Who are we and where are we going: From Past Myths to Present Politics
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Abstract:
Social groups, and the social identities which people develop as part of them, are often experienced as stable and continuous over time. Thus, countries experiencing rapid socio-political change often face the challenge of re-constructing the meaning of the social group to adapt to the demands of the present, while simultaneously making this re-construction appear as a natural progression of 'our' historical journey. In the present paper, I ask the question of how, in times of socio-political change, the past is used in the present, and the implications this has for how individuals represent their nation's future. Drawing on Serbia and its political movement towards EU integration, the present article illustrates how developed and legitimized historical narratives, linked to the myth of origin of a nation, become utilized to frame present challenges. In doing so, it allows for uncertainties in the present to become anchored in established historical narratives, which in turn have consequences for which political actions are deemed acceptable and legitimate for the future.

Introduction
Scholars working on collective memory, identity, history and inter-group relations have argued, and illustrated, that social groups, such as a nation, are frequently constructed as stable over time and space (Alonso, 1988; Jetten & Hutchison, 2011; Jovchelovitch, 2012; Liu & Hilton, 2005; Penic, Elcheroth & Reicher, 2016; Sani, Bowe, Herrera, Manna, Cossa, Miao & Zhou, 2007). Sani et al. (2007) use the concept of 'perceived collective continuity' to illustrate how groups perceive links between their past, present and future, and the implications this has for intergroup relations and political decision-making.

In the present paper, we ask the question of how, in times of socio-political change, the past is used in the present, and the implications this has for how individuals represent their nation's future. The article begins by first discussing the social psychological literature on historical myths and narratives, and the role these play in providing a sense of attachment to an essentialized version of national identity. Secondly, it draw on social representations theory to argue that, the ability of historical myths to persist over time is due to their adaptive nature, understood through the concept of 'thema'. Thirdly, drawing on qualitative data from Serbia, it illustrates the ways in which developed historical narratives about a nation's origins and identity become utilized to anchor present politics, thus providing a template from which to understand socio-political change. Lastly, the article discusses the implications of this for how individuals come to conceptualize the future of their nation, and their role in shaping it.

Identity Continuity: Myths of origin and historical narratives
For scholars interested in issues of national identification, nationalism and intergroup relations, understanding the historical contexts in which these develop becomes crucial. Because of this, there is a growing acknowledgment of the importance of

history in providing the material through which social groups, such as nations, are developed and maintained, with scholars emphasizing the importance of promoting a psychology that includes history in its analysis (Liu & Hilton, 2005; Reicher & Hopkins, 2001).

History becomes important as it tells a story of where a nation and its people come from by providing it with foundational myths (Malinowski, 1926) and historical charters (Liu & Hilton, 2005). These constructs bind the past with the present and future of a nation and its people by defining the origins of the group, but also its role in relation to other nations.

Liu and Hilton (2005) have argued that nations have particular 'historical charters' that define their identities and their role vis-à-vis other nations. A historical charter provides a narrative of a group's origins, which in turn functions to legitimizing present socio-political actions intended to promote a future that is perceived as continuous with the past. Considering this, Liu & Hilton argue that the different responses of England, France and Germany to the 9/11 aftermath can be understood by the different historical missions, and identities, of the nations.

The importance of drawing on history to legitimize not only the present, but also proposed projects for the future, places historical myths and narratives at the centre in creating a sense of stability and continuity in a nation. The idea of 'perceived collective continuity' (Sani et al., 2007) conceptualizes the ways in which we see our social groups and consequently social identities, as stable constructs moving through time. The construction of a perceived collective continuity assures that "within the national imagination, we are rendered immortal, forever reproduced through the timelessness of metaphorical genealogy" (Alonso, 1988, p.40). However, while perceived collective continuity functions to essentialize a national identity as stable and outside of the boundaries of time, it is important to note that historical continuity "is not derived from a passive act of perception [but rather] involves an active process of selection, interpretation and construction" which is always future-oriented (Reicher, 2008, p.151). Thus, an inclusion of history into the study of psychological phenomena does not entail taking a deterministic and static approach to topics of interest, but rather it provides a framework through which to understand how socio-political change becomes (and dissent silenced) possible by embedding it within legitimized narratives of group belonging (Obradović & Howarth, 2017; Penic, Elcheroth & Reicher, 2016).

Because of the importance of perceived collective continuity and foundational myths in providing a sense of belonging and stability to a group's identity, in contexts of proposed socio-political change, perceived threats to national identity (or group identity more generally) frequently lead to unwillingness to support the change (Jetten & Hutchison, 2011; Sindic & Reicher, 2009). Identity threats can be based on disrupting a sense of continuity from the past, but also a perceived fear of how the group will fare in the future. Thus, advocates of change are faced with the challenge of representing socio-political change as a continuation, rather than rupture, of group identity (Reicher & Hopkins, 2001; Obradović & Howarth, 2017). As Smith (1995) has argued, nationalism should be understood as a form of 'political archaeology' where history functions to rediscover, reinterpret and regenerate a national community.

However, as is often evident within both reified and lay perspectives on history, not all historical events are given equal importance and emphasis within nations. Thus, when studying how nations maintain a sense of continuity in times of change, we must first understand what parts of history are given centrality to a

collective identity, and thus become the elements selected through political archaeology . In other words, we must unpack the myths of origin beyond the content of the events themselves to understand what they *communicate* about a nation's identity. We can do this by drawing on the social representations theory and the concept of thema, to understand how supposedly fixed events of the past become re-negotiated and kept alive through times of change.

Social Representations and Thema: Unearthing the Core of Identities
Myths of origin persist due to their dialogical nature. They are, like identities, constantly re-presented and re-negotiated to provide a historically rooted legitimacy for present ingroup goals and identities. The theory of social representations (hereafter SRT) becomes a useful theoretical framework through which we can understand how historical events become part of common-sense knowledge, and communicate something about who 'we' are, and how 'we' should act.

At the core of SRT (Moscovici, 2000; Howarth, 2006) is an emphasis on how we make sense of the world and thus how knowledge is socially created and re-presented. This becomes particularly relevant to understand in the study of how history, psychology and politics become intertwined. For example, the popular saying that "those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it" (originally coined by George Santayana) illustrates the powerful nature of history as a source of legitimacy in shaping and mobilizing groups for certain political actions, supposedly intended to safeguard the group for re-living past atrocities (or failures to hinder them).

Social representations of history thus serve a vital function in providing both the content (meaning) of identities as well as providing an understanding of the processes through which this meaning becomes shared, re-interpreted and resisted through communication. The past, and the ways in which it is remembered, is thus constantly in a process of reconstruction. Historical representations, and their corresponding cultural signs and symbols, will become remembered or forgotten "depending on their ability to fulfil the needs of different social, political and cultural functions" (Jovchelovitch, 2012, p.444). Social representations of history further provide an addition to research on social (particularly national) identities in acknowledging the importance of place and space in creating a sense of psychological attachment to a physical reality (Hopkins & Dixon, 2006). By considering how historical events (often tied to specific territories or lands) shape identities and create a sense of continuity, we can also understand how identities encompass a spatial dimension, which comes to have implications for geopolitics and the management of boundaries and belonging.

The concept of 'thema' can be seen as the "basic starting point for generating social representations" (Markova, 2000, p. 442). Originating in the work of Holton (1975), thema and themata were originally defined as antinomies of thought found in science (see also, Liu, 2004). Developing this further, Markova (2000; 2003) argues that common sense thinking is characterizes by antinomies of thinking, where opposites such as "we/them" come to shape our way of understanding the social world. According to Markova (2000) not all antinomies become themata. Rather, this occurs "if, in the course of certain social and historical events, e.g., political, economic, religious, and so on, they turn into problems and become the focus of social attention and a source of tension and conflict." (Markova, 2000, p. 184). Themata then, allow us to explore "the socio-historical embeddedness" of social representations in a non-reductive way (Liu, 2004, p. 254).

Applying the concept of thema to social representations of history and social identities allows us to understand how an ingroup's identity can be built on opposites. For example, Jovchelovitch (2012) found that the oppositional nature of the foundational myth of the Brazilian people functioned to celebrate the 'mixedness' of its identity, and to allow for inclusion and endurance by being inherently dynamic and complex. Similarly, in the context of Serbia, the myth of origin (discussed more in detail below) emphasizes an identity that is simultaneously victimized and strong/resilient (Bieber, 2002). Thus, SRT in general, and the concept of thema in particular, becomes useful for unearthing the links between foundational myths, ingroup identities and the ways in which socio-political change becomes understood.

Continuity in Times of Change: The case of Serbia

By understanding foundational myths, and the historical charters which they become part of, through the concept of thema we can begin to unpack the dynamic function that historical representations serve for national identities, and the role they come to play in shaping how present socio-political changes are understood and oriented towards. The present article focuses on unpacking how a particular historical event, the battle of Kosovo, became a core myth through which ingroup identity was understood in Serbia, but also intergroup relations and present politics. However, before we can unpack this, we must give some context to the event itself.

The issue of the political status of Kosovo is perhaps the biggest hurdle for Serbia on its path towards EU membership. Kosovo is a region in (or below) Southern Serbia that declared independence from Serbia in 2008 (after years of conflict and with a predominantly non-Serbian population). The territory holds a prominent identity position among Serbs as it was the territory on which the legendary battle of Kosovo took place in 1389 and has continued to be a site of conflict between Serbs and Kosovars in the past 20 years. This story of the battle is one of both victory and defeat. Namely, in 1389 Prince Lazar led Serbia into battle against the more powerful Ottoman forces, which were invading the country in an attempt to conquer it. As Bieber (2002, p. 96) argues;

> "According to the myth, on the eve of the battle, Knez Lazar was offered the choice between establishing either a heavenly or an earthly kingdom. Lazar chose the former, which prevented his victory the following day but ensured the creation of a perpetual heavenly realm for the Serbian people.'

Consequently, from the fifteenth century and onwards (until the 18th century) Serbia was under Ottoman rule, a period known as the epoch of Turkish slavery (Cirkovic, 2004, p. xx). The Kosovo myth gained significance only after this period as the foundational myth of a newly independent Serbian state in the late 1800s (Bieber, 2002). The reproduction of the myth through cultural symbols, songs, religious holidays and celebrations has further solidified the image of Kosovo in Serbia, making it an everyday and banal symbol of nationalism and national identity (Billig, 1995). It further legitimizes claims to the territory of modern-day Kosovo by constructing the region as the physical embodiment of a psychological belonging to the nation (Hopkins & Dixon, 2006).

The narrative that the myth communicates is one which emphasizes how the Serbian people were simultaneously victims (under Turkish power) but also strong and resilient when faced with a seemingly more powerful opponent. In a way, the

myth draws on an oppositional pair of victory (spiritual) and defeat (physical), with the former proving more significant on a symbolic level than the latter.

Although the EU is said to hold no position towards the independence issue, continued efforts have been made to normalize relations between Serbia and Kosovo. These efforts in turn have domestically led many to believe that Serbia would (eventually) have to make a decision between EU membership and Kosovo (Ker-Lindsay, 2009, p.6), a trade-off with consequences extending far beyond the sphere of geopolitics.

Method:

The present paper asks the question of how, in times of socio-political change, the past is used in the present, and the implications this has for how individuals represent their nation's future. It does so by drawing on qualitative data gathered in Serbia, exploring how citizens perceive their country's movement towards joining the European Union, and the (positive/negative) implications this might have for their collective future.

Study Design

As the aim of this study was to explore the ways in which lay representations of history become part of understanding the present and future, a qualitative approach was deemed most suitable. Particularly as research on social representations is best explored "in the in-between space we create in dialogue and negotiation with others" (Howarth, 2006, p.68). With this in mind, 12 focus group (FG) sessions were conducted between April 2015 and April 2016 in four cities in Serbia, two in the North (Novi Sad and Belgrade) and two in the South (Nis and Vranje) of the country. These comprised of meeting the same 4 groups (one from each city) at three different time-points (April 2015, September 2015 and April 2016). The rationale behind this design was to develop an iterative method through which in-depth tensions could be explored more fully, by returning to the same participants with new questions, rooted in the discussions from the previous session. Furthermore this design was seen as complimentary to the theoretical framework both in terms of the focus on perceived continuity, but also the emphasis that SRT places on communication. Namely, it highlights the role of dialogue in the process of generating and re-negotiating socially shared knowledge, and iterative FGs were seen as an innovative method for capturing this in situ. Lastly, the selection of cities in the north and south reflected an interest in exploring the importance of physical proximity to Kosovo in shaping opinions, and understandings, of the importance of the region for Serbian identity, and subsequently collective continuity in the future.

Participants

32 individuals participated in this study, 10 of which were female and 23 male. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 55, with median age 31 (at time of first FG sessions; for participant demographics see table 1). Participants were recruited through snowballing. For each of the first FGs, one participant was contacted via telephone and (if they accepted) came to serve as the point of contact for that particular city, helping the researcher organize a setting in which to conduct the FG, as well as gain access to other potential participants. The rationale behind the sampling choice of these individuals was not to reach statistical representativeness or generalisability, but rather to explore the diversity in beliefs and opinions expressed by a larger pool of individuals from different parts of the country (Barbour &

Kitzinger, 1999, p.7). The first round of FGs comprised of 7 – 9 participants. In some instances, certain individuals brought a friend, co-worker or family member (particularly if they did not know any of the prior invited participants). In order to maintain a good rapport with the participants, these additional participants were allowed to join the FG discussions. However, due to the nature of the study design, an average of 2 participants per FG did not attend the second and third sessions.

*******************insert table 1 here*******************

Procedure
All FGs took place in 'natural' settings such as cafes and participant's homes. Within each group, participants were introduced to the moderator, the aims of the study, as well as the intended procedure of the FG. Participants were told that "together with another 5-7 people, you will discuss certain topics and questions that will be provided by the moderator. All I ask you to do is state your honest opinion about these topics and engage in discussion with the other participants." Following this, participants were given an information sheet (which repeated some of this information) and a consent form to sign. Also, to ensure confidentiality (and address any concerns about anonymity) participants were asked to provide their name, age and occupation to the group prior to the audio recording commenced and these were saved in collected field notes. The topic guides for each three sessions followed the same format, including questions covering themes of politics, identity, the past and the future (see table 2). After conducting the first round of FGs (April 2015), any remaining issues, tensions or points of debate for each question were used to inform the topic guide for the second session, thereby allowing the data-collection to follow an iterative design where the researcher was able to go back to the participants to gain further insight on questions which had remained unanswered. FG discussions lasted between 33 and 87 minutes, with an average length of one hour and five minutes.

*************insert table 2 here*************

All FGs were conducted (and subsequently analysed) in Serbian. The ability to conduct the FGs in Serbian overcame an important language barrier. However, while the researcher is of Serbian ethnic-origin, she was not born nor has ever lived in Serbia (which was disclosed to the participants). This positioned her as both an insider and outsider in all group discussions and influenced the dynamics of the FG discussions in an interesting way, as participants reflexively positioned the researcher as both a source of Western knowledge and practice, but also a representative of a non-Serbian world that inherently misunderstood the lived experiences of Serbian people. In order to ensure participant confidentiality all names and identifiers were modified during transcription.

Analysis
The audio recorded FGs were transcribed verbatim and a thematic analysis was conducted following the guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). All transcripts were coded using NVivo 11, a qualitative data software program. The analytical procedure was also iterative and consisted of firstly coding the transcripts from the first set of FGs (hereon FG1), from which an initial codebook was developed

and subsequently applied to FG2 and FG3 transcripts. As additional codes were added during the analysis of FG2 and FG3 transcripts, the FG1 transcripts had to be re-analysed as well. The analytical procedure was deductive, focusing on coding for references to change (socio-political and cultural), historical events, political attitudes and references to the past and the future. The data was coded on a semantic level, and the initial codebook consisted of 76 codes. These were re-read and combined into themes. After revising some themes, the final codebook included 72 Codes, 17 themes and three organizing themes. For each organizing theme there were tensions that arose between the various theme (i.e., between independence and inclusion) which captured the 'essence' of each organizing theme, of which the various topics discussed became manifestations of. These tensions are the basis of each of the three subsections of results, but also evident in the extracts themselves.

Results
At the heart of the data, were tensions around managing a sense of continuity in times of change. Namely, as the analysis will show, both the past, the present and the future become understood through the foundational thema of Serbian identity; victimhood and resilience. This antinomy functioned to both make sense of the domestic and international context of Serbia, and became thematized due to the tensions which arose around answering the question of 'who we are' and which political direction we should take in the future.

The results section is divided into three parts, each addressing one of these 'tensions'. The first relates to how the political and symbolic meaning of Kosovo is narrated and the implications this has for the construction of a Serbian identity, the second considers how this narrative becomes utilized in explaining the domestic socio-political context and addressing the tension of who is to blame for a lack of progress, and the third section explores its application to meaning-making on an international scale, which at root is a debate about how to maintain a sense of sovereignty while becoming part of a seemingly hierarchical and stigmatizing union.

Narrating Kosovo: Tensions between De Facto and De Jure
Within the various FGs over the one-year time frame, participants were asked about the historical and political significance of Kosovo. Discussions often centred on the tension between the historical and symbolic importance of the region and acknowledging the political reality of Kosovo as a 'de facto' independent state. When asked about the Battle of Kosovo, social representations of the historical event often drew on imagery of heroic martyrdom;

Excerpt 1: Belgrade 3
M3: Uhm, the whole myth is primarily associated with the Battle of Kosovo and everything that happened afterwards, and that whole, this great Serbian army, which opposed an even greater Turkish army, and our glorified defeat.

Excerpt 2: Nis 3
W3: Well yes, a small Serbian army which defeated large Turkey [Ottoman Empire]. Told as one of the greatest victories of Serbs.

These short excerpts illustrate that within both northern and southern cities in Serbia, the battle of Kosovo is narrated in a similar manner. However, what differs is the

supposed outcome of the battle, illustrating the extent to which the battle is remembered as both a victory and a defeat. When discussions moved from the socio-historical representations to the political status of Kosovo, participants frequently used words such as 'cradle' 'root' and 'home' to anchor the space within the boundaries of Serbian belonging, not only as a part, but as encompassing a central place.

Excerpt 3: Novi Sad 3:
M6: I think the question [of the political status of Kosovo] becomes important in Serbia because it represents the territory on which the first Serbian state was constructed in the 7th century. It is the cradle of today's national identity, and from there, that was, how do I put this… a key territory which was Serbian, from where, no matter how much Serbia expended or narrowed, it originated.

Excerpt 4: Vranje 3
M1: You see, the oldest Serbian monasteries are down there.
M5: Yes
M1: Orthodox monasteries, not only Serbian. So…, it's not for nothing that it's the source of Serbian heritage.
W4: the cradle of Serbia.
M5: Yes, from where Serbia originated, from the beginning.

From these excerpts we see how the territory of Kosovo is constructed as the only stable point in Serbian history, from which a sense of continuous national identity has been build. As Hopkins and Dixon (2006, p.179) argue, "a striking feature of much talk about place and identity is the way in which it naturalises people's relationships with territory in politically significant ways." In relation to Serbia, the psychological significance of the battle of Kosovo becomes embodied in the physical territory of the region, intertwining attachment and continuity with geopolitical attitudes. This is visible in the following excerpt;

Excerpt 5: Belgrade 2
W1: You know what, theoretically that sentence, "Kosovo is not Serbia" no one will say that, but everything else beyond that has been done. So, what does that mean to you when you publicly don't say it but you have a liaison officer to communicate with them, you have borders, I mean, I think we've already recognized Kosovo, only that we're not saying it….
W2: I don't think there was ever a big problem saying like 'Kosovo is lost'. But it's what comes after that. –
W1: It's not lost, it's its own state, that's different
W2: But no, no, you can always add after that 'currently'. So, there's always that, this moment of the current arrangements in the world, Europe, and so on, so that that's simply the reality now, but I don't think anyone thinks that it's something final.

In this exchange, we see the tension between participants when attempting to come to terms with the political reality of Kosovo, a reality that stands at odds with a perceived collective continuity of the Serbian identity. W2 evokes a statement of temporality to argue that, despite the present (independent) status of Kosovo, the future is uncertain, and therefore the current political reality is one that is malleable, and potentially up for change. While this communicative strategy was common

among participants from northern cities, those who lived in the south were less likely to even recognize the current political reality of Kosovo as 'lost'. Instead, the proximity of these participants to the physical space of the region and the border made the psychological attachment stronger and less flexible in accepting alternative representations of the region where it belongs.

What this section has attempted to briefly illustrate is that, the foundational myth of Serbia rests on the Battle of Kosovo myth, which highlights a thema drawing on both victimhood and strength/resilience. This myth in turn becomes both rooted in the present-day physical territory of Kosovo as well as the psychological identification individuals feel towards their nation, making any political changes, which cause disruption to this continuity, considered threatening to the nation as a whole. While the third section will explore this more closely in relation to Serbia's EU trajectory, the following section explores how this myth, and its embeddedness within constructions of national identity, becomes part of framing how individuals see their relationship vis-à-vis their political elites and the institutions they become affiliated with.

The People and Politicians: Managing agency and accountability
The myth of origin, and its foundational elements which give meaning to the Serbian identity, also shape how individuals position themselves vis-à-vis their state. Namely, similarly to how the Battle of Kosovo was represented through an imagery of 'heroic martyrdom', so citizens conceptualize their relationship to their political elites. When discussing the necessary changes needed to improve Serbia, discussions centred around themes that emphasized a lack of 'normality' and institutional order in the country, the powerlessness of the public to bring about positive change and therefore the naivety of those who believed in change, but also the corruption of politicians and continued efforts to suppress dissent and promote a disenfranchised and docile citizenry. Consider a context in which participants discussed how political and socio-economic progress of the nation would become possible;

Excerpt 6: Vranje 2
M6: Under the condition that Serbia is governed intelligently.
M1: Intelligent governing means that a person is incorruptible. Honest, meaning, he doesn't have to be a specialist but he has to be honest.
W3: and how long will that last?
M2: it can't
M1: hold on, just so we're on the same page here. If I steal from my own house, I don't know, a TV, and sell it, my wife and kids have nothing to watch. Meaning, I need that TV.
W5: That's right, with this political perspective we haven't done anything, we've even gone backwards.

The importance of incorrupt leadership in order to achieve progress in Serbia was an important theme that permeated discussions acknowledging that Serbia was 'lagging behind' other European countries in its modernization and democratization. Within this type of argument then, it is the assumption that, while the public is doing their part to move forward, this movement is being stifled, and even overturned, by the political elite stealing from their "own home". As one participant argued;

Excerpt 7: Belgrade 1:
M7: It's a matter of the system, they [EU countries] have an orderly system and then they act towards that specific model because they've learned to [...] and I don't think at all that, okay it's the Serbian mentality, okay, every nation has its own mentality but it's built over time and only at the level of an orderly state can you see a country that serves its people and not the other way around.
W2: I respect the law and follow it, but then you come to a point where they [criminals] don't pay taxes and laugh in your face when you do. And then you think, whatever, why should I give money to the state when it's robbing me. And then they force you to the other side, where you do everything opposite of what is order and law, which isn't your, or at least not my, choice.
M4: And then they tell you at the end 'see how you [Serbs] are!'
W2: Yeah. But it's not that we're like that but that they've forced us to the tipping point.

As this exchange illustrates, participants rationalize 'corrupt' behaviour on the part of citizens as an adaptation to the malfunctioning situation that they're in. In doing so they highlight their ability to adapt, persevere and prove resilient, despite the continued challenges they face. This exchange furthermore illustrates how the stigmatizing representations attached to Serbia (as corrupt) are actually held by the political elites, and not Serbian citizens themselves. Instead, by emphasizing resilience as an adaptive strategy participants are able to reinterpret seemingly negative characteristics into positive,, and even envied, features of the Serbian people. This is evident in the exchange below;

Excerpt 8: Vranje 1:
M6: Look at the past 25 years, this nation has survived so much trauma, from economic crises, sanctions, poverty, wars, NATO aggressions, loss of workplace, factories closing down, jobs being lost, territory being lost, uhm, all that influences a nation in a very stressful way. And it's a real mystery –
    W5: that we've survived
M6: that people are still surviving, still an exceptionally mentally well people, of course we have out problems with –
    M7: the limits of our tolerance
M6: meaning everyone is at the tipping point of their tolerance because of these everyday stresses and trying to survive, but we're still here. So I think that, had any other nation experienced this, that would have been a disaster.
M1: People are more or less the same, the only difference is how the situation has forced them to act.
M6: but that's just proof of how resilient and capable we are as a people. We're ready to overcome any crisis.
W3: That's how we grew up, that's how we've learned [to be].

As the present section illustrated, Serbian individuals make a clear distinction between a positive Serbia, embodied by the resilient people and a powerful, corrupt system (driven by the decisions of politicians) which in turn victimizes them and forces them to adapt to seemingly negative behaviours. We see how discourses on victimhood and strength/resilience manifest themselves in positioning Serbs as bearers, and protectors, of a truly Serbian identity, one which is being stifled from its full potential by the acts of greedy politicians. By drawing these links, the participants

are inevitably also constructing themselves as continuous with past Serbs, from which they have "learned" to be resilient. In the domestic context, the antinomy of victimhood/resilience is thematized in attempts to make sense of the present, and distinguish between the 'good' and the 'bad' of the nation. Thus, extending this further, the victimhood/resilience thema becomes a particular manifestation of a more universal thema; we/them. While in the domestic context, this distinction is made between we 'the people' and them 'the politicians', in the context of EU integration, it is instead the we 'the nation' and them 'the EU' which is problematized.

The Nation and the EU: Managing independence and inclusion

When discussing Serbia's potential membership into the European Union, issues of global powerlessness were central, and these highlighted how a potential future in the EU would be one where Serbia would lose three crucial things; 1) sovereignty, becoming a colony or cheap labour for the rest of Europe, 2) cultural continuity, being forced to 'Westernize' and thus strip itself of Serbian values to be replaced by more individualistic and capitalistic values, and 3) territory, as EU integration would, it was speculated, lead to a choice between joining the union and keeping Kosovo as a part of Serbian territory. We provide a quote for each to illustrate the functionality of the victimhood/resilience thema.

Excerpt 9: Nis 2:
M2: The gist of the story is that we're so small that we can't play independent but be so financially dependent of that same EU, that is over with. We're being blackmailed, a basic colony, we don't have the opportunity, our budget is filled with EU funds, I mean we don't, we don't, I think that that's the reality of it. Values and education and whether they want us to join or not, the reality is that we can't leave that [relationship] because our budget is being filled, we haven't bankrupted thanks to the fact that they're pumping money into us, and that's as long as we do as we're told.
M4: Yeah, we can't make any kinds of demands.

The use of the word 'colony' and the implication that Serbia, due to its financial instability has no agency over its own country and politics draws on the victimhood element of the thema to position Serbia as moving towards complete loss of sovereignty as part of the EU. The asymmetrical power-relationship in turn also has consequences beyond politics and economics, stretching into the area of cultural values.

Excerpt 10: Vranje 2:
M5: Although the last few years, I have to admit, that more and more people are accepting those influences from the West, becoming worse.
M2: Before marriage used to be sacred, whatever either does, a divorce was never an option, but recently –
*   6: but that's coming from the West*
W2: that the West.
M6: The Western system
M5: To not respect your parents or family
W4: nothing good has come from the west
M5: that's right. It's not like before, of course we're still humanitarian but not the same way as before, socially, that doesn't exist anymore. Earlier, it wasn't tied to money nor the time of the year but simply, the system has changed.

When discussing how the present is different from the past, participants often reference the influences of (Western) capitalism in bringing about values of materialism and individualism, which in turn clash with the more "warmer" (Novi Sad3, M4) nature of Serbs. These discourses, occurring more frequently in the south than north, thus highlight the assumed (and continued) disruption to a more collectivist Serbia through the political integration into the EU. Thus, the antinomy of victimhood/resilience becomes thematised in the context of present politics as goals such as EU integration bring up tensions regarding how to maintain, and protect, a sense of perceived collective continuity (Sani et al., 2007). It is not surprising that this was discussed more in the south than north, as the southern cities are more rural and experience less tourism and interaction with foreign travellers, thus creating more distance and assumed differentiation from the non-Serbian other. It also emphasizes an underlying belief that Serbian cultural values are neither respected nor wanted within the EU. This is particularly evident in quotes attributing stigmatizing representations to the beliefs of EU member-states, such as the following two excerpts illustrate;

Excerpt 11: Novi Sad 2:
W2: And the Brits, Swedes and those [countries] look at us, not as second-class citizens, but as tenth-class.
M3: Well when they think that we're savages [...]
M6: But see, that image will never change because we've literally, 20 years, been presented as poor, miserable and guilty for everything in this region, and that image will never change unless someone comes to this country and meets people.

What is interesting in this exchange is the positioning of Serbian individuals in relation to these representations. While participants are aware of the negative representations of Serbs held by others, and the extent to which these are because of recent political events, they are able to re-negotiate the actual source of these representations (Howarth, 2006). Namely, similarly to excerpt 7, we see how individuals actively resist these stigmas by arguing that it is only when "someone comes to this country and meets people", meaning that it is not the people themselves that embody these representations. Rather, these representations have been (wrongfully) imposed on the people, again reaffirming a sense of victimhood. The thematization of the antinomy of victimhood/resilience comes to the fore when discussions turn to tangible political changes. Most problematic here, is of course the future status of Kosovo if Serbia joins the EU, as participants speculated that the EU would use membership as a bargaining chip to pressure Serbia into recognizing the independence of Kosovo.

Excerpt 12: Novi Sad 1:
M8: You know, we're all aware that Kosovo is lost but my personal opinion is that people wouldn't accept this publicly because we know that it's one of the conditions that we're asked to fulfil and who knows how many of these conditions are yet to come if we publicly say 'okay, Kosovo isn't ours'. How much more can they ask of us?

EU conditionality then, particularly in relation to Kosovo, becomes seen as a normative pressure to strip Serbia of its 'essence', both geopolitically and

psychologically in order to become a better fit within the superordinate union. These sacrifices in turn are seen from a context of an asymmetric power-relationship, where Serbia is dependent on the EU for sustenance but in turn risk losing their identity in the process. This political tension with regards to EU integration is framed as a struggle between being victimized (by being pressured to give up Kosovo) and staying resilient (by never fully acknowledging or supporting its independence, no matter how 'real' it is). Consequently, while most participants voice concerns and worries about EU integration, ultimately many of them see no other alternative for the future (i.e., excerpt 9).

The lack of alternatives comes not only from the censorship within the sphere of politics (i.e., Penic, Elcheroth & Reicher, 2016) , but more importantly, it becomes an ironic way of sustaining a sense of continuity in the future. By representing themselves as powerless (both domestically and internationally), individuals also strip themselves of any agency or responsibility in bringing about change, instead commending themselves on their ability to adapt, and adjust, to a corroding society. Ultimately then, these narratives function to provide individuals with a sense of security and stability; while everything around them is changing (potentially for the worst), at least they are able to maintain a sense of continuity with the past, and the sufferings of previous generations of Serbs.

Conclusion
At the heart of both the theme of the domestic and international context is a tension of answering the question of who we are, and in turn, how we should act. It was illustrated that the battle of Kosovo, serving as a foundational myth to the Serbian nation, communicates that Serbian identity is (and continues to be) an identity that is victimized but resilient and strong, an underdog that does not surrender without a fight.

It is important to highlight here that this identity (as with all social identities) exists and is kept alive within communities of others, whether real or imagined. That is, "[m]eaning is always relational – and therefore the contestation of meaning can only occur in relationship." (Howarth, 2006, p.77). In the present context we saw the meaning of history and identity be negotiated within a context of a domestic Other (politicians) and international Other (EU community). Namely, the thema of victimhood/resilience, embedded within a context of we/them, was utilized to construct an essentialized national identity, a process which functioned to adapt in-group identity to a complex present and recent past, wrought with conflicts and ruptures. It further functioned to distance participants from those conflicts and ruptures, by positioning the 'Other' as a source of stigmatization (i.e., excerpts 7 and 11), *against* which a positive sense of self was constructed and reaffirmed. This in turn allowed participants to become the embodiment of collective continuity of a historically old nation, despite circumstantial changes and challenges. Consequently, these processes of meaning-making became part and parcel of their justifications for, and rejections of, various political change.

What this study then tells us is that, while history might weigh on the present, history is also utilized to give meaning to the present and to construct a particular version of the future, which is seen as aligned with a sense of collective continuity, both

historical and cultural (Jovchelovitch, 2012). By doing so, it inevitably has consequences for the present-day politics which become deemed legitimate for attaining this future, particularly when social knowledge and psychological attachment become intertwined and linked with existing geopolitical tensions. The empirical example draw on in this paper provides an interesting context in which to explore how these processes are negotiated as they occur, and the importance of considering not only the role of history, but also the role of place and space, in the construction of psychological belonging (Dixon & Hopkins, 2006).

Research on historical representations, national identity and socio-political change should thus contemplate the importance of an interdisciplinary approach which considers not only the psychology behind these processes, but also the history through which they have developed, transformed and solidified, and the political consequences they bring. The SRT, coupled with a temporal understanding of identity, has the potential to allow us to do so. Namely, by considering how social representations become part of constructing continuity and how they become anchored in existing physical spaces, SRT can realize its full potential as a critical theory of both agency and resistance (Howarth, 2006). Thus, an interdisciplinary approach to socio-political change would consider the ways in which the meaning attributed to political actions emerge from the significance these actions have for promoting, or disrupting, a perceived continuity of the group's identity and historical narrative. This can only be done by combining a thick description of the socio-historical context and an analysis of its role in giving meaning to political and psychological processes of integration, belonging and change.

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Table 1: Participant Demographics

Participant	Gender	Age	Occupation	City
1	Male	55	Business owner	Belgrade
2	Female	28	Student (PhD)	Belgrade
3	Male	27	Insurance Agent	Belgrade
4	Female	28	NGO Employee	Belgrade
5	Male	25	Engineer	Belgrade
6	Male	29	Student	Belgrade
7	Male	26	Engineer	Belgrade
8	Male	27	Journalist	Belgrade
9	Male	28	Unemployed	Niš
10	Male	30	Unemployed	Niš
11	Female	27	Retail Worker	Niš
12	Female	24	Student	Niš
13	Female	27	Unemployed	Niš
14	Female	24	Student	Niš
15	Male	28	Electrical Engineer	Niš
16	Male	26	Medical Technician	Niš
17	Female	50	Office clerk	Niš
18	Male	31	Architect	Novi Sad
19	Female	35	Architect	Novi Sad
20	Male	31	Accountant	Novi Sad
21	Male	31	Taxi Driver	Novi Sad
22	Male	30	Unemployed	Novi Sad
23	Male	28	Lawyer	Novi Sad
24	Male	34	Waiter	Novi Sad
25	Male	30	Military Employee	Vranje
26	Female	28	Military Employee	Vranje
27	Male	36	Unemployed	Vranje
28	Male	57	Self-employed farmer	Vranje
29	Female	55	Casino Employee	Vranje
30	Male	47	Lawyer	Vranje
31	Male	28	Military Employee	Vranje
32	Male	28	Military Employee	Vranje

Table 2: Focus Group Topic Guides

FG1: Topic Guide
General Questions to Start Discussion
1. There have been many discussions about Serbia joining the EU. What have been some of the benefits and some of the downsides discussed?
Identity / Compatibility
2. What is your opinion about Serbia joining the EU? Are you for or against it?
Meta-perspective
3. Do you think Serbia is welcomed in the EU, from the perspective of other member countries?
Politics
4. Serbia has (or has had) a close relationship with Russia, which has at times conflicted with its pro-EU politics. Do you think that Serbia should be more political oriented towards Russia or the EU? Or both, if possible.
5. In many media reports, EU membership and the question of the status of Kosovo have been placed in opposition. Do you think accepting Kosovo's independence is worth it if it would guarantee Serbia membership into the EU?
Future

6. When the year 2020 comes, the year by which politicians predict Serbia will have finally become a member, what do you realistically think the situation will look like?

Identity (2)

7. Considering the past 25 years and everything that has occurred in Serbia and the region, do you think that the people, as a nation, has changed in comparison with the past?

FG2: Topic Guide

General Question to Start Discussion

1. When we last met in April I asked you if you thought Serbia joining the EU was a good idea, has your opinions changed at all since then?

Identity / Compatibility

2. Do you consider Serbian culture as compatible with European culture?
3. Do you think Serbia's way of life is representative of a European way of life? How are they similar, and how are they different?

Meta-perspective

4. Do you think that the majority of Serbia is pro- or against EU integration?

Politics

5. Since the EU integration process came on the Serbian agenda, there have been various government in Serbia in support or against the process. Who are some of the most important politicians in this process?
6. do you feel like you can trust politicians in Serbia?

Future

7. If Serbia becomes a part of the EU in the future, do you think anything will change [in Serbia] and if so, what exactly?
8. Do you think people in Serbia have a voice in shaping Serbia's future and politics?

FG3: Topic Guide

General Question to Start Discussion

1. Within our last two FGs there's been a lot of talk about the politics around Kosovo. What is the historical significance of Kosovo?
2. What are some media sources (whether it is print or broadcast TV) which you use and consider to be unbiased in their news-reporting?

Politics

3. What role do you think the media has is in shaping the political attitudes and opinions of people in Serbia?
4. This year there is an election on the 24th April, do you plan to vote and if so, why?

Meta-perspective

5. Prompts 1 and 2: Texts from FGs in South (Nis and Vranje) introduced in North FGs (Novi Sad and Belgrade) and vice-versa to stimulate discussion (specifically, the prompts selected included both commonalities and differences to the discourses of the FG itself, and was intended to function as a way of engaging with the perspective of an 'Other')

Future

6. If you had the possibility to imagine the future of Serbia, how would this Serbia look?