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Apart from many requests and conditions shared by the countries waiting to first achieve the status of “candidates” and then “full EU members,” the Serbian public perceives the expected opening of an IKEA store in the state capital Belgrade as an equally important sign of Serbia’s progress towards the EU as the “major” political and economic issues. After its short-lived presence in the former Yugoslavia in the late 1980s, the IKEA store in Belgrade was the first to be closed at the outbreak of the war in 1991 and the first from which the company had ever withdrawn in its entire history. Ever since, there has been a longing for the reopening of the IKEA store among many members of both the public and private spheres who had grown accustomed to IKEA’s simple, well-designed and, above all, affordable furniture and home appliances. After the democratic change in 2000 marked by the final defeat of the Milošević regime, and particularly from 2007 onwards, debates on whether, when, where and under what circumstances IKEA would resume its business in Serbia, have been appearing on a regular basis, always as part of some pre-election promise, with the would-be-opening of IKEA regarded as a token of the “final” modernization, democratization and Europeanization of Serbian society.

Anthropological and cultural studies of consumption take as axiomatic (Douglas, Isherwood 1979; Appadurai (ed.) 1986; Gell 1986; Miller 1987; Campbell 1987; Featherstone 1991) that commodities do not only serve the practical purpose of satisfying some need but also signify some cultural meaning or convey an idea. For both politicians and “ordinary people” IKEA means the same: it is a guarantee that the country has changed enough to be a safe and desirable place for investments, which can also be understood and interpreted as a safe and desirable place to live. Therefore, bringing IKEA to Belgrade means being closer to the EU, being able to afford well-designed, reasonably priced furniture to “modernize” domestic living space, and finally, being able to return to “normal life” with a renewed sense of being part of the world. From this perspective, the arrival of IKEA to Serbia attests to Serbia’s advancement towards the EU. This, however, raises a few questions, such as: “When will IKEA finally cross Serbia’s border?” and “When will Serbia finally
pass through the gates of Fortress Europe?” The official narrative of the political elite has thus inscribed the story of the opening of IKEA’s store into the hegemonic discourse of Europeanization, in which the final opening of the store will in many respects testify to Serbia’s readiness to become part of the “European family” exemplified in the EU.1

The politicians’ discourse is unambiguous when it comes to the economic, social and cultural benefits of IKEA’s presence in local economy and society. However, wider debates that also involve “ordinary people” (or consumers, for that matter) reveal more contradictory attitudes of society towards IKEA’s presence in Serbia. In other words, public debates in formal and informal spaces, with pros and cons of IKEA, indicate that the actual hesitation over the start of IKEA’s business in Serbia, in fact, mirrors Serbia’s hesitation concerning the EU. Therefore, the expected opening of the IKEA store in Belgrade may be understood at the same time as a symbol of the desired modernization and Europeanization of consumption choices and possibilities of Serbian consumers and as a symbol of the state’s hesitant policy on its EU accession. On the other hand, it may also be regarded as a symptom of deep insecurity that the neoliberal twist in economy and society has created both on the global and local level as a by-product of uncontrolled economic growth and rise of social inequalities.

IKEA—(Hi)story of the Company, Its Business Success and Its Image

IKEA is one of the biggest and most globalized companies in the world. It was founded in 1943 by a seventeen-year-old Ingvar Kamprad in Sweden, and its name is an acronym comprising the initials of the founder’s name (Ingvar Kamprad), the farm where he grew up (Elmtaryd), and his home parish (Agunnaryd, in Småland, southern Sweden), according to Wikipedia. From its humble local origins, the company has gradually grown into one of the most globalized enterprises, with its impressive worldwide retail chain currently spreading through forty-two countries, most of them in Europe, North America, Asia and Australia.2 According to the company history, IKEA was originally founded in 1943 as a trade firm. Furniture was introduced in its

1 On the most prevailing rhetorical tropes in the official discourse on “Europeanization” in Slovenia and “the Western Balkan” societies, including both “European family” and “Fortress Europe,” see Petrović 2009.