THE EUROPEAN PATH OF THE WESTERN BALKANS: IDENTITY AS A CHALLENGE TO LOYALTY

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of ethnic and religious identity in shaping geopolitical orientations towards the European Union in the Western Balkans. It explores how identity narratives intersect with territorial divisions, historical memory and relations with external actors, particularly Russia and Türkiye. The central hypothesis is that identity-based geopolitical narratives may challenge loyalty to the European integration project, understood as a commitment to its shared principles, obligations and strategic objectives. The analysis focuses on Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, three cases characterised by different

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configurations of political identity, territorial organisation and external relationships. The methodology combines conceptual analysis, qualitative content analysis of 15 selected political statements, and critical engagement with secondary literature and public-opinion data. Particular attention is given to differences between state-level orientations and those expressed within territorial and ethnopolitical communities. The analysis suggests that formal European integration does not necessarily correspond to uniform geopolitical identification, while the political significance of Russian and Turkish identity-based narratives varies across states, territories and communities.

Keywords: Western Balkans, European Union, identity, loyalty, security

Introduction

The Western Balkans constitute a geopolitically distinctive and spatially dynamic region whose geographical scope tends to contract as individual countries accede to the European Union (EU). The region is characterised by considerable ethnic and religious heterogeneity, with collective identities playing an important role in political mobilisation and relations between communities. Historical experiences of conflict and competing national projects have reinforced their political significance. Moreover, ethnic and religious communities frequently extend beyond state borders, while individual states encompass different collective identities and geopolitical orientations.

European integration introduces an additional dimension to these relationships. While the EU's normative framework emphasises individual rights, equality and shared political principles, collective ethnic and religious identities retain considerable political influence in the Western Balkans. Their mobilising

potential may not always be adequately reflected in predominantly institutional approaches to European integration. Consequently, progress in adopting European standards and fulfilling accession requirements does not necessarily correspond to equally strong political loyalty to the European integration project. Political actors and communities may demonstrate institutional commitment to European integration while maintaining identity-based geopolitical affinities extending beyond the EU framework. Such affinities may coexist with European orientations or challenge particular European principles and strategic objectives.

The continuing relevance of ethnic and religious identities creates opportunities for external geopolitical engagement, particularly by Russia and Türkiye, whose historical, cultural and religious relationships with different Western Balkan communities provide recognisable foundations for identity-based narratives. These relationships differ in their political implications and should not automatically be interpreted as opposing European integration. Their influence depends on the political and territorial contexts in which such narratives are received and mobilised.

A political-geographical perspective is essential to understanding these processes. The uneven spatial distribution of ethnic and religious communities, the divergence between political borders and cultural affiliations, and competing geopolitical imaginaries contribute to differences in geopolitical orientation. These differences emerge between states and within their territories and communities, meaning that state-level commitments to European integration may conceal considerable internal variation in political identification and loyalty.

Against this background, the central research question is: How do ethnic and religious identities shape geopolitical orientations and loyalty to the European integration project across different political-geographical contexts in the Western Balkans? The central hypothesis is that identity-based geopolitical narratives may challenge loyalty to the European integration project, understood as a commitment to its shared principles, obligations and strategic objectives. The paper examines this hypothesis through a comparative qualitative analysis of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, focusing on the interaction between collective identities, territorial differentiation and external geopolitical narratives. It seeks to clarify the political-geographical conditions under which identity becomes relevant to geopolitical orientation and political loyalty, without treating ethnic or religious identity itself as an obstacle to European integration.

Theoretical Framework

Ethnic and Religious Identity in Political Geography

Ethnic and religious identities acquire political-geographical significance through their relationship with territory, state boundaries and wider geopolitical contexts. Drawing on Hartshorne's functionalist approach, Flint and Taylor (2025) discuss how ethnic and religious differences may act as centrifugal forces within states, while emphasising broader power relations and internal social divisions. The territorial concentration of ethnic communities, their position within state boundaries and their relationships with neighbouring states may shape political claims and orientations (Abdi, 2018), particularly where cultural and historical affiliations extend beyond political boundaries.

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Ethnic and religious identities should not be understood as homogeneous or politically predetermined categories. Pfaff-Czarnecka (2020) distinguishes collective identity from belonging, emphasising multiple affiliations, mutual attachments and internal differences within ethnic communities. Shared cultural or religious identification therefore does not necessarily imply uniform political preferences or geopolitical orientations. This distinction is especially relevant in the Western Balkans, where communities maintain different relationships with state institutions, neighbouring countries and external geopolitical actors.

Religious identity also acquires political significance through historical memory, sacred places and symbolic interpretations of territory (Harris, 2022). However, common religious traditions do not necessarily produce corresponding political orientations. Comparing Orthodox Churches in Greece, Serbia and Russia, Veković (2021) demonstrates how institutions sharing the same theological tradition may adopt different political positions according to their historical circumstances and relationships with the state. Consequently, Orthodox Christianity cannot be treated as an automatic source of geopolitical identification with Russia, just as shared Islamic heritage does not necessarily determine political orientations towards Türkiye.

These considerations highlight the spatial differentiation of identity-based geopolitical relationships. State borders do not always coincide with cultural and historical reference spaces, while political communities may simultaneously identify with European, national and wider religious or civilisational frameworks. The significance of such affiliations varies across territorial and ethnopolitical communities, making political

geography essential for examining their relationship with European integration.

Political Loyalty and European Integration

Political belonging involves expectations and obligations extending beyond identification with a collective (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020). For this study, political loyalty towards the European integration project denotes commitment to its shared principles, obligations and strategic objectives, beyond support for EU membership. Poulsen (2020) conceptualises loyalty more narrowly as persistent preferential behaviour rooted in affective attachments, shaped by shared identities and sustained interaction. His distinction between loyalty, formal obligations and instrumental cooperation is useful here, although political statements can reveal expressed commitments rather than establish underlying affective loyalty.

Political loyalties may overlap across territorially defined national, regional and supranational political communities (Waller & Linklater, 2003). National and European identities are not inherently incompatible, although exclusive national identities may challenge integration (Börzel & Risse, 2020). Political commitments also depend on democratic expectations and institutional conduct (Ross, 2024). The EU's own policies also influence political orientations towards European integration. Turhan (2025) examines the geopolitical construction of European identity within enlargement discourse, while Zweers et al. (2022) associate inconsistencies in EU conditionality and its engagement with political leaders facing criticism over democratic standards with limitations in the Union's transformative influence in the Western Balkans.

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Formal alignment does not necessarily entail substantive commitment. Hasić et al. (2020) identify selective acceptance of European norms among political elites in Bosnia and Herzegovina and North Macedonia. Dobbels (2009) similarly examines pragmatic Serbian cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia despite identity-related resistance. These examples illustrate the distinction between institutional adaptation and political allegiance, without necessarily establishing identity as the principal explanation for such discrepancies.

Territorial organisation and contested statehood further complicate integration. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, constitutional arrangements linking ethnic representation with territorial autonomy can constrain European obligations (Woelk et al., 2023), although political choices remain significant (Bieber, 2010). Divergent interpretations of statehood and territorial authority also influence integration debates (Preljević & Ljubović, 2024). In Kosovo, contested sovereignty and disagreements among EU member states shape European engagement (Noutcheva, 2020; Bargués et al., 2024). These differences in territorial organisation, sovereignty and political identification shape the relationship between European integration and loyalty across states and ethnopolitical communities.

In Serbia, Styczyńska and Dajč (2022) associate Eurosceptic party positions with narratives concerning Kosovo, sovereignty and historical grievances, identifying differences between pro-Russian and politically neutral orientations. Their findings illustrate how geopolitical preferences vary even among actors operating within the same state and formal accession framework.

Identity-Based Narratives and External Geopolitical Influence

Identity-based geopolitical narratives connect historical memory, cultural belonging and territorial interpretations with foreign policy orientations. Their influence depends on domestic political actors and territorial circumstances. Humă (2015) demonstrates how competing identity narratives reproduce geopolitical distinctions in Moldova, while Laruelle (2015) conceptualises the Russian World as a transborder framework linking cultural affiliation with geopolitical influence. This offers a comparative perspective on Serbian national unity narratives without presuming equivalence.

Russian engagement in the Western Balkans draws upon Orthodox and Slavic affinities, historical relationships and diplomatic positions concerning Kosovo. Rrustemi (2020) examines Russian engagement through political, religious and nationalist networks in Serbia, Republika Srpska and Serb-majority areas of Kosovo, highlighting the territorial concentration of such relationships and their connections with local political actors. Amadio Viceré (2019) associates uncertainties surrounding EU enlargement with opportunities for Russia to strengthen its geopolitical relationships in the region. However, cultural proximity alone cannot fully explain foreign policy orientations. Dufalla and Metodieva (2026) distinguish affective attachments to Russia from pragmatic calculations about European integration, while Trailović and Rapaić (2023) identify their coexistence in Serbian political orientations.

Ponomareva (2020) describes Serbia's foreign policy as multi-vector, interpreting its relations with the EU, Russia and China as an attempt to preserve political

autonomy, while emphasising historical and cultural affinities with Russia and the unresolved status of Kosovo.

Türkiye's engagement draws upon partly different historical relationships. Alpan and Öztürk (2022) examine religion and nationalism within Turkish soft power, while Rašidagić and Hesová (2020) show that Ottoman heritage and Islamic identity coexist with diplomatic, economic and strategic interests, including support for European integration. Turkish engagement therefore need not constitute an alternative to the European project.

Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates territorial differentiation. Kapidžić and Hirkić (2025) identify Russian political and Orthodox cultural connections in Republika Srpska alongside Turkish historical, religious and institutional relationships with Bosniak communities. Interpretations of Ottoman heritage contribute to contrasting perceptions of Türkiye (Zalta, 2016). Such relationships are mediated by domestic actors and do not imply homogeneous orientations within ethnopolitical communities.

Examining Türkiye's policy towards Kosovo between 1989 and 2008, Özlem (2026) identifies a gradual shift from a primary focus on the ethnic Turkish minority towards broader engagement with Kosovo's Albanian majority, partly drawing upon shared Islamic identity and Ottoman heritage. Educational and cultural initiatives reinforce these connections (Ketenci, 2023). Türkiye's recognition of Kosovo and support for its Euro-Atlantic aspirations illustrate the compatibility of cultural relationships with Western integration (Abazi, 2008). Szerencsés (2026) also identifies domestic opposition to certain forms of Turkish engagement, illustrating the limits of external geopolitical influence.

Russian and Turkish engagement also reflects different geopolitical priorities. Vuksanović (2023) identifies pragmatic interests in both approaches, associating Russian influence with unresolved regional disputes and Turkish engagement with support for Western Balkan integration into Western institutions where this corresponds to Ankara's interests. Across the three cases, the geopolitical significance of identity-based narratives depends on their interaction with territorial arrangements, domestic political actors and institutional relationships, with considerable variation between states and ethnopolitical communities.

Methodology

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative research approach based on the qualitative content analysis of selected political statements concerning the European Union, Russia and Türkiye in the Western Balkans. The empirical material comprises 15 directly quoted political statements published between 1 January 2020 and 30 September 2026 on the official websites of political institutions or the online news platforms of established media organisations. Each statement must contain at least one complete sentence and explicitly connect ethnic, religious or historical-cultural identity with a political or geopolitical relationship. The analysis includes statements by both domestic and external political actors, while journalistic interpretations and paraphrases are excluded from the sample. The statements were purposively selected to capture contrasting identity-based geopolitical narratives expressed by actors occupying different political and institutional positions, including domestic political leaders, foreign officials and religious authorities.

The research employs a purposive selection of three contrasting case studies: Serbia, Bosnia and

Herzegovina and Kosovo. These cases differ in their international status, geopolitical orientations, ethnic and religious composition, historical experiences and relationships with external actors. The statements are distributed across the three cases according to their analytical relevance and the diversity of political-geographical contexts represented, with five statements assigned to Serbia, six to Bosnia and Herzegovina and four to Kosovo. Their primary political context is determined by the speaker, intended audience, circumstances and substantive focus of each statement. Statements relevant to more than one case may be considered in multiple political-geographical contexts but are counted only once in the overall sample.

The qualitative analysis is organised around five interconnected categories: ethnic and religious identity; historical memory and shared cultural heritage; sovereignty and territorial claims; geopolitical belonging and external reference points; and orientations towards European integration. Each statement constitutes a unit of analysis and is examined through these categories, taking account of its political-geographical context and the institutional position of the speaker. The same analytical framework is applied across all three cases. Identity affiliation is identified through ethnic, religious and historical-cultural references, while declared geopolitical orientation is examined through expressed preferences and relationships concerning the EU, Russia and Türkiye. Potential challenges to political loyalty are assessed through narratives suggesting tensions between these orientations and the principles, obligations or strategic objectives of European integration. Attention is also given to whether the identified identity-based narratives complement, coexist with or challenge orientations towards the European integration project. Statements by political leaders, foreign officials and religious authorities are interpreted

according to their respective institutional roles rather than treated as equivalent expressions of political commitment.

Given the exploratory character of the study and the limited, purposively selected sample, the findings are interpreted as indicative of selected identity-based geopolitical narratives rather than representative of political discourse across the Western Balkans. The analysis does not seek to establish direct causal relationships between external geopolitical engagement and political loyalty to European integration. The distinction between declared geopolitical orientations and political loyalty is maintained by interpreting the statements as expressions of political narratives rather than direct evidence of institutional conduct or the implementation of European integration commitments.

Results

Serbia: European Integration and Alternative Geopolitical Affinities

Serbia's formal commitment to European integration coexists with geopolitical affinities grounded in historical, ethnic and religious identity. According to the International Republican Institute (2025), 39% of respondents would support EU membership in a hypothetical referendum, while an equal proportion would oppose it. The selected statements illustrate how identity is invoked in relations with Russia, neighbouring territories and the European Union.

In February 2024, Russian President Vladimir Putin connected Russia's historical engagement with Serbia to religious affinity:

> “We could not refrain from defending the Serbs because the Serbs are a special

> people, close to us, with an Orthodox culture." (Putin: Srbi su poseban i nama blizak narod, 2024; author's translation)

Orthodox Christianity is presented as a foundation of political solidarity, linking shared cultural identity with Russia's historical involvement in the former Yugoslavia. Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić similarly emphasised historical fraternity in November 2022:

> "For us, the Russian people are our brother people, and centuries-old history has proven it many times. Therefore, Russian-Serbian relations cannot be destroyed under any pressure." (Taylor, 2022)

Vučić's statement portrays Russian–Serbian relations as enduring despite external pressures. Against the background of the war in Ukraine, historical-cultural identity thus provides a justification for maintaining relations with Russia despite differences between Serbian and EU foreign policy orientations.

Religious identity acquires an explicitly geopolitical dimension in Serbian Orthodox Patriarch Porfirije's statement during his meeting with Putin in April 2025:

> "My wish, and the wish of the majority in our Church, is that in the future, if a new geopolitical realignment occurs, we should be close to that Russian environment." (N1 Beograd, 2025; author's translation)

Made during discussions concerning Kosovo, Republika Srpska and Serbian communities beyond Serbia, the statement associates religious authority with a preferred geopolitical orientation towards Russia. It illustrates how

the Serbian Orthodox Church can contribute to the political articulation of ethnonational identity.

The territorial dimension is evident in the First All-Serbian Assembly, held in Belgrade in June 2024 under the slogan One Nation, One Assembly – Serbia and Srpska. President Vučić declared:

> "Today, an agreement has been reached on Serbian unity that will last not just one day, two or three months, but forever." (Ministry of Defence of the Republic of Serbia, 2024; author's translation)

Accompanied by initiatives strengthening cooperation between Serbia and Republika Srpska, the statement advances a conception of Serbian national unity extending beyond state borders. It links ethnonational belonging with cross-border political relationships, carrying implications for Bosnia and Herzegovina's political-geographical organisation.

Historical affinity can also support European integration. During his visit to Belgrade in August 2024, French President Emmanuel Macron stated:

> "Through my presence today, I wish to renew the message of friendship between Serbia and France and affirm as strongly as possible that your country's place is in our Europe and in the European Union." (Présidence de la République française, 2024; author's translation)

Macron invokes historical friendship to legitimise Serbia's European belonging, contrasting with narratives emphasising Russian–Serbian fraternity. The five statements therefore reveal competing geopolitical reference points: religious and historical affinities

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support relations with Russia, ethnonational unity informs cross-border political cooperation, and historical friendship with France reinforces European integration.

Bosnia and Herzegovina: Internal Differentiation and Competing Geopolitical Narratives

Bosnia and Herzegovina illustrates how geopolitical orientations differ across ethnic and territorial contexts. Although 66% of respondents supported EU membership in a hypothetical referendum (International Republican Institute, 2025), competing interpretations of statehood, collective rights and external partnerships shape political discourse.

In Republika Srpska, Serb ethnonational identity is explicitly associated with Russia. In March 2024, Milorad Dodik declared:

> "Whatever happens, Serbs will stand with the Russians." (Radio Slobodna Evropa, 2024; author's translation)

Together with his references to Orthodox Christianity and historical solidarity, the statement presents geopolitical allegiance to Russia as an expression of collective identity. Republika Srpska consequently emerges as a territorially distinct setting in which identity-based political orientations diverge from Bosnia and Herzegovina's declared European integration objectives.

Türkiye articulates its engagement through historical and cultural relationships. Before visiting Sarajevo in August 2021, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated:

> "We have very close historical, cultural and social ties with the friendly and brotherly Bosnia and Herzegovina." (Republic of

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> Türkiye Directorate of Communications, 2021b)

Although addressing the country as a whole, this formulation draws on historical connections particularly resonant among Bosniaks. Erdoğan's declared support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's multicultural character coexists with references to Alija Izetbegović and Bosniak historical memory. This relationship was further emphasised in November 2021:

> "We will continue to stand by our Bosnia brothers and sisters in a much stronger and more distinct manner from now on." (Republic of Türkiye Directorate of Communications, 2021a)

Invoking the legacy of the 1992–1995 war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Erdoğan presents Turkish involvement as a continuing historical responsibility. While formally supporting the country's multiethnic character, his references to Bosniak political traditions and historical experiences reveal a particular affinity towards Bosniaks. Türkiye's discourse thus combines inclusive diplomatic commitments with a pronounced identity-based dimension.

Bosnian and Herzegovinian political actors articulate different relationships between identity and European integration. Following a meeting with Croatian Foreign Minister Gordan Grlić Radman in November 2023, Foreign Minister Elmedin Konaković stated:

> "Sympathies towards anyone, whether based on traditional, religious or other ties with any country, are entirely permissible, but ambitions to distance Bosnia and Herzegovina from the European path are detrimental to citizens throughout Bosnia

> and Herzegovina, in both entities and the Brčko District." (Hodžić, 2023; author's translation)

Konaković distinguishes legitimate cultural affinities from political orientations that could undermine European integration. His statement recognises the coexistence of external identity-based relationships while prioritising EU accession.

From the perspective of Croat political representation, Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina (HDZ BiH) President Dragan Čović declared in February 2026:

> "If anyone wants Bosnia and Herzegovina's European path, it is precisely the representatives of the Croats." (Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2026; author's translation)

Čović associates European integration with Croat political representation and, in the wider interview, with the constitutional position of constituent peoples and legitimate representation. His statement demonstrates how support for EU membership can be articulated through an ethnonational understanding of Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutional organisation.

A contrasting state-centred perspective was expressed by Denis Bećirović, Chairman of the Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, in April 2024, responding to the proposed assembly involving Serbia and Republika Srpska:

> "It is very important for politicians in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the region to distinguish the legal-political dimension of relations between independent and

> internationally recognized, sovereign states, from the cultural-historical and ethnic-religious dimension of communication between people in different states." (Presidency of Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2024)

Bećirović distinguishes cross-border ethnocultural connections from interstate sovereignty, challenging interpretations of national unity that extend into political relationships across established boundaries. His position directly contrasts with the Serbian narrative examined in the preceding case study.

The six statements reveal territorially differentiated identity-based orientations. Dodik associates Serb identity with Russia, while Erdoğan combines declared support for multiethnic Bosnia and Herzegovina with particular historical and political affinity towards Bosniaks. Konaković prioritises European integration over competing external allegiances, Čović links it to Croat collective political rights, and Bećirović emphasises state sovereignty. Identity consequently shapes both external geopolitical relationships and competing visions of Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutional future.

Kosovo: European Orientation and Cultural Relations with Türkiye

Kosovo combines strong support for European integration with Albanian ethnonational identification and historical-cultural connections with Türkiye. According to the International Republican Institute (2025), 89% of respondents would support EU membership in a hypothetical referendum. The selected statements illustrate how Albanian identity and Turkish partnerships coexist with European and Euro-Atlantic

orientations despite Kosovo's contested international status.

In December 2021, Prime Minister Albin Kurti stated:

> "I am convinced that Kosovo and Albanians in general have their place in NATO and the EU." (Office of the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kosovo, 2021; author's translation)

Kurti explicitly associates Albanian collective identity with Euro-Atlantic institutions, presenting national belonging as compatible with European integration. President Vjosa Osmani developed a similar argument before the joint session of the Kosovo and Albanian parliaments in December 2024:

> "Our aspiration to join the European Union is not just a political goal, but a reflection of who we are and what we represent, therefore a reflection of our identity and our vision." (Office of the President of the Republic of Kosovo, 2024)

Osmani connects European integration with collective identity and shared political aspirations. Her wider references to Kosovo and Albania as independent states belonging to a common nation introduce a cross-border ethnonational dimension while maintaining the framework of separate state institutions.

Relations with Türkiye illustrate another expression of identity-based geopolitical proximity. During a meeting with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in June 2022, Osmani stated:

> "The Turkish community in Kosovo and the large Albanian diaspora in Türkiye are a strong bridge between the two countries."

> (Office of the President of the Republic of Kosovo, 2022)

Minority and diaspora communities are presented as foundations of bilateral cooperation. Alongside Türkiye's support for Kosovo's international recognition, defence cooperation and Euro-Atlantic aspirations, these connections complement rather than replace Kosovo's Western institutional orientation.

Prime Minister Kurti similarly emphasised transnational relationships during his visit to Türkiye in June 2024:

> "So, wherever the Albanians are in the Balkans, they can create bridges of economic, commercial, cultural cooperation with you here, just like we have the Turks in Kosovo, who are also a bridge of cooperation between Kosovo and Turkey." (KOHA.net, 2024)

Kurti presents Albanian communities across the Balkans and the Turkish minority in Kosovo as facilitators of economic and cultural cooperation. Ethnonational identity thus supports transnational connectivity without implying exclusive geopolitical allegiance.

The four statements indicate that Albanian ethnonational identity is articulated alongside European belonging, while historical-cultural relationships with Türkiye provide additional channels of international cooperation. Unlike the Russian-oriented narratives identified in Serbia and Republika Srpska, Kosovo's selected statements present identity-based external partnerships as compatible with European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

Discussion

The comparison of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo reveals different relationships between ethnoreligious identity, external geopolitical affinities and European integration. Although the three cases share experiences of political transformation and competing external influences, identity-based narratives acquire different meanings depending on territorial, institutional and political contexts. This corresponds to political-geographical approaches that emphasise the spatial dimensions of collective identity and belonging (Flint & Taylor, 2025; Abdi, 2018). Historical, cultural and religious connections may consequently support alternative geopolitical orientations, reinforce European belonging or sustain relationships with multiple external partners.

Differences in public support for EU membership provide a broader context. The International Republican Institute (2025) reported support of 39% in Serbia, 66% in Bosnia and Herzegovina and 89% in Kosovo. However, country-level figures may conceal territorial and community-level differences, particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where political orientations expressed in Republika Srpska differ from those articulated by other political representatives. Such differentiation highlights the relationship between collective identity, territorial concentration and political institutions (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2020). Nevertheless, these survey results cannot establish a causal relationship between identity-based narratives and individual attitudes towards European integration.

Russian and Turkish narratives demonstrate how historical memory and cultural or religious affinity provide a familiar vocabulary for geopolitical proximity. Putin's references to Orthodox culture and Erdoğan's

emphasis on historical ties with Bosnia and Herzegovina both associate contemporary political relationships with a shared past. This reflects the identity-related dimensions of external influence discussed by Laruelle (2015) and Rašidagić and Hesová (2020). However, similarities in rhetoric should not obscure differences in political objectives and territorial engagement. In the Russian-oriented statements, particularly those of Patriarch Porfirije and Milorad Dodik, ethnoreligious affinity is explicitly associated with geopolitical alignment towards Moscow, potentially competing with European integration.

Religious or ethnic identity, however, does not automatically produce geopolitical loyalty. It may provide a receptive framework for external narratives without determining political preferences across entire communities. As Vuksanović (2023) demonstrates, Russian and Turkish engagement in the Western Balkans also reflects pragmatic geopolitical interests, suggesting that identity-based affinities must be understood alongside broader political and strategic considerations. In Serbia, references to Russian–Serbian fraternity coexist with formal European integration objectives and alternative historical relationships, including those invoked by Macron. Geopolitical orientations therefore emerge through the interaction of identity, political agency and institutional interests rather than cultural belonging alone.

Türkiye's engagement illustrates a different configuration. Erdoğan's statements combine declared support for Bosnia and Herzegovina's multiethnic character with a pronounced affinity towards Bosniak historical memory and political traditions. This distinguishes Turkish engagement from Russian narratives directed primarily towards Serb ethnonational solidarity, although the inclusive language of Turkish

diplomacy should not obscure its particular cultural and political connections with Bosniaks. The findings thus reinforce the importance of interpreting external influence within specific political-geographical contexts (Rašidagić & Hesová, 2020).

Kosovo further demonstrates that Turkish influence should not automatically be interpreted as an alternative to European integration. Osmani and Kurti associate relations with Türkiye with minority communities, diaspora networks and political cooperation while affirming Kosovo's European and Euro-Atlantic orientation. Historical-cultural affinities therefore appear as complementary channels of international engagement. This distinction is relevant to Europeanisation, whose outcomes depend on domestic institutional and political conditions (Börzel & Risse, 2020). Nevertheless, the selected statements establish declared orientations rather than the extent of substantive Europeanisation.

Territoriality provides another important dimension. The All-Serbian Assembly and Bećirović's response illustrate competing understandings of ethnonational solidarity and state sovereignty. Similarly, Konaković and Čović express support for European integration through different interpretations of Bosnia and Herzegovina's institutional organisation. These differences are consistent with Hasić et al. (2020), who examine how domestic political actors selectively interpret and accommodate European norms within existing political and institutional contexts. In Kosovo, shared Albanian identity supports cross-border cooperation and European aspirations, demonstrating that ethnonational solidarity does not necessarily challenge existing institutional frameworks.

The security implications of these findings arise primarily when identity-based narratives are mobilised to legitimise competing geopolitical alignments, territorial claims or challenges to institutional authority. In Serbia and Republika Srpska, references to Russian–Serbian solidarity illustrate how ethnoreligious affinity can be associated with geopolitical orientations that diverge from European integration objectives. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, competing interpretations of ethnonational solidarity, territorial sovereignty and political representation reveal the institutional sensitivity of such narratives. Kosovo provides a contrasting example, as the selected statements associate historical-cultural ties with Türkiye and cross-border Albanian identity with European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. These differences suggest that the destabilising potential of identity-based narratives depends on their political instrumentalisation, particularly where they reinforce territorial disputes or justify resistance to institutional commitments.

Overall, the findings provide qualified support for the research hypothesis. Identity-based geopolitical narratives may challenge loyalty to European integration when historical, religious or ethnonational affinities are mobilised in favour of competing political orientations. However, these affinities may also reinforce European belonging or coexist with it. This distinction recalls the difference between formal institutional alignment and substantive political commitment discussed in the literature on Europeanisation (Börzel & Risse, 2020; Hasić et al., 2020). Political loyalty to European integration must therefore be understood through the territorial and institutional contexts in which identity-based narratives are articulated.

Conclusion

This study has illustrated that ethnic and religious identities acquire geopolitical significance through their relationships with territory, historical memory and external political reference points. The comparison of Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo reveals that identity-based narratives operate within distinct political-geographical contexts, reflecting the uneven spatial distribution of ethnocultural communities and the differences between state boundaries and historical, cultural or religious spaces of belonging. These geographical dimensions influence how external geopolitical relationships are articulated and interpreted across the Western Balkans.

The three cases illustrate different configurations of identity and geopolitical orientation. Serbia demonstrates the coexistence of formal European integration objectives with strong historical and religious affinities towards Russia. Bosnia and Herzegovina reveals particularly pronounced internal differentiation, as competing ethnonational and territorial perspectives shape relationships with external actors and interpretations of European integration. Kosovo, meanwhile, illustrates how Albanian national identity and historical-cultural connections with Türkiye can coexist with a strong European and Euro-Atlantic orientation. These differences indicate that identity-based geopolitical influence cannot be understood through uniform assumptions about the region or its constituent communities.

The findings provide qualified support for the research hypothesis that identity-based geopolitical narratives may challenge loyalty to the European integration project. Such challenges are particularly visible where ethnoreligious and historical affinities are explicitly

associated with alternative geopolitical alignments. However, the analysis also demonstrates that identity-based narratives may reinforce European belonging or complement existing European orientations. Ethnic and religious identity therefore cannot be regarded as an automatic determinant of geopolitical loyalty, while formal participation in European integration does not necessarily imply equally strong political identification with the European project.

From a political-geographical perspective, the findings highlight the importance of territorial differentiation, cross-border ethnocultural connections and competing geopolitical imaginaries. External influence has a distinct geography, as similar historical or religious narratives acquire different political meanings across states, entities and communities. Understanding European integration in the Western Balkans consequently requires attention to internal political geographies alongside relations between the European Union and individual states.

Ultimately, ethnic and religious identity should not itself be understood as a security problem. Its geopolitical instrumentalisation becomes relevant to security when collective belonging is mobilised to legitimise competing political allegiances, challenge institutional commitments or intensify territorial disputes. The principal implication is therefore the need to distinguish cultural and historical affinities from the political purposes for which they are employed.

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