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The Role of Religious Beliefs in Shaping Public Attitudes Toward EU Integration in
Serbia

MA thesis

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Authorship Declaration

I have prepared this thesis independently. All the views of other authors, as well as data from literary sources and elsewhere, have been cited.

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Abstract

This thesis examines how religious affiliation, particularly to the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), influences public attitudes toward European Union membership in Serbia. The relatively low public support for EU integration in Serbia highlights the importance of identifying contributing factors. Religion emerges as a key determinant, especially in contexts where religious institutions have a significant impact on societal values and political preferences. The Serbian Orthodox Church, beyond its role as a religious authority, serves as a symbol that is deeply tied to Serbian national identity. The thesis uses data from the European Social Survey (ESS10) and applies quantitative methods, including logistic regression, interaction, and variance analysis, to assess the impact of religious affiliation on attitudes toward EU membership, with national attachment as a conditional effect. The findings reveal that being a Serb Orthodox alone does not significantly affect attitudes toward the EU, while religiosity plays a more important role, with higher levels of religiosity associated with stronger opposition to EU membership. Incorporating European attachment as an additional moderator provides a deeper and statistically significant interpretation of the conditional effect of national attachment; as European identity strengthens, the conditional effect of national attachment diminishes among Serb Orthodox individuals. Variability in attitudes was more pronounced among Serb Orthodox individuals, particularly those with higher levels of religiosity, reflecting greater ambivalence on the issue. Overall, the thesis highlights the critical role of religious faith and identity dynamics in shaping public opinion on EU membership in Serbia, offering valuable implications for policymakers aiming to bridge societal divides and strengthen support for EU integration.

1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) represents a unique model of regional integration, promoting economic cooperation, political stability, and shared values among its member states. However, the process of European integration is not universally embraced across the continent. While some nations view EU membership as an opportunity for economic growth and political alignment, others are more hesitant, seeing it as a potential threat to national sovereignty, identity, and traditional values (Harteveld et al., 2013; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). While the EU continues to expand its influence in the Western Balkans, Serbia's path toward integration has been marked by fluctuating public support (Bazić, 2019) and various political challenges (Petrović, 2019). Serbia has been negotiating its accession to the EU for over a decade, yet public opinion toward EU membership has remained divided and volatile. In 2022, support for EU membership among Serbs stood at 43%, reflecting a significant decline from earlier years when optimism for integration was higher (MEI, 2022). Compared to Serbia's neighbors in the Western Balkans, where majority support for EU membership is more common (International Republican Institute, 2024), Serbia stands out as an exception, raising questions about the underlying factors shaping public attitudes.

There are various determinants that influence public opinion on EU membership, including economic factors, such as perceptions of financial benefits or costs; identity-based factors, such as the balance between national and European identities; and domestic political influences, such as trust in national institutions, party alignment, and government performance (Hooghe & Marks, 2005; Harteveld et al., 2013; Henjak et al., 2012). Among the various factors shaping public opinion on EU membership, religion—particularly the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC)—has emerged as a critical and underexplored variable.

The Serbian Orthodox Church is not merely a religious institution; it is a cornerstone of Serbian identity, deeply interwoven with the nation's history, culture, and political life (Brujić, 2017; Subotić, 2019). Unlike Catholicism, which has historically supported European unity, or Protestantism, which emphasizes the

sovereignty of the nation-state (Nelsen et al., 2011), Orthodoxy occupies a more complex position in the European context. Orthodox Churches lack a unified stance on governance, with their positions shaped by country-specific church-state dynamics (Leustean, 2018). Additionally, the Orthodox Church's conservative hierarchy often resists liberal values associated with the EU, such as secularism and tolerance of homosexuality, while simultaneously promoting universalistic impulses that could align with a united Europe (Ramet, 2016; Nelsen et al., 2011). This duality underscores Orthodoxy's multifaceted relationship with European integration. In Serbia, the SOC is often perceived as the guardian of national traditions and values, and its influence extends beyond the spiritual realm into the socio-political sphere. This raises the research question: How does the SOC shape public attitudes toward Serbia's EU membership?

The objective of this thesis is to examine how affiliation with the Serbian Orthodox Church influences public attitudes toward Serbia's membership in the European Union, with a particular focus on the attachment to the national identity as a conditional factor. The effect of religion will be analyzed from two perspectives: religious denomination (whether an individual belongs to the SOC or not) and the level of religiosity among SOC adherents. This distinction helps clarify the relative importance of institutional affiliation versus personal levels of religiosity in shaping public opinion on European integration. Therefore, it would provide insights into whether simply belonging to the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) influences attitudes toward EU membership, and how the intensity of religious beliefs among SOC adherents further shapes these attitudes. Then, this research investigates whether national identity mediates the impact of religious affiliation on EU attitudes, exploring the interaction between the religious denomination and national attachment. Furthermore, this thesis focuses on the variability in public attitudes, examining how both religious denomination and religiosity contribute to the ambivalence or consistency of public attitudes toward EU membership.

This thesis employs a quantitative approach using data from the European Social Survey (ESS) to analyze public attitudes toward EU membership in the single case of

Serbia. The ESS dataset provides a comprehensive basis for exploring the relationship between attitudes toward EU integration and various factors, including religious denomination, religiosity, national identity, and other control variables that will be applied in the model. Logistic regression models are applied as the independent variable since attitude toward the EU membership will be treated as dichotomous through all hypotheses. Interaction terms will be applied to test whether national attachment plays a conditional effect on religious affiliation on attitudes toward EU membership. Variances of the predicted probability are used to further investigate the variability in attitudes by religious denomination and by religiosity.

The relevance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding Serbia's unique position toward EU integration as an outlier among the Western Balkans but also among Orthodox-majority nations in Eastern Europe. Unlike its regional counterparts, Serbia exhibits the lowest level of public support for EU membership. This raises critical questions about what are the underlying factors contributing to this low level of support. Although the major focus of this research is on the determinant of religion, the empirical model also comprehensively includes other determinants from three clusters (economic, identity, and domestic politics) that are widely accepted in the literature. As a result, this research ensures a holistic analysis of the factors shaping public opinion on EU membership in Serbia. Furthermore, this study contributes to the underexplored field of Orthodoxy's role in European politics. While in terms of religious factors, Catholicism and Protestantism have been more extensively studied in the context of European integration, the influence of the Orthodox Church, particularly the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), remains relatively neglected. Yet, the SOC is deeply embedded in Serbian national identity and has historically acted as a key institution shaping public perceptions of sovereignty, governance, and cultural values. This makes it a critical lens to examine Serbia's ambivalent stance toward the EU.

This thesis is structured in four chapters. The first chapter establishes the theoretical framework by conceptualizing the theoretical constructs of attitudes toward EU integration that will be applied in the thesis and arguing the determinants of public support for EU integration through a three-approach framework encompassing rational,

identity-based, and domestic political factors. Within this framework, special attention is devoted to the role of religion, with a subchapter discussing the impact of religion in EU politics. Particular focus is placed on the Eastern Orthodox Church, examining its unique characteristics and contributions in the context of European integration. Following this, it explores the specific role of the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC), reflecting on the ambivalent stance within the Church, and its symbolic role in national identity. At the end of this chapter, hypotheses are introduced. The third chapter presents an overview of the data, operationalization of the variables, and the statistical methods that will be used. The fourth chapter presents the empirical analysis, testing the proposed hypotheses and providing a detailed interpretation of the results through three main themes of the hypotheses: religious affiliation and attitudes toward EU membership, interaction with national attachment, and variability in attitudes. The thesis then ends with concluding remarks.

2. Theoretical Framework

This chapter focuses on conceptualizing key concepts of the thesis, structured into three sections. The first section outlines the theoretical constructs of attitudes toward EU integration that will be applied in this paper. The second section identifies the determinants of public support, employing a three-approach framework; each approach shapes attitudes towards the EU in distinct ways. The third section concentrates on the influence of religious faith, particularly examining the role of the Eastern Orthodox Church in shaping political attitudes toward EU integration. This chapter sets a solid foundation for the empirical case study of Serbia, where these theoretical elements will be applied to explore attitudes towards the EU in a specific context.

2.1 Attitudes toward EU integration

The dependent variable of this paper is the level of support toward EU membership. Public opinion towards the EU is multifaceted and can be conceptualized in various ways; it is necessary to conceptualize attitudes toward EU membership properly by navigating through the literature to avoid any misconception.

Regarding the concepts in the literature that tend to capture public opinion toward European integration or EU integration, the most prominent terms are EU support and Euroskepticism. EU support incorporates attitudes ranging from strongly favorable to strongly unfavorable toward the European Union and its various policies, institutions, and integration efforts; it can be found in early studies of mass attitudes toward the EU (Boomgaarden et al., 2011). In the last two decades, increasing attention has also been given to the concept of Euroskepticism, where the research focuses specifically on opposition to the EU. It is crucial to differentiate Euroskepticism into two categories: that arising from political parties and that emanating from public opinion, with the latter essentially reflecting varying degrees of low or absent support for the EU (Spoon & Williams, 2017). While some scholars (Beaudoynet & Di Mauro, 2012; Krouwel & Abts, 2007) criticized these terms for their defects in both conceptual and empirical

clarification, some suggest focusing on the use of a multi-dimensional approach to capture the scope of public opinion towards the EU fully (Boomgaarden et al., 2011).

What does the concept of public opinion toward EU integration imply? First of all, it is a “bottom-up” approach to exploring the issue of EU integration, which focuses on the attitudes and behaviors of the electorate rather than an elite-centered perspective that “emphasizes national eligibility and macro-level performance” (Ehin, 2001, p.53). Instead of the “permissive consensus” in the early years of integration (Down & Wilson, 2008), some authors (Hobolt & Vries, 2016; Tillman, 2013) have pointed out that European integration is becoming more reliant on public support, given the growing public division that acts as a “constraining dissensus” (Hooghe & Marks, 2009).

Meanwhile, some studies (e.g., Boomgaarden et al., 2011; Hobolt & Vries, 2016; Harteveld et al., 2013) also point out the necessity of distinguishing the type of political support in the context of mass behavior toward European integration. Authors like Beaudonnet and Di Mauro (2012) argue that “support cannot be used directly in empirical analysis since its operationalization needs lower degrees of abstraction” (p.5); they suggest making differentiation to identify types that affect political systems differently. By using Easton’s (1975) framework, [political] support describes how an individual forms an evaluative stance towards some object “through either his attitudes or his behavior” (p.436), and there are two types of political support in general: specific and diffuse support. The former is based on how the public perceives the government’s performance in terms of policy outcomes and decisions, while the latter represents a general faith in the political system and its principles as a whole, independent of the satisfaction with specific outcomes. Mass opinion can be quite diverse overall in terms of different modes of support. According to the Eurobarometer data, people in the North Eurozone countries have higher support for the EU regime than in the South and the East, while the South and the East European countries have higher support for the general policy of speeding up European integration (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). Therefore, a clear and proper distinction of the type of support being measured is crucial to the conceptualization of this paper. As the thesis focuses on how Serbs view the European Union as a regime in general, hence, the outcome variable will be considered

as reflecting the mass attitude toward the EU system (diffuse support) instead of focusing on the performance of any specific EU policy domain (specific support). It is based on public evaluation of the actual or perceived performance of the EU and the actual or perceived benefits of being a member of it. Previous research proved such categorization valid (e.g., Beaudonnet & Di Mauro, 2012; Henjak et al., 2012).

2.2 Determinants of the public support

There exists various literature that discusses the antecedents or causes of the regime/diffuse support toward the EU at the individual level. In the early days (1990s) of the EU, the dominant theory for explaining public regime support of the EU relied on an economic/utilitarian approach (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). It was due to the integration process at that time being heavily focused on economic cooperation and market liberalization. At the individual level, citizens' support for the EU was primarily driven by their perceptions of personal economic gains. This utilitarian perspective assumed that individuals would support European integration if they perceived it to bring tangible economic benefits, while opposition would stem from perceived economic disadvantages. At the aggregated state level, support is affected by the member states' economic performance (Eichenberg & Dalton, 1993). However, as the EU evolved into a more political and institutional entity, scholars began to acknowledge that economic considerations alone could not fully explain public attitudes toward the EU. Issues such as identity, national sovereignty, political legitimacy, and immigration gained prominence, giving rise to alternative explanations for diffuse support (Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016).

From the current literature, scholars use different approaches to capture the antecedent of the public regime support. Harteveld et al. (2013) adopt a three-logic framework, incorporating the logic of rationality, the logic of identity, and the logic of extrapolation. The logic of rationality refers to the citizens' evaluation and perception of the general performance of the EU and the way they are involved. On the one hand, the general performance includes but is not limited to economic performance; it counts on a wide range of policy areas where the public uses their rational evaluation to assess

whether the EU benefits them personally or whether its policies align with their interests. On the other hand, citizens also use their rationality to evaluate the political process: whether and to what extent their voices are counted. The logic of identity refers to national identity and European identity and whether their effects would positively or negatively impact the topic of EU integration. In the end, the logic of extrapolation involves citizens' attitudes toward their national government in contrast to their confidence in the EU (Harteveld et al., 2013).

Other scholars have used similar frameworks with slight differences. Henjak et al. (2012) categorize different theories in explaining logic that links to the generalized EU support into three clusters: instrumental calculus of tangible benefits, expressive and/or instrumental judgment based on sociopolitical identity, and cue-taking from trusted sources (p.179). In a more intuitive understanding, the first logic named by the authors implies the utilitarian consideration or economic/ tangible benefits calculated by citizens; the second logic implies the impact of sociopolitical identity where factors such as individual political awareness, national identity, etc., are being taken into account; while the third logic implies national political impact, such as party preference and satisfaction with the performance of national institutions. Hooghe and Marks (2005) synthesize various theories explaining public opinion on European integration into three main frameworks: economic model, identity, and political cues. Quite similarly, Hobolt and De Vries (2016) define the framework as the utilitarian, identity, cue-taking, and benchmarking approaches. Boomgaarden et al. (2011) also sum up close to the author mentioned above, adding immigration-related factors as the fourth cluster of determinants related to public support of the EU regime. Here, I am not going to list all other scholars and, respectively, their theoretical frameworks related to the determinants of public support. The aim of mentioning the above authors is to demonstrate a certain degree of uniformity or similarity from the literature in how scholars categorize dispersed factors that influence the public's opinion or attitude toward the EU into main clusters. In principle, no matter what specific terms scholars use for the framework, they actually refer to three groups of factors that influence the public's opinion in different mechanisms. Based on the current literature, this thesis

decided to name them as rational/economical/utilitarian approach, identity/belief/affective approach, and domestic politics approach. In the following subsection, each approach will be discussed in detail, which will serve as the logic for selecting potential explanatory variables for this paper.

Rational/economic/utilitarian approach

The economic or utilitarian perspective on public support for European integration emphasizes a cost-benefit analysis at both individual and national levels, and this approach is rooted in rational choice theory and suggests that people support the EU based on perceived economic gains.

At the macro level, studies show that support for EU membership would be tied to broader national economic performance, including GDP growth, trade, employment, and national financial conditions. In this view, countries that are net beneficiaries of the EU economically, in terms of net fiscal transfers or improved trade and economic conditions, would see higher levels of public support for integration (Eichengreen & Dalton 1993). However, empirical results at the national level have been inconsistent, as some countries with positive economic indicators still exhibit varying levels of EU support (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). This led researchers to refine the economic approach, focusing on micro-level expectations and individual cost-benefit analyses.

At the micro level, public support for EU integration is contingent upon how individuals perceive the effects of market liberalization on their economic well-being. Scholars argue that the competitive pressures brought by EU integration disproportionately benefit citizens with higher education, income, and job skills—those who can better take advantage of new economic opportunities (Gabel, 1998). Conversely, individuals who feel economically vulnerable, particularly low-skilled workers, may fear that integration and the removal of trade barriers will lead to job insecurity and wage stagnation. Thus, socioeconomic status becomes a key predictor of EU support, showing that individuals with higher income education levels are more likely to favor integration. However, it does not really necessarily mean that low-skilled workers will not favor their country joining the EU. Manual laborers may be more

supportive in nations with cheap labor because of freedom of movement within the EU (Gabel & Palmer, 1995). From this aspect, micro-level logic may also be closely tied to aggregate or national-level economic conditions.

Identity/belief/affective approach

The identity and belief-based approach to understanding public attitudes toward European integration emphasizes that the support may extend beyond economic or rational calculations, focusing instead on cultural, religious, emotional, and symbolic factors. This perspective has received increasing attention in the post-Maastricht era. Scholars try to explain the decline in support for European integration with new theories rather than solely relying on economic and rational approaches (De Vries, 2013).

Drawing from Inglehart's (1970) concepts of post-materialism, citizens increasingly embrace cosmopolitan and post-materialist values when societies progress economically. These values are associated with higher levels of education and information and are expected to lead individuals to support international integration. However, the empirical findings regarding the effect of post-materialist values, including age, education, and income on support for European integration have not reached a consensus where some factors of post-materialist beliefs do not significantly influence public attitude toward EU membership (Ehin, 2001). It is worth mentioning that these individual determinants related to post-materialist belief have dual explanatory power. For instance, age, education, and income factors also play important roles according to the economic/rational approach. Meanwhile, they are considered to have an effect on perceiving different cultures, where "younger, well-educated, urban, highly skilled citizens with higher incomes" are supposed to be more open to European integration (Mihić et al., 2021, p.56).

Another major focus within this approach is the role of national identity. Individuals with a strong attachment to their nation-state often view EU integration with skepticism, perceiving it as a threat to national sovereignty and cultural uniqueness (Carey, 2002; Hooghe & Marks, 2005). Those with a strong sense of national identity may feel conflicted about transferring authority to a supranational entity, fearing that

such a shift undermines their country's self-determination (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016; Harteveld et al., 2013). Meanwhile, citizens with a strong sense of national attachment and who feel threatened by or hold negative views toward immigrant groups are more likely to oppose European integration. National identity, therefore, is supposed to be a negative factor influencing public support for EU integration, though it may also depend on the national context where the relationship between national identity and support for European integration may not always be negative if individuals do not consider the European integration as a threat to their national attachment (Boomgaarden et al., 2011). Some authors also point out the importance of the measurement of national identity by distinguishing indicators of one's attachment to the state and to the ethnic group, where he argued that these two measurements could correlate differently (Mihic et al., 2021).

In contrast, citizens are more likely to support the EU when they identify with its community. While a strong national identity may create an emotional distance from EU governance, a European identity can instead foster it (Harteveld et al., 2013). The effect of one's self-identification as a European has a similar logic of impact on individuals' attitudes or support toward the EU as a national identity but in an opposite way.

Identity or belief factors do not exclusively rely on general post-materialist values and are not only contingent on national/European identity. Other group social identities, such as confessional identity, may also play an important role (Nelsen et al., 2011; Scherer, 2015). Faith factor, among other explanatory variables, is also the main focus of this paper. Although some scholars argue that present-day religion has no longer been the primary focus in the empirical models, religion may still serve as a strong determinant regarding the support toward EU integration (Hobolt et al., 2011). To deal with the effect of religion is path-dependent as it may ask for attention to the specific background and historical legacies (Scherer, 2015). Early studies predominantly focus on the division existing between countries of the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church; the eastern enlargement also includes Eastern Orthodox countries that require specific examination in the empirical study.

The role of religion in identity formation cannot be overlooked, as religious affiliation often shapes individual and collective perceptions of sovereignty, governance, and community. This influence can be particularly pronounced in countries where religious institutions play a prominent societal role or where religion is interwoven with national identity (Brujic, 2017; Scherer, 2015). Consequently, religious beliefs may either reinforce Eurosceptic sentiments or foster support for the EU, depending on the alignment between religious values and the EU's perceived cultural and moral framework. Thus, understanding the role of religion in shaping public opinion on EU integration requires a nuanced approach that accounts for the intersection of faith, identity, and historical legacy. The relationship between religious faith and public support for EU integration will be elaborated in the next section of this chapter.

Overall, the identity/belief/affective approach underscores that attitudes toward the EU are not only driven by rational economic considerations but are also deeply rooted in individuals' identities, values, and emotional attachments. These factors could provide critical insights into why some citizens remain resistant to European integration despite potential economic benefits.

Domestic politics approach

The domestic politics approach assumes that national political dynamics significantly influence public attitudes toward EU integration, particularly through partisanship, government approval, and the broader political environment. Citizens often lack direct knowledge about the EU and thus rely on domestic political cues to shape their views (Henjak et al., 2012). Several studies have shown that support for the EU is higher among citizens who align with pro-EU parties or who approve of the incumbent government when it supports integration (Boomgaarden et al., 2011).

Citizens' support toward the EU is often mirrored by their party allegiance. This logic is based on the logic that citizens develop their positions on EU integration by following the guidance of trusted political parties, relying on their party loyalty and ideological ties (Henjak et al., 2012). Supporters of conservative or pro-European parties are generally more favorable toward the EU than those aligned with left-wing

parties (Ehin, 2001). However, this relationship is complex. Studies have noted that party elites shape the public's opinion but are also influenced by the public, leading to a reciprocal relationship between party and voter opinions (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). Moreover, since many mainstream parties decide not to politicize this issue, this relationship is not always one-directional between the left-right party's allegiance and the level of support toward the EU. Instead, Euroskeptic parties are often found in the extreme position of the left-right spectrum, hence a U-shaped relationship, where parties closer to the middle of the left-right scale are more supportive of the EU (Van Elsas & Van der Brug, 2015).

Citizens' support for the EU also reflects their satisfaction with national institutions as a benchmark. Citizens may project their evaluations of the performance of national governance onto their attitudes toward the EU (Anderson, 1998). This correlation is supported by the argument that the public uses national proxies to evaluate the EU, as they hold more information on the former. The dissatisfaction with the national governance could lead to higher EU regime support, where they expect to see efficient governance and potential improvement, particularly in less affluent countries (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). This evaluation is not only on the basis of economic performance, but it can also come up with political criteria. Therefore, the public may also project their satisfaction with national democracy onto their confidence in the EU (Harteveld et al., 2013). For those dissatisfied with national democracy, EU institutions may appear as a preferable alternative, leading them to be more supportive of European integration, while those content with national democracy may see EU institutions as democratically deficient and are, therefore, less supportive (Hobolt & De Vries, 2016).

The effect of domestic politics on EU support can also extend to specific issues, such as citizens' consideration of the immigration issue that is concerned both domestically and within the EU. The government approval (i.e., the incumbent government being supportive of the EU) has also led to higher public support for the EU (Boomgaarden et al., 2011; Ehin, 2001). Overall, the domestic politics approach argues that citizens' attitudes toward the EU are influenced by their national political context, with party allegiance and government performance all serving as proxies or

cues. Citizens tend to evaluate the EU through a national lens, using familiar domestic political information as a basis for their opinions on European integration.

By providing a concrete explanation of three approaches regarding the antecedents of public support toward the EU integration, I hereby form a theoretical basis for our empirical model of what independent variables can be included as individual determinants. The operationalization of each variable based on the survey dataset will be based on these three approaches in the next chapter. Though I briefly introduce the variable of religion in the second approach, I have underlined that the religious factor is quite complicated and needs more specification as different Church denominations have different implications for shaping the public's opinion toward EU integration. As a result, I dedicate the next section to building the theoretical linkage between the factors of religious faith and the support for the EU. I will discuss first the general role of the Christian religion in the EU, then the specific role of the Eastern Orthodox Church, and the unique features of the Serbian Orthodox Church.

2.3 Religious faith and public support for the European Union

This subchapter explores how religious faith may influence public attitudes toward the EU. The first section focuses on the historical significance of religion in EU politics, while the second section focuses on the distinct position of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the EU integration process.

2.3.1 The role of religion in EU politics

The impact of religious factors has been rooted in EU politics since the beginning.

The creation of the EU's predecessors was significantly influenced by Catholic leaders from influential Christian Democratic parties, and the European integration effort gained early and essential backing from the Catholic Church (Nelsen et al., 2011). The three most prominent leaders in this endeavor—Konrad Adenauer, Alcide De Gasperi, and Robert Schuman—were devout Catholics who played crucial roles in transforming the European vision into a political reality during the post-war years (Nelsen, 2005). Therefore, the first division by religious faith lies between Catholic and Protestant nations. The former are more united toward the idea of a single European federation,

while the latter often hesitate to relinquish sovereignty with a longstanding skepticism towards 'Catholic Europe' (Nelsen, 1993; Young, 1998). This mistrust can be found among political leaders and the general public (Nelsen et al., 2001). The reason behind that could be traced back to the Reformation era when protestants took the sovereign nation-state as the most reliable protector of their political, social, and cultural independence (Nelsen et al., 2011). In contrast, Catholicism's universalism could not completely accept the Westphalian nation-state. Instead, it embraces the idea of uniting Christian nations (Nelsen & Guth, 2020).

Early research has focused chiefly on this division between Catholics and Protestants. Scholars have found belief in Catholicism favors EU unification, contrary to Protestantism. Regarding the degree of commitment, observant Catholics are stronger supporters of the project, while a negative trend can be found among observant Protestants (e.g., Jasiewicz, 2006; Nelsen et al., 2005). However, with EU enlargement during the last two decades, the influence of confessional culture has become far more complex than it was in the early days.

The first important and consistent trend is society's rapid secularization and modernization, where the influence of the religions diminishes, especially in Europe (Casanova, 2007). From the conceptual side, it is important to clarify the claim of the secularization theory. Two types of secularization can be found: The first one with an emphasis on "institutional differentiation" that focuses on the separation of state and church, the liberation of societal and political entities from religious influence, and the increasing self-governance of religious organizations within a liberal democratic framework; the other one that can be described as "privatization" which implies the withdrawal of religion from public life and its resulting diminished influence (Casanova, 2011, p.39-40).

Empirically, secularization in Europe has caused debates about whether the factor of religion is still relevant and effective in the context of the EU. Some researchers suggest that the impact of religion on all areas of European life will further diminish (Bruce, 2002; Van der Brug et al., 2009). However, other academics believe that while religious beliefs and practices are undergoing significant changes, they continue subtly

influencing attitudes and behaviors (Boomgaarden & Freire; Greeley, 2003). There are also arguments that religion in Europe might experience a resurgence triggered by factors like immigration and birth rates (Kaufmann et al., 2012). As a result, there are diverse perspectives on religion's future role and influence in Europe. Therefore, it is theoretically necessary to treat the religious variable differently across the time.

Secondly, the EU has absorbed new member states from Eastern Europe since the collapse of the Communist regimes in the 90s. The religious groups in Eastern Europe vary differently, including Catholics being the majority in Visegrad countries, Protestants in the Baltic states, and different Orthodox churches in the Balkan. The expansion of the European Union towards the south and east has brought it into closer engagement with Catholic and Orthodox Christian institutions, sparking active discussions regarding how the EU might influence 'traditional Christian values' (Katzenstein, 2006). In addition to that, the religious landscape in Eastern regions is made more complex due to the significant impact of the enforced secularization carried out by Communist regimes over four decades (Nelsen et al., 2011). Besides, the Orthodox autocephalic tradition in Eastern European countries may require specific examination that it would be inaccurate to perceive Orthodoxy as a progressive and liberal political influence that is actively supportive of "inter-confessional dialogue, sexual tolerance, and European integration and enlargement" (Katzenstein, 2006, p.13).

Therefore, it is necessary to ask two questions regarding the above two types of influence related to the impact of faith on EU politics. First, I question whether religion still influences the public's attitude toward EU integration against rapid secularization, and secondly, how this issue should be analyzed by distinguishing different religious denominations (Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Catholicism, and Islam) with various historical and geopolitical backgrounds (e.g., ex-Soviet, ex-Yugoslav, and other ex-communist regimes). In the case of this paper, I ask how the Orthodox Church and its believers perceive the issue of EU integration in contrast to other Christian denominations and how it performs its role in Serbian politics.

In terms of measurement, religion's role in politics is multifaceted, and it is necessary to distinguish different aspects of its potential impact. These aspects can

encompass religious denomination, religiosity, and institutional action (Fox, 2008; Minkenberg, 2009). Religious denomination considers the specific religious traditions or branches that individuals or groups belong to. Religion as religiosity refers to an individual's religious beliefs, practices, and commitments. The aspect of institutional actors acknowledges the role of religious organizations and institutions in politics. Philpott (2007) addresses the question of what influences the political activities of religious actors through two significant factors: differentiation, namely “the degree of mutual autonomy between religious bodies and state institutions” (p.506), and political theology, namely “the ideas that religious actors hold about political authority and justice” (p.507). The political theology would undoubtedly add one more facet to the research on religion's role in politics. At the same time, the differentiation factor in Philpott's theory functions similarly to the institutional action mentioned above.

This paper will apply only the individual-level measurement to test whether the belief in the Serbian Orthodox Church may impact one's attitude toward the EU membership issue in Serbia, which concerns the aspects of denomination and religiosity. However, it is also essential to discuss the aspect of religion as an institutional actor in this section. The purpose is to explain the mechanism behind an individual's religious faith and attitude toward the country's EU membership issue. Therefore, it is necessary to understand how the Church interacts with national political institutions in ways that lead to its adherents would choose to behave differently on the same issue. From the literature, this aspect could include the broad spectrum of political activities, such as the role of Christian parties (e.g., Taggart, 1998), church-state separation (e.g., Minkenberg, 2009), and the public advocacy by religious organizations on social-political issues (e.g., Wald, Silverman, & Fridy, 2005). Political theology is also essential to explain the mechanism by which the political position of a religious group can be partly linked to its specific beliefs and principles regarding politics (Philpott, 2007). The following subchapter will discuss this inherent mechanism existing within the Orthodox Church in different aspects to understand how the Church may interact at both national and European levels of politics.

2.3.2 Eastern Orthodox Church

Although the EU is officially a secular organization, it is often claimed that it is founded on Catholic and Protestant traditions, which Orthodox Churches are largely separated from (Katzenstein & Byrnes, 2006). For several reasons, the Orthodox Church should be distinguished from other Christian branches in terms of its stance toward EU integration. First, Orthodox churches do not have a unified theological stance on interactions with governing bodies. The way they relate to politics is shaped by individual instances of church-state dynamics within each country rather than a collective approach to political authority and governmental frameworks (Leustean, 2018). Therefore, analyzing it requires an examination of the specific historical, cultural, and political contexts unique to each nation where the Orthodox Church has a presence. Secondly, the Orthodox Church stands out from other major religious institutions due to the prevalent influence of conservative figures within its hierarchy (Ramet, 2016). This conservatism spans a great variety of issues, including the idea of Europeanization, liberal projects such as the separation of Church and state, the tolerance of homosexuality, the attitude toward other non-Orthodox Christian groups, etc. Though the Orthodox Church has “strong universalistic impulses” that could favor the idea of a united Europe (Nelsen et al., 2011), these impulses are often tempered by a strong commitment to preserving traditional values, which may not align with the secular and progressive policies of the EU. The response to whether the Orthodox Church supports or opposes EU integration is not a simple yes or no answer.

In the following paragraphs, this thesis will examine three perspectives on how the Orthodox Church may challenge EU integration. The first two perspectives, Church-State relations and the reluctance to liberal values, align respectively with two theoretical dimensions (the Church’s institutional action and its political theology) mentioned in the above subsection, while the third perspective focuses on the historical trajectories of the Orthodox Church.

The first perspective focuses on church-state relations. The relationship between Orthodox churches and state authorities significantly shapes their stance toward EU integration. Leustean (2018) indicates that the church's involvement in politics is tied

to national cases rather than “a supranational policy on political power and state structure” (p.151). Meanwhile, the Orthodox Church does not support a “clear separation of Church and state” (Ramat, 2006, p.164) while claiming the ‘partnership’ between church and state (Leustean, 2018, p.151). This particular relationship would ultimately lead the Church to more active involvement in the political arena of its territory, including EU-related issues.

The second perspective emphasizes the Church’s reluctance to liberal values. Orthodox Churches' stance on EU integration is also influenced by their response to liberal values, elements strongly associated with the EU. The Orthodox Church's engagement with the EU is marked by a defensive stance against liberal values promoted by the EU, particularly those concerning human rights and secular governance (Ramet, 2016). The Church views EU pressures as threats to its moral and doctrinal authority. It perceives ecumenism and the liberal project, including tolerance of homosexuality and secularism, as threats to its purity and doctrinal integrity. Therefore, there exists a clash between the Orthodox Church's values and EU standards in discussions about sexuality, human rights, and the role of religion in public life.

The third perspective underlies the importance of the historical trajectories of the Orthodox Churches. The Orthodox world's historical experience—lacking the Renaissance and Enlightenment influences, later urbanization, has contributed to the Church's strong authority in the East. Later, the long period of communist rule “habituated [the Church] to thinking in terms of threat and survival” (Ramet, 2016, p.150). The widespread existence of anti-Westernism within the Orthodox tradition should not be neglected, which can be found among “Orthodox clergy, monks, theologians, intellectuals and various lay people” (Makrides, 2009, p.210). This anti-western sentiment traces back to the historical division of the schism between the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Patriarchates. This long-standing division has fostered a perception of the West as a source of danger for Orthodox Christianity, conflating anti-Westernism with anti-Europeanism in contexts where "Europe" has historically been equated with the West. In recent times, the wars in Yugoslavia have exacerbated anti-Western feelings within the Orthodox communities.

Besides, this anti-Westernism is not solely a religious phenomenon but also has political, cultural, and social dimensions (Makrides, 2009). Nevertheless, the caution and resistance derived from historical experience influence attitudes toward EU integration in complex ways, mixing skepticism and resistance with engagement and dialogue, where there is also openness to dialogue, change, and constructive participation in the EU (Leustean, 2018).

Besides the general mechanism of how the Eastern Orthodox Church influences politics, it is also necessary to emphasize that the relationship between Orthodox churches and politics is shaped by the specific church-state dynamics of individual countries rather than by a unified supranational policy (Leustean, 2018). Thus, highlighting the specific national background and the specific characteristics of the Serbian Orthodox Church is essential for analyzing its influence on believers' perceptions of EU membership. Accordingly, the next chapter will provide a detailed justification for the case study of Serbia, focusing on the intersection of religion, identity, and public support for European integration.

3. Case study of Serbia: religion, national identity and support for European integration

This chapter justifies the selection of the case of Serbia for the analysis and provides background information for the quantitative analysis that will be presented in the next chapter. Serbia represents a unique case where the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) plays a significant cultural, historical, and political role. The distinctive characteristic of Serbia, compared to other Orthodox-majority countries, is that it has the lowest level of support for the EU. For Orthodox-majority countries that are already part of the EU (Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, and Cyprus), their public support for the EU is below the average, according to the Eurobarometer survey conducted in 2023 (European Commission, 2023). When asked, “Generally speaking, do you think that (OUR COUNTRY)'s membership in the EU is...?”, an average of 61% of respondents across the 27 member states viewed it as a good thing. Among Orthodox-majority countries, Romania had the highest approval rate at 51%, followed by Greece and Cyprus, while Bulgaria recorded the lowest rate at 48%. Although the rates in these countries are relatively low, they remain comparable to one another. For Orthodox-majority countries in the Western Balkan region that are still in EU candidate status, the 2024 Western Balkans Regional Poll posed the question, “If a referendum were held today on our country joining the European Union, how would you vote?” Serbia recorded the lowest support, with only 40% of respondents indicating they would vote to join the EU. In contrast, all of Serbia's neighbors reported majority support for EU membership (International Republican Institute, 2024).

Although the two questions are derived from different datasets with slightly different wording, they inherently aim to capture the same information by asking respondents about their views on EU membership. The results consistently indicate that Serbia stands out as a notable outlier. It exhibits the lowest level of support for EU membership among Orthodox-majority countries in the Western Balkans. This raises an important question: why is Serbia so distinct from its regional counterparts with

similar religious majorities? A part of the answer lies in the historical roots of Serbia's complex relationship with the EU. Additionally, the Serbian Orthodox Church's influence on public attitudes toward the EU, particularly through its role in framing national identity, makes it a critical factor worth studying. Therefore, I focus on the single case study of Serbia to examine the complex relationship between religion, national identity, and support for EU integration, aiming to shed light on the unique dynamics shaping public opinion in this context. In the following subchapters, I will first provide an overview of Serbia's relationship with the EU and the political challenges underlying it, as well as its reflection on public opinion based on the findings from opinion polls, then discuss the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church in shaping attitudes towards the EU in Serbia. In the end, I will present the hypotheses that will be tested in the empirical analysis.

3.1 Serbia and the European Union: A Complex Relationship

The journey of Serbia towards European Union (EU) membership is marked by significant events and agreements that reflect the implications of historical legacies, political challenges, and strategic decisions. The relationship between Serbia and the EU is not merely a process of meeting accession requirements but also a deeply political challenge influenced by both regional and global geopolitics. This special context will inevitably shape public opinion, reflecting how historical legacies and political tensions have profoundly influenced societal attitudes toward EU integration.

The breakup of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s set the stage for Serbia's complex relationship with the EU. As Bazić (2019) notes, the ensuing conflicts with neighboring territories and the NATO bombing of 1999 severely impacted Serbia's (at that time, the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) international standing, subsequently influencing its path toward European integration. This period was characterized by political isolation and significant challenges in addressing war crimes and building regional stability. During this period, the EU joined the UN sanctions, and its member states were actively involved in NATO's military intervention in Serbia (Economides & Ker-Lindsay, 2015). It was only until the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in 2000 that Serbia indeed

started to normalize its relations with the EU. In June of the same year, the European Council meeting in Feira acknowledged all Western Balkan countries as potential candidates for EU membership (European Council, 2000). This era marked a pivotal shift for Serbia towards integration (Subotić, 2010). Serbia was included in the EU's Stabilization and Association Process in 2008, which is one of the prerequisites for obtaining the status of candidate for accession to the EU, alongside the fulfillment of the Copenhagen Criteria. However, as Economides & Ker-Lindsay (2015) highlighted, Serbia's lack of full cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) and unresolved political issues from previous decades remained a substantial barrier; in addition, the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2008 profoundly affected Serbia-EU relations. Though the EU could not require Serbia to acknowledge Kosovo as an independent state as a prerequisite for membership due to its internal split over this issue, normalization of the relations with Kosovo is required as a necessary condition (Petrović, 2019). Serbia applied for EU membership in 2009. Following the EU-facilitated dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, Serbia has reached several pragmatic solutions to improve regional cooperation and relations with Kosovo; it also completed the tasks assigned by the ICTY by arrests and extradition of the last remaining Serbian fugitives in the same year, 2011. As a result, Serbia was formally granted candidate status in 2012 (European Council, 2012). Later, in 2013, the European Council decided to open accession negotiations. The 1st Intergovernmental Conference with Serbia was held in January 2014. Until 2024, 22 out of 35 negotiation chapters for Serbia have been opened, two of which were provisionally closed (European Commission, 2024).

Despite Serbia's progression in the EU accession process, unresolved issues from the past coupled with new challenges have persisted. The normalization of relations with Kosovo remains a central issue. The EU played a significant role in the process of separating Kosovo and Metohija from the Republic of Serbia and offered logistical assistance in establishing Kosovo's state institutions, while NATO supplied military support. EU exerted pressure on Serbia regarding the issue of Kosovo by imposing various agreements, which largely contributed to Serbia relinquishing its sovereignty

or influence over Kosovo (Bazić, 2019). Nevertheless, the Serbian government does not always reach a consensus on this issue. Serbia receives political backing from Russia in its stance against recognizing Kosovo as an independent state (Radeljić, 2017). While Serbia has repeatedly affirmed that it will never accept Kosovo's independence, it aims to improve relations with Kosovo to align its policies with EU expectations. This ambiguous stance has led to a deadlock on the issue, hindering negotiation progress. Besides, significant democratic backsliding was observed under Vučić's government since the 2010s, where EU conditionalities appeared to have limited impact in curbing authoritarian tendencies. Media freedom has been increasingly restricted, and elections were accused of being manipulated, all of which raise concerns about Serbia's democratic trajectory and commitment to European values (Castaldo, 2020). More recently, Serbia has been unable to align with EU sanctions against Russia following its aggression in Ukraine. This ambiguous stance has sparked criticism within some official EU circles, who urged Serbia to clarify its intentions, warning that pursuing a pro-Russia path while pretending to seek EU membership undermines trust and could jeopardize pre-accession financial aid (Radeljić & Özşahin, 2023). Several scholars argued that the primary focus of the accession talk with Serbia lies on stability instead of democratic development, which has caused frustration among Serbian pro-EU circles (Petrović, 2019; Radeljić & Özşahin, 2023). Moreover, this stabilization-oriented approach is seen to manage risks and prevent importing instability into the Union, but it has also slowed Serbia's progress, leading to a lengthy and discouraging integration process, which also led to disenchantment among Serbian citizens and decision-makers (Petrović, 2019). These persistent and emerging challenges significantly influence public attitudes towards EU membership in Serbia.

The public's support for EU integration in Serbia is not uniform and fluctuating. Public opinion polls show a segmented attitude among Serbian citizens for those who support EU membership, those opposed, and those who neither support nor oppose. Support peaked at 70% in 2006 but has significantly declined in subsequent years, reaching as low as 41% in some years such as 2012, surprisingly the year when Serbia was granted EU candidate status (Bazić, 2019). In the most recent 2022 survey

(conducted by the Ministry of European Integration of the Republic of Serbia (MEI), public support for Serbia's accession to the EU was 43%, while the percentage of those who oppose membership was 32% (MEI, 2022). The image of the EU among the public follows a similar trend to their responses to the question of whether they would support accession in a referendum. However, a notable gap can be observed in the latest survey (2022) between those who support EU accession (43%) and those who have a positive image of the EU (31%). This trend is consistent across other years, with the percentage of support for accession consistently exceeding the percentage of those with a positive perception of the EU. This disparity may also indicate that support for EU accession and positive perceptions of the EU are distinct constructs within the broader framework of public opinion on European integration in the case of Serbia. Meanwhile, the issue of Kosovo is still considered the most significant event (17%) regarding the process of Serbia's accession to the EU, despite the recent war in Ukraine. The public opinion is heavily influenced by the EU's conditionality, which many Serbs perceive as asymmetrical and unfair, particularly regarding issues like Kosovo's independence, which has created a sense of distrust and frustration among the public, contributing to the declining support for EU integration over time (Bazić, 2019; Jović, 2018). Despite the overall official backing for integration from Serbia's ruling elites, public sentiment has become a significant negative indicator to promote for promoting EU accession, where even less than the majority of the population now seems to support the EU membership of the country.

3.2 Role of SOC in shaping attitudes towards the EU in Serbia

Most Serbs identify themselves as Orthodox Christians, and as such, they have often been stereotyped by some scholars as being skeptical or opposed to Europe (Brujic, 2017; Ramet, 2006). This attitude of rejection is in line with some SOC leaders. However, it is a rather complex attitude that is often contradictory and ambivalent (Scherer, 2015). First of all, it is important to make a distinction between sincere believers who follow Church dogma and those self-declared believers who develop their personal interpretations of religion, who may reject Church doctrines and not

practice their religion (Vukomanovic, 2011). For the latter, belief in Orthodoxy plays a “symbolic historical and cultural role in the reaffirmation of kinship ties and personal and Serbian ethnic identity” (Brujic, 2017, p.35). Therefore, their attitude towards the EU will be less likely to be affected by the Church’s stance on this issue, while the religion’s influence will likely be more significant for those sincere believers. The public’s trust in the church is a good indicator of this complexity. A public survey in 2013 shows that the trust in Church has fallen to 41% (Brujic, 2017, p.39), while Serbian national census in 2022 has identified 81.1% of the Serbian population as Orthodox (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2022), though a slight decline in percentage in comparison to the result of census in 2011, at that time 85.5% (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2011).

The Serbian Orthodox Church is one of the autocephalous Churches within Eastern Orthodoxy. It is self-governing and operates independently from other Orthodox Patriarchates. As an autocephalous Church, it holds full autonomy in ecclesiastical matters while communicating with other Orthodox Churches worldwide. During the Nemanjić dynasty (12th–14th centuries), Stefan Nemanja founded a unified Serbian state and established an independent Serbian Church, reducing Byzantine influence and elevating Serbian culture. The concept of "svetosavlje," shaped by Saint Sava, who was the founder of the autocephalous SOC, merges Orthodoxy with national identity (Wygnańska, 2021), solidifying the belief that being Serbian is tied to being an Orthodox Christian. Later in history, because of the century-long Ottoman rule, the only national institution that connected the Serbs around that time was the Serbian Orthodox Church. Hence, it was reinforced as an important pillar of the Serbian national identity (Ristic, 2007). In the 90s, after the collapse of the communist regime, the resurgence of Serbian spiritual and national identity led to the concept of an “Orthodox Serb” becoming central to defining Serbia’s new national and religious identity, serving as the foundation of the country and the main focus of the Serbian Orthodox Church's efforts (Subotic, 2019). Therefore, in the specific case of Serbia, the SOC also represents national identity and traditional values. During this period, the Serbian government also deepened its ties with the Church, granting it unprecedented symbolic

and normative influence, which significantly shaped a new ideological framework and value system for state institutions and public education (Vukomanovic, 2011). The interwoven relationship between Orthodoxy and Serbian ethnic identity implies that on the one side, self-declaring as an Orthodox believer in Serbia does not necessarily indicate adherence to Church dogma; rather, it may simply signify an expression of ethnic Serbian identity; on the other side, the SOC could leverage its symbolic role in national identity to influence how Serbs perceive the meaning of their national identity. How individual Serbs interpret the role of Orthodoxy in their identity could ultimately shape their attitudes toward the EU. If the influence of religious connotation is not particularly strong, I expect the association between religious faith and an individual's support for the EU to be weak or insignificant in our model. Alternatively, its influence could be driven by the national identity that is embedded in their religious identity.

However, even among the Church, the opinion is not united toward the EU, separate from the liberal, Western-oriented faction and from the conservative, anti-EU ones. The conservative faction views the EU as a predominantly Western, secular entity rooted in Catholic and Protestant traditions, which they see as fundamentally at odds with Serbian Orthodox values and identity (Katzenstein & Byrnes, 2006; Brujić, 2017). Many within this faction fear that EU membership would dilute Serbia's religious and cultural heritage and undermine the Church's influence in Serbian society by promoting liberal values that contradict Orthodox beliefs (Mihić et al., 2021). Additionally, the conservative faction perceives the EU's policies on issues such as LGBTQ+ rights, secularism, and multiculturalism as threats to the traditional values upheld by the Church (Subotić, 2019). Consequently, this faction opposes EU integration, fearing that it would lose national and religious identity and diminish the Church's role in shaping Serbia's moral and ethical standards. In contrast, the pro-European faction sees potential benefits in engaging with European institutions, particularly if integration could bring stability and economic development and improve Serbia's position in the international arena (Brujić, 2017). The Church may be open to the EU if it perceives that Serbia's cultural and religious identity can be preserved within the EU framework, allowing the SOC to maintain its influence over moral and social issues within the country. They

also argued that European unity cannot be achieved without the spiritual foundation provided by Christianity, which serves as the core of Europe's cohesion (Stojic, 2006). Thus, some SOC leaders see engagement with the EU as a way to promote the Serbian Orthodox faith and values within Europe, fostering dialogue between Orthodox Christianity and Western Christian traditions. This pragmatic approach suggests that while there are ideological hesitations, the SOC could support EU integration if it aligns with national interests and respects Serbia's unique cultural and religious heritage (Subotić, 2019).

Therefore, belief in SOC should not be simply understood as unfavorable toward Western European values and the EU, as some scholars may suggest, such as Ristić (2007). Nevertheless, these two factions are, to some extent, united around the issue of Kosovo, where both factions share a similar stance that emphasizes the importance of Kosovo as a central part of the symbolic ethnic and religious identity of the Serbs. This shared viewpoint underscores the complexity of Church positions regarding the EU, where nationalistic and cultural concerns can align even amidst broader ideological divides (Brujic, 2017). The issue of Kosovo thus serves as a unifying factor within the Church, bridging the gap between factions that may otherwise disagree on matters like European integration and Western influence. This shared focus on the issue of Kosovo complicates the Church's position on EU integration. As a result, predicting the Church's overall impact on public support for EU membership becomes more uncertain.

In the empirical studies, Mihić et al. (2021) rely on quantitative analysis and find the predictor of religion significant in explaining Serbs' perceptions of pro-European attitudes and even more significant for explaining perceptions of European integration as a threat. In Brujic's (2017) work, by applying qualitative research techniques of in-depth interviews, she concludes that the attitudes of Serbian Orthodox believers toward European Union integration are complex and multifaceted, they do not uniformly align with the views of the Church leadership. I will further explore the effect of the Serbian Orthodox religion on the Serbian population regarding their attitude toward EU membership in this thesis, which is not the same, by asking whether they hold a pro-European attitude or perceive it as a threat.

3.3 Hypotheses based on the theory

While previous sections have conceptualized the research question and provided relevant background about the case, this section formulates the hypotheses to be tested in the empirical analysis. The hypotheses are specific to Serbia, as they rely on the unique context of the Serbian Orthodox Church, I do not expect these hypotheses to hold true elsewhere. The object of evaluation of the dependent variable in this paper is the public attitudes toward EU membership. Public attitudes toward EU membership have several distinct implications as one of the numerous indicators of measuring public attitude toward the EU integration: It measures the regime support or diffuse support of the EU; it measures the public's view on the EU in an intuitive and accessible way that does not require the respondents to have sophisticated knowledge related to the EU, while at the same time, it captures the core issue to the current political discussion about EU integration in Serbia. Next, I have developed a three-approach framework based on existing literature, identifying three clusters of determinants influencing attitudes, with religious or faith factors being one of these key determinants. I will measure it in two aspects: religious denomination and religiosity. Therefore, I propose the following two hypotheses:

H1: Religious denomination correlates with public attitudes toward EU membership in Serbia: Individuals who identify themselves as Serb Orthodox are less supportive of EU membership than those who are not Serb Orthodox.

H2: Religiosity correlates with public attitudes toward EU membership: the more religious a Serb Orthodox believer is, the less supportive they are of EU membership.

In addition to that, I have also discussed the tight bond between SOC and Serbian national identity. Orthodox identity has a symbolic role in national identity, while the national identity itself is also an important determinant of the support for EU

membership, as it belongs to the identity/belief/affective approach in the three-approach framework. Regarding the geopolitical challenge of Serbia-EU relations over the past two decades, national identity is inevitably another important and highly relevant variable that the public may perceive the EU as a threat to national sovereignty. Hence, I expect to observe an interaction between these two variables. The third hypothesis is:

H3. The relationship between religious denominations and attitudes toward EU membership in Serbia varies depending on levels of national attachment. For individuals with higher levels of national attachment, the effect of religious denomination on attitudes toward EU membership is weaker.

As I have explained in the previous section, SOC does not have a unanimous stance on the issue of EU integration due to the divergence between the liberal branch of the Church and the conservative branch of the Church. This would allow us to ask whether this divergence also holds true within the believers whom the Church may influence differently. The liberal branch of the Church, which often takes a more progressive stance on issues of globalization and integration, may foster more favorable attitudes toward EU membership among its followers. Conversely, the conservative branch, which emphasizes national sovereignty, tradition, and skepticism of Western influence, may encourage opposition to Serbia's EU membership among its followers. As many scholars suggest, the attitude can also be conceptualized as inherently variable. This can also be interpreted as the attitude being ambivalent, meaning that individuals may simultaneously hold both positive and negative evaluations of the same issue (De Vries & Steenbergen, 2013). The variability of attitude, in our case, refers to the degree to which an individual's expressed opinion on EU membership is inconsistent and uncertain. If one group has a higher response variance, it suggests that their attitudes are less consistent. With the focus on the faith variable, this variability highlights the need to explore whether religious denomination or religiosity amplifies uncertainty or ambivalence in public attitudes toward EU membership in Serbia. Highly devout

believers who closely follow Church teachings are likely to exhibit attitudes more closely aligned with the stance of their specific Church branch. They may align with either the liberal/pro-European branch of the Church, which promotes EU integration, or they may align with the conservative/anti-EU branch of the Church, which perceives the EU as a threat to national interests and traditional values. Hence, their attitudes will more likely vary due to the influence of the specific Church branch's position they follow; while less religious Serb Orthodox, they are supposed to be less reliant on the Church's stance. In addition to that, they may rely more on other sources of information, such as political or media narratives. As such, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H4: Religious denomination is associated with increased variability in attitudes toward EU membership in Serbia; Serbian Orthodox believers are more likely to exhibit greater variability in their attitudes than others.

H5: Religiosity is associated with increased variability in attitudes toward EU membership among the Serb Orthodox in Serbia; the more religious an individual is, the more likely to exhibit greater variability in their attitudes.

4. Data, Method, and Operationalization

In this chapter, I will present the data, methods, and operationalization strategies used in this study. The first section introduces the dataset, explaining the rationale behind the selection of the European Social Survey (ESS) as the data source. Then how variables are operationalized in the analysis will be explained, as well as how they align with the theoretical framework. The second section outlines the statistical methods employed to test the hypotheses. Together, they provide the foundation for the empirical analysis conducted in the subsequent chapter.

4.1 Data and Operationalization

The data for the analysis are derived from the European Social Survey (ESS). The ESS is a research-focused, cross-national survey that has been carried out across Europe since its creation in 2001. The ESS is coordinated by a central scientific team headquartered at the University of London and has operated as a European Research Infrastructure Consortium (ERIC) since 2013. Conducted biennially, it involves face-to-face interviews with cross-sectional samples. The ESS has completed 10 rounds of data collection, with the most recent data from Round 10 (2020-2022). The ESS covers a wide range of participating countries, including both European Union member states and other European nations. ESS data are open-access and contain various survey questions measuring public attitudes toward different issues, including but not limited to domestic politics and EU politics. It also collects personal information regarding respondents' beliefs and socioeconomic status, which are essential for our analysis. So far, ESS has done ten rounds of data collection, and Serbia was included in the last survey.

I selected the ESS10 dataset for the empirical analysis. Conducted between 2020-2022, this dataset is relatively recent (for Serbia, the data were collected in 2022) and not outdated, potentially offering more relevant and accurate measurements for our study. Besides, it employs a rigorous and systematic sampling procedure. Using the 2011 Census list of dwellings as a sampling frame ensures comprehensive and reliable

population coverage. The proportionate stratified sampling design, which accounts for regional and urban/rural differences, guarantees representation across diverse demographic and geographic groups. Additionally, the next birthday method for selecting individuals within households minimizes selection bias and ensures randomization at the respondent level. Individuals are chosen using strict random probability techniques at each stage (ESS10, 2020). Although ESS used to conduct face-to-face interviews to collect data, it was because of the COVID-19 pandemic situation that the self-completion approach was adopted in some countries where Serbia is one among them. This was due to force majeure and is unlikely to compromise the data's reliability significantly. The sample size for Serbia in ESS10 is 1,505, which is sufficient for conducting statistical analysis.

Questions in the ESS10 dataset are valid for operationalizing the key variables of the analysis. Besides asking respondents whether the European unification had gone too far or should go further, it also asks the respondents whether they would vote for [country] to become a member of the European Union or remain outside. The latter perfectly fulfills the requirement for the dependent variable of this paper. It directly asks about Serbs' attitudes toward their country's EU membership. It concerns their own country's relationship with the EU, unlike previously mentioned questions in EVS2017 and Eurobarometer 95.2, which only capture the general evaluation of the EU regime. It is also relevant to the current political issue of Serbia-EU relations, where EU membership remains a contentious and pivotal topic. When it comes to the religious factors, the ESS10 dataset has corresponding questions as well. Firstly, religious denominations of the individual and religiosity data are available. The variable of religious denominations asks about specific religions that each respondent belongs to, with additional specifications for Orthodox believers (“Srpskoj pravoslavnoj” for Orthodox in SOC, and “Drugim pravoslavnim” for Orthodox belongs to other Orthodox Church). Meanwhile, the ESS10 dataset includes other questions that can be used as other control variables (for more detail, please refer to the operationalization section), including the national attachment variable that will be used for analyzing interaction in

Hypothesis 3. Therefore, I adopt the ESS10 dataset for empirical analysis for the above reasons.

ESS data are not the only open-access data available regarding the EU integration. In this paper, I decide to choose the ESS 10 dataset for several other reasons. The Eurobarometer data was widely used in the literature. However, it is not the case as Serbia was not regularly included in each survey, likely due to its candidate status. In addition to that, not all EU integration-related survey questions were asked in each survey. Moreover, religious factors were not included in most Eurobarometer surveys. The Eurobarometer 95.2 was the only dataset I found in all Eurobarometer datasets that satisfies the above-mentioned three conditions. However, the EU integration-related survey question used in this survey was about the EU's general image, i.e., does the European Union conjure up for you a very positive, fairly positive, neutral, fairly negative, or very negative image? Asking for the general image of the EU does reflect a certain attitude toward the EU, but it offers limited insights into how respondents perceive the relationship between the EU and their own country. Particularly in the case of Serbia, which is not yet a formal member of the EU, a positive perception of the EU does not necessarily translate into support for EU membership or alignment with EU policies. Therefore, I reject the idea of using Eurobarometer 95.2 as the dataset for this paper.

European Value Survey (EVS) was also once considered for use in this study. It provides insights into the beliefs and values of citizens all over European countries. It has very detailed questions asking about respondents' religious faith. However, regarding the outcome variable, it confronts almost the same problematic issue as the Eurobarometer survey does. I found two questions in the EVS 2017 that are related to European integration: one related to how much confidence the respondents have in The European Union, and the other one asks whether the European Union enlargement should go further, or it has already gone too far. Both questions have similar concerns as asking the EU's general image in Eurobarometer 95.2. Having confidence in the EU or whether EU enlargement should go further provides limited insights into how

respondents perceive their own country's stance toward the EU. Hence, I decide not to use EVS 2017 for this paper.

There are various objects of evaluation for measuring generalized or diffuse support of the masses toward EU integration. Most scholars rely on different surveys as the basis for empirical analysis. In the case of diffuse support, various dimensions exist, such as membership, trust in the EU institutions, perceived threats of European unification, etc. (e.g., Beaudonnet & Di Mauro, 2012; Boomgaarden et al., 2011; Carey, 2002). Hence, it is necessary to determine which indicator will be chosen as the object of evaluation and explain the validity and reasons behind the choice. I choose the public attitude toward the EU membership of Serbia as the indicator in this paper. Although it is not identical to the EU integration itself, it is approved by some scholars that few average citizens possess the sophisticated ability to hold distinct views on European integration in general and their own country's EU membership specifically (Henjak et al., 2012). Instead, measuring public attitude towards EU membership gauges support for integration in the most natural way for citizens—precisely how they are likely to encounter the issue in everyday discussions and political activities. Besides, this paper uses quantitative analysis, which would inevitably be restrained by the survey question. Thus, choosing public attitudes toward their country's EU membership aligns with the survey question in the dataset (ESS10 dataset) used in this paper.

Though selecting a single “best” indicator to address measurement issues is a common approach in social science research, it presents potential challenges that the chosen item may be simplistic and only offers limited response options (Guinaudeau & Schnatterer, 2019). For instance, the standard Eurobarometer survey questionnaire asks respondents whether EU membership is a good thing or a bad thing, whether the EU conjures up a positive or negative image, or whether their country has benefited or not from being a member of the EU, all these specific questions shed light on public's attitude toward EU integration in a generalized way, while each one of them has its respective difference, which may raise theoretical concerns, such as the item asking the benefits from being a member of EU may highlight more aspect of utilitarian support than others. However, selecting public attitudes toward their country's EU membership

as the single indicator is still valid in this paper. It captures the most direct and relevant aspect of how Serbian citizens perceive EU integration when it directly concerns their own country's relationship with the EU, making this indicator a more intuitive and accessible measure of support for or opposition to EU integration.

As previously discussed, the dependent variable is support for Serbia's EU membership. In the ESS10 dataset, it asks whether the respondent would vote for Serbia to become a member of the European Union or remain outside. This question offers several options for answers; in our statistical model, 0 is recoded as remaining outside the EU and 1 for becoming a member of the EU. Other options for answers do not include an explicit neutral stance. Instead, respondents can choose between submitting a blank ballot paper, spoiling the ballot paper, or not voting, excluding other invalid answers. However, there is no effective evidence to assume these three voting behaviors are either opposition or neutral attitudes. Therefore, I opt to exclude these answers from the model. Consequently, the dependent variable is binary, and only unambiguous support or opposition will be considered. To get an overview of the distribution of respondents who support or oppose Serbia's accession to the EU, in the ESS10 dataset for Serbia, after excluding people who hold other attitudes, there are 732 respondents who would vote yes for accession and 473 respondents who would vote no. Hence, in this case, I get a support/opposition ratio that is close to 1.69. The support rate for accession in the total sample is 48%, and the rate for opposition is around 31%.

In the chapter on the theoretical framework, I have constructed a three-approach framework to identify antecedents of public support for EU integration. In this part, I will use this framework as a reference to find concrete indicators from the dataset as independent variables to build the complete model. From the rational/economic/utilitarian approach, I will incorporate income level, level of satisfaction with the present state of the economy, and education level as control variables into the multivariate statistical model. The income level is based on the household's total net income from all sources, categorized into ten deciles, with the 10th being the highest household income. 431 respondents (28%) did not provide the answer. Therefore, they were dropped from the analysis. The level of satisfaction with the

present state of the economy provides a direct measure of how individuals perceive economic conditions in their country. From a rational perspective, it may reflect an individual's cost-benefit analysis regarding integration. This variable is measured on a 0–10 scale, by excluding 23 cases of no answer, the mean value is 4.25, serving as a reference point for evaluating overall satisfaction with the economy among respondents. The variable for education is measured by the respondent's highest level of education and is adjusted with the national context accordingly on a 1-18 scale, with 18 representing the highest degree of education in Serbia. Besides, gender and age are also included as control variables as socio-economic factors.

From the identity/belief/affective approach, I also find several survey questions suitable for being included in the model as independent variables. The key independent variables here are related to religious factors. Religious denomination and religiosity will be employed in the model, with the religious denomination categorized into “Serb Orthodox” and “Others”. The religious denomination in the survey does not include atheism or people who do not have a religious belief, and the simple question regarding whether a respondent belongs to a particular religion or denomination was not asked in this survey. However, when asking the respondents which religion or denomination they belong to at present, the respondent can choose not applicable apart from nine major religions and denominations in the list. I also found that the number of respondents who chose this non-applicable category is not negligible. In the dataset, 1041 out of 1505 respondents chose the Serbian Orthodox Church as the religious denomination, while 281 respondents chose non-applicable. Few others chose other denominations, and 60 respondents refused to answer. The proportion of 'non-applicable' responses aligns closely with other survey data, such as the 81.1% of the Serbian population identifying as Orthodox, according to the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2022). Therefore, this ‘non-applicable’ category should not be excluded. Instead, I incorporate this category with other denominations to constitute an “Others” group. Only 7 respondents identified themselves as belonging to other Orthodox churches. They were excluded from the sample to avoid any confusion. Religiosity is measured through a self-assessment question asking respondents to

evaluate how religious they consider themselves to be on a 0-10 scale. Regarding the distribution of religious denominations, there are 1041 respondents who are Serb Orthodox; the number of respondents who belong to other religions is quite few — only 123 observations in total, with Catholics being the majority (74). I will also count those who answered “not applicable” to this question, which is a total of 281. Only those who refuse to answer this question (60) are excluded, then there are 1445 observations in total. Hence, the Serb Orthodox rate is approximately 72%, which is not far from the official statistic of 81% (Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia, 2022). The group for others includes the non-applicable category and all other religions except other Orthodox denominations, representing the remaining 28%. Overall, the results from these two distributions provide a reasonable level of confidence in the representativeness of the dataset for analyzing public opinion on EU membership and religious affiliation in Serbia.

Besides the confessional identity, the identity approach also involves other sorts of identity, such as national attachment and, in the context of the EU, the European identity. The national attachment is measured by asking the respondents how emotionally attached they are to Serbia on a 0-10 scale. Although there are alternative ways to measure national identity, our dataset includes only one question on this topic, so it is not required to compare among different measures. Similarly, the European identity or attachment is measured by asking how emotionally attached they are to Europe on a 0-10 scale. The national attachment variable is not only used as a control variable but also to examine the interaction between national identity and religious denomination (H3).

The domestic politics approach allows us to explore other potential indicators as control variables for the model. Although I previously mentioned that the relationship between left-right ideology and support for the EU might not be linear or one-directional, it is still valuable to include this variable in the analysis as it may vary depending on the political context. It is measured on a 0-10 scale, with 0 being the extreme left and 10 being the extreme right. The dataset includes a survey question asking respondents about their level of interest in politics (very interested, quite

interested, hardly interested, and not at all interested, excluding no answers), which is then converted into a binary variable: interested (1) and not interested in politics (0). I decided to include it in our model as well, given that it also provides insight into their level of political engagement and political knowledge (a more interested individual may possess more information regarding domestic politics and the EU regime, hence potential influence on their attitudes).

Since public support for the EU also reflects their satisfaction with national institutions as a benchmark, I include the question measuring satisfaction with the national government (on a 0-10 scale). Meanwhile, the public may also project their satisfaction with national democracy onto their confidence in the EU; hence, the analysis incorporates the question measuring satisfaction with the way democracy works in Serbia, assessed on a 0-10 scale. Meanwhile, in the dataset, several trust variables can also be included according to this approach. Trust in the legal system, trust in the police, trust in politicians, and trust in the country's parliament are four trust variables that are relevant to domestic politics. However, it is not possible to incorporate all of them into the model as they are strongly correlated (> 0.7), which suggests potential multicollinearity issues. I decided to use trust in politicians rather than other trust variables because of the conceptual relevance it could provide. Trust in politicians indicates a mass-elite dynamic and reflects the perceived credibility and accountability of the political elite, who are directly responsible for shaping policies and decisions. Meanwhile, politicians often act as intermediaries between the national government and the EU. Public trust in politicians can potentially influence whether citizens believe political leaders are capable of negotiating EU membership and protecting national interests. Therefore, this variable could provide additional insights into how domestic political cues may impact public attitudes toward EU membership. The public trust in politicians is coded on a 0-10 scale.

I must acknowledge that party allegiance is also an important indicator under this approach since studies have shown that support for the EU is higher among citizens who align with pro-EU parties or who approve of the incumbent government when it supports integration (Boomgaarden et al., 2011). The aim is to create a new category

distinguishing pro-EU and anti-EU parties by asking respondents which party they feel closer to. However, while this survey question is included in surveys conducted in other European countries, it is absent in the Serbian case. Nevertheless, this omission should not be a major issue, as I already have numerous other control variables, making it unlikely to affect the results of the model significantly. A detailed operationalization of all variables used in this study is provided below in **Table 1**. This table outlines the variable names, survey questions, and measurement scales for each variable, ensuring clarity and transparency in the analytical process.

Table 1. Operationalization of the variables

<i>Variable name</i>	<i>Survey question</i>	<i>Coding</i>
Religious Denomination	Religion or denomination belonging to at present, Serbia	Serb Orthodox = 1 Others = 0
Satisfaction with Economy	How satisfied with present state of economy in country	0-10 scale
Satisfaction with the national government	How satisfied with the national government	0-10 scale
Age	Age of respondent, in years	/
Gender (ref: Female)	Gender	0 = female 1= male
Household income	Household's total net income, all sources	0-10 scale
Education level	Highest level of education, Serbia	1-18 scale (1 stands for the lowest level, 18 for the highest)
Attachment to Country	How emotionally attached to [country]	0-10 scale
Attachment to Europe	How emotionally attached to Europe	0-10 scale
Satisfaction with democracy	How satisfied with the way democracy works in country	0-10 scale
Left-right scale	Placement on left right scale	0-10 scale (0 stands for the extreme left, 10 for the extreme right)
Political interest	How interested in politics?	0 = Not interested 1 = Interested
Trust in Politicians	Trust in politicians	0-10 scale

**All 0-10 scales represent 0 as the lowest level and 10 as the highest level, unless otherwise noted.*

4.2 Method

This section outlines the statistical methods applied to test the five hypotheses in this study. Two regression models will be applied to examine the influence of religious denomination (H1) on attitudes toward EU membership. The first is logistic regression. This model is used to estimate the relationship between the predictors and the binary dependent variable (support for EU membership: yes/no). It is appropriate as it directly models the probability of support or opposition by expressing the log odds of the event as a linear combination of one or more independent variables. Meanwhile, an alternative solution is also possible. It is possible to use a mixed-effects logistic regression model to account for potential multilevel data structures (in this case, different religious denominations). Instead of representing Serbian Orthodox and Non-Orthodox as binary variables (0 and 1) in the logistic regression model, they are treated as two distinct groups. This approach could include random effects to capture unobserved heterogeneity across groups, with random slopes for other independent variables to account for varying effects across these groups. The final choice of the model for H1 will depend on the model's interpretability in the context of the actual analysis. For religiosity (H2), only logistic regression will be applied, as the degree of religiosity does not involve grouped data structures requiring mixed-effects modeling. Logistic regression is sufficient to assess the relationship between religiosity and attitudes toward EU membership in this case.

To investigate the interaction between national identity and religious denomination (H3), I will include an interaction term based on the model of H1. An interaction term allows us to examine whether the effect of religious denominations on attitudes toward EU membership is moderated by national attachment. In other words, this means that the relationship between the respondent's religious affiliation (i.e., Serbian Orthodox or others) and attitudes toward EU membership is conditional on national attachment. The inclusion of this term allows the testing of conditional hypotheses that the effect of one variable is dependent on the values of another, which coincides with the purpose of H3.

For H4 (the variability in attitudes by religious denomination) and H5 (variability by religiosity), I will calculate the variance of predicted probabilities of support for EU

membership within each group. Variance analysis will involve using Levene's Test to assess whether the variances in predicted probabilities differ significantly across groups (e.g., Serbian Orthodox vs. others for H4 and high vs. low religiosity for H5). This method will allow us to quantify the degree of inconsistency or ambivalence in attitudes, testing whether religious factors amplify variability in public opinion.

5. Empirical results

This chapter presents the empirical analysis of how Orthodox religion influences public attitudes toward EU membership in Serbia. The analysis will test the five hypotheses proposed in the previous chapter rigorously. The chapter is structured into three main sections: first, the impact of religious denomination and impact of religiosity among the group of Serb Orthodox on attitudes toward EU membership through the analysis of the logistic regression model; second, the analysis explores how national identity interacts with religious affiliation, which is further expanded into a three-way interaction model by incorporating an additional interaction term, attachment to Europe; and third, an analysis on the variability in attitudes, driven by religious denomination and religiosity. The chapter ends with a short summary of the findings.

5.1 Religious Affiliation and EU Attitudes

Before conducting the statistical analysis, it is useful to first examine the distribution of hypothetical votes among the two groups: Serb Orthodox and others. The data shows a distinct difference in voting patterns between these two groups. Among other respondents, a total of 221 individuals voted in favor of EU membership, compared to 97 who voted against it. On the other hand, Serb Orthodox respondents show a more divided stance. While 493 Serb Orthodox individuals voted "Yes" for EU membership, 365 voted "No". This indicates a relatively stronger division of opinions within the Serb Orthodox community. The higher number of opposition could be reflective of a more cautious or skeptical attitude toward EU membership. The Serb Orthodox community appears to have a more balanced view of EU membership, with almost half expressing opposition, while the others seem more supportive overall.

The next step is to conduct a statistical test to determine whether these observed associations are statistically significant. For Hypothesis 1, it is necessary to first determine whether a logistic regression model or a mixed-effects logistic regression model is more appropriate. The logistic regression model will include both a bivariate model to examine the isolated effects of religious denominations and a multivariate

model to consider these effects alongside other predictors. From the bivariate model, the p-value for religious denomination is less than 0.001, indicating a statistically significant relationship between religious denomination and the attitude toward EU membership. Calculating the odds ratio reveals that if a person is Serb Orthodox, their odds of supporting EU membership are 0.59 times lower compared to other respondents. Therefore, individuals who identify themselves as Orthodox are less supportive of Serbia's EU membership. However, the low McFadden's R^2 value of 0.0091 for this model indicates that the model does not improve much over the null hypothesis. This coefficient shows that the overall variance explained by the model is quite small. Hence, it is important to incorporate other control variables into the model to increase the model fit.

In the multivariate model (see **Table 2** and refer to the model labeled “Affiliation”), the relationship between religious denomination and attitude toward EU membership is no longer statistically significant ($p > 0.05$) when other control variables are included. Meanwhile, some other variables are also statistically insignificant. The level of satisfaction with the present state of the economy, level of household income, and education representing the rational/economic perspective of the public attitude are all statistically insignificant ($p\text{-value} > 0.05$) in the new model, suggesting that the economic approach is not effective in explaining the public attitude toward EU membership in the context of Serbia.

The indicators from the identity/belief approach perform better in the model. Although the key variable of the religious denomination is statistically insignificant, the variables for national attachment ($p < 0.01$) and European identity ($p < 0.001$) are all statistically significant. The odds ratio suggests that a stronger attachment to the country is associated with a lower likelihood of supporting EU membership. If a person's attachment to the country increases by one unit, their odds of supporting EU membership are 0.903 times lower. Meanwhile, an opposite relationship is found between the attachment to Europe and the support of EU membership; higher attachment to the European identity is associated with a higher likelihood of supporting EU membership. In contrast, if a person's attachment to European identity increases by

one unit, their odds of supporting EU membership are 1.324 times higher. However, it is worth questioning whether national attachment is highly negatively correlated with European identity in this context. This assumption stems from the historical relationship between Serbia and the EU. The EU has exerted consistent pressure on Serbia, particularly regarding the Kosovo issue, which remains a central concern. Kosovo's independence, often seen as a critical threat to Serbian sovereignty, continues to fuel tensions in the EU accession process of Serbia. The mean value of the Serb's national attachment in our model is 7.649, while the mean value of the attachment to Europe is 3.505. The gap between the two identities is relatively high. Pearson's correlation test is applied to identify the correlation between two variables, resulting in a correlation coefficient of 0.067, which indicates a very weak positive linear relationship between the variables. Although the correlation is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), its magnitude suggests that the association between these variables is negligible in practical terms. Therefore, it can be concluded that national attachment and European identity are not correlated.

As for the third approach related to domestic politics, only left-right placement is statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). If a person's left-right placement increases by one unit, their odds of supporting EU membership are 0.925 times lower. This suggests that individuals who identify more with the right-wing on the political spectrum are less likely to support EU membership compared to those on the left wing. The level of satisfaction with the way democracy works in Serbia and the level of satisfaction with the national government are both statistically insignificant ($p > 0.05$). Meanwhile, when checking the multicollinearity of the model, the variance inflation factor (VIF) for the level of satisfaction with the national government is relatively high (5.459), indicating potential multicollinearity issues. This suggests that this variable may be highly correlated with other predictors in the model, which could affect the stability and reliability of the coefficient estimates. The potential correlation may arise because satisfaction with the national government encompasses multiple aspects of governance, such as economic performance and democratic performance. The correlation coefficients provide evidence for this assumption. The score for satisfaction with the

national government is highly positively correlated with satisfaction with the way democracy works in Serbia ($r = 0.859$) and highly positively correlated with the level of satisfaction with the present state of the economy ($r = 0.767$). The variable measuring satisfaction with the national government was excluded from the model due to its high multicollinearity with other variables. In the updated model, satisfaction with democracy remains statistically insignificant ($p > 0.05$), and no significant associations are observed for other variables under this approach. Specifically, trust in politicians and political interest are not statistically significant in explaining the public's attitude toward EU membership ($p > 0.05$). Overall, the domestic approach does not provide strong explanatory power for attitudes toward EU membership in Serbia.

Gender and age are also incorporated as socio-economic variables in the model (see **Table 2** and refer to the model labeled “Affiliation”). Age is statistically significant ($p < 0.001$) in predicting support for EU membership. If a person's age increases by one year, their odds of supporting EU membership are 1.018 times higher, suggesting that older individuals are slightly more likely to favor EU membership. The model fit for the logistic regression model is assessed using the pseudo R-squared measure based on the McFadden score. In this model, the score is 0.153. The multicollinearity issue does not exist in the improved model; all variables have a VIF score of less than 5.

In addition to the pseudo R-squared measure, the model's performance is evaluated by examining its sensitivity and specificity in classifying cases. The model achieves a true positive rate (sensitivity) of 0.818 and a true negative rate (specificity) of 0.541. The relatively high sensitivity (81.8%) indicates that the model performs well in identifying individuals who support Serbia's EU membership. The relatively low specificity (54.1%) implies that the model struggles to identify those who want Serbia to remain outside the EU. The low specificity also suggests that there is high variability within the group that opposes the EU membership.

An alternative mixed-effects logistic regression model is also employed. This model includes all independent predictors from the previous model as fixed effects, assuming their effects are constant across groups. Additionally, it incorporates a random intercept and a random slope for the predictor of national attachment at the

group level of religious denomination. The regression result for the fixed effects model is similar to the logistic regression model. Only the age, left-right placement, national attachment, and European identity are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). The random effects structure of the mixed-effects logistic regression model is examined, focusing on the variability and correlation of the random effects. The standard deviation of the random slope for national attachment is 0.003, indicating that the effect of national attachment does not vary meaningfully across religious groups. The correlation between the random intercept and slope is perfectly negative (-1.000), which could suggest redundancy in the model. This could indicate that including random slopes does not improve the model. As a result, the normal regression model is retained. Based on the results from this model, Hypothesis 1 is rejected.

Table 2. Regression results for attitudes towards EU membership in Serbia

	Affiliation		Religiosity		Interaction	
	Coefficient	Odds ratio	Coefficient	Odds ratio	Coefficient	Odds ratio
Intercept	-0.013 (0.552)	0.987	0.554 (0.714)	1.741	-0.952 (0.694)	0.386
Religious Denomination	-0.349 (0.204)	0.705			0.524 (0.662)	1.689
Religiosity			-0.128** (0.041)	0.88		
Satisfaction with Economy	-0.035 (0.04)	0.966	-0.043 (0.046)	0.958	-0.039 (0.04)	0.962
Age (calculated)	0.018*** (0.005)	1.018	0.016* (0.006)	1.016	0.018*** (0.005)	1.019
Gender	-0.179 (0.175)	0.836	-0.104 (0.204)	0.901	-0.17 (0.177)	0.843
Household Income	0 (0.032)	1	-0.014 (0.037)	0.986	-0.003 (0.033)	0.997
Education Level	0.013 (0.024)	1.013	-0.006 (0.028)	0.994	0.012 (0.024)	1.012
Attachment to Country	-0.102** (0.033)	0.903	-0.088* (0.04)	0.915	0.012 (0.068)	1.012

Attachment to Europe	0.28*** (0.03)	1.324	0.276*** (0.035)	1.318	0.832*** (0.211)	2.299
Satisfaction with Democracy	0.006 (0.041)	1.006	0.003 (0.046)	1.003	0.006 (0.04)	1.006
Left-Right Scale	-0.077* (0.031)	0.925	-0.072 (0.037)	0.931	-0.073* (0.031)	0.93
Political Interest	0.324 (0.183)	1.383	0.252 (0.209)	1.287	0.314 (0.184)	1.369
Trust in Politicians	0.027 (0.04)	1.028	0.061 (0.047)	1.063	0.035 (0.04)	1.035
RD*AC					-0.106 (0.082)	0.899
RD*AE					-0.521* (0.248)	0.594
AC*AE					-0.066** (0.023)	0.936
RD*AC*AE					0.062* (0.028)	1.064
Number of Observations	746		543		746	
Pseudo R-squared (McFadden)	0.153		0.153		0.163	

Standard errors are reported in parentheses.

For abbreviations in the interaction terms RD, AC, and AE represent religious denomination, attachment to country and attachment to Europe, respectively.

*, **, *** indicates p-value $p < 0.05$, $p < 0.01$, and $p < 0.001$, respectively.

To test Hypothesis 2, which examines whether religiosity correlates with public attitudes toward EU membership in Serbia, the analysis includes only respondents who identify as Serb Orthodox. The same control variables used for Hypothesis 1 are applied. The regression results for Hypothesis 2 are presented in **Table 2** (refer to the model labeled “Religiosity”). The regression results indicate that the relationship between religiosity among Serb Orthodox individuals and attitudes toward EU membership is statistically significant ($p < 0.01$). An odds ratio of 0.88 means that there is a negative association. If religiosity increases by one unit among Serb Orthodox individuals, their

odds of supporting EU membership are 0.88 times lower. Higher religiosity is associated with a lower likelihood of supporting EU membership. This result suggests that while identifying as Serb Orthodox is not a significant determinant of attitudes toward EU membership, the level of religiosity within this group has a significant impact. Individuals with higher religiosity are less likely to support EU membership, reflecting how personal religious commitment may shape views on integration more strongly than mere religious identity. According to this model, the predicted probability of support for EU membership (see **Figure 1**) decreases as religiosity increases, with higher levels of religiosity being associated with a lower likelihood of supporting EU membership. At low levels of religiosity (around 0), the predicted probability of supporting EU membership is approximately 70%. At high levels of religiosity (around 10), the predicted probability drops to approximately 30-40%.

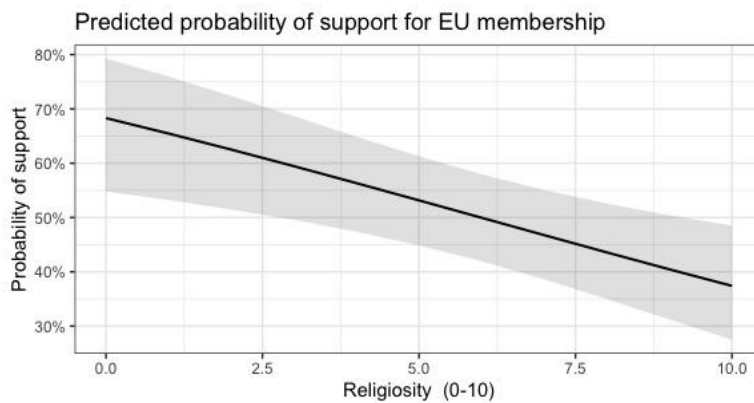


Figure 1. Predicted probability of support for EU membership by religiosity

Additional insights can also be drawn from the control variables. In the model for Hypothesis 2 (see **Table 2**, refer to the model labeled “Religiosity”), the statistically significant control variables align with those identified in the model for H1, except for left-right placement, which is not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). Among Serb-Orthodox, the mean value for the national attachment is 8.046. It is higher than the average in the entire population, which is 7.649. The mean value for the European identity is 3.285 among Serb Orthodox, which is lower than the average for the entire population (3.505). The variables for national attachment ($p < 0.05$) and European

identity ($p < 0.001$) are all statistically significant among Serb Orthodox. Based on the odds ratio, it can be assumed that higher attachment to the country is associated with a lower likelihood of supporting EU membership. If a Serb Orthodox individual's national attachment increases by one unit, their odds of supporting EU membership are 0.915 times lower. Higher attachment to the European identity is associated with a higher likelihood of supporting EU membership; if a Serb Orthodox's attachment to Europe increases by one unit, their odds of supporting EU membership are 1.318 times higher. Age is also statistically significant ($p < 0.05$) in predicting support for EU membership. The left-right placement does not show a statistically significant relationship with support for EU membership in this model. This suggests that political ideology, as measured on a left-right scale, may not be a strong determinant among Serb Orthodox.

While assessing the model fit, the pseudo R-squared measure by the McFadden score is 0.153 in this model (see **Table 2**, "Religiosity"). The multicollinearity issue does not exist here, as all variables have a VIF score of less than 5. The model's performance, assessed by sensitivity and specificity, shows a true positive rate (sensitivity) of 0.782 and a true negative rate (specificity) of 0.580. The relatively high sensitivity (78.2%) implies that the model performs well in identifying people who support EU membership, which is similar to the case in the model for H1. Hypothesis 2 is retained in this context. Religiosity is negatively associated with public attitudes toward EU membership in Serbia.

In conclusion, both analyses show that affiliation with SOC alone does not significantly determine attitudes when other variables are accounted for. However, religiosity emerges as a key factor predicting support for EU membership among Serb Orthodox individuals. Higher levels of religiosity are associated with a decrease in support for EU membership, indicating that personal religious commitment plays a more substantial role than mere religious identity.

For control variables, economic and domestic political variables are less effective in explaining attitudes toward EU membership, while the identity approach provides

stronger explanatory power. From this perspective, support for EU membership appears to be driven more by emotional or affective factors than by rational calculations.

5.2 Interaction with National Identity

To test Hypothesis 3, the analysis examines whether the relationship between religious denominations (Serb Orthodox and others) and attitudes toward EU membership in Serbia varies depending on levels of national identity. Initially, a repeated measures t-test is conducted to determine whether the true difference in means of national attachment between Serb Orthodox and others is not equal to zero. The test result finds a statistically significant result ($p < 0.001$), and the estimated mean of national attachment for others is 6.687, and the estimated mean for Serb Orthodox is 8.046. Serb Orthodox individuals have a higher level of national attachment compared to other individuals, with an average difference of approximately 1.359. The analysis then focuses on the conditional effect of national attachment. Using the initial logistic regression model, the variables of religious denomination and national attachment are adjusted for interaction to assess whether national attachment has a conditional effect. The two-way interaction is not statistically significant in the result output ($p > 0.05$). The effect of religious denomination on EU membership preference does not significantly vary by levels of national attachment alone.

However, conclusions should not be drawn without considering other potential moderators. The statistical results from Hypotheses 1 and 2 indicate that European identity is also an important determinant of attitude preferences. It has the conceptual implication that national attachment conflicts with European identity in the Serbian case. Serbian Orthodoxy is deeply tied to Serbian national identity, while other individuals may not associate their attitude strongly with national identity. Meanwhile, the attitudes toward the EU among church officials are not unanimous (Scherer, 2015). The ambivalence of such an attitude may also be reflected among individual believers. Besides, respondents may balance their national attachment and European identity simultaneously. When both identities are salient, they may interact with their belief to

shape attitudes toward the EU. Hence, the European identity is included as an additional interaction term in the model. A t-test is conducted to determine whether the true difference in means of European identity between the Serb Orthodox group and the others is not equal to zero. The test result finds a statistically significant result ($p < 0.001$). The estimated mean of European identity for others is 4.043, and the estimated mean for Serb Orthodox is 3.286. Serb Orthodox individuals have a lower level of European attachment compared to other individuals.

Before conducting a three-way interaction, the potential of attachment to Europe as a single moderator is tested. For this purpose, the variables of religious denomination and attachment to Europe are set for interaction. From the output result, this interaction is also not statistically significant ($p > 0.05$). The effect of religious denomination on EU membership preference does not significantly vary by levels of attachment to Europe alone.

Finally, a three-way interaction analysis is conducted, with the variable of religious denomination as the independent variable and national attachment and attachment to Europe as moderators. The regression results (see **Table 2**, refer to the model labeled “Interaction”) show that attachment to Europe ($p < 0.001$), age ($p < 0.001$), and left-right placement ($p < 0.001$) are statistically significant main effects. In this new interaction model, the national attachment ($p > 0.05$) does not significantly affect attitudes toward EU membership by itself. To interpret the interaction terms effectively, attention is centered on the three-way interaction term, supported by a plot for clarity. The three-way interaction term is statistically significant in this model ($p < 0.05$). For the plot, the focus is on the conditional effects of national attachment and attachment to Europe on the relationship between religious denominations and attitudes toward EU membership. Religious denomination will be displayed on the x-axis, while the predicted probability of support for EU membership will be shown on the y-axis. For conditional effects, the national attachment and attachment to Europe have both ten levels (0-10); it would be hard to understand the plot if each level were present in the plot. Therefore, three categories—Low, Middle, and High—are created for both variables. Notably, respondents tend to have relatively high scores for

national attachment. Very few respondents (less than one-third of the entire sample) would rate their national attachment as less than 5, and more than one-third of respondents would rate their national attachment as 10. For national attachment, scores are categorized with 5 representing a low level, 8 representing a middle level, and 10 representing a high level. On the other hand, respondents have relatively low scores for European attachment. Almost one-third of respondents would rate their European attachment as 0, and less than one-third of them would rate their European attachment as 10. For European attachment, scores are categorized with 0 representing a low level, 5 representing a middle level, and 10 representing a high level. Three columns are created in the plot that correspond to different levels of European attachment, with national attachment delineated by three different lines indicating varying degrees of national attachment. **Figure 2** is the three-way interaction plot created based on the above criteria.

From the plot, we observe that when attachment to Europe is low, national attachment exerts virtually no conditional influence on other individuals' attitudes toward EU membership. The national attachment has a conditional effect on Serb Orthodox's attitudes toward EU membership. When the national attachment is low, both groups have a similar probability of support toward EU membership; when the national attachment is middle or high, Serb Orthodox has a lower probability of support. However, when European attachment is on the middle level, national attachment has a conditional effect on both groups' attitudes toward EU membership, and the conditional effect is more important on the group of others. The Serb Orthodox have a lower probability of support across all levels of national attachment in comparison with the others, while their gap decreases when the level of national attachment increases. For the last column, when European attachment is high, the national attachment has a conditional effect on both groups' attitudes toward EU membership, and the conditional effect is more important on the group of others. The Serb Orthodox have a lower probability of support when the level of national attachment is middle or low in comparison with the others. An inverse trend is observed, which is that Serb Orthodox have a higher probability of support when the national attachment is high. Overall, the

plot suggests that the conditional effect of national attachment depends on the level of European attachment. For Serb Orthodox, the conditional effect of national attachment diminishes when their European attachment increases. For the group of others, the conditional effect of national attachment is enhanced when their European attachment increases. The relationship between religious denominations (Serb Orthodox and others) and attitudes toward EU membership in Serbia varies depending on levels of both national attachment and European attachment. When either identity factor is eliminated, no statistically significant interaction is observed. Rather than rejecting Hypothesis 3, an additional moderator is introduced to support it.

In conclusion, the findings reveal a complex interplay between identity dynamics, showing that the influence of national attachment is not static but depends on the salience of European attachment. It highlights the dynamic of the identity approach, where competing identity factors shape public opinion in nuanced ways.

For Serb Orthodox individuals, the diminishing conditional effect of national attachment as European attachment increases suggests that two identities can neutralize each other's conditional impact. In contrast, for other respondents, national attachment has a more pronounced conditional effect than for Serb Orthodox as European identity increases.

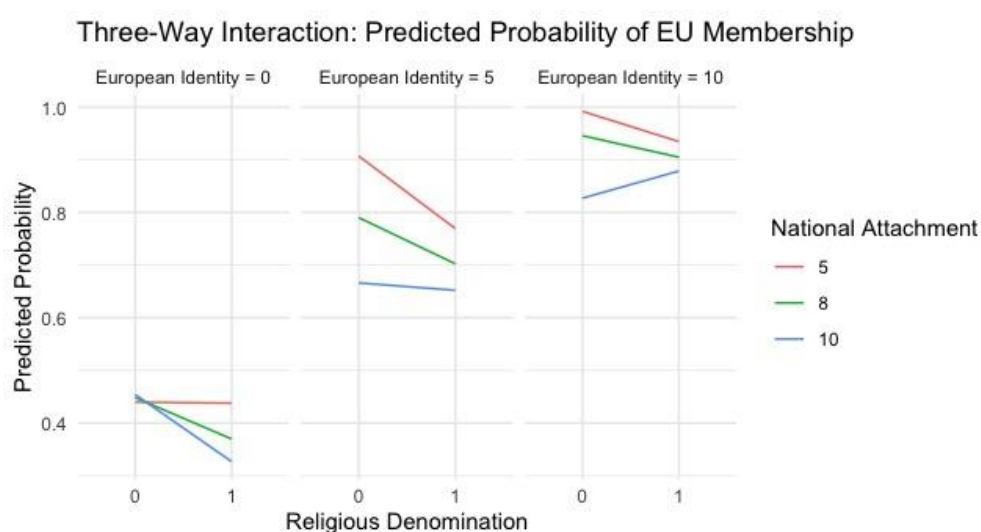


Figure 2. Three-way interaction visualization

5.3 Variability in Attitudes

Lastly, I will test Hypothesis 4 and Hypothesis 5, which are related to the variability of attitude. Based on the first logistic regression model, the predicted probability is calculated across two groups (Serb Orthodox and others) for Hypothesis 4. Then, the variance of the predicted probability for each group is calculated. The variance of the predicted probability is 0.034 for the others and 0.042 for Serb Orthodox. Therefore, being a Serb Orthodox amplifies uncertainty in support of EU membership. Meanwhile, the variability of the predicted probabilities differs significantly ($p < 0.01$) across the two groups by Levene's test, which assesses the equality of variances. Hence, these results lend support to H4.

For Hypothesis 5, the same method is applied to calculate the variance of the predicted probability for each level of religiosity. The output consists of eleven values representing the variances of the predicted probabilities across different levels of religiosity. Comparing these eleven disparate values is challenging because they do not follow a clear, single positive or negative trend, though the variability of the predicted probabilities differs significantly ($p < 0.01$) across eleven levels of religiosity by Levene's test. However, the aim of testing this hypothesis is also to see whether religiosity is associated with increased variability in attitudes toward EU membership. It is unlikely to find a clue from the result of variance if religiosity has eleven categories; it might be possible if recategorizing the variable into fewer categories. As a consequence, the level of religiosity is recoded as low (0-3), middle (4-6), and high (7-10). The predicted probability is calculated again across three levels, as well as their variance of predicted probability, respectively. This time, a single positive trend is observed, with the variance of predicted probability being 0.025 for the low level of religiosity, 0.034 for the middle level of religiosity, and 0.048 for the high level of religiosity. The variability of the predicted probabilities also differs significantly ($p < 0.01$) across the three restructured levels of religiosity. Therefore, these results lend support to H5.

The findings from Hypotheses 4 and 5 highlight critical dimensions of uncertainty in public attitudes toward EU membership in Serbia, driven by both religious

denomination and religiosity. The amplified variability observed among Serb Orthodox individuals suggests that their attitudes are shaped by a greater degree of ambivalence, potentially reflecting competing influences within the Serbian Orthodox Church. The group of others, on the other hand, exhibit less variability, further suggesting that Serbian Orthodoxy plays an ambivalent role in shaping attitudes toward EU membership among Serb Orthodox individuals.

5.4 Summary of findings and discussion

This section summarizes the main findings from the empirical analysis and reflects on their implications. For the five hypotheses of the thesis, H1 was rejected, and H3 was supported only by adding an additional moderator of attachment to Europe, and the dynamic of the conditional effects of two moderators varies across different levels of the attachment. The rest of the hypotheses (H2, H4, H5) were supported by the statistical results.

The empirical results reveal a complex dynamic of the impact of religion on public attitudes toward EU membership in Serbia. Being Serb Orthodox as a mere religious identity alone does not significantly distinguish individuals from others in terms of their support for EU membership, though the hypothetical vote distribution shows that the group of Serb Orthodox are less supportive of EU membership than others. Based on the statistical results for religiosity, which show that more religious Serb Orthodox individuals are more likely to oppose EU membership, it can be inferred that the more religious segments of the Serb Orthodox community constitute a significant portion of the opposition within the overall Serb Orthodox vote distribution.

The overall Serbian population, based on the dataset sample, exhibits a strong sense of national identity and a relatively weak sense of European identity. The gap between these two identities is even more pronounced among Serb Orthodox individuals. Both identities jointly have conditional effects on the attitudes of Serb Orthodox individuals as well as other Serbs. The conditional effect of national attachment on EU membership support is dependent on the level of European attachment and vice versa. Although a stronger sense of European identity would promote support of EU membership across

all respondents, and a stronger sense of national identity would promote more opposition to it, regardless of whether they are affiliated with the SOC; their interaction with religious denominations was not as clear-cut as their main effect. For Serb Orthodox, the conditional effect of national attachment diminishes as their European attachment increases. This suggests that as Serb Orthodox individuals feel more European, their sense of national identity becomes less influential in determining their EU membership stance. The opposite trend was observed among the others, where national attachment becomes more influential in determining their EU membership stance as their attachment to Europe increases.

This amplified variability among Serb Orthodox individuals in comparison to other Serbs could be reflective of the mixed opinions within the group regarding EU membership. The Church itself has historically shown both support and opposition to EU integration, and this internal division is likely influencing the public attitudes of Serb Orthodox individuals. This assumption can be further explained by the variability in religiosity. Less religious Serb Orthodox individuals tend to exhibit more stable attitudes, possibly because their opinions on EU membership are influenced more by other considerations than by religious doctrine. In contrast, more religious Serb Orthodox individuals are likely to align more closely with the Church's stance, which is characterized by internal division and ambivalence. The higher variability in attitudes observed among Serb Orthodox individuals and within the more religious segments may help explain why the true negative rate (specificity) is relatively low in the statistical models (See **Table 2**) for religious denomination and religiosity, as both Serb Orthodox group and the more religious segment constitute a significant portion of the opposition in the vote distribution.

6. Conclusion

The objective of this thesis was to examine how affiliation with the Serbian Orthodox Church influences public attitudes toward Serbia's membership in the European Union, with a particular focus on the attachment to the national identity as a conditional factor. Relying on the existing literature to construct a three-approach framework to identify various determinants correlated to public support toward the EU integration and focusing on the attitude toward the EU membership as the specific object of evaluation, this research emphasized the specific case of Serbia, where Serbian Orthodox Church plays a critical role. Five hypotheses were formed to systematically explore how religious identity influences attitudes toward EU membership and how it interacts with national attachment. Using data from the ESS10 survey, hypothesis testing was conducted through logistic regression models, interaction terms, and variance analysis.

The findings revealed that religious affiliation alone does not significantly predict attitudes toward EU membership when other factors are considered. However, religiosity plays a critical role; higher religiosity among Serb Orthodox individuals is associated with decreased support for EU membership. This highlights the importance of personal religious commitment over mere religious identity. Economic or rational factors did not have a significant impact in the multivariate model, either for the overall population in the sample or for the group consisting solely of Serb Orthodox individuals. Similarly, domestic political factors exhibited limited explanatory power in shaping attitudes toward EU membership; while left-right placement was statistically significant for the overall population, it lost its significance within the Serb Orthodox group. The identity/emotional cluster emerged as the most influential in shaping public attitudes toward EU membership, highlighting the significance of identity-driven factors over economic or political considerations in the context of Serbia. While stronger national attachment is associated with opposition to EU membership, stronger European attachment correlates with increased support.

The analysis further demonstrated that attachment to national and European identity

jointly act as conditional factors, shaping the impact of religious affiliation on attitudes. The three-way interaction is indivisible in this case, as neither national attachment nor European attachment alone demonstrates statistical significance in their interaction with religious affiliation. Among Serb Orthodox individuals, the conditional effect of national attachment diminishes as their European attachment grows. Conversely, for other individuals, the conditional effect of national attachment increases as their attachment to Europe grows. Regarding the variability in attitudes, Serb Orthodox individuals, particularly those with higher religiosity, exhibited greater variability in their attitudes toward EU membership. This may reflect the ambivalence within the Serbian Orthodox Church regarding EU integration, which likely fosters a divided stance among its faithful followers. The others, in contrast, show less variability, suggesting a more consistent attitude toward EU membership.

Overall, the findings from the empirical analysis highlight the influence of Serbian Orthodoxy on public attitudes in Serbia from several perspectives. More religious believers appear to be strongly influenced by their religious doctrines and affiliations when forming their opinions about EU membership. The lack of significant impact from the Serb Orthodox group as a whole may stem from the less religious segments within the group, whose attitudes are likely shaped by factors other than religious influence. This perspective, drawn from the literature (Vukomanovic, 2011; Brujic, 2017), as already mentioned in the chapter of the case selection, suggests that less devout individuals may regard Orthodoxy primarily as a component of their national identity and cultural heritage rather than as a guiding religious authority. Consequently, their views on EU membership are likely influenced more by personal or socio-political considerations than by the Church. The greater variability of attitudes among Serb Orthodox individuals, particularly those with higher levels of religiosity, indicates the presence of ambivalent attitudes toward EU membership both within the Church and among its believers. The three-way interaction reveals that national identity and European identity in Serbia are not conceptually independent but rather interdependent and mutually exclusive. Two identities can neutralize each other's conditional impact. A stronger sense of European identity increases support for EU membership and

reduces divisions between Serb Orthodox individuals and others. This finding has practical implications for policymakers, highlighting the importance of fostering awareness of European identity to bridge societal divides based on religious identity and promote support for EU integration.

This thesis contributes to the literature by highlighting the nuanced ways in which religion shapes attitudes toward the EU, particularly by demonstrating how religious factors interact with other identity dimensions to influence public opinion. In the specific case of Serbia, this thesis suggests further exploration of public attitudes toward EU integration with a stronger focus on identity-based dynamics. From a practical standpoint, this thesis underscores the importance for policymakers of fostering a sense of European identity among the population through policy-making, particularly if the goal is to prevent declining public support for the EU. Furthermore, it may be practical for the state to engage with the internal divisions within the Church or to promote pro-liberal figures within the Church to foster support for EU membership among mass Serbian Orthodox believers.

The limitations of this thesis include the narrow scope of the outcome variable, which addresses only a limited aspect of general support for the EU regime—specifically, support for EU membership. If more survey questions related to diffuse support for the EU were available, such as those addressing perceptions of the EU's future, the image of the EU, or trust in EU institutions, a more comprehensive analysis could be conducted. Secondly, due to data limitations, this thesis could be further improved by conducting a cross-year analysis to examine whether the impact of religion on public attitudes toward the EU varies over time. The third limitation of this thesis lies in its exclusion of blank ballots, spoiled ballots, and non-voters from the empirical analysis. As a result, the analysis was not able to account for neutral stances, which could have meaningful conceptual implications.

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