the discourses that surrounded the Ukrainian crisis.

The most common explanation to be found in the literature for explaining Serbia's reasons in assuming this policy was that it decided to pursue the road of neutrality hoping to maintain good relations with both sides – Russia and the West. The most problematic element is that Serbia has no explicit Foreign Policy

Strategy where the term to be defined in a detailed normative form. This is both a challenge and an opportunity for researchers that try to depict Serbia's strategic choices. In the absence of an official document, studies are left mainly with the possibility to approximate the country's positions in relation with major events in the region and by looking at the main patterns of Serbia's actions and reactions to international events. From this point of view, the events triggered by the conflict in Ukraine and mainly by the annexation of Crimea offer a special point of reference for assessing the characteristics of Serbia's foreign policy as the country was faced with several important decisions. The events of 2014, which have led to a dramatic rift in EU-Russia relations placed Serbia in a difficult position of terms of foreign policy strategic choices, as well as it gave the EU and Russia the chance to deepen their leverage in Serbia. It was shown how Belgrade has strived to keep a neutral position in the years that followed the annexation of Crimea.

Using in-depth field research interviews with Serbian experts, the article pointed to the fact that there are different ways to interpret the impact of this duality in Serbia's foreign policy (what the article metaphorically called 'sitting on tow chairs'). In order to tackle those aspects, I opted for a constructivist approach that focuses on the ways actors' discourses and perceptions attach certain meanings to policy decisions. For that purpose, an in-depth contextualization is the key. Instead of focusing on providing a causal mechanism for explaining Serbia's foreign policy decisions in the Ukrainian crisis (by asking why Serbia abstained from the sanctions against Russia, but at the same time supported the territorial integrity of Ukraine?), the study aimed at unpacking the main justifications for Serbia's position, as perceived by several key elites that are relevant for producing and reproducing the rhetoric repertoire for Serbia's foreign policy making.

Looking at the rhetoric of politicians, but also in think tank analyses, one can observe that the conflict in the Ukraine was considered responsible for reviving the logic of the Cold War. The Ukraine crisis has challenged the post Cold War European order, reviving the old 'friend-enemy' rhetoric. This geopolitical outcome explains the increased attention (and high level official visits) that Serbia has been receiving from both sides. It also put a growing pressure on the

country, particularly when it held the OSCE chairmanship in 2015 at a critical moment of the Ukrainian conflict – the signature of the Minsk Agreements. In this context, maintaining a neutral policy proved to be extremely delicate and could damage its credibility in front of its partners, that have diverging expectations (EU and Russia). Three main policy issues were pointed as dominant in actors' justifications: a. in 2014, the annexation and particularly the Kosovo-Crimea legitimacy claims invoked by Russia were identified as the first relevant moment in the analysis; b. 2015, when Serbia took the helm of the OSCE. Its chairmanship meanwhile had become rather delicate politically due to Serbia's position in the "border lands" between Russia and the EU in the shadow of the Ukraine Crisis after the moment when Belgrade had refused to join Western sanctions against Russia; c. the 2016 parliamentary elections that have strengthened Russia's influence in Serbia's domestic politics, together with the paradoxical pro-European tone of Aleksandar Vučić and his engagement to take Serbia in the EU by 2020. The final phase of interpretations of the findings touched upon the limits of Serbia's neutrality policy that is so abstract and ambiguous that allows for a wide space of symbolic and rhetorical manoeuvre which is interpreted as inconsistency in building its foreign policy identity.

The last years were times of growing antagonism between Brussels and Moscow, and elites' allegiances are crucial for determining strategic choices in foreign policy. In the Serbian government, it was President Nikolić in particular who adopted a clear pro-Russian stance, regularly seeking the proximity of his Russian counterpart, President Putin. But even if his party colleague Prime Minister Aleksandr Vučić is more often associated with a decidedly pro-European stance, he too fails to pursue a clear line in his foreign policy.

In the end, the study tried to stress the fact that the 'New cold war' paradigm of discussing Serbia's position in the conflict is in many ways misleading because it manages to rhetorically construct in imperative of choice for Serbia – either with Russia, or with West. The two options are defined as being incompatible to each other. This perspective is very influential in Serbian narratives (both official statements and in experts' justifications). Its main role is to show that deterioration between these two blocs (the revived East-West division) means that Serbia will increasingly have to choose a side. The counter effect of this

rhetoric is to show that in reality – Serbia’s policy of neutrality could not be conceived otherwise than it is now – biased and ‘unbalanced’. In fact, Serbian elites strived in the last three years to prove that balancing between the two sides, hidden under the evasive concept of ‘neutrality’ is the most profitable option for the current situation. As the conflict in Eastern Ukraine continues to this day, there were actually no real signs that this policy of ‘sitting on two chairs’ would change in the following years to come. Serbia still refuses to take part in the sanctions certain countries have adopted against Russia. The evolving situation in Eastern Ukraine and the continuous destabilization in Serbia’s neighboring countries (Macedonia and Montenegro) is further undermining the idea of ‘continued’ neutrality for Serbia. The key question, however, is whether or rather for how long will Serbia be able to balance between the West and the East without compromising its main goal of joining the EU. Many believe that if Serbia eventually wants to become member of the EU, it will have to adapt its foreign policy to that of the EU, as stipulated in chapter 31 of the accession negotiations. But recent events (such as the fact that in October 2019 Serbia has signed a free-trade agreement with the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union - EES), confirm that ‘sitting on two chairs’ seems to be the most comfortable position for Serbia current leaders in foreign policy. It remains to be seen if this is also the most sustainable on long term.

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