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NATIONAL STEREOTYPES AS A CO-DETERMINANT OF BILATERAL RELATIONS: THE CASE OF THE WESTERN BALKANS[1]

Abstract. *This is a preliminary study of the role played by national stereotypes in the relations between Western Balkan countries. According to a model that is proposed, stereotypes co-determine bilateral relations together with structural factors such as competition for political and economic resources, with physical distance serving as a proxy for the role of stereotypes as such and ethnic distance for the role of structural factors. The model is tested through a cross-country comparison of the indicators of stereotypes, physical and ethnic distance and developments in bilateral relations in the period 2014–2015. The results show an indicative correlation between relative stereotypisation, physical and ethnic distance and specific developments in bilateral relations, thus supporting the model.*
Key words: *stereotypes, bilateral relations, foreign policy, Western Balkans*

Introduction: stereotypes and bilateral relations in the Western Balkans

Two beggars sit on a street in Zagreb. One holds a sign "I am Croatian" and the other "I am Serb". While the hat of the former is full of money, the hat of the latter is empty.
A (Catholic) priest comes by and says: "It is not nice of you to divide yourselves by nationality".
After the priest goes away, one beggar turns to the other and says: "Mujo (a popular Bosnian Muslim name), how much do you think we could earn by teaching the Croats marketing?".

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Stereotypes played an important role in the conflicts between ethnic and national groups following the disintegration of Yugoslavia (Hayden, 2012: Ch. 1). In the early 2000s, the "improvement of school textbooks through eliminating 'conflict producing' national stereotypes" was identified as a long-term means for reconciliation and conflict prevention in the Western Balkans (CDRSEE, 2015). However, in the European Union's (EU) recent enlargement strategy for the period 2014–2015, stereotypes are only mentioned in the context of the rights of the lesbian, gay, bi-, trans- and intersexual (LGBTI) community in the region (European Commission, 2014: 15–16; Brglez et al., 2016). Stereotypes are generalisations of characteristics of social groups which are typically based on information that is at least partial, if not biased and inaccurate (Ule, 2004). National stereotypes refer to characteristics of people of the same nationalities and ethnic stereotypes to members of certain ethnic groups. While in the 'Western European' citizenship model the two do not necessarily overlap, in the 'Eastern European' model they are considered the same. Stereotypes have been neglected by international politics scholars. For example, despite its social-constructivist theoretical grounding, an influential recent academic work on foreign policies in multicultural societies (Hill, 2013/2015) does not reflect on stereotypes as an element of foreign policymaking. Lebow (2008), on the other hand, points out that the contemporary political theory focusing on the identity tends to overstretch the role of the 'idea of others', which also relates to stereotypes. In the literature on the post-Yugoslav space, state building is mainly investigated from the perspective of the international community and the Europeanisation process (e.g. Keil and Stahl, 2014; Roter and Bojinović Fenko, 2015; Bojinović Fenko and Urlić, 2015; Svetličič et al., 2014). The issue of Balkan states' identity is approached from the perspective of pro/contra European identity-building (e.g. Subotić, 2011) and not from the perspective of the dynamic of their inter-national relations *per se*.

The aim of this article is to preliminarily explore the role of national stereotypes for bilateral relations in the Western Balkans (also see Rašković and Svetličič, 2011). Building on the ground-breaking study on the role of stereotypes for 'inter-national understanding' in a post-conflict context by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) after the Second World War[2], it is argued that stereotypes co-determine international politics together with structural factors such as competition for political and economic resources. According to the proposed model,

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[2] *The project "Tensions affecting International Understanding" initiated by the UNESCO social sciences department after the Second World War aimed at "promoting enquires into the ideas which people of one nation hold concerning their own and other nations" (UNESCO, 1951). Some results of individual research projects were published after four years of work in the UNESCO bulletin "National stereotypes and international understanding" of autumn 1951.*

physical distance serves as a proxy for the role of stereotypes as such and ethnic distance for the role of structural factors. In order to test the argument, the research part engages in a cross-country comparison of stereotypes, physical and ethnic distances and developments in bilateral relations by drawing on the results of the 2014–2015 study of national stereotypes in post-Yugoslav space and the assessment of bilateral relations within the European Commission's Progress Reports on Western Balkan countries for the same period. In conclusion, the relevance of the results is discussed, e.g. from the perspective of a possible policy prescription for the EU's approach to the region.

Theoretical framework: stereotypes as a co-determinant of international politics

Building on the research by the 'UNESCO group' (1951), this section begins by defining stereotypes from an agency perspective, followed by establishing their role as a co-determinant, acting together with other political and economic factors as part of the social structure approach. In addition, focus is put on the particular role of stereotypes for international politics. In subsection, an analytical model is introduced with physical distance serving as a proxy for the role of stereotypes as such and ethnic distance for the role of structural factors.

Definition and agency approach

Stereotypes are forms of generalisation which refer to the personal characteristics of members of individual social groups, thereby diminishing intra-group differences. They can be either positive or negative. In contrast with other types of generalisation, stereotypes are based on particular observations and/or information sources which are likely to be biased and/or inaccurate. According to Klineberg (1951), even though there might be some truth in them, this is only coincidental. Within cognitive processes, stereotypes act as unsaid/uncritical assumptions about things, thus pointing out the role of ideas of things in general and information in particular (ibid.: 506–507).[3] While the UNESCO group, in line with progress made in

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[3] *Klineberg (1951: 510) refers to the experiment by Allport and Postman (1947) in which groups were shown an image from a subway station with a white man having a razor blade behind his pants and a dark-skinned man standing next to him. They were asked to discuss and report on what they have seen. More than half the groups had put the razor blade in the possession of the dark-skinned man with some arguing that he was acting hostile. Reflecting on the results, researchers argued that the message was influenced by prejudice against coloured people carrying razor blades that had been spread by the mass media during that period. Other early research mentioned is that of the influence of surnames implying different*

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the research of stereotypes at the time, stressed their cognitive dimension, there is also a conative and emotional aspect to stereotypes (Ule, 2004: 167).

Structure approach

Researchers demonstrated that stereotypes are not independent of but are inter-dependent with various social, i.e. political and economic, factors such as increased competition for scarce sources, meaning that they co-determine social relations.[4] What is meant by the term is that, although being grounded in autonomous cognitive mechanisms, stereotypes are influenced by socio-political and economic factors and can also be employed as a way of sustaining socio-political and economic conditions, e.g. through differentiation of social groups. A replication of the 1933 study by Katz and Braley which proved the existence of racial, ethnic and national stereotypes, especially negative ones (e.g. for "Negros", Jews, Japanese) among US college students, by Gilbert (1951) in the 1940s showed that stereotypes, particularly negative ones, although remaining in force, had become weaker. Individual students were also reported to be irritated by the request to make a generalisation of an ethnic group. The change in attitudes corresponded to the change in US society, e.g. in terms of the mobilisation of different social groups in the war against the Nazis, which both required and triggered the diminishing of stereotypes. The exception was the negative stereotypes of Japanese which was explained by the negative press about Japan after Pearl Harbour (Gilbert, 1951; Klineberg, 1951: 511).

International politics

In line with understanding stereotypes as a co-dependent variable, the 'UNESCO group' researchers focusing more specifically on international politics quickly realised that stereotypes as such could not explain the Second World War since American stereotypes of Germans were positive while those of their allies the Turks were negative. Further, prejudice that the Russians and the British will not stand a fight, itself being a product of Nazi propaganda, turned out disastrous for Hitler's strategy (Klineberg, 1951: 506). This led Klineberg to support the thesis that stereotypes do not

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origins on the rankings of selected characteristics of the individuals in the same pictures and the perceived criminality of members of ethnic groups against official statistics.

4   In the early 19th century when there was a need for more labour in California, Chinese were described by the press as "the most worthy of our newly adopted citizens", "law-abiding", showing "all-round ability" and "adaptability beyond praise". After 1860, when the economic situation had changed, they were considered as "a distinct people", "inassimilable", "clannish, criminal and servile" (Klineberg, 1951: 509-510).

determine but 'co-determine' social relations by representing "a fertile soil in which hostility may be more easily developed" (ibid.: 505). Stereotypes are, however, not merely an amplifier: once established they, to a certain extent, play a role of their own, either in terms of perceptions by political elites or in terms of making it easier for political elites to legitimate certain foreign policy actions.

The focus on the role of identity as a way of delimiting spheres of influence and legitimising the authority, thus reproducing social power, tends to overstretch the role of particular 'ideas of others' and thus, at least implicitly, of stereotypes. According to Lebow (2008: 474–475), against the prevailing assumption by political theory in general and International Relations in particular, the others are not necessarily the source of one's identity, in the sense of Carl Schmitt or Samuel Huntington. Allport's (1954) studies showed that group membership does not require inter-group antagonisms and that it in fact precedes the image of those 'outside'. Solidarity is thus conceptually different from hostility while discrimination does not require an image of 'us' or even a negative perception of 'them'. Competition for resources or political power seems to be a much more important factor in stereotype production (Lebow, 2008: 479).

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Analytical model

The purpose of this subsection is to put an analytical model forward. The need for change in European politics in the post-Second World War period attracted the attention of the 'UNESCO group', resulting in more specific empirical research. The early research demonstrates that physical and ethnic distance can be considered approximations for the role of agency and structural mechanisms affecting stereotypes.

Physical and ethnic distance

In a survey by de Bie (1951), university and technical school students from Belgium, the Netherlands and Luxembourg were asked to state the biggest obstacles to the trade union of Benelux. For most of them, these were nationalism and unwillingness to make sacrifices (almost 40% of responses), followed by economic difficulties (35%), general foreign policy trends (13%) and cultural, linguistic and religious differences (11% of responses). Since only the latter could be more directly linked with the stereotypes, de Bie (1951: 543) thought stereotypes were not a very important factor. Against his conclusion, the perception of other more important obstacles might have, however, also been related with stereotypes. The 'UNESCO group' (1951: 499) argued that the fact that the Dutch saw

themselves as "hard-working" (*travailleurs*) and were described as such by other nationalities involved in the study was a good basis for integration: "In much the same way as two men who look upon one another with respect as workers are well fitted to enter into a working partnership, it is reasonable to suppose that a people having this stereotype of themselves and of the neighbouring people are psychologically prepared for some measure of economic union".

De Bie (1951: 545, 551) established that the stereotypes and attitudes to the integration were influenced by information, education background, personal contacts, ethnic distance and area of residence (urban/rural). While information can be considered an intermediate variable, education and residence area could be influenced by negative effects of integration on these groups, which makes ethnic distance a better approximation of the structural aspect of the stereotypes. Personal contacts or physical distance can, on the other hand, be considered the best approximation of potential stereotypes' strength per se (Scheme 1).[5]

Scheme 1: ANALYTICAL MODEL
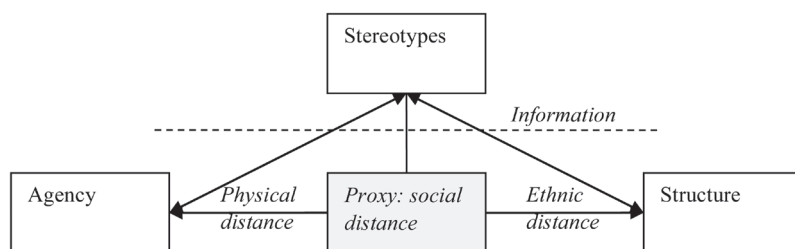
Source: own elaboration.

In the contemporary EU, national stereotypes have not disappeared but represent a constitutive part of the shared 'European identity' (Šabec, 2006). Piaget and Weil (1951) in their study of 'dual loyalty', based on interviews with children living in Switzerland as a multi-ethnic country, argued that each new cognitive layer triggers egocentrism, which might take more subtle forms, with the ability to overcome the egocentric 'layering' depending on an individual's capacity to establish mechanisms of reciprocity. Following Lebow (2008: 480), experiments by Sherif and Sherif demonstrated that 'transcendent identities' offering a basis for shared identity and empathy can mute a feeling of hostility. Growing inter-dependence can however lead to inter-group conflict. As groups become larger, institutions, rules and

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[5] *Following James and Tenen (1951: 500), those British pupils which had personal contact with Germans (e.g. with prisoners of war) had considerably different views from those who only knew Germans from war propaganda movies. Upon being asked for their opinion, the former said: "Hitler was a bad man, but Hans was nice" and "Germans are like us" (ibid.).*

habits that sustain loyalty take over the role of moral authority. Indifference towards those 'outside' who do not abide by these rules can be replaced with tensions and hostility.

Empirical research: national stereotypes and bilateral relations in the Western Balkans

This part brings forward the results of empirical research of stereotypes and developments of bilateral relations in the Western Balkans. It begins by elaborating the methodology of the research which is based on a cross-country comparison of stereotypes, physical and ethnic distances as approximations of agency and structural mechanisms of stereotypisation and developments of bilateral relations by drawing on the 2014–2015 survey of national stereotypes in the post-Yugoslav space and EU progress reports on bilateral relations for the same period. The focus of subsection 3.1 is on the role of stereotypes and social distances as reflected in the survey while subsection 3.2 introduces to the analysis developments in bilateral relations in the region.

Methodology

The agency and structure level stereotypisation mechanisms and their role as a co-determinant of bilateral relations would be confirmed by correlations between stereotypes, physical and ethnic distance, and developments in bilateral relations. The research of stereotypes and social distances is based on the 2014–2015 international survey of national stereotypes in the post-Yugoslav space which involved 814 students of international politics, business and administration (for details, see Rašković and Udovič, 2016). As an indicator of relative stereotypes, the ranking of 13 selected characteristics is used, while the substance of the stereotypes is estimated further based on the open questionnaire. Physical distance is measured by a nominal scale of frequency of contacts and ethnic distance by a standard ordinal scale.[6] EU membership which in the last few years has become a strategic objective for all post-Yugoslav countries explicitly requires a constructive approach to open issues in bilateral relations (European Commission, 2014), meaning

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[6] *The survey methodology is in line with the methodology of the pilot study financed by UNESCO (1951). The pilot study asked respondents to rank nations according to 12 characteristics. Open questionnaires were suggested as a way of assessing the substance of the stereotypes. An early study demonstrated that some nationalities were considered to have more in common than others; that a number of nationalities had a relatively more positive image of themselves and that positive stereotypes were a good indicator of good relations between nations, thus proving the role of stereotypes (Buchanan, 1951: 528). Students were used in similar studies before for practical reasons (e.g. Gilbert, 1951; de Bie, 1951). Their views are considered representative of the views of constituencies and/or political elites of which they will become part.*

that any departure from this kind of relations can be considered a sign of the persistence of negative attitudes, including stereotypes. The assessment of bilateral relations draws on the Progress Reports on the EU accession process for Western Balkan countries prepared by the European Commission as part of implementing the EU enlargement strategy for the period between October 2014 and September 2015. The reports refer to all post-Yugoslav countries; while candidate countries are addressed directly, Slovenia and Croatia which had already become EU members are mentioned by candidate countries in the context of their open bilateral issues.[7]

National stereotypes survey

This subsection presents the results of a survey of stereotypes in the post-Yugoslav space. In the given order, indicators concerning the levels and substance of stereotypes, physical and ethnic distance are presented, followed by the establishment of indicative correlations.

Stereotypes

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According to the survey, Serbs have relatively strong negative stereotypes about Croats and Kosovars and Kosovars about Macedonians and Bosnians. Kosovars and Serbs have relatively strong positive stereotypes about Slovenians (Table 1, column "c"). Serbs, Croats and Kosovars are considered to be relatively "nationalist" while others are predominantly seen as "open and communicative". There is relatively strong stereotypisation of Kosovars by members of other nationalities and stereotypisation of members of other nationalities by Kosovars. The open questionnaire demonstrates that every fifth respondent would describe Montenegrins as "lazy", while Slovenians are typically seen as "hard-working". The other 'open' national stereotypes are, on an aggregate level, less strong or consistent. In contrast with Croats

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[7] *Serbia acquired candidate status in 2012. The Serbian Stabilisation and Association Agreement (SAA) entered into force in 2013, followed by the launch of accession negotiations in 2014. The report was conducted during the 'screening' period. In the report period, Serbia was facing the consequences of economic recession, including high unemployment. Bosnia signed the SAA in June 2015 and applied for membership in February 2016. Bosnia was encountering huge socioeconomic challenges including 30% unemployment, reaching 60% among youth. The SAA between Montenegro and the EU entered into force in 2010 and Montenegro acquired candidate status in the same year, followed by the launch of negotiations in 2012. By September 2015, 20 chapters had been opened, of which eight were opened in the period covered by the report, including Chapters 23 and 24 on the state of law. Two chapters – science and research, education and culture – were provisionally closed. Macedonia became a candidate in 2005, a year after its SAA entered into force. The Commission first proposed that negotiations would begin in 2009. Since then, Macedonia has faced a backslide. In the period of the report, Macedonia was dealing with a major political crisis. Kosovo signed its SAA in October 2015. The country was facing huge economic and institutional challenges. For a historical analysis of foreign policies by countries in the region, see the volume edited by Keil and Stahl (2014).*

and Serbs, members of smaller nations and ethnic groups are more likely to be seen in a neutral or positive way.

Social distances

As far as the physical distance is concerned, contacts are the most frequent between Slovenians and Croats, Croats and Bosnians, Montenegrins and Serbs, and Macedonians and Kosovars (Table 1, column "a"). Serbs and Bosnians are met most often and Slovenians, Macedonians and Kosovars the least often. Slovenians have the most and Kosovars the least frequent contacts with members of other nations. There is a relatively high ethnic distance between Serbs and Montenegrins on one hand and Kosovars on the other (Table 1, column "b"). Croats feel members of other nations the closest, followed by Serbs, while all other nations do not see the members of these two nations as being close.[8] As far as the difference between physical and ethnic distance is concerned, there is a relatively high ethnic distance between Bosnians on one hand and Serbs and Croats on the other, and relatively low ethnic distance between Serbs on one hand and Slovenians and Macedonians on the other, and between Bosnians and Kosovars.

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Table 1: RELATIVE (A) PHYSICAL AND (B) ETHNIC DISTANCES AND (C) STEREOTYPES

	Slovenia			Serbia			Macedonia			Croatia			Montenegro			Bosnia			Kosovo		
	a	b	c	a	b	c	a	b	c	a	b	c	a	b	c	a	b	c	a	b	c
Slovenia				0	0	0	–	0	0	++	+	0	–	0	0	0	0	0	––	–	––
Serbia	––	0	++				–	+	+	0	–	––	++	+	0	+	+	0	–	––	––
Macedonia	––	–	0	0	+	–				–	0	++	0	0	+	0	0	+	++	+	++
Croatia	+	0	0	+	0	+	–	0	0				–	0	0	++	+	+	––	–	+
Montenegro	–	–	+	++	+	+	–	0	+	0	–	+				+	+	0	–	––	––
Bosnia	–	–	0	++	0	0	–	0	0	++	0	0	+	0	+				––	0	+
Kosovo	–	0	++	0	0	0	+	0	––	0	0	++	0	0	–	0	0	––			

Legend: social distance/stereotypes: -- very high/very negative; - high/negative; 0 insignificant; + low/positive; ++ very low/very positive

Source: own calculations based on Udovič et al. (2015).

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[8] *Physical distance is influenced by the size and location of a country, e.g. if a nation is relatively big and located in the centre of the region, it is more likely for others to meet its members than vice versa. Migrations also play role, e.g. Slovenians have relatively frequent contacts with Croats due to summer holiday migrations which does not apply in reverse since only a segment of Croats living on the coast meets Slovenians in this way. Another case is economic migrations which typically run from south to north. Slovenians are present in Western Balkan states within various EU and NATO structures which might affect the perception of their presence (Udovič, 2011; Udovič and Bučar, 2014; 2016). Ethnic and religious ties also play a role. For example, when Bosnians are asked about Serbs, their views are influenced by their perception of ethnic Serbs living in Bosnia. However, this does not mean that the Serbs living in Serbia perceive the Bosnian Serbs as equals. The relatively low ethnic distance between Bosnians and Kosovars might be influenced by the same religious background.*

Correlation between stereotypes, physical and ethnic distance

A comparison of the relative distances and stereotypes shows that very strong stereotypes correlate with very high social distance (see light-grey shaded areas in Table 1). Relatively high physical distance correlates with both positive and negative stereotypes. As contacts become more frequent, stereotypes become neutral or more positive, thus supporting the argument on the agency stereotypisation mechanism. High ethnic distance, especially relative to the physical distance, on the other hand, correlates with relatively negative stereotypes, thereby supporting the argument on the structural stereotypisation mechanism. The main exception to this trend is the relatively strong stereotypes Kosovars hold about members of individual nationalities. Since Kosovo is relatively closed, this finding is, however, in line with the general argument.

Developments in bilateral relations

The purpose of this section is to present the significant events and overall trends in bilateral relations between the Western Balkan countries in the given period by drawing on the EU progress reports and to reflect on these developments from the perspective of the agency and structural aspects of bilateral stereotypes.

Significant events and trends

In the period covered by the report, relations between Serbia and Kosovo started to normalise, although several problems remained, which was reflected in graffiti on the Visoki Dečani monastery in Kosovo and the 'football match' incidents taking place in October 2014 and the way they were handled (European Commission, 2015e: 26).[9] In the first part of 2015, Belgrade and Kosovo engaged in constructive relations, followed by a number of ground-breaking cooperative agreements in August, which should have a "concrete positive effect on daily lives of citizens in Kosovo and Serbia" (ibid.: 29–30). In September, dialogue with Serbia and demarcation of the border with Montenegro were used by the opposition in Kosovo to trigger attacks on the regime. There were lots of tensions in relations between Serbia and Croatia with a number of political incidents occurring in November 2014, August 2015 and September 2015 (European Commission, 2015a:

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[9] *During a football match between Albania and Serbia in October 2014 in Belgrade, a drone carrying a flag of 'Great Albania' supposedly owned by a member of the Albanian political establishment flew over the stadium, triggering riots and the evacuation of the Albanian team. In response, the number of attacks on the Serbian minority in Northern Kosovo increased.*

21–23).[10] The visit by the Serbian Prime Minister at the commemoration in Srebrenica in Bosnia in July 2015 resulted in a small incident in terms of several stones being thrown at him by individual provocateurs. State leaders, however, responded in a constructive way, with the relations between Serbia and Bosnia remaining good and/or being further improved (European Commission 2015b: 29). In response to the border incidents in Goshince in April 2015 and the terrorist attack in Kumanovo in May 2015, which were related to individuals from Kosovo, the Macedonian multi-ethnic government reacted in a way which prioritised the maintenance of good relations with Kosovo (European Commission 2015d: 23–24). There were further improvements in good relations between Serbia, Macedonia and Montenegro (European Commission 2015a: 19–20). Montenegro invested substantial efforts in solving open issues with its neighbours, which included the signing of a border agreement with Bosnia and Kosovo in August 2015 (while the border between Serbia and Croatia remained disputed) (European Commission 2015c: 22).

Stereotypes and bilateral relations

A comparison between developments in bilateral relations and stereotypes shows a correlation between strong negative stereotypes and conflicting behaviour, e.g. between Serbia and Kosovo and between Serbia and Croatia. Even when individual governments decided to engage in cooperation, they were sometimes pulled back into conflicting relations, such as in the case of Kosovo. The constructive handling of relations has, on the other hand, built on neutral to positive stereotypes, such as in the cases of Serbia and Bosnia or Macedonia and Kosovo. The exception has been Montenegro which has engaged in constructive relations with Kosovo against the negative stereotypes, which was due to its strong commitment to progress towards the EU membership. Commitment to the EU was also present in the behaviour of Serbia and reflected in positive stereotypes of Slovenians, demonstrating that Slovenia's recognition of Kosovo during its EU Council presidency in 2008 had long been forgotten (Zupančič and Udovič, 2011).

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[10] *The incidents included statements by Vojislav Šešelj, a Serbian politician alleged of war crimes, after being released and political reactions in Zagreb; criticism of commemoration of the anniversary of Operation Storm during which Croatia reclaimed territory from the Serbs, driving Serbs from the land, in Zagreb, by Belgrade, the removal of signs in Cyrillic in Vukovar and blockades of border crossings by Zagreb in response to the migrant crisis.*

Table 2: STEREOTYPES AND DEVELOPMENTS IN BILATERAL RELATIONS

			Developments in bilateral relations	
			Negative	*Positive*
Stereotypes	*Negative*	Physical distance based		
		Ethnic distance based	Serbia-Kosovo Serbia-Croatia	Montenegro-Kosovo Serbia-Kosovo
	Positive	Physical distance based		Serbia-Slovenia
		Ethnic distance based		

Source: own elaboration.

A breakdown of the main developments in bilateral relations related to strong stereotypes with regard to physical and ethnic distance (Table 2) shows that physical distance as such plays a less significant role while ethnic distance is much more important for determining the bilateral relations, as seen in the cases of Serbia and Kosovo and Serbia and Croatia, which demonstrates the structural or 'political' nature of antagonisms.

Table 3: SIGNIFICANT EVENTS IN BILATERAL RELATIONS AND THE TIMING OF THE SURVEY

	2014			2015								
	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sept
Serbia	KOS (–)	CRO (–) X								BiH (–/+)	KOS (+) CRO (–)	CRO (–)
Bosnia					X	X				SRB (+/–)		
Montenegro					X	X					KOS (+) BiH (+)	
Macedonia							KOS (–)	KOS (–) X				
Kosovo	SRB (–)(–)						MAC (–)	MAC (–)	X		SRB (+)	
Croatia*			X	X								
Slovenia*			X	X								

Legend: + positive/–– negative event; X timing of survey

* As EU member states, Croatia and Slovenia are only addressed indirectly by the reports.

Source: compiled by the authors based on the EU progress reports.

A comparison between the timing of significant events and the results of the stereotypes survey (Table 3) shows that in the case of Serbia the survey took place after negative incidents with Kosovo during October 2014, while in the case of Kosovo it took place after improvements in relations, thus explaining the relatively more positive attitudes of Kosovars towards Serbs. In similar terms, the negative attitudes of Kosovars towards Macedonians are influenced by the survey coinciding with negative events.

Discussion and conclusion

The aim of this research was to test the argument stating that the bilateral relations between Western Balkan countries are co-determined by national stereotypes. Research into correlations between stereotypes, physical and ethnic distances as proxy variables for agency and structural stereotypisation mechanisms, and developments in bilateral relations between Western Balkan countries in the period 2014–2015 shows indicative correlations between physical and ethnic distances on one hand and stereotypes on the other, and between stereotypes and developments in bilateral relations. The findings point to several possibilities for future research, e.g. testing the representativeness of a survey involving students for the general population, observation of additional variables such ethnic group membership, role of political parties and economic trends, and more specific analysis of the causal relationship between stereotypes and bilateral relations through in-depth comparative analysis and/or longitudinal research.

In terms of policy prescription, the results show that it is not enough to simply put pressure on governments to engage in 'European type' cooperative behaviour since this does not immediately change the underlying stereotypes and can in fact result in backlashes such as those demonstrated in the cases of Kosovo and Serbia and Croatia and Serbia. Further, as is evident from the case of Croatia, EU membership does not yet guarantee improvements in foreign policy which makes negative stereotypes a persistent threat. Thus, stereotypes must be addressed explicitly (Brglez et al., 2016), through social relations, e.g. via specifically targeted promotion/information campaigns, programmes facilitating regional cooperation on the bottom-up level, support for the development of quality and responsible media and regional mobility programmes. The policies should specifically target societies which are relatively closed such as Kosovars, and the key players in the region, such as Serbia and Croatia, which are due to conflicting bilateral relations and past politics seen with certain discontent by the others. Specifically, a viable experiment in the region would entail a replication of Franco-German post-Second World War rehabilitation through the production of a positive stereotype, in this case a Serbian-Croatian partnership for regional leadership.

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