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**A Clash of Persuaders: How the West and Russia Vie for Serbia's
Stance on Ukraine?***

Despite being a European Union candidate country, Serbia has refused to align with EU sanctions against the Russian Federation over the conflict in Ukraine. Serbian officials have cited a number of political, economic and historical reasons for such an approach, which has received harsh criticism from Western countries and praise from Moscow. This paper seeks to analyse the key strategic frames and narratives used by policymakers, media and think tanks on both the Western and the Russian side to persuade the Serbian public opinion and officials to change/retain the current position. The fact that a year after the beginning of the conflict Serbia has retained its original position can be explained by national interests, but also by public support to the official position expressed by more than three quarters of the population. This paper argues that such an outcome is due more to the weakness of Western strategic communication than to the argumentation of the Russian side. Its key manifestation includes the perception in the Serbian public opinion that the West has adopted double standards over the issue of territorial integrity of Serbia/Ukraine. The West has been waging simultaneously two campaigns: one for the preservation of territorial integrity of Ukraine and the other for the adoption of a diplomatic plan implying the dissolution of the territorial integrity of Serbia over Kosovo, a Serbian province which unilateral proclamation of independence in 2008 has been recognized by most Western countries, but rejected by a majority of United Nations members, including UN Security Council members Russia and China.

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