

# Revisiting the European Union's agency as peace-maker or as source of ontological insecurity?: A Case of Republika Srpska

*Faris Kočan and Rok Zupančič*  
*University of Ljubljana*

## Abstract

In this paper, we attempt to answer the question if the European Union (EU) as a polity, which aspires to be perceived as an actor of peace, democracy, economic prosperity, cultural diversity, etc., is really comprehended as such by people living in strongly "ethno-politicized" societies. Or even more important; is such EU agency, which is also embedded into the broader international post-conflict reconciliation efforts, rather understood as source of ontological insecurity given the fact that it attempts to de-intensify the strength and meaning of highly politicized ethnic identities of peoples by promoting the agency of a civic Bosnia and Herzegovina. Drawing on the case of Republika Srpska (RS) – a subnational political entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) – we aim to understand if the EU as an actor allegedly working for peace and reconciliation, with its agency directly affects daily political routines existing in RS, which can be interpreted by local political elites as a source of anxiety for the Bosnian Serbs' imagined "homogeneous collective". To answer these questions, we used a statistical analysis of public opinion survey in RS (N=320), which was done in 2020, focusing on the voters of two biggest ethno-political parties in RS, namely the Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) and Serb Democratic Party (SDS). We hypothesized that the voters of SNSD and SDS would evaluate the EU agency as both actor of peace and reconciliation in BiH more negatively than those who do not vote for ethno-political parties. The results revealed that 'political party affiliation' did not play a substantial role in evaluating EU's agency in peace-making terms. The findings thus insinuate that the EU's attempts to de-intensify the meaning of ethno-politicized identities at the expense of developing civic ones – comparing to the success of the domestic political elites' efforts to consolidate the 'ethnic' self in RS – is limited, when talking about eventual transformation of the Self-Other dialectic.

## Introduction

Achieving peace in post-conflict societies has proved to be an exceptionally elusive objective for the international community, including the European Union (EU). The ideational underpinning of European integration that commenced after the World War II was intertwining Europe politically, economically and socially and to create a common (European) space without antagonisms. This attempt resonates with the so-called "Old Europe" narrative (Manners in Murray, 2015) which refers to the narrative of peace and post-war reconstruction of the Western Europe. This narrative functioned well only until the EU enlargement in the 1990s and 2000s to the Central and Eastern Europe (CEE); namely, the CEE countries were no longer able to identify exclusively with such a story, because of different socio-historical and ideological experience after the WWII, but understood the European integration through the idea of the stability (meaning that integration in the EU will make countries more stable, and not only without antagonism, as "the Old Europe narrative" had it). This stability, alongside with the historical memory and reconciliation, were becoming a part of a stable narrative that

the EU represents a (re)resolution for post-conflict issues due to the ability to provide means and/or grounds for overcoming antagonisms through transformation of national (and ethnic) identities beyond the primordial "Self-Other" dialectics (Zupančič, Kočan and Vuga, 2021).

Such context is also relevant for the post-Yugoslav states, which are from 2000 onwards undergoing the process of the European integration via Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAA), the signing of which marks an important step of the country towards the full EU membership. One of those countries is Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), which started the SAA negotiation process in 2005. This process is embedded into the political, social and economic reality of BiH, as institutionally framed and set out by the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA) that marked the end of the Bosnian war (Ker-Lindsay, 2016) and set in stone the possibility for further 'ethnicization' of BiH's post-war reality. Even though the DPA ended the Bosnian war, BiH's social and material environment – understood through symbols, narratives, memories, myths, geographical imagination and spatialization (Giddens, 1991) – is still exposed to different ethno-political claims, such as higher level of autonomy of the three so called constitutive nations - Bosniaks, Bosnian Serbs and Bosnian Croats (Kartsonaki, 2017). Such ethno-political claims are, as we argue in this paper, possible by building an "appropriate" political climate by ethno-political elites of the three ethnic groups, which have been constantly constructing and reproducing 'nation's' autobiography' – discursive consciousness that manifests through self-narrative – with an aim of providing the historical and cultural-political legitimacy about its own ethnic group (Subotić, 2013).

As the post-Dayton BiH legally and politically consists of two subnational political entities with a high degree of autonomy (Republika Srpska – RS and Federation of BiH – FBiH)<sup>1</sup> where three constitutive nations live, we can talk about the existence of at least three subnational social and material environments that often fight with each other for the supremacy of correct narrative(s). Within those environments, the ruling ethno-political elites are, in search of the legitimacy of their own ethnic group, imagining the "Other" through the reification at the extremes – as the primordial enemy (Giddens, 1991; Kinnvall, 2004). For the purpose of this paper, both the discourse and the framing of the "Other" are important as the perplexity between identity and security cannot be understood without distinguishing between the ontological and physical security (Rumelili, 2013; Subotić, 2015; Ejodus, 2017). The former is, in its most rudimentary, defined as "trust in the continuation of its own identity" (Giddens, 1991; Kinnvall, 2004; Steele, 2008; Mitzen, 2006; Zarakol, 2010; Rumelili, 2013; Subotić, 2015; Ejodus, 2017). Such trust can also be disrupted by critical situations (Ejodus, 2017). The latter, which usually cause ontological insecurity that corresponds with not being able to manage the every-day anxieties, began to increase in RS after 2005, which coincide with the EU-promoted (reform) incentives (e.g. SAA and Prud and Butmir processes). Those (reform) incentives would – if successful – "signal" the "overall progress of BiH on its European path", meaning that BiH is on the "right" path towards democratization, market liberalisation, and general improvement of personal liberties. Instead of this, such EU-promoted (reform) incentives – as the empirical puzzle insinuates – somehow offered a platform for further ethno-political manipulation by political elites in RS, which are highlighted and discussed later. This observation is also evident in the survey of the Directorate for European Integration (2019) that in RS measured only 58.9% support for the integration of BiH in the EU, which is significantly less than in 'the rival' political entity of BiH, where 86.5% of its residents are supportive of the integration of BiH in the EU.

---

<sup>1</sup> Alongside FBiH and RS, BiH also institutionally regulates District Brčko as autonomous area.

Focusing on the case of RS, this paper attempts to answer the question if the EU as polity, which aspires to be perceived as an actor for peace, democracy, economic prosperity, cultural diversity (Zupančič et al 2018), etc., is really comprehended as such by people living in a strongly ethno-politicized society. Or is the EU, which aims to de-intensify the meaning of ethnic identities of BiH peoples by promoting a more civic BiH with calls to make it more ‘functional’ (and thus pushing for agency on the national level at the extent of ”cutting back” the agency on subnational levels), rather perceived as a threat to ethnic identity and as source of ontological insecurity among the domestic political elite and people in RS? By doing this, the article fills the gap in the existing academic debates by analysing the question of ontological (in)security at the *subnational* level. Such approach has – to our knowledge – not been applied to date by the scholars, who have been mainly focusing on the ontological security of states as units of analysis. We argue that a subnational focus in ontological security theory could partly overcome the limitations stemming from treating the states as unitary actors (black boxes).

The paper is divided as follows. The first section briefly outlines the literature on ontological security with an aim of frame the subnational RS as a case of ontological (self-)asymmetry. The second section briefly introduces the EU agency in post-conflict BiH with an emphasis on RS. The section on the results and the discussion on the case of RS follows. The conclusion unravels the theoretical and policy implications of this study and outlines avenues for future research.

### **Ontological (in)security of Republika Srpska as a case ontological (self-)asymmetry? Conceptualisation of ontological (in)security at subnational level**

Although that the theory of ontological security (OST) was developed primarily in the field of psychology (Laing, 1965; Erikson, 1968) and later in sociology (Giddens, 1984; 1990; 1991), its application in the field of International Relations is rather recent. What OST offers in conceptual terms is the basic trust that is based on ‘hope’ and ‘courage to be’ with an aim to understand the relationship between security and (self-)identity (Giddens, 1991). Such conceptual differentiation means that while OST is focused on security of Self (being), other security concepts build on the logic of security as survival (physical security). In its most basic, we could say that OST is defined as “the security of existence, a sense of courage and trust in the world as it is through the basic trust in own biographical continuity” (Kinnvall, 2004, p. 30).

Ontological security is positive security, for which agents strive for, because it is foremost about the sense of security by being aware of who we were, who we are and who we would like to be. The latter is maintained through routinisation of every-day life, to which actors’ resort in order to manage the fundamental anxieties (Giddens, 1991, p. 44). Although there is no generally accepted scholarly consensus<sup>2</sup> on which entity is primarily the one seeking the ontological security, the argument of McSweeney (1998), Huysmans (1999), Kinnvall (2004), Steele (2005) and Mitzen (2006) are convincingly enough to argue that states and collectives can be – besides individuals – unit of analysis. Similarly has been argued by Wendt (1999), who emphasized that states, like individuals, possess both physical and social motivations. The logic of such extrapolation lies in the fact that both collectives and nations produce their

---

<sup>2</sup> See for example Krolkowski (2008), who rejects the state-centric logic by arguing that the assumption of state personhood obscures important aspect of how the state affects individual.

autobiographies and value their existence in making sense of their own selves. By focusing on RS, a subnational political entity, we are filling the existing gap in literature by demonstrating that also subnational political entities seek ontological security.<sup>3</sup> The feeling of belonging to a certain (sub)national entity, ethnic or other collective, is thus created and consolidated on the basis of a coherent autobiography that promises continuity, without which only the membership in such group would make no sense (Steele, 2008). Hence, one's own identity is in a close relationship with group identities, as there is a certain degree of attachment of the autobiography to collectives/(sub)national political entities, which enable the development and preservation of one's own identity. Based on this, OST is equally postulated around memory and history as it is on the continuity. Here, there is a need to emphasise that identity is not a social reality but changeable and amorphous (Giddens, 1991; Campbell, 1998; Kinnvall, 2004).

Given the fact that we follow the argument that identity is a social construct, the second question that we have to reflect on is the challenge of identity formation; while authors such as Wendt (1999), Steele (2008) and Ejodus (2017) advocated an individualist approach and understood identity formation as endogenous, authors such as Rumelili (2004) and Mitzen (2006) supported the social approach, which presupposes exogenous identity formation. If endogenous formation can be defined as an "internal dialectic of one's own Self" that prescribes that we must first know our own Self before framing it in relation to other (Steele, 2008, p. 32), the exogenous formation grounds on the fact that identities are formed in relation to Other through routinised social relations (Mitzen, 2006, pp. 355–359). Scholars also defined the third way of identity formation, which is defined as a middle-ground approach (Zarakol, 2010, p. 8; Ejodus, 2017, p. 5), and presumes that identity is both exogenously and endogenously shaped. This stems from the fact that it is difficult to distinguish whether challenging (identity) interactions are those that act as a central source of ontological insecurity, or whether challenging interactions are merely a symptom of agent's uncertainty about his/her own identity.

Understanding such challenging (identity) interactions that derive from conflict is of a rather recent nature in OST, when scholars attempted to link OST with the literature on conflict resolution (Rumelili, 2015b; Rumelili and Çelik, 2017). The importance of this linkage is at least two-fold; first, scholars have showed that both individuals and societies can develop some kind of an attachment to conflicts and conflict-supporting narratives" (Bar-Tal, 2013; Rumelili, 2015b). Second, the linkage between OST and conflict resolution shows that anxiety is not always something "that needs to be avoided at all cost", but can also be an integral part of conflict resolution as it can both generate a desire for the return to the certainty of conflict (meaning that peace creates anxiety) and create space for change (Rumelili and Çelik, 2017, p. 4). This is particularly relevant for ethnic conflicts, such as in the case of RS, which are often underpinned by the so-called ontological asymmetry. The latter is – according to Rumelili and Çelik (2017, p. 4–5) – understood as a state of insecurity that stems from the "non-recognition of the identity narratives of one group" that is usually in minority position vis-à-vis the majority. Even though that in the case of RS, such ontological asymmetry is of rather self-imposed nature due to their rather symmetrical status vis-à-vis both FBiH and BiH as a state that is guaranteed via DPA, the empirical reality of RS still follows the theory of ontological asymmetry in one important aspect; openness to the pursuit of change (Rumelili and Çelik, 2017, p. 4). The theory on ontological asymmetry presupposes that minority groups are much

---

<sup>3</sup> Here, we have to mention recent attempts to analyse the political agency of subnational or non-recognized political entities. One of such case was for example the agency of Catalonia (Karlsson, 2019) and Abkhazia as a *de facto* state (Jakša, 2019).

more vulnerable to spoilers of peace process, because they lack recognition of their established narratives, meaning that they become freer in their pursuit of change and peace (ibid.).

In the case of subnational RS, the political elite is framing the relations between RS and (F)BiH as asymmetrical, because they perceive the state level (BiH) as an "exclusive Bosniak idea". This means that the "risks and costs" for the Bosniaks to pursue the idea of a unitary and centralised BiH, who are also *de facto* the biggest ethnic group in BiH – 50,1% of Bosniaks and 30,8% of Bosnian Serbs, according to the census from 2013) – are "generally lesser, because by definition, the rectification of the 'injustice' involves upsetting the *status quo* that assures the existence of RS" (Rumelili and Çelik, 2017, p. 5). Any conflict, which is subjected to the ontological asymmetry, is never fully stable. This was lucidly argued by Rumelili (2015b), who showed that in ontologically asymmetric conflicts, one of the parties is always in a state of ontological insecurity. This in turn not only fosters greater attachment to the conflict and narratives about it, but also facilitates space for the consolidation of agency of respective political entity to pursue change that would bring recognition (Rumelili and Çelik, 2017, p. 5). In the case of subnational RS, its political elites pursue the change that would lead to the recognition of RS as a state by threatening to organize an "unconstitutional referendum" (Mušinić, 2015) that would to the independence of RS from BiH.<sup>4</sup> In such asymmetrical constellations, it is very hard to conclude peace processes, as any kind of intervention must be suitable for all the parties, where one is ontologically more secure and the other is ontologically more insecure (Çelik, 2015). In this paper, such intervention is analysed through the lens of the EU agency in BiH, which is not only striving for peace and reconciliation between three biggest ethnic groups, but also aiming at making BiH more functional as a state, which is to a certain extent presupposed by decreasing the legal powers of RS and FBiH as subnational political entities.

Based on this, the ontological (in)security of RS as subnational entity can be defined as an example of ontological (self-)asymmetry, whereby the domestic political elite in RS frame Bosniaks (i.e. Others) as someone who can rely on 'their' autobiography that is reproduced on at least two institutional levels (subnational (FBiH) and national (BiH) level). Such autobiography in turn does not only serve as a means to pursue ontological security of the Bosniaks, but is also – as the elites in RS argue – being legitimized by the EU agency in BiH. The argument here is that the EU's agency rather unintentionally challenges the autobiography that the domestic political elite in RS is trying to reproduce in order to pursue the ontological security of RS. This 'pursuit' is primarily done by upkeeping the *status quo* that is guaranteed via DPA. In next section, we will critically reflect on the EU's agency and untangle its potential as source of ontological (in)security within a complex constellation of ontological (self-)asymmetry of RS vis-à-vis subnational FBiH and BiH as a state.

---

<sup>4</sup> In the period between 2009 and 2013, Milorad Dodik, Bosnian Serb leader of the strongest political party in RS, has "threatened" with (unconstitutional) referendums approximately 19-times (Mušinić, 2015).

## EU's agency as source of ontological (in)security?: the case of Republika Srpska

The starting point for the discussion on how the EU's agency can be understood as source of ontological (in)security in RS starts immediately after the Bosnian war, when the EU claimed the leading role for the civil implementation of the DPA. This was further epitomized via the demand of the Council of the EU that the High Representative, who had the final authority in BiH, 'should come from the EU' (Daalder, 2000, p. 157).<sup>5</sup> However, the EU's agency was limited, which was also argued by Biermann (2014, p. 497), who showed that the EU had "not expected this amount of obstruction after Dayton" and that the EU's leverage in the RS was minimal. The EU's minimal leverage in the RS changed once Milorad Dodik was elected RS Prime Minister in early 1998. Dodik instantly moved to Banja Luka (from Pale, the war-time capital of Bosnian Serbs), froze the assets of the Pale leadership and signposted his eagerness to comply with the DPA (Majstorović, 2013). However, while the Serbian democratic party (Srpska demokratska stranka – SDS) still won the elections in 1998, the following years in the RS saw the emergence of the two camps – one continued to reject the Bosnian state and the other accepting the post-Dayton reality (Gromes, 2008, p. 14). Biermann (2014, p. 498) observed that the power struggles in the period between 1998 and 2005 declined, which Greenwood and Hartog (2005, p. 81) termed a 'seismic shift' within the RS. This in turn led to the possibility of the Defence reform (Aybet and Bieber, 2011).

The positive outcome of the international community's efforts in pushing for the Defence reform corresponds with the March 2000 EU decision to monitor the BiH's preparedness to start the SAA. By September 2002, BiH accomplished all the requested efforts in order to start the SAA negotiations. An important factor for the success could also be attributed the end of Tuđman's and Milošević's rule in 1999 and 2000, which in turn buried hopes that both patrons would continue to sponsor secessionism since both Croatia and Serbia were eager to start their own EU accession process (Biermann, 2014, p. 500). This period is important as it opened a window of opportunity for the EU to start advocating more transformative issues on its political agenda, which were directly aimed at decreasing ethnic entrenchments set in stone by DPA. Such logic was also present during the 2005 Progress Report on BiH (Commission of the European Union, 2005, p. 5). The latter framed DPA as "too complex and fiscally unsustainable", and advocated for a 'more functional state'. Hence, the EU directly affected the social and material environment that is maintained by the domestic political elites in RS – i.e. *status quo* of DPA – as any calls for more functional state means transfer of competences from subnational level to the national level. Noutcheva (2012, p. 164) noted that such call implied cutting back the authority of the RS while empowering the Bosniaks. This manifested in April 2006 (so called April Package), when negotiations on a package of constitutional reforms failed and sparked new tensions between the ethno-political elites in BiH. Muehlmann (2008) and Juncos (2013) even argued that the Office of High Representative (OHR) was extremely impatient with Bosnian Serbs trying to force the SDS to its knees, while the EU did failed by not openly opposing to the OHR's coercive actions. Both the EU and the OHR have 'failed' and led Muehlmann (2008, p. 20) to argue that "neither the stick of the OHR through Bonn powers, nor the carrot of EU accession can drive top-down reforms which do not have a basis of support within Bosnian society".

Since 2006, Dodik's ethno-political rhetoric started dominating social and material environment of the RS. One of the most important narratives that permeated the social

---

<sup>5</sup> Juncos (2013, p. 97) noted that the EU then nominated the High Representative and funded 53% of its budget, established a Delegation in Sarajevo, upgraded its Monitoring Mission in Bosnia and extended its Administration in Mostar.

environment of RS was the policy of permanent questioning of the future status of subnational political entity of RS. This in turn started to affect the public opinion in RS as the majority of Bosnian Serbs (62%), which in 2006 argued that they would favoured independence of RS if Kosovo would declare independence (Biermann, 2014, p. 500–501). Furthermore, as Zdeb (2017, p. 374) pointed out, the 2006 elections were subjected to an extremely negative and almost a single-issue campaign, which was based on the question of the constitutional system of BiH. Furthermore, only 2 of the registered 36 parties for the elections (Social Democratic Party and People’s Party for Work and Betterment) had civic platforms and more than 70% of campaign on newspapers were based either by ethnic or national rhetoric (Zdeb 2017, p. 375).

The so called April Package that failed to be implemented in 2006 and a fierce campaign preceding it, which was grounded on the question of constitutional system, led to the Prud negotiations initiated by Sulejman Tihić (Bosniak), Dragan Čović (Bosnian Croat) and Milorad Dodik in December 2008. The process failed on 21 February 2009 when Dodik gave ultimatum to Tihić and Čović that the status of RS should be guaranteed, ethnic voting preserved and entities receive the right to secede (Zdeb, 2017, p. 375). Such events called for a ‘much more aggressive’ EU policy, which gained its visibility during the so-called Butmir Package, but failed due to the difficult circumstances, as Butmir talks coincided with the general elections in 2010, ongoing crisis in Mostar and the OHR-RS tensions (Parish, 2010, p. 231). Bieber (2010) argued that the EU failed because it was ill prepared, suggested ‘quick solutions’ to the parties and in return had little to offer in exchange for reform. The resistance was visible on the (sub)national level, as in 2010 only 13% of Bosnian Serbs identified very or extremely strongly with BiH – which resonates with the idea of the civic identification that the EU promotes – while 62% and 68% of them identified with RS and Serbia (Biermann, 2014, p. 500).

Dodik did not stop here. In the following years he proposed another three referendums, namely: a) in April 2011 a referendum on the authority of the state judicial system; b) in April 2015 a referendum on the National Day of Republika Srpska; c) in November 2015 a referendum on the authority of the BiH state Court. The transformative role of the EU here was untraceable, as there were only *ad-hoc* reactions in order to prevent the unconstitutional actions of RS’s political elites. The only transformative actions that had the potential to undermine the existing social and material environment of the RS (i.e. giving meaning and value of ethno-politicized identities promoted by the domestic political elites in RS) already installed in 2006 was vivid in June 2015, when SAA entered into force, and in February 2016, when BiH submitted its application to join the EU. However, the unconstitutional referendum on the National Day of RS was held on 25 September 2016, and weak EU’s reaction to the challenge has accelerated further division along the ethnic lines (Bassuener and Mujanović, 2017, p. 110).

In this context, the next section will first outline the methodology and then unpack the dynamics and perceptions of the voters of the biggest ethno-political parties in RS, namely the SNSD and SDS vis-à-vis the EU, and analyse if the EU’s attempts to de-intensify the strength and meaning of ethno-politicized identities and develop civic identities, functions as a source of ontological security.

## Methodology

To answer the question if the EU's agency as the polity, which attempts to de-intensify the strength and meaning of ethno-politicized identities in BiH by developing a more civic understanding of BiH, functions as source of ontological security, we rely on the analysis of the public opinion survey.<sup>6</sup> Out of 922 respondents in the survey, 34,7% (320 people) were from RS, while 63,8% (588 people) and 1,5% (13 people) were from Federation of BiH and District Brčko, respectively. While the survey did not ask respondents explicitly regarding their national (ethnic) belonging due to the methodological limitations of the research consortium (ethics), we are following Kapidžić's (2017) definition on ethno-political parties, where SDS and SNSD are categorised as parties with clear ethnic (Bosnian Serb) connotation. For the purpose of this article, we only analysed the attitudes of the 320 respondents from RS.

Firstly, we identified those respondents who stated that they have voted for SNSD (15,2 %) and SDS (12,5 %) in the last General elections in 2018. Both political parties are important as not only that they are understood as ethno-political, but they are the only two parties that have ruled over RS since 1996. The first level of analysis is the perception of those Bosnian Serb respondents regarding their understanding of the EU. In doing this, we are relying on four sets of questions, namely: "What does the EU mean to you personally?, where the respondents rated if the EU for them symbolizes: i.) *a strong say in the world*, ii.) *peace*, iii) *economic prosperity*, iv) *cultural diversity*, v) *loss of cultural identity*, etc.<sup>7</sup> The second set focuses on the general evaluation if the membership in the EU is considered a good or a bad thing for BiH. The third set focuses on the EU agency to overcome the antagonisms (ethnic division) in BiH and the perception of the EU's help to those who suffered from the past injustices of the Bosnian war. Finally, the fourth set focuses on evaluating what the most appropriate means for reconciliation are (national trials, international trials etc.). The second part of the analysis will be thus focused on the comparison between the answers of the Bosnian Serb respondents who voted for one of the two 'ethno-political parties' (SNSD or SDS) and the respondents who voted for non-ethno-political parties such as the Social Democratic Party of BiH, which was identified by Kapidžić (2017) and Zdeb (2017) as one of rare BiH parties, which does not have an ethno-political connotation, as it includes members from all ethnic groups and does not pursue an ethno-political agenda. Here, we will try to determine whether there is a correlation between the perception on the EU's agency as an actor for peace and reconciliation and party affiliation, meaning that those that vote for ethno-political parties would evaluate the EU agency as both actor for peace and reconciliation in BiH more negatively than those that do *not* vote for ethno-political parties. This is important since ethno-political parties are ruling over RS since its existence and are thus (re)imagining the "Other" through the reification at the extremes in order to maintain the ontological security of subnational RS.

320 respondents from RS participated in the public opinion survey: among the determined ones (52.3%), the largest percentage voted for SNSD (15.2%) and SDS (12.5%). 27.7% (88 people) have voted for other parties (largest share of them for Democratic People's Alliance<sup>8</sup> (DNS –

---

<sup>6</sup> The public opinion survey was conducted within the Horizon2020 project entitled RePAST ([www.repast.eu](http://www.repast.eu)).

<sup>7</sup> Respondents evaluated the meaning of the EU on the scale from 1 to 4 (from *not at all* to *very much*).

<sup>8</sup> *Demokratski narodni savez* (DNS).



5.6%) and Party of Democratic Progress<sup>9</sup> (PDP – 5.3%).<sup>10</sup> With regard to religious affiliation, the highest share of participants declared themselves as Orthodox Christians (70%), followed by no answer (19.6%) and Muslims (7.9%). 55% among the respondents had lower education<sup>11</sup> and 45% had higher education. The urban vs. rural representation in the sample was balanced: 51.1% of respondents came from a village or town with less than 10,000 inhabitants while 48.9% of them come from a city with more than 10,000 inhabitants. The same balance could be noticed in terms of gender representation, as 54.4% of the respondents were men and 45.6% were women. Finally, when talking about the specific traits of the respondents that voted for SDS and SNSD, the statistics are the following: among the 86 (out of 320) who have voted for one of the above two ethno-political parties, 90.1% among them declared as Orthodox Christians, 63.4% of them are men, 65.3 % of them are coming from a village or town with less than 10,000 inhabitants and 65.3% have lower education.

## Results and discussion

The analysis confirmed that there is no significant, statistically established pattern to argue that the ‘political party affiliation’ played any role in how respondents in RS – voting for either ethno-political parties or other parties in RS – assessed the meaning of the EU in several questions (see Table 1 for details). In other words: when talking about whether the EU means stronger say in the world, peace, economic prosperity, democracy, social protection, freedom to travel anywhere in the EU, cultural diversity, EURO (currency), bureaucracy, waste of money, loss of our cultural identity, more crime, not enough control at external borders, unemployment and Christian religion, there was no significant difference in evaluation of these questions, if the voters of ethno-political parties are compared with the voters of other parties. Furthermore, the results are also rather surprising when reflecting upon the EU as something that means “a loss of our cultural identity” – which is the question directly related to the ‘self’ of RS. The mean value of those that voted for ethno-political parties stood at 2.57. A rather similar mean value (2.42) at this question has been observed by those that have voted for other parties in RS. Such results hint at the conclusion that the respondents in RS neither agree nor disagree with the statement that the EU’s agency causes losing cultural identity.

*Table 1: Evaluation of the meaning of the EU among voters of ethno-political and other parties in RS*

*(1 – nothing at all; 4 – very much)*

What does the EU mean to you personally?	Ethno-political	Other
A stronger say in the world	2.63	2.52
Peace	2.57	2.79
Economic prosperity	2.54	2.71
Democracy	2.40	2.62
Social protection	2.59	2.77
Freedom to travel, study and work in the EU	3.10	3.16
Cultural diversity	2.60	2.48
EURO (currency)	2.52	2.61

<sup>9</sup> Partija demokratskog progresu (PDP).

<sup>10</sup> Other parties are the following: Social Democratic Party of BiH (*Socijaldemokratska stranka BiH*); Democratic Front (*Demokratska fronta*); Our Party (*Naša stranka*); Independent Block (*Nezavisni blok*); Socialist Party of Srpska (*Socijalistička partija Srpske*).

<sup>11</sup> Here, we have merged four responses, namely: i) primary school; ii) secondary school; iii) vocational (secondary) school; iv) no school at all.

Bureaucracy	2.56	2.46
Waste of money	2.47	2.33
Loss of our cultural identity	2.57	2.42
More crime	2.40	2.22
Not enough control at external borders	2.33	2.30
Unemployment	2.36	2.27
Christian religion	2.34	2.16

Source: Authors' own analysis.

In analysing the perception among the residents of RS whether the membership in the EU is good, neither good nor bad or a bad thing, we observed some differences between those that have voted for ethno-political parties and those that have voted for other parties. The mean value of those that have voted for ethno-political parties stood at 2 (on a scale from 1 to 3), and 2.3 for those that voted for other parties (see Table 3). The results showed statistically significant difference, meaning that the voters of ethno-political parties believe in RS more that the BiH's membership in the EU is a *bad thing* than the voters of other parties in RS. Here, we have to highlight that the perception on BiH's membership in the EU as a *bad thing* is also very much present among the voters of others parties in RS as well. This means that the contemporary 'state-of-the-art' among the examined group of voters in RS is that BiH's membership in the EU would not be perceived as something positive.

Table 2: Evaluation of the BiH's membership in the EU *by voters of ethno-political and other parties in RS*

<b>Voting preferences</b>	Ethno-political	Other
	<b>mean value</b>	<b>mean value</b>
<i>Generally speaking, do you think that BiH's membership in the EU would be ... (1 – a good thing; 2 – a bad thing; 3 – neither a good nor a bad thing)</i>	2	2.3

Source: Authors' own analysis.

When talking about the EU's agency in overcoming the divisions (antagonisms) between the ethnic groups related to Bosnian war, we observed slightly higher discrepancy in evaluations between those residents of RS that have voted for ethno-political parties and those who voted other parties. The mean value of those that have voted for ethno-political parties stood at 3.55 (on a scale from 1 to 5), and 3.35 for those that voted for other parties. The statistical significant difference could not be observed. A relatively small deviation among both 'groups of voters' when evaluating the EU's agency in overcoming the division suggests that the respondents in RS are comparatively united in reflecting that the EU didn't do enough to overcome the antagonisms between ethnic groups that derive from the Bosnian war.

Table 3: Perception on the EU's agency by voters of ethno-political and other parties in RS

<b>Voting preferences</b>	Ethno-political	Other
	<b>mean value</b>	<b>mean value</b>

<i>The EU has helped to overcome the divisions related to the Bosnian war (1 – completely agree; 5 – completely disagree)</i>	3.55	2.1
<i>The EU should do more to help those who have suffered from the past injustices from the Bosnian war (1 – completely agree; 5 – completely disagree)</i>	3.35	2.26

Source: Authors' own analysis.

We proceed with the discussion by looking at the respondents' perceptions regarding the EU's agency in helping those who have suffered from past injustices of the Bosnian war. In general, the respondents in RS, who belong to one of the two examined groups (ethno-political, other) did express the need for more active EU's agency in terms of helping the victims of the past Bosnian war (M=2.23).<sup>12</sup> However, there are no substantial differences among the mean values, if both 'groups of voters' are compared. A relatively small deviation between the voters of ethno-political parties (2.1) and other parties (2.26), when evaluating the EU's agency in helping those that have suffered regardless of their ethnicity, suggests that all respondents are comparatively united in a belief that the EU's agency in helping those that have suffered from past injustices of the Bosnian war is/was not satisfactory. In other words: the results insinuate that the EU's agency in dealing with the injustices are something that they would welcome, but it remains unanswered whether such 'welcoming' stance would still persist if the survey's question would somehow indicate the 'ethnic identity label' to the victim.

We conclude this section by looking into the respondents' evaluation of the proposed seven<sup>13</sup> measures for achieving reconciliation.<sup>14</sup> Even though the question is not directly connected with the EU's agency, there are at least two measures that the EU as a polity is promoting in BiH from 1995 onwards, namely: i) hold international trials to prosecute those that committed crimes<sup>15</sup>; ii) reform laws and institutions.<sup>16</sup> In general, the respondents, which belong to one of the two examined groups (ethno-political, non-ethno-political), evaluated all measures relatively highly (M=8.73), which hints at the conclusion that reconciliation is important for them. Even though that we could not establish statistical significant difference between the voters of ethno-political parties and other parties, we could reflect on certain trajectory that is inherent to the voters of ethno-political parties. The results insinuate that voters of ethno-political parties are more prone towards either upkeeping or changing the social and material environment via both symbolic reparations (e.g. public recognition, monuments, street names) and educating children on what happened during the Bosnian war.

<sup>12</sup> On the scale from 1 to 5, 1 meant "totally agree" and 5 "totally disagree".

<sup>13</sup> The measures were the following: i) hold national trials to prosecute those that committed crimes; ii) hold international trials to prosecute those that committed crimes; iii) provide material reparations for those affected (economic reparations, property restitutions.); iv) provide symbolic reparations for those affected (public recognition, commemorations, monuments, street names); v) carry out investigations about what happened; vi) educate children on what happened; vii) reform laws and institutions.

<sup>14</sup> The question "Thinking about Bosnian war, how important would you say are the following measures?" has been measured on a was measured on a 10-point scale (0 – not important at all; 10 – extremely important).

<sup>15</sup> Here, we are talking about the trials in front of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY).

<sup>16</sup> e.g. Prud and Butmir process.

Table 4: Evaluation of the most important means to achieve reconciliation by voters of ethno-political and other parties in RS

Thinking about Bosnian war, how would you say are the following measures?	Ethno-political	Other
Hold national trials to prosecute those that committed crimes	8.92	8.75
Hold international trials to prosecute those that committed crimes	8.51	8.84
Provide material reparations for those affected (e.g. economic reparations)	9.18	9.25
Provide symbolic reparations for those affected (e.g. street names)	8.28	8.18
Carry out investigations about what happened	9.63	9.01
Educate children on what happened	8.99	8.62
Reform laws and institutions	9.55	9.09

Source: Authors' own analysis

## Conclusion

Our analysis was motivated by the empirical observation that the EU's agency in RS is not something that local ethno-political elites in this political entity would welcome. Furthermore, the most important EU policy incentives that had the potential to directly touch upon the social and material environment of the RS in order to both advance the post-conflict resolution via institution-building efforts and de-intensify the institutional securitisation of ethnic identities in BiH (e.g. SAA, Prud and Butmir processes) were encountered by strong local resistance of ethno-political elites. In this paper, our primary research goal was to examine whether the EU's agency, which wants to be perceived as 'force of good' in post-conflict societies, can function as a source of ontological insecurity in one of the subnational political entities in BiH, namely RS. By doing this, the article also attempted at filling the gap in the existing debates as the question of ontological (in)security at the subnational level has been neglected by scholars, who are predominantly focused on the ontological (in)security of states as analytical units. This was done with the argument that the ontological (in)security of RS as subnational entity vis-à-vis (F)BiH can be defined as an example of ontological (self-)asymmetry, whereby the domestic political elite in RS frame Bosniak political elite as someone who can rely on narratives that are reproduced on at least two institutional levels (subnational – FBiH; national – BiH). Furthermore, the reproduction and the legitimacy of such narratives on both levels is – as perceived by the domestic political elite in RS – epitomized by and within the EU' reform incentives in the past fifteen years or so.

We used a statistical analysis of the public opinion survey in order to assess the EU's agency in de-intensifying the meaning of ethno-politicized identities 'at the expense' of developing civic ones vis-à-vis the domestic political elite efforts to consolidate the 'ethnic' self in RS. We have analysed the respondents' perceptions on the EU agency via differentiating between the two groups of voters (i.e. voters of ethno-political parties and voters of other parties), while primarily focusing on the voters of ethno-political parties. The analysis is built upon four sets of questions, which touched upon the meaning of the EU (particularly the statement that the EU means losing our own cultural identity), EU's agency in overcoming the divisions between the ethnic groups, the EU's agency in helping those that have suffered from past injustices and the evaluation of the (potential) measures for achieving reconciliation in RS, of which the EU as a polity utilises in order to promote meaningful reforms that are assumingly of transformative nature for the post-conflict social and material environment of RS (and BiH).

The results have shown that all respondents – regardless of their voting preference – neither agree nor disagree with the statement that the EU means losing cultural identity. This is important as it reflects on the broader understanding of the EU’s agency in de-intensifying the meaning of ethno-politicized identities, meaning that the respondents in RS do not think that EU’s agency causes losing cultural identity. However, when it comes to the evaluation of the BiH’s potential membership in the EU, the results were much more indicative. Respondents in RS – regardless of their voting preference – think that the membership in the EU would be a bad thing for BiH. When it comes to the evaluation of the EU’s agency in overcoming the antagonisms between the ethnic groups, the results are similarly united, but the other way around; practically all of the respondents within the two examined groups in RS believe that the EU didn’t do enough to overcome the antagonism(s) between the ethnic groups. Such result hints that the EU’s agency is somehow welcomed in RS, even though that the empirical reality hints on a completely different trajectory. One possible explanation would be that while the ethno-political elites in RS are not inclined towards ”more EU” in their social and material environment due to the aforementioned ontological (self-)asymmetry vis-à-vis Bosniak political elite that is epitomized via FBiH (subnational level) and BiH (national level), the people that vote them would want a ”stronger/more active” EU agency in lessening the antagonism(s) between the ethnic groups.

Similarly could be argued in terms of the perceptions of the EU’s agency in helping those who have suffered from past injustices of the Bosnian war. The results have shown that the respondents in RS are again – regardless of their voting preference – united in a belief that the EU’s agency in helping those that have suffered from past injustice of the Bosnian war is/was not satisfactory. However, it remains rather unclear whether such ‘unity’ would still persist if the question would indicate the ‘ethnicity’ of those victims. Finally, when reflecting upon the measures for achieving reconciliation, the results add an even more nuanced answer to the question whether the EU as a polity, which aspires to be perceived as an actor for peace, democracy, etc., is really perceived by people living in RS as such, or it is rather understood as source of ontological insecurity. Here, both groups of voters were rather divided in what is perceived as better means to achieve reconciliation; the voters of ethno-political parties for example believe that material reparations for those affected by the Bosnian war and educating children about what happened during the Bosnian war is the most appropriate measure to achieve reconciliation, in contrast to the voters of other parties, who – alongside the material reparations – believe that reforming laws and institutions and carry out investigation about what happened is the most appropriate measure to achieve reconciliation.

The case study of RS thus shows how autonomous and complex subnational social and material environments can be and how ontological (self-)asymmetry can also function as a technique of governance by domestic ethno-political elite. Here, the argument is that the domestic ethno-political elite in RS is upkeeping a unique form of ontological (self-)asymmetry in order to facilitate an appropriate political atmosphere in RS where the existence of subnational RS is not only legitimate but a ‘must’ for the imagined Bosnian Serb ‘Self’. By doing this, ethno-political elite tries to manage the existential anxieties that derive from the uncertainties of the EU’s agency in BiH as one of the main goals of the EU in BiH is to make it ‘more functional’. The latter – vivid in the discourse of the domestic political elite in RS – implies at ”taking” certain political powers of subnational RS. This in turn not only prevents meaningful cooperation between the ethnic groups but also prevents effective agency of ‘international peace-makers’, starting with the EU.

To conclude, this study comes with at least one important limitation. The analysis was done exclusively via the statistical analysis of public opinion survey, which is of quantitative nature and reflects more broadly on the general 'state-of-the-art' of the EU's agency in RS in 2020. This means that the respondents' views are subjected to potentially a high number of both micro- and macro- points of ruptures throughout years. In this regard, future endeavours utilizing similar approach could also include some qualitative methods such as semi-structured interviews or focus groups, which would then not only give a more nuanced picture on the EU's agency in social and material environment of RS, but also offer a more complex answers to the question of the EU's agency in de-intensifying the meaning of ethno-politicized identities at the expense of building more civic ones. However, the statistical analysis of public opinion survey gives results that are valuable insofar as they indicate towards a need to critically examine to which extent the 'general-state-of-the-art' can give an insight into the general state of the security of ones' own Self (be it on a societal or (sub)national level), which is not analysed around point of ruptures but instead on a broader institutionalisation of antagonisms between different ethnic groups. This in turn would also reflect on the empirical reality of other subnational entities in international community (e.g. Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus) where on the one hand, the EU's agency could simultaneously function as a source of ontological security and as a source of ontological insecurity.

## References

- Aybet, G. and Bieber, F. (2011). From Dayton to Brussels: the impact of EU and NATO conditionality on state building in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *Europe-Asia studies*, 63(10), 1911–1937.
- Bassuener, K. and Mujanović, A. (2017). The 2016 Referendum in Bosnia and Herzegovina. *East European Quarterly*, 45(1/2), 99–111.
- Bieber, F. (2010). *Constitutional reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina: preparing for EU accession*. Brussels: European Policy Centre.
- Biermann, R. (2014). Coercive Europeanization: the EU's struggle to contain secessionism in the Balkans. *European Security*, 23(4), 484–508.
- Campbell, D. (1998). *National Deconstruction: Violence, Identity and Justice in Bosnia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Çelik, A. B. (2015). Kurdish Issue and Levels of Ontological Security. In B. Rumelili (ed.); *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties* (pp. 52–70). Abingdon: Routledge.
- Commission of the European Union. (2005). *Bosnia and Herzegovina 2005 progress report*. Brussels, COM (2005) 561 final.

- Cupać, J. (2020). The Anxiety Dilemma: Locating the Western Balkans in the Age of Anxiety. *Journal of Regional Security*, 15(1), 1–32.
- Dingott, Alkopher, T. (2015). The political psychology of integration strategies: the case of the European Commission's interculturalism. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 18(1), 428–454.
- Directorate for European Integration. (2019). *Citizen's opinion on EU membership and EU integration process*. Available at [http://dei.gov.ba/dei/media\\_servis/istrazivanje/default.aspx?id=1905&langTag=en-US&template\\_id=120&pageIndex=1](http://dei.gov.ba/dei/media_servis/istrazivanje/default.aspx?id=1905&langTag=en-US&template_id=120&pageIndex=1) (15 June 2020).
- Ejdus, F. (2017). Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21(1), 883–908.
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and Crisis*. New York: WW Norton & Company.
- Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, A. (1990). *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Greenwood, D. and Hartog, M. (2005). *The Western Balkan candidates for NATO membership and partnership*. Groningen: Centre for European Security Studies.
- Gromes, T. (2008). *Common democracy, divided society. The impossibility to implement a peace strategy for Bosnia and Herzegovina* (HSFK Report no. 9). Frankfurt: Hessische Stiftung Friedens-und Konfliktforschung.
- Gustafsson, K. and Krickel-Choi, N. (2020). Returning to the roots of ontological security: Insights from the existentialist anxiety literature. *European Journal of International Relations*, 0(0), 1–21.
- Hansen, L. (2012). Reconstructing Desecuritisation: the normative-political in the Copenhagen Schools and directions for how to apply it. *Review of International Studies*, 38(3): 525–546.
- Huysmans, J. (1999). Security! What do You Mean? From Concept to Thick Signifier. *European Journal of International Relations*, 4(2), 226–255.
- Juncos, A. E. (2013). *EU foreign and security policy in Bosnia: the politics of coherence and effectiveness*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Kapidžić, D. (2017). Segmentirani stranački sustav Bosne i Hercegovine. *Političke perspective – časopis za istraživanje politike*, 7(1/2), 7–23.
- Kartsonaki, A. (2017). *Twenty Years After Dayton: Bosnia-Herzegovina (Still) Stable and Explosive*. *Civil Wars*, 18(4), 488–516.

- Ker-Lindsay, J. (2016). *The Hollow Threat of Secession in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Legal and Political impediments to a Unilateral Declaration of Independence by Republika Srpska*. London: LSEE – Research on South Eastern Europe.
- Kinnvall, C. (2004). Globalization and religious nationalism: self, identity, and the search for ontological security. *Political psychology*, 25(5), 741–767.
- Krolkowski, A. (2008). State Personhood in Ontological Security Theories of International Relations and Chinese Nationalism: A Sceptical View. *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2(1), 109–133.
- Laing, R. D. (1971). *Self and others*. London: Penugin Books.
- Majstorović, D. (2013). Comments on Gerald Toal’s ”Republica Srpska will have a referendum: the rhetorical politics of Milorad Dodik”. *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, 41(1), 209–213.
- Manners, I. and Murray, P. (2015). The End of a Noble Narrative? European Integration Narratives after the Nobel Peace Prize. *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 54(1), 185–202.
- McSweeney, B. (1998). *Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mitzen, J. Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dillema. *European Journal of International Relations*, 12(3): 341–370.
- Muehlmann, T. (2008). Police restructuring in Bosnia-Herzegovina: problems of internationally-led security sector reform. *Journal of intervention and statebuilding*, 2(1), 1–22.
- Neumann, I. B. (1999). *Uses of the Other: "The East" in European Identity Formation*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota press.
- Noutcheva, G. (2012). *European foreign policy and the challenges of Balkan accession*. London: Routledge.
- Parish, M. (2010). *A free city in the Balkans. Reconstructing a divided society in Bosnia*. New York: I.B. Rauris.
- Prozorov, S. (2011). The other as past and present: beyond the logic of ‘temporal othering’ in IR theory. *Review of International Studies*, 37(3): 1273–1293.
- Rumelili, B. (2011). Identity and Desecuritization: Possibilities and Limits. Paper presented at Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI) Research Seminar Series. Oslo: Norway.
- Rumelili, B. (2013). Identity and desecuritisation: the pitfalls of conflating ontological and physical security. *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 18(1), 52–74.
- Rumelili, B. (2015). Ontological (in)security and peace anxieties: a framework for conflict resolution. In B. Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties* (pp. 10–29). Abingdon: Routledge.



- Steele, B. J. (2008). *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State*. London: Routledge.
- Subotić, J. (2015). Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change. *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12(4), 610–627.
- Wendt, A. (1999): *Social Theory of International Politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Zarakol, A. (2010). Ontological (in)Security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan. *International Relations*, 24(1), 3–23.
- Zdeb, A. (2017). Prud and Butmir Processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Intra-ethnic Competition from the Perspective of Game Theory. *Ethnopolitics*, 16(4), 369–387.
- Zupančič, R., Kočan, F. and Vuga, J. (2021). Ethnic distancing through aesthetics in Bosnia-Herzegovina: appraising the limits of art as a peacebuilding tool with a socio-psychological experiment. *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 21(1), 101–123. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14683857.2020.1867410>
- Zupančič, Rok, Pejič, N., Grilj, B. and Peen Rodt, A. (2018). The European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo: An Effective Conflict Prevention and Peace-Building Mission? *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, 20 (6), 599-617. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19448953.2017.1407539>