

# **The Influence of Secessionism in Foreign Relations: The Case of Kosovo's Secession from Serbia**



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## **Abstract**

This thesis aspired to analyze Serbia's relationship with Kosovo after Kosovo's Declaration of Independence in 2008. Building on the literature related to ontological security, fear of domino secession, and counter-secession foreign policies, this research hypothesized that Kosovo's secession dented Serbia's national identity, triggered a more defensive policy toward Kosovo, and ultimately led to a deterioration of the Kosovo-Serbia relationship. To test these assumptions a content analysis was conducted, using 255 statements from the official site of the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs dating between 2009 and 2013. Following, the statements were assessed and coded deductively in Atlas.ti. From this several conclusions could be drawn. First, Serbia adopted a more defensive foreign policy toward Kosovo in the aftermath of the secession. Second, Serbia's relationships with other countries became evermore relevant after the secession. Third, Serbia seemed to perceive its autobiographical continuity as a bigger priority than EU accession. Drawing on the findings, it is recommended to further look into Serbia's foreign policy before and after Kosovo's secession, analyze the difference in results between other types of sources, examine Kosovo's foreign policy after secession compared to Serbia's, and apply a different time frame.

## **Acknowledgements**

Ever since I started my Bachelor's and throughout my Master's, I have struggled with written assignments. Not because I did not know what to write about or because I lacked creativity, but more due to my perfectionistic tendencies. I could spend hours "working" on a paper to only write one paragraph. As you can imagine this can be quite frustrating, especially when you are writing a thesis. It goes without saying that this was a difficult process for me, but now that I am approaching the end I can confidently say I am proud of what I have delivered. However, I could not have done this without the guidance, support, and encouragement of certain people. Therefore, I would like to give special thanks to my supervisor Dr. Saliha Mentinsoy, my parents and brother, my boyfriend, and my friends.

# Table of Contents

<b>Abstract</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Acknowledgements</b> .....	<b>3</b>
<b>Table of Contents</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>5</b>
<b>1. Introduction</b> .....	<b>6</b>
1.1. Historical Background: The Importance of Kosovo and Secessionism in the History of Serbia.....	6
1.2. Research Approach.....	8
1.3. Social and Academic Relevance.....	9
1.4. Outline.....	9
<b>2. Theoretical Framework</b> .....	<b>9</b>
2.1. Literature Review.....	10
2.1.1. Responses to Secessionism.....	10
2.1.2. The Kosovo-Serbia Relationship after Kosovo’s Secession.....	11
2.2. Defining the Main Concepts.....	13
2.3. Expectations.....	13
Figure 1.....	14
Conceptual Model of Serbia’s Ontological Security and its More Defensive Foreign Policy Toward Kosovo.....	14
Figure 2.....	15
Figure 3.....	16
<b>3. Methodology</b> .....	<b>16</b>
3.1. Research Strategy, Methods, and Techniques.....	16
3.2. Operationalizing the Main Concepts.....	17
3.2.1. Ontological Security.....	17
3.2.2. Fear of Domino Secession.....	18
3.2.3. Counter-Secession Foreign Policy.....	18
3.2.4. The Kosovo-Serbia Relationship.....	19
3.3. Validity and Reliability.....	19
<b>4. Results</b> .....	<b>20</b>
4.1. The Threat to Serbia’s Ontological Security and a More Defensive Foreign Policy Toward Kosovo.....	22
4.2. The Prevention of Domino Secession.....	24
4.3. The Deterioration of the Kosovo-Serbia Relationship.....	26
4.4. Accession to the EU and its Requirements.....	27
<b>5. Discussion and Conclusion</b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b>6. Recommendations</b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b>7. Reference List</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b>8. Appendix A: Reference List of the Mentioned Statements in the Results</b> .....	<b>38</b>

## List of Figures

<b>Figure 1.</b> Conceptual Model of Serbia’s Ontological Security and its More Defensive Foreign Policy Toward Kosovo.....	15
<b>Figure 2.</b> Conceptual Model of Serbia’s Fear of Domino Secession in its Counter-Secession Foreign Policy.....	15
<b>Figure 3.</b> Conceptual Model of Serbia’s Counter-Secession Foreign Policy and its Deteriorated Relationship with Kosovo.....	16
<b>Figure 4.</b> Visualisation of the Codes.....	19

## List of Tables

<b>Table 1.</b> Coding Scheme and Examples.....	21
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# **1. Introduction**

Over the last three decades, scholars have been puzzled by the complex relationship between de facto states and their parent states after secession. De facto states refer to seceded territories within an existing country (the parent state) that possess certain conditions of statehood (population, territory, etc.), but lack significant support from the international community (Kyrus, 2018). Such a situation creates a unique interplay wherein the de facto state aims to establish its independence and legitimacy, while the parent state seeks to preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty.

Generally, it is believed that there are two ways by which a parent state could put an end to a secessionist conflict (Pegg, 2023). One way is to instantly shut down the secessionist movement, if necessary, by using force (e.g. Russia eradicating Chechnya in 1999 or Sri Lanka eradicating Tamil Eelam in 2009). A less common option is to recognize the seceded territory and allow it to leave (e.g. Ethiopia recognizing Eritrea in 1993 or Sudan recognizing South Sudan in 2011). If neither options seem plausible, most parent states try to prevent recognition (Pegg, 2023). There is a wide range of non-recognition activities states can choose from, including blocking participation in international organizations, economic sanctions, and embargoes (Pegg, 2023; Ker-Lindsay & Berg, 2018). Besides these punitive approaches, states can also employ a more accommodating approach by allowing free movement, transportation links, and educational recognition (Pegg, 2023).

Out of the long list of secessionist conflicts (e.g. Catalonia, Corsica, Kurdistan, etc.), the secessionist movements in the Western Balkans are possibly considered the most interesting (Prezelj & Ramsay, 2023). Characterized by its tumultuous history (the Balkan Wars, the World Wars, the Yugoslav Wars, and the Kosovo War), the region has been considered the least stable area in Europe. The concept of “Balkanization”, used to refer to the interconnectedness of secessionist movements in a region, attests to this claim. Today, the progress in regional safety remains uncertain, with Kosovo’s secession still fresh in the collective memory (Prezelj & Ramsay, 2023). Although a lot is known about the historical events leading up to the secession (Ejdus, 2019; Calić, 2019; Badger, 2009; Hajrullahu, 2019) and the way these events are remembered by the Serbian public (Satjukow, 2022; Fridman, 2016), the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia post-secession remains under-analyzed. This thesis, therefore, aims to answer the following research question: *how did secessionism influence foreign relations between the parent state (Serbia) and the de facto state (Kosovo)?*

## **1.1. Historical Background: The Importance of Kosovo and Secessionism in the History of Serbia**

Serbia’s fascination with Kosovo dates back to the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. In the two decades leading up to the battle, the Serbian “golden” age was in the sign of expansion (Ejdus, 2019). Most of the expansionist movements by the proto-Serbian polity were targeted at what is today the territory of

Kosovo. After the death of Stefan Dušan in 1355, one of the most successful Serbian rulers of the golden age, the Serbian Empire was met by a lot of uncertainty. The Ottoman Empire saw its opportunity and defeated the Serbian Empire at the Battle of Maritsa in 1371. Unwilling to obey the Sultan any longer, the Serbian Prince Lazar challenged the Ottomans in 1389. The battle went down as a tremendous defeat in the Serbian collective memory (Ejdus, 2019). Despite the loss, most accounts from that time consider it as a victory for the Serbs rather than the Ottomans. It became an eternal lesson for the Serbs that resistance and perseverance eventually reap its benefits. From that moment on the legend of the Battle of Kosovo symbolized the very essence of Serbia. Yet, it was not until the Serbian-Turkish wars (1876-78) that Serbia's desire to conquer Kosovo was expressed (Ejdus, 2019; Calić, 2019). With this, the legend of the Battle of Kosovo became not only ethically and spiritually colored but also territorially. The narrative that Kosovo, historically tied to Serbia as a holy land, is in need of liberation and annexation, came into existence.

The next decades were followed by a tumultuous period for the Western Balkans (Ejdus, 2019; Calić, 2019; Badger, 2009). From the two Balkan Wars, the assassination of the Austro-Hungarian archduke in Sarajevo, the invasion and occupation by the Axis powers, to the creation of the Federal People's Republic of Yugoslavia (FPRY). A new era started when Josip Broz Tito was elected president of the FPRY in 1953 (Calić, 2019). People spoke of Tito as a charismatic leader who was capable of persuading others to pursue the common good (Calić, 2019). In this regard, he succeeded in shutting down the conflict between the Serbs and the Kosovars in 1967, concerning Kosovo's status. As such, Kosovo remained a province of Serbia (and an integral part of the FPRY), while receiving all the rights of a republic except for the right to secession. This was further enforced with the Constitution of 1974, which pronounced Yugoslavia as a federation composed of six republics with Kosovo and Vojvodina as two autonomous regions within Serbia (Badger, 2009).

Tito's death in 1980 was a turning point. From then on the FPRY started to fall apart (Ejdus, 2019; Calić, 2019). The economy was shrinking and there was an uprising in nationalistic movements. When Slobodan Milosević was elected as president of Yugoslavia, in 1989, he made it his goal to suppress these nationalistic movements, especially those in Kosovo. As such, he enforced his authority across Yugoslavia (Calić, 2019). This act destabilized the federation and caused a series of claims for independence in Slovenia, Croatia, and Macedonia (Ejdus, 2019). Eventually, leading to the gruesome wars in Slovenia (1991), Croatia (1991-1995), and Bosnia (1992-1995). In 1995 the Bosnian War ceased with the Dayton Agreement (Ejdus, 2019). Despite the Dayton Agreement, unrest was still lurking around the corner. In Kosovo, the people were unsatisfied with the perpetual rejection of their demand for independence. As a consequence, the Kosovo Liberation Army executed a series of terrorist attacks targeting Serbia. What followed was a forceful intervention by Serbia, causing mass expulsions and killings. This escalated into another war in 1998: the Kosovo War (Ejdus, 2019). In October of the same year, NATO attempted to de-escalate the problem by forcing Serbia into an armistice (Posen, 2000). The agreement fell short of its initial aim; the violence

continued. In response, the international community ordered a peace conference in Rambouillet, which resulted in a peace proposal by NATO (Ejdus, 2019). The proposal was accepted by the Albanians, but rejected by the Serbs since it entailed the stationing of NATO troops in the sovereign territory of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY, which at the time was composed of Serbia and Macedonia) (Ejdus, 2019; Calić, 2019). Frustrated by the booked progress, NATO, without the consent of the UN Security Council (UNSC), decided to launch airstrikes targeting Belgrade in March 1999 (Calić, 2019). Eleven weeks later, Serbia adopted the UNSC Resolution 1244, which authorized a peacekeeping force and established the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK). As a result, Serbia lost its power over Kosovo, except for the continuation of a non-security presence in the largely Serbian-populated northern part of Kosovo (Ejdus, 2019).

In the years following, the international community started to speculate about the future of Kosovo (Badger, 2009). The main question was whether Kosovo should be granted the status of a country or not. Eventually, in 2007, Martti Ahtisaari, a UN special envoy, introduced a report on Kosovo's future. In this report, Ahtisaari recommended that Kosovo should be granted independence. Inspired by the "Ahtisaari plan" Kosovo then, in February 2008, unilaterally declared independence (Calić, 2019; Badger, 2009). Within a short period, a wave of recognitions followed (to date, 97 countries have fully recognized Kosovo), including states Serbia considered allies (Ejdus, 2019; Word Population Review, 2024). Completely overthrown by the act and the multitude of its support, Serbia declared Kosovo's secession as a violation of the UN Charter, Resolution 1244, the Final Helsinki Act, and the entirety of the international legal order (Ejdus, 2019). As such, Serbia has ever since continued to counter Kosovo's Declaration.

## **1.2. Research Approach**

The objective of this research is to describe the influence secessionism has on the foreign relations of the parent state by specifically looking at the case of Kosovo and Serbia. For this a content analysis was conducted, examining 255 official statements from the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs between the years 2009 and 2013. The statements contained a broad range of topics such as Serbia's relationships with other countries, the EU accession process, and Serbia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, among others. By not exclusively looking at statements regarding the Kosovo-Serbia dispute, it allowed for other themes, than the ones expected, to emerge. As such, this comprehensive context was indicative of two things. One, it gave a complete overview of the factors involved in the shaping of the Kosovo-Serbia relationship after secession. Second, the complete overview allowed for inferences to be made about the significance of the factors.

### **1.3. Social and Academic Relevance**

To this day research related to the Kosovo-Serbia conflict is largely lacking. Specifically, the influence of Kosovo's secession on the Kosovo-Serbia relationship is understudied. Any contributions to this line of study could thus be considered socially relevant as they add to the understanding of this complicated relationship. More specifically, it could create a larger awareness of how a country's identity is impacted by secessionist movements and with that identify factors that could either improve or worsen the bilateral relations. In this regard, the findings could be used to develop effective conflict resolution and peacebuilding frameworks.

The academic relevance can be attributed to three points: a) a new angle is introduced to the existing studies on secessionism by looking at Serbia's foreign policy in relation to Kosovo's secession b) the findings of this research could be applied to other regions with similar dynamics, such as Transnistria (Moldova), Nagorno-Karabakh (Azerbaijan), and Abkhazia and South Ossetia (Georgia) c) the research could provide valuable insight into the disciplines of International Relations (IR), Policy Studies, and Conflict Studies, among others.

### **1.4. Outline**

The remainder of this thesis is organized as follows. To start, the existing studies regarding the research topic will be laid out and with that, the key variables will be clarified. Then the theoretical lens will be presented, encompassing the expectations from this research. In the third chapter, a detailed justification of the chosen research design will be given, along with an explanation of how the analysis was conducted. After the methodology, the findings of the analysis will be presented. In the discussion these findings will be interpreted, providing an answer to the hypotheses and ultimately the research question. To conclude this thesis, the limitations, implications, and recommendations for further research will be mentioned.

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

This section will first offer a survey of previous research conducted on similar topics as the one discussed here. The main strands of literature were grouped into two different categories: responses to secessionism, and the Kosovo-Serbia relationship after Kosovo's secession. Alongside the survey, the main concepts (secessionism and relationship) will be identified and clarified. Following, the expectations of this research will be presented. For a visual representation of these expectations see the conceptual models (Figures 1, 2, and 3).

## 2.1. Literature Review

### 2.1.1. Responses to Secessionism

With the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union and Yugoslavia, a new interest emerged in how states respond to acts of secession. Primarily, why states oppose secession. Ker-Lindsay (2013) identified six reasons for opposing secession. These reasons are: “emotional attachment to the territory; internally displaced persons; economic factors; historical and cultural issues; fear of further secession; and national pride” (Ker-Lindsay, 2013, p.1). Additionally, he noted the difference between opposing secession and opposing recognition. Opposing secession regards the intrinsic significance of a specific territory for a state, whereas opposing recognition is about preserving the claim to the territory in the hope of achieving a better bargaining position which in turn will determine the course of the dispute. The distinction thus comes down to substance versus process. Just like opposing secession, preventing secession has different reasons. These reasons include peaceful negotiated reunification, keeping the possibility of military intervention, consensual separation, and preserving the status quo (Ker-Lindsay, 2013).

In a later work, Ker-Lindsay (2017) found that such counter-secession movements constitute four elements in a country’s foreign policy. He exemplified this by looking at the Cyprus case. Cyprus, which was under British rule for a long period, tried to preserve the peace between the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots after the country’s independence. In the years following, the tensions between the two groups increased. Slowly but surely, the Greek Cypriots were demanding more power. The pinnacle of the conflict was reached when the Turkish Cypriot authorities announced the establishment of the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Since then the government of Cyprus, led by Greek Cypriots, endeavored various approaches to ensure that the TRNC would not get officially recognized nor unofficially accepted in the global community. Among these approaches were: preserving the claim to the territory; preventing recognition of the seceded territory; stopping legitimization; and pursuing legal venues (Ker-Lindsay, 2017). Interestingly, not all countries vividly express this security threat in their foreign policy. Fikke and Godzimirski (2006), for instance, argued that Russia sought to capitalize on the secessionist conflicts in the post-Soviet space. The country adopted a foreign policy leveraging separatist movements to benefit its interests. This interest was aimed at maximizing its geopolitical gains and maintaining some control over strategically significant regions. In the short run, this strategy might bring geopolitical gains, but in the long run, it could damage Russia’s credibility as a predictable and serious international partner.

Another area that has received more attention is the issue of state recognition. It remains puzzling to academics why some seceded territories receive recognition whereas others do not. One answer to this phenomenon is provided by Griffiths (2017), who claims that states commonly respond to the desire for secession by making a cost-benefit analysis. A state's decision to deny the demands is

based on the potential loss of economic assets, the security threat, or the symbolic value of a territory. More important is the precedent-setting problem (Griffiths, 2017; Coppieters, 2017). This problem assumes that potential separatist regions consider themselves alike. Fearing that comparisons might lead to negative outcomes for their case, country X might thus not express support for secession in country Y. In such a situation, country Y will try to differentiate its case to proclaim itself as a non-precedent case. If a country succeeds in establishing this it will more likely receive recognition. A different explanation is proposed by Saideman (1997), who introduced the ‘ethnic ties’ argument. According to this argument, state leaders express support for secessionist movements in countries their domestic supporters have ethnic ties to. As an example, he mentions Russia, which at the time of Yugoslavia’s dissolution decided to support Serbia, despite its need for investments and trade from the West.

### **2.1.2. The Kosovo-Serbia Relationship after Kosovo’s Secession**

But what did Kosovo’s secession mean for Serbia’s relationship with Kosovo? According to Hajrullahu (2019), Serbia has been reluctant to recognize Kosovo’s independence from the very start. The country’s reluctance stems from its 2006 constitution, which states that Kosovo is an integral part of Serbia and that Serbia’s institutions and president should protect its sovereignty in Kosovo (Russell, 2019). A prime example of this was shown on the day of the Declaration itself, when the Serbian Prime Minister, Koštunica, said he would never recognize Kosovo as an independent state (Ejdus, 2019). As the issue progressed, Serbia decided to limit diplomatic contact with countries that did not recognize Kosovo. Particularly, the support for Kosovo’s secession by the West, a region Serbia desires to belong to politically, damaged Serbia’s political discourse. More recently, Serbia lobbied for the de-recognition of Kosovo, succeeded in blocking Kosovo's membership to UNESCO and INTERPOL, and boycotted local elections in Kosovo (Fella, 2024).

At the same time Hajrullahu (2019), Russell (2019), and Fella (2024) claim that Serbia has an interest in joining the EU, ever since they officially applied for membership in 2009. For Serbia receiving EU membership did not entail recognizing Kosovo’s independence. It did, however, mean normalizing the relations with Kosovo (Obradovic-Wochnik & Wochnik, 2012). During these negotiation talks the countries managed to reach several new agreements, including the Brussels Agreement in 2013 (Russell, 2019). With the Brussels Agreement most of the parallel structures (e.g. police and courts) the Belgrade authorities had established in northern Kosovo, to undermine the local authorities, were dissolved. In return, Kosovo agreed to create the Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities (ASM), which Serbia considers a highly important measure for protecting the rights and security of the Serbian community in Kosovo (United Nations, 2023). The ASM provision was further enforced in 2015, with the decision to expand its competency over areas such as healthcare, welfare, and education. Despite the positive progress, the ASM provision was never implemented by Kosovo (Russell, 2019; Fella, 2024). Apart from the ASM, tensions increased with discussions about

a proposed land swap and the license plate dispute, among others (Fella, 2024). In 2023, the EU and USA opened a new round of negotiation talks, leading to another agreement about normalizing the relations. Thus far, the progress on the implementation of the 2023 agreement has been very limited by both Serbia and Kosovo. As such, Serbia still awaits approval for EU membership.

Fundamental in the understanding of Serbia's EU accession process is Serbia's balancing act between the East (Russia) and the West (Member States of EU, UN & NATO). Throughout the Yugoslav and Kosovo wars, the EU, UN, and NATO joined forces to restore stability in the Western Balkans (Jovanović, 2023). Specifically, the Dayton Agreement in 1995 and the NATO bombing in 1999 impacted Serbia's political landscape. These events required Serbia to redraw its border, leaving the country with a heightened sense of insecurity and a deep desire to establish powerful international alliances to safeguard its national interests. In the aftermath of the wars, Serbia, like many other countries from that region, suffered from a destabilized economy (Jovanović, 2023). This is when Russia emerged as a crucial ally, offering Serbia economic assistance and political support. With the support for Kosovo's secession by the West, Serbia was pushed further away from the West and towards the East. Fearing that Serbia might grow even closer to the East, the EU has been reluctant to urge Serbia to recognize Kosovo, despite it being beneficial to Serbia's EU membership prospects (Hajrullahu, 2019; Bieber, 2015; Obradović-Wochnik & Wochnik, 2012).

Most recently, Serbia's balancing act was displayed with the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Ivanov & Laruelle, 2022). From the start of this dispute Serbia refused to impose any sanctions on its friendly ally, Russia. In fact, only a couple of months later, in May, the two countries negotiated a gas deal. Simultaneously, Serbia has felt pressured to accommodate the Western values of opposing Russia's wrongful actions. As such, Serbia has voted in favor of several UN resolutions, which among others condemn Russia's invasion, and exclude Russia's participation in the Human Rights Council (Ivanov & Laruelle, 2022). This example demonstrates the significance for Serbia to on the one hand sustain Russia's support regarding Kosovo's status, and on the other hand, preserve good relations with the West as it desires to join the EU. Contrary to Serbia's political discourse, the Serbian public is much clearer about their stance. From surveys, it was derived that only 4-5% of the Serbian population want Serbia to join NATO, 35-40% support EU membership, and 8% would accept European integration if that meant recognizing Kosovo's independence (Zawadewicz, 2023). Therefore, it is evident that the Serbian population perceives any type of involvement by Western entities in their country as an attempt at Western domination.

Yet, over the last couple of years, scholars like Mitrović (2023) and Zweers et al. (2020) have argued that Russia is being replaced by China. China is one of the countries that has not recognized Kosovo's independence (Mitrović, 2023). Together with Russia, it supports Serbia's territorial integrity and sovereignty in the UNSC. Contrary to Russia, China has been able to live up to its economic commitments (Zweers et al., 2020). For this reason, China has been a crucial financier of infrastructure and supplier of direct investments to Serbia in recent years.

## **2.2. Defining the Main Concepts**

Before the theoretical lens can be presented, the main concepts require clarification. The first concept in need of clarification is secessionism. Here the definition of secessionism draws on the work of Sorens (2012), who sees secessionism as a form of nationalism that advocates for secession. The word secession stems from the Latin words ‘se’ which means ‘apart’ and ‘cedere’ which means ‘to go’ (Pavković & Radan, 2008). By this logic, the term secession is understood as an act of leaving or withdrawing from someplace. In a broader context, this could refer to an association or an organization. However, in the context of international law or municipal constitutional law, secession is commonly used as follows: ‘Secession is the creation of a new State upon territory previously forming part of, or being a colonial entity of, an existing State’ (Pavković & Radan, 2008, p.5). This definition by Radan underscores the creation of a new state and with that the competency to execute acts, develop treaties, and more, in the international community.

Bartkus (2009) provides a more detailed account by defining four necessary elements of a secession crisis. First, the demands for secession should be presented by a district community, which is smaller than the state and threatens to leave if they are dissatisfied. Second, the district community should have a connection to a geographical territory, for which they would be able to proclaim independence. Third, leadership is necessary to articulate the public’s desires into demands for secession and to coordinate actions aimed at strengthening the secession's credibility. Fourth, discontent with the status quo within a state is required to stimulate the district community to act.

Finally, Muro (2017) adds that secessionists have a goal of combatting some form of national injustice. Examples of such grievances are: ‘violation of human rights, annexation of territories, systematic violations of charters of autonomy or economic inequality’ (Muro, 2017, p.20). These grievances are, thus, at the root of secessionist movements.

The second concept, relationship, builds on the definition of Rogers and Farace. According to Rogers and Farace (1975, p.79), relationships can be defined as: ‘...emergent, social structures conjointly created by the members in the mutually influencing, interrelating process of communication’. The use of the term in this research, however, is specifically interested in the nature of the relationship. Thus, it tries to determine whether the actors involved assess the relationship as positive or negative and whether they have any desire to improve the current relationship.

## **2.3. Expectations**

This research hypothesizes that Kosovo’s Declaration of Independence threatened Serbia’s statehood. As mentioned before, Serbia’s history and cultural connectedness with Kosovo, created a claim over the territory amongst Serbian natives. Essentially, the idea of Kosovo was embedded in Serbia’s identity. Similar to the secessionist cases in Cyprus and Georgia, Kosovo’s secession led to an immense dent in Serbia’s sense of self (Blank & Schmidt, 2020; Ker-Lindsay, 2013). To prevent

humiliation and shame and preserve Serbia’s authority, Serbian political leaders pledged to never recognize Kosovo as an independent country (Ejdus, 2019). This response can be understood with the help of Emotional Research in IR. Edney-Browne (2019), for instance, argues that (political) leaders use communal trauma to strengthen their country’s national identity and preserve control. Similarly, Hall (2015) suggests that collective emotions are utilized strategically in international diplomacy to create an emotional display that forms the perceptions of others. Building on this, Subotić (2016) argues that in times of great crises or threats, states strategically activate a narrative, one that protects both the physical and ontological security, to bring forth policy change. Thus, Serbia’s behavior can be seen as an act of ontological self-help.

Serbia’s act of ontological self-help stems from the concept of *ontological security*, which refers to “security not of the body but of the self, the subjective sense of who one is, which enables and motivates action and choice” (Mitzen, 2006, p. 344). For an individual, their sense of identity is shaped through repeated social interaction (Vékony, 2020). Throughout this process they experience self-validation, understanding what connects them to others and makes them unique. One thus feels ontologically secure if the consistency of the environment and continuity of one’s identity can be preserved. Similarly, states seek to safeguard their national identity (Mitzen, 2006). In IR ontological security is regularly used to get an understanding of state behavior (Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi, 2020). Contrary to Political Realism, the constructivist school of IR believes that states seek both physical (“security as survival”) and ontological security (“security as being”) (Walt, 2010; Vékony, 2020; Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi, 2020). Any ontological insecurities can form a threat to a country’s identity and since identity determines the course of action it could also affect the foreign policy. With that in mind, the following hypothesis can be formulated: *H1: After Kosovo’s secession Serbia’s ontological security was threatened, causing Serbia’s foreign policy to become more defensive toward Kosovo.*

**Figure 1.**

*Conceptual Model of Serbia’s Ontological Security and its More Defensive Foreign Policy Toward Kosovo*

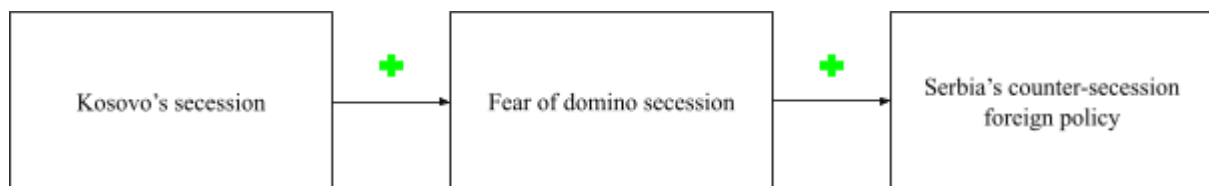


For Serbia, a more defensive foreign policy meant implementing a counter-secession strategy. At the heart of this strategy was preventing further secession. Ejdus (2019), showed that Kosovo’s secession endangered Serbia’s survival prospects as it opened up the possibility for other Serbian territories to

claim independence as well. This fear of further secession can be dated back to the start of the Balkan wars in the 1990s when the former member states of Yugoslavia seceded one by one. Research conducted on this phenomenon suggests that domino secession is more likely to happen in a smaller geographic domain, where the demonstration effects can easily be transferred to a neighboring case (Prezelj & Ramsay, 2023). Research also suggests that the success of one closeby or similar secessionist group affects the desire of other states or groups (Prezelj & Ramsay, 2023). This explains why states and the international community perceive the likelihood of domino secession, and the related instability and chaos that come with it, as a real threat. For Serbia specifically, this threat is fueled by the fear of losing Vojvodina, a region that has gained a lot of autonomy over the years, and Sandzak, a region dominated by the Muslim community (Ker-Lindsay, 2013). By this logic, the second hypothesis was written as follows: *H2a: Serbia's counter-secession foreign policy is driven by the prevention of domino secession.*

**Figure 2.**

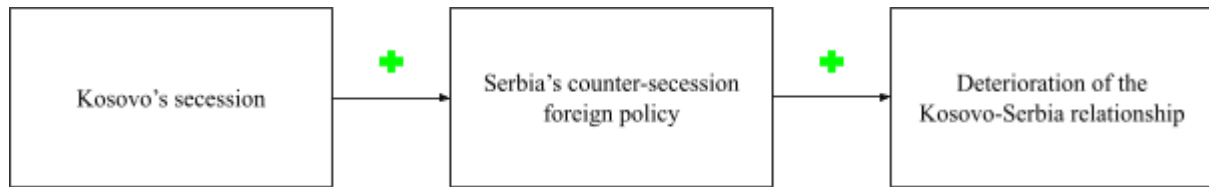
*Conceptual Model of Serbia's Fear of Domino Secession in its Counter-Secession Foreign Policy*



In their counter-secession efforts, Serbia has tried to prevent further recognition and block Kosovo's attempts at joining international organizations (Papić, 2020). In addition, Serbia claimed to have successfully secured a number of de-recognitions of Kosovo. By 2020, this number allegedly included 17 states. It remains unclear, however, if these states actually de-recognized Kosovo (Papić, 2020). Mainly, because most of the de-recognizing states stayed silent after Serbia's withdrawal announcement and some even revoked their withdrawals. Both the Serbian and Kosovo authorities provided different accounts on this number. According to Kosovo authorities, the de-recognitions never took place and served merely as 'fake news'. Ker-Lindsay and Berg (2018) argue that such punitive approaches could have harmful effects. Isolating de facto states from the international system obstructs not only the efforts at resolving the issue but also compels them into a relationship with a patron state (a state that provides support in the form of financial assistance and security). For that reason, the subsequent hypothesis was formulated: *H2b: Serbia's counter-secession foreign policy contributes to the deterioration of the Kosovo-Serbia relationship.*

**Figure 3.**

*Conceptual Model of Serbia's Counter-Secession Foreign Policy and its Deteriorated Relationship with Kosovo*



### **3. Methodology**

This section gives a more detailed explanation of how the analysis was conducted. First, the research strategy, methods, and techniques will be covered, among others. Second, the above-mentioned concepts from Chapter 2.2 - ontological security, fear of domino secession, counter-secession foreign policy, and the Kosovo-Serbia relationship - will be operationalized. Finally, a remark will be given on how the validity and reliability of this research were safeguarded.

#### **3.1. Research Strategy, Methods, and Techniques**

Given the limited knowledge about the research topic, a *case study* was deemed the most suitable research strategy, as it generates an in-depth analysis of a specific case (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The assumption that the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo deteriorated after Kosovo declared independence, led to the choice of an *extreme case study*. As Seawright and Gerring (2008) state, extreme case studies are characterized by their extreme values of either the independent or dependent variable. In this case, it is believed that the extreme conditions (see Chapter 1.1) before the secession significantly impacted the Kosovo-Serbia relationship (dependent variable). This combined with the rarity of secession makes the at-hand case unusual and therefore worth studying.

Within this research strategy, a *content analysis* was chosen as the method for the data collection and analysis (Babbie, 2018). The interest in the content of the foreign policy (expressions hinting at ontological security, fear of domino secession, a counter-secession foreign policy, and/or the Kosovo-Serbia relationship), instead of the social and cultural context underlying the communication (as would be the case in a discourse analysis), is what led to the decision for this type of method. For this, the official government site of Serbia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs functioned as the main source (<http://arhiviranisajt.msp.gov.rs/en/>). Particularly, the tab "press service" was of interest as it offers a broad range of announcements, statements, and activities of Serbian diplomatic missions, among others. Compared to the announcements and the activities, the statements provided a more detailed and clear expression of the underlying message. Apart from that, statements were also considered to

provide a more accurate account of Serbia's stance than, for instance, media articles. Especially, because the statements were derived from Serbia's foreign ministry site. For those reasons, it was chosen to solely focus on statements.

The selection of these statements was dependent on the *purposive sampling technique*. This technique involves "a type of non-probability sampling in which the units to be observed are selected based on the researcher's judgment about which ones will be the most useful or representative" (Babbie, 2018, p. 187). The usefulness or representativeness was determined by two factors. First, the statements had to fall within the years 2009-2013. This time frame would not only limit the scope but also allow inferences to be made about the relationship shortly after the Declaration of Independence. Second, the statements had to reflect a wide range of topics (e.g. Serbia's EU integration process, relationships with other countries other than Kosovo, state visits, etc.) and not only Kosovo's secession. By not limiting the content to just one topic it kept the possibility open for other themes, than the ones expected, to emerge. Ultimately, the time frame provided a total of 354 statements for further examination. Out of this number 255 were deemed as useful. The usefulness was determined by the degree to which a statement was sufficiently indicative of a certain code. For instance, statements mentioning a state visit without explaining the effect it could have on the bilateral relations and thus hinting at Serbia's willingness to preserve the relationship with one country were not sufficiently indicative of Serbia's foreign relations in the aftermath of Kosovo's independence.

Before the actual coding could commence two points were considered. One of them being the *unit(s) of analysis* (Babbie, 2018). Since this research is not specifically interested in the statement of an individual but more in the patterns across different statements, the unit of analysis is not the individual making the statement, but the words or phrases used in the statement. After determining the unit of analysis, a logical step was to decide the type of content this research should focus on (Babbie, 2018). Considering that the interest does not necessarily lie with the number of times an explicit word is mentioned, but to what degree the expressions hint at ontological security, fear of domino secession, a counter-secession foreign policy, and/or the Kosovo-Serbia relationship, *latent contents* (underlying message) were chosen for analysis. Using a deductive coding approach, certain words and phrases were then coded in Atlas.ti, based on the defined indicators (see Chapter 3.2). Note that the concepts "fear of domino secession" and "counter-secession foreign policy" are grouped under the same code due to their relatedness and resemblance.

## **3.2. Operationalizing the Main Concepts**

### **3.2.1. Ontological Security**

From the studies about ontological security, we have gathered that actors require a stable sense of self to feel ontologically secure (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2016). The sense of self is dependent on the support

and recognition derived from relationships with others. Through socialization states not only learn the written and unwritten rules that exist in the international context but also who their enemies and allies are (Vékony, 2020). On top of that, potential security dilemmas in international relations could be resolved by building trust between the actors. In some cases the lack of trust between states becomes the new normal, integrating it into their identity. As a consequence, states employ routines related to the distrust which are not even in alignment with their long-term goals. Both cases suggest that repeated interaction or the lack thereof shapes and preserves a state's national identity.

If the relationships get disrupted, however, the country's ontological security will feel threatened, causing the risk of conflict and violence (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2016). Generally, conflict resolutions and concessions are viewed as hurtful not only to a state's physical security but also to its idea of the self (Kinnvall & Mitzen, 2016). By notably expressing an interest for conflict resolutions or concessions the image of the self and others, an image which contradicts the (national) interest, is consolidated. It is for this reason, that scholars like Kinnvall and Mitzen (2016) argue that some states or actors purposely follow strategies that cause greater physical insecurity and in turn maintain the feeling of ontological security (Krickel-Choi, 2022). A strategy aimed at creating greater physical insecurity (avoidance of conflict resolutions and concessions) while sustaining ontological security (the national interests), therefore, is the second indicator. To sum up, the two indicators of ontological security are:

1. repeated interaction with other countries or the lack thereof, and;
2. strategies aimed at creating a greater physical insecurity while sustaining ontological security.

### **3.2.2. Fear of Domino Secession**

According to Prezelj and Ramsay (2023), secession is usually accompanied by instability and chaos (e.g. violence, territorial loss, betrayal of the state, etc.) For Serbia specifically the attempt at secession could also mean the loss of regions such as Vojvodina, Sandzak, and/or the Serbian Republic in Bosnia. Based on this, one could say that Serbia's fear of domino secession can be measured by looking at:

1. Serbia's expressed fear of losing sovereignty over the regions Vojvodina, Sandzak, and/or the Serbian Republic in Bosnia, and;
2. Serbia's expressed fear of instability and chaos in these regions.

### **3.2.3. Counter-Secession Foreign Policy**

As mentioned before, counter-secession foreign policies are made out of four necessary elements (Ker-Lindsay, 2017). These elements can simultaneously be used as indicators for this concept. As such, claims about the following points are indicative of a counter-secession foreign policy:

1. preserving the claim to the territory (e.g. issuing a decree or maintaining local bodies in the seceded territories);

2. preventing recognition of the seceded territory (e.g. pursuing an active diplomatic campaign and seeking lobby opportunities at regional and international organizations);
3. stopping legitimization (e.g. boycotts), and;
4. pursuing legal venues (e.g. taking a case to an international court).

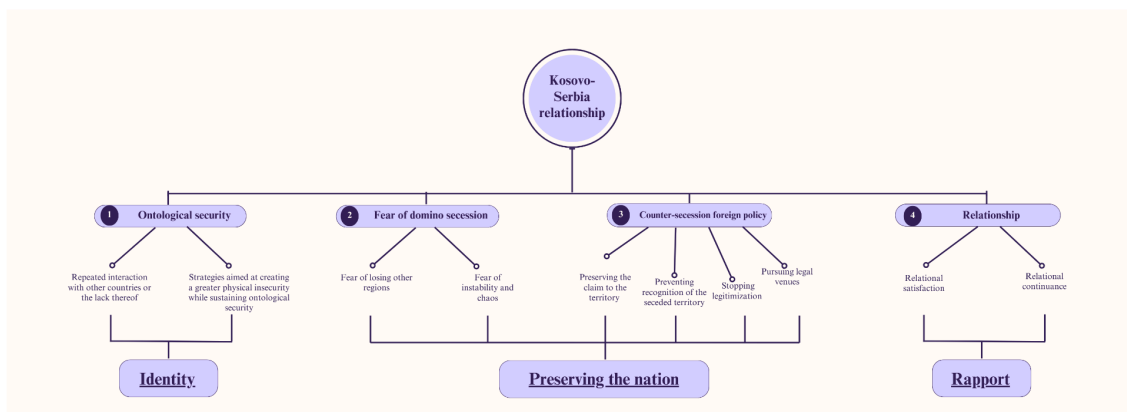
### 3.2.4. The Kosovo-Serbia Relationship

The operationalization of the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia is based on Tam & Kim's work (2017). In their work, the two academics claim that relationships in public diplomacy can be split into two categories: experiential (relationships based on direct contact with another country) and reputational (relationships based on secondhand information from the media and individuals). Per category, they ascribed a set of two indicators. Since Serbia's relationship is based on direct contact with Kosovo, only the first category will be considered. For this category, the indicators were:

1. relational satisfaction (experiential): The degree to which an individual perceives the relationship with a foreign country to be beneficial for both parties, and;
2. relational continuance (experiential): The degree to which an individual believes that the interactions with citizens/institutions/cultures/etc. from a foreign country, are worth maintaining in the hope that it will be repeated.

**Figure 4.**

Visualization of the Codes



### 3.3. Validity and Reliability

Usually, it is understood that case studies have a high internal and low external validity. The same applies to this research. The in-depth analysis allows for thorough research, covering a wide range of variables. According to Babbie (2018), the higher the amount of variables, the likelier it is that the concept is covered to a more comprehensive extent. This in combination with the *triangulation* of

sources, ensures high *internal validity*. The *external validity*, however, is compromised due to the limited generalizability. Since this research only looks at the case of Serbia, a country with a rich historical and cultural inheritance, it remains difficult to compare and thus generalize the findings to other countries. However, the research could still be valuable for other secessionist conflicts or cases such as in Spain, France, Russia, etc. (Prezelj & Ramsay, 2023)

Additionally, my ethnic ties to Serbia urged for a critical reflection on my own perspective and biases. Coming from a partially Serbian family, my parents and other relatives have always expressed strong opinions on the Kosovo matter. Through conversations with my parents and online research, I started to understand the complexity of the matter. Where one person or article would say Kosovo belongs to Serbia, the other would claim Serbia should have no right over Kosovo. Due to the ambiguity in information and my possible bias, I am not in the position to make any conclusions about territorial sovereignty, and I also do not aspire to. One thing, however, I can say something about is the social media presence among Serbians. On my Instagram alone I have seen countless pictures with a three-finger salute (nowadays used as a gesture for ethnic Serbs and Serbia), Instagram stories explaining why Kosovo belongs to Serbia, and posts commemorating the NATO bombing in Belgrade. Although I do not aim to refute the accuracy of the content, I do want to point out a shared numerator: the belief that Kosovo is part of Serbia. This observation made me wonder to what extent these nationalistic tendencies could influence the relationship with Kosovo. At the same time, I am very much aware that this assumption could shape my results and interpretation. Therefore, I have tried to take an objective position by writing the research as academic and formal as possible, without conveying any hidden criticism or defaming either of the two countries. As such, both the internal and external validity could be safeguarded.

As for *reliability*, it can be questioned whether the coding is accurate as it is based on one's interpretation of the context. In this case, one might say that certain words or phrases are indicative of a certain code, while another individual would disagree. For this reason, it can not be guaranteed that the codes would be the same if another person would conduct the coding. Simultaneously, the concreteness of the content being studied strengthens the likelihood of reliability (Babbie, 2018). One could code and recode the documents as often as one would like to, in contrast to field research in which there is no way to reanalyze the original event. In an attempt to further increase reliability memos were created in Atlas.ti. This measure ensured higher transparency by explaining the assigned codes which might not seem obvious at first glance (Babbie, 2018).

## **4. Results**

Chapter four will present the findings, themed by the three defined hypotheses in Chapter 2.3. The themes are: a) the threat to Serbia's ontological security and a more defensive foreign policy towards Kosovo b) the prevention of domino secession c) the deterioration of the Kosovo-Serbia relationship.

In addition, a fourth theme emerged from the analysis: accession to the EU and its requirements. For ease of understanding, this section will first explain which words or phrases were indicative of a certain code (see Figure 4). To begin, the code “identity” is strongly connected to the relationships between countries and the presence or absence of trust between them. Characteristic of this code were statements hinting at Serbia’s willingness to cooperate with a country, develop bilateral relations, and make a commitment by signing an agreement. In a similar manner, expressions concerning Serbia’s stance on a matter, such as condemning terrorism in Iraq or supporting China’s unifying policy, signified Serbia’s relation with the country. By condemning terrorism in Iraq, for instance, Serbia demonstrated that it supports the Iraqi government in its fight against terrorism. Its stance not only colors the relationship with Iraq but also shapes Serbia’s identity.

The second code, “preserving the nation”, was identifiable by expressions about safeguarding territorial integrity and sovereignty. In the context of this study, the more obvious indicators of this code were statements hinting at preventing further secession, maintaining local bodies in Kosovo, and thanking countries for their support on the Kosovo matter. More broadly, the code could also be tied to preserving peace and stability in the region. This included comments related to the complicated return of internally displaced Serbs, strengthening stability, and criticism about the local elections in Kosovo.

Lastly, the code “rapport” could be attributed to words or phrases indicating the degree of relational satisfaction. Most commonly, this was discovered in statements containing the literal word “satisfaction”. In some cases, it was also found in statements describing Serbia’s perception of a country or an organization as “credible” or “trusted”. The same holds for a more negative perception. Besides the degree of relational satisfaction, the code could be attributed to words or phrases indicating Serbia’s willingness to improve the current political, economic, or cultural cooperation with a country or an organization. For a more detailed overview of examples see Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
*Coding scheme and examples*

<b>Code name</b>	<b>Words or phrases indicative of the code</b>
<b>Identity</b>	<p>“...an expression of the mutual desire to further promote the good bilateral relations...”<sup>1</sup></p> <p>“...China’s gratitude for Serbia’s principled support to China’s policy”<sup>2</sup></p>

<sup>1</sup><http://arhiviranisajt.msp.gov.rs/en/statements-archive/statements-2009/2183-foreign-minister-jeremic-in-brussels->

<sup>2</sup><http://arhiviranisajt.msp.gov.rs/en/statements-archive/statements-2013/12618-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-the-republic-of-serbia-ivan-mrkic-met-today-the-delegation-of-the-lao-peoples-democratic-republic-headed-by-parliament-speaker-pany-yathotou>

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**Preserving the nation**

“...he will sign two cooperation agreements between Serbia and Russia”<sup>3</sup>

“... the return of IDPs from Kosovo and Metohija”<sup>4</sup>

“...prevent further recognitions of the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo and Metohija”<sup>5</sup>

“...their importance for the stability of the entire region...”<sup>6</sup>

“...he presented the problems regarding the organization of local elections”<sup>7</sup>

**Rapport**

"We are proud to be a credible and trusted partner of the Government and people of Serbia”<sup>8</sup>

“...harmed good-neighbourly relations and undermined regional cooperation”<sup>9</sup>

“... readiness for intensifying the cooperation...”<sup>10</sup>

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*Note.* From “the Statements Archive”, by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Serbia, n.d. (<http://arhiviranisajt.msp.gov.rs/en/statements-archive/statements-2009>)

## **4.1. The Threat to Serbia’s Ontological Security and a More Defensive Foreign Policy Toward Kosovo**

Throughout the statements, the Serbian representatives reiterated the country’s national interests, including the Kosovo-Serbia dispute, at both bilateral and regional meetings. By doing so, the representatives hinted at the disruption in Serbia’s autobiographical continuity and the restoration

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<sup>3</sup><http://arhiviranisajt.msp.gov.rs/en/statements-archive/statements-2012/11649-mfa-mrkic-having-bilateral-meetings-on-the-eve-of-the-67th-un-general-assembly-in-new-york>

<sup>4</sup><http://arhiviranisajt.msp.gov.rs/en/statements-archive/statements-2009/1538-foreign-minister-jeremic-meets-with-un-high-commissioner-for-refugees>

<sup>5</sup>*Serbia.* <http://arhiviranisajt.msp.gov.rs/en/statements-archive/statements-2009/1549-minister-jeremic-in-meeting-with-foreign-ministry-council-on-foreign-relations>

<sup>6</sup><http://arhiviranisajt.msp.gov.rs/en/statements-archive/statements-2013/12687-mfa-ivan-mrkic-meets-speaker-of-the-house-of-representatives-of-the-bih-parliamentary-assembly-denis-becirovic>

<sup>7</sup><http://arhiviranisajt.msp.gov.rs/en/statements-archive/statements-2013/12578-qit-is-a-very-positive-coincidence-that-greece-will-assume-presidency-of-the-council-of-the-european-union-in-the-first-half-of-next-year-when-the-opening-of-accession-talks-between-serbia-and-the-eu-is-expected>

<sup>8</sup><http://arhiviranisajt.msp.gov.rs/en/statements-archive/statements-2010/4944-new-country-partnership-strategy-signed-between-the-government-of-serbia-and-the-united-nations>

<sup>9</sup><http://arhiviranisajt.msp.gov.rs/en/statements-archive/statements-2009/1539-serbian-foreign-ministry-protests-to-albanian-representative-in-belgrade>

<sup>10</sup><http://arhiviranisajt.msp.gov.rs/en/statements-archive/statements-2010/3379-foreign-minister-jeremic-meets-caherine-ashton>

thereof. In the statements, certain indicators pointed to this threat to the sense of self, also known as ontological security. One of these indicators entailed the nature of Serbia's foreign relations. In Statement 5, for instance, it appears the Albanian Prime Minister has made a provocative statement about Serbia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. This comment was not taken lightly by the Serbian Foreign Ministry, which then publicly condemned the statement. Similarly, Erdogan's words "Kosovo is Turkey and Turkey is Kosovo", caused a lot of uproar among the Serbs, who called the comment "hostile" and "openly intolerant" (Statement No. 1). Both statements "harmed" Serbia's relations with Albania and Turkey, ultimately shaping Serbia's stance and therefore identity toward those countries. Inversely, Serbia conveyed positive exclamations of countries that did support Serbia on the Kosovo matter, such as Moldova, Cuba, and Slovakia (Statement No. 2, 3 & 4), to name a few.

Another indicator was Serbia's attached significance to sustaining its national identity. In Statement 85 (Statement No. 5), the development in the bilateral relations between Bosnia and Serbia was positively assessed. With that, the significance of stability in the region was underscored. Although the statement might not have specified the exact parts of the region, in this context, it is reasonable to say it implies the Serbian Republic in Bosnia. A secession in this district could lead to another secession in the region of Sandjak (Prezelj & Ramsay, 2023). Therefore, the secession by the Serbian Republic in Bosnia and with that the launch of other secessionist movements, could have caused another major dent in Serbia's identity.

The third indicator was Serbia's response to the 2013 elections in Kosovo. The elections were a historical moment for Kosovo as it was the first time local elections were held in its territory (ENEMO, n.d.). Due to the provision of normalizing relations, as mentioned in the Brussels Agreement, Serb-populated entities in Kosovo were also able to participate. For this reason, Serbian Foreign Minister Ivan Mrkić and Assistant Minister Vasić expressed the hope that Serbs would go to the polls in large numbers (Statement No. 6). Given the alleged sabotaging attempts by Pristina (Statement No.6), they found it particularly important that the elections were fair and reliable. To ensure this the Serbian representatives urged for support from international organizations such as the OSCE and the UN (Statement No. 7). These concerns about the fairness and reliability of the electoral process, coupled with the demand for involvement by international organizations, indicate the lack of trust Serbia had in Kosovo. From the perspective of the Serbian government, the sabotaging efforts by Pristina could have encroached on the autonomy of the Serb population in Kosovo, which in turn would have undermined the Serbian identity.

Although less frequent, Serbia also seemed to employ strategies aimed at creating greater physical insecurity to sustain ontological security. In statement 56 (Statement No. 8), Mrkić, in a meeting with Ambassadors of NATO member countries, underscored that Serbia will not join NATO. Instead, he conveyed Serbia's interest in becoming a "reliable and responsible partner" (Statement No. 8) of the organization. Given Serbia's history with NATO, specifically the NATO bombing in

1999, this exclamation can be partially understood. It shows that Serbia is not willing to forget the atrocities from the past, which shaped its identity of the present.

Now that we have established that the ontological security threat was deemed as very real in Serbia, the question remains: how did Serbia respond to this threat? Most notably, Serbia has tried to preserve the claim to the territory through its demands in the Brussels Agreement. As mentioned before, one of these demands concerned the establishment of the ASM. According to Mrkić, the Serbian municipalities would provide a solution to the “vexing problems” (Statement No. 9) in Kosovo, which included the low return rates of displaced Serbs and the perceived security risk of Serbs and other minorities. This interest for Serb majority municipalities was thus driven by both the desire to preserve the Serbian identity (in terms of its cultural heritage) and sustain the survival of the Serbian community (in terms of territorial integrity and sovereignty).

Next to preserving the claim to the territory Serbia tried to prevent further recognition. By pursuing an active diplomatic campaign, Serbia has managed to receive support from South Africa, China, Russia, Armenia, Slovakia, and many more. Out of this list, Serbia seemed to be particularly fond of its relations with Russia and China. Serbia’s relationship with Russia is defined by its longtime friendship and similar cultural and religious heritage (Statement No. 10 & 11). It is, therefore, not surprising that Russia takes Serbia’s side on the matter of Kosovo. As such, a number of statements (Statement No. 10, 12 & 13) expressed Russia’s support for Serbia’s efforts to preserve its territorial integrity and sovereignty in relation to Kosovo. Similarly, Serbia’s relationship with China is based on traditional friendship and mutual support (Statement No. 14). China, too, has supported Serbia in its efforts to preserve territorial integrity and sovereignty. Interestingly, Serbia has also expressed its support for China’s unifying “one China” policy and its territorial integrity and sovereignty (Statement No. 14). Based on these findings, it can be argued that Serbia’s position colored its relationship with other countries and that Serbia sought consistency in its position, as demonstrated by its support for China’s unifying p

Apart from diplomatic campaigns, Serbia also attempted to receive support on bigger platforms. In Statement 4 (Statement No. 15), for instance, it is mentioned that the former Serbian Foreign Minister, Vuk Jeremic, met with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. In their talk, the actors agreed to organize an international conference regarding the resolution of the refugee problem in the region. The conference would be held in Belgrade, creating the opportunity for the Serbian government to seek support for their position.

## **4.2. The Prevention of Domino Secession**

From the statements, it becomes evident that the Serbian government regards the rights and interests of the Serbian population in Kosovo highly. Any threats to these rights or interests were perceived as detrimental to the stability of the region. This fear of instability was noted in various ways throughout

the statements. In one instance, the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs claimed (Statement No. 16) that a statement made by the Albanian government contained provocative language, directly inciting activities aimed at destabilizing the situation in the region. This concern was once again underscored when the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs called on the Albanian government to take the situation seriously and ensure that all communities, including the Serbian community, were protected.

A more direct threat was posed by the series of anti-Serb incidents in Croatia. In a short period, Rijeka, Zagreb, and Vukovar (Statement No. 17, 18 & 19) were tormented by hate speeches targeting Serb minorities and the vandalization of Serb houses and governmental institutions. The frequency and the interval of these incidents created enough reason for concern. Ultimately, leading the Serbian government to urge the Croatian government to prevent any further escalation of the Anti-Serb campaign and to respect the rights of the Serbian population living there. The situation in Croatia is a prime example in which the fear of instability turned into a fear of losing territory. Using the logic of Prezelj & Ramsay (2023), it could be argued that tensions amongst the Serbian population in Croatia could have evoked secessionist movements elsewhere.

Moreover, the fear of instability was found in the diligence with which the Belgrade-Pristina dialogue was orchestrated (Statement No. 20 & 21). Not abiding by the terms discussed in these negotiation talks was believed to hurt the relationship between the countries. This was exemplified by Mrkić's statement about a military agreement between Pristina and Albania, in which he said (Statement No. 22): "For, if Serbs and the other non-Albanians of Kosovo and Metohija constantly see that Pristina has negotiated one thing with Belgrade and then continues with its attempts to carry out something quite different, instead of building lasting peace, all our efforts to arrive at agreements would only amount to increasing the mistrust existing among minority communities". Mrkić added that he does not believe Pristina will use this agreement against Serbia, yet he acknowledged that it could heighten the anxiety among non-Albanian communities in Kosovo.

It can be questioned, however, whether preserving stability in the region is an end goal for Serbia. From the statements one ulterior end goal could be identified: Serbia's desire to join the EU (see Chapter 4.4). In Statement 208 (Statement No. 20), it was already mentioned that regional cooperation is viewed as an "important factor of stability and development of the region", considering it therefore also a relevant precondition for EU membership. In Statement 211 (Statement No.23), Mrkić once again expressed this desire to improve economic cooperation with Serbia's neighboring countries. As such, he stated: "We are all dependent on and must rely on each other". Moreover, Statements 205 and 221 (Statement No. 24 & 25) indicated that the participation of the Serbian Armed Forces (SAF) in peace support missions not only enhanced Serbia's reputation and contributed to the development of operational competencies of the military, but also deepened the relationship with the EU. Drawing from this, it can be asserted that Serbia's profiling primarily served to accommodate the values of the EU and to be recognized as a valuable member of the EU family.

### **4.3. The Deterioration of the Kosovo-Serbia Relationship**

The statements did not explicitly mention the impact of Serbia's counter-secession foreign policy on its relationship with Kosovo. Still, it can be said that the implementation of the Serbian municipalities, as a way of preserving the claim to the territory, diminished the relational satisfaction. During the Pristina-Belgrade negotiation talks, differences regarding the responsibilities of the Serbian municipalities surfaced, with representatives of Pristina expressing concerns about the role of "policing" and "justice" in these municipalities (Statement No. 26). From the perspective of the Kosovar government, the municipalities could be interpreted as an attempt to gain more power in Kosovo, explaining why to this day the provision has not been implemented.

This conviction was partially confirmed by one of Mrkić's statements, in which he stated that the Serbian community might not understand the essence of the agreement at first. Phrases like "will soon realize" and "as soon as they come to realize", indicate that the Serbian community would be more prone toward the conditions of the agreement if they would understand the implications. What this would exactly entail for the Serbian community was explained by Mrkić as: "...they will essentially remain where they are, living on their own land, that they will be able to plan their future and that there are instruments to ensure that, the implementation will then be accelerated" (Statement No.23).

Much like Kosovo, Serbia voiced concerns over the implementation of the Brussels Agreement. According to Mrkić, the Kosovar Parliament had attempted to undermine the agreement by intending to terminate the UNMIK's mandate (Statement No. 9). More importantly, he believed the Kosovar Parliament was violating the Serb population in Kosovo in terms of their security and property rights. As such, he reiterated the significance of the UNMIK in addressing the mistrust in the region. Remarkably, he pointed out that these discussions with Pristina should not be seen as a weakness but as a force and their political determination (Statement No. 9). This suggests that Serbia with this act was not necessarily compromising its identity by actively seeking a common ground. Instead, Mrkić framed it as a means to an end; the end of preserving the nation.

Conversely, the statements expressed a high degree of relational continuance. The prospects of EU membership motivated Serbia to enter negotiation talks and promote the relationship with Kosovo. Commandments by other countries such as "Serbia's responsible approach to the implementation of the agreement between Belgrade and Pristina" (Statement No. 27) and "I congratulate the Serbian leadership on the efforts made in the past year to normalize relations with its neighbors" (Statement No. 28), suggest Serbia has made a significant effort in the promotion of bilateral relations.

#### **4.4. Accession to the EU and its Requirements**

Serbia's ulterior motive for joining the EU constitutes the fourth theme. Before receiving EU membership Serbia had to undergo certain structural reforms. One of them was normalizing the relations with Kosovo, as mentioned in the Brussels Agreement. After two years of negotiating, Serbia finally adopted the agreement on the 19th of April 2013 (Statement No. 29). By signing, Serbia showed the international community its commitment to improve its relationship with Kosovo. A couple of days later, on the 22nd of April (Statement No. 30) the EC recommended that the negotiations regarding Serbia's EU membership should be opened at the Foreign Ministers meeting in Luxembourg. As put by the EC: "The report that was made public, states that Serbia has taken very important steps towards a visible and sustainable improvement of relations with Kosovo in line with the Council conclusions of December 2012" (Statement No. 30). That being said, the Serbian representatives emphasized that the implementation of the Brussels Agreement did not equal recognizing Kosovo's Declaration of Independence (Statement No. 31).

Although it was recommended to start the negotiations, it remained unclear when exactly the negotiations would commence. On the 28th of June 2013, the Council was expected to give its definitive assessment of Serbia's progress. A positive assessment would then be followed by a date for the negotiations. The months leading up to the 28th of June were characterized by a fair share of uncertainty among the Serbian representatives. At first, Mrkić showed little to no hesitation that the Council would reach a positive decision. Even the Foreign Ministers of Belgium, Italy, and Slovenia (Statement No. 32, 33 & 34) stated that the Council should positively assess Serbia's progress and insisted that Serbia should be given a clear date. Still, some countries like Germany were not fully convinced and therefore opposed the setting of the date. Eventually, on the 28th of June, the Council expressed their excitement regarding the developments in the Belgrade and Pristina dialogue (Statement No. 35). The Council agreed to start the negotiations in January 2014.

Certain achievements or decisions were meant to increase Serbia's chances at European integration. One of those achievements was obtaining the OSCE chairmanship in 2015 (Statement No. 36). Receiving OSCE chairmanship was of great significance for Serbia as it would contribute to the region's overall progress, strengthen stability, and accelerate the European perspective. Also, the decision to open the accession talks gave a positive impulse to Serbia's identity in the international community. Regarding this, Mrkić stated the following at an OSCE meeting in July 2013: "... this is recognition of a positive development in the past and a signal of encouragement that Serbia has become a reliable partner " (Statement No. 36).

Mrkić added that opening up the negotiation talks gave Serbia an "impetus" to continue its reform processes (Statement No. 36). At the same meeting, he also expressed to take responsibility for Serbia's troubled history by addressing the problems in its region and also across Europe and Eurasia. This renewed collaborative approach was underscored by Mrkić's satisfaction with settling the situation in the

region and developing good neighborly relations with other countries. He even went so far as to say that Serbia has ‘‘never had relations of such quality and substance with its neighbors’’(Statement No. 36) Additionally, the positive change in Serbia’s identity was demonstrated by Mrkić’s assessment that Serbia was now highly sought after as an interlocutor for the UNGA, indicating that in the years before 2013, they were not taken as seriously (Statement No. 37).

## **5. Discussion and Conclusion**

This thesis tried to answer the research question: *how did secessionism influence foreign relations between the parent state (Serbia) and the de facto state (Kosovo)?* The answer to this question is rooted in the tension between Serbia’s desires. On the one hand, the statements indicate that Serbia has had a great desire to restore its national identity since Kosovo’s secession. Most notably, Serbia has tried to safeguard its territorial integrity and sovereignty by advocating for the establishment of Serbian municipalities and pursuing diplomatic campaigns. Based on these findings hypothesis 1 can be accepted. On the other hand, Serbia also conveyed an interest in joining the EU. Part of this entailed normalizing the relations with Kosovo. From the statements congratulating Serbia’s progress and leadership regarding this precondition, we gathered that Serbia has put in a serious effort to develop the relations, all the while maintaining its claim to the territory. This contradiction is highlighted in Serbia’s claim, which states that signing the Brussels Agreement does not equate to Serbia recognizing Kosovo (Statement No. 31).

Given this tension, Serbia’s said balancing act between the East and the West becomes all the more important. Serbia’s friendly relationship with Russia (East) is based on a long history of trust and a similar cultural heritage. Alongside China, another significant ally of Serbia, Russia has been one of the few member states in the UNSC to not recognize Kosovo. Simultaneously, Serbia has the wish to join the EU and thus grow closer to the West. Due to the complicated history between the West and Serbia and the stronger growing relationship with the East, the West has adopted a more careful approach toward Serbia, allowing the country to be exempt from recognizing Kosovo. Still, Serbia does not take this unique position for granted. The anti-Serb movements across Croatia posed a direct threat to the living circumstances of the Serb population. Similar to the Serbian Republic in Bosnia, it was argued that instability and chaos among the Serb communities in Croatia could potentially offset secessionist movements elsewhere. Since the statements do not directly relate this fear of instability and chaos to a fear of domino secession, hypothesis 2a can only be partially accepted.

As for the impact this tension has had on the relationship with Kosovo, several observations can be made. In terms of relational continuance, both countries expressed a willingness to cooperate. That being said, the statements did not explicitly mention relational satisfaction. Three situations could be identified in which the relationship was potentially harmed. First, the demand for Serbian

municipalities led to criticism by both Kosovo and Serbia. The Serbian government accused Kosovo of sabotaging the implementation of the Serbian municipalities, whereas the Kosovar government deemed the provision as just one of Serbia's maneuvers to gain more power in Kosovo. The accusations made on both sides could have severed the trust between the countries, ultimately altering the nature of the relationship. Second, Serbia expressed worries about the 2013 elections held in Kosovo. The representatives were mainly concerned with the fairness and credibility of the elections, indicating a lack of trust in their counterpart. Three, Serbia's attempts at blocking Kosovo's participation in international organizations and lobbying for de-recognitions are isolating Kosovo from the international community. As argued by Ker-Lindsay and Berg (2018), this could harm the relationship between the de facto state and the parent state. Taking everything into consideration, these findings indicate that the prospect of joining the EU and thus improving the relationship with Kosovo does not outweigh Serbia's desire to sustain its autobiographical continuity. It could, therefore, be questioned whether Serbia's efforts aimed at normalizing the relationship merely served to stabilize the region. It is likelier, that Serbia agreed to improve the relationship with Kosovo with the intent to increase its chances at EU membership. By this logic, hypothesis 2b can partially be accepted as the findings acknowledged both the improvement and deterioration of the relationship.

To conclude, the years after Kosovo's secession were characterized by a lot of uncertainty for Serbia. Fearing that the secessionist movement in Kosovo could have severe repercussions for other areas, the country adopted a more defensive stance toward Kosovo. Simultaneously, Serbia expressed a stronger desire for EU membership. As such, Serbia had to find the right balance between its valuable relationships. Although, Serbia made some progress in the normalization of the relationship it still perceived its autobiographical continuity as its main priority. So if preserving its autobiographical continuity meant the deterioration of the Kosovo-Serbia relationship and the delay of EU accession, Serbia seemed willing to take that risk.

The results of this study can be applied to other secessionist cases, used to understand the influence of secession on the functioning of international organizations such as the UN, and illustrative of the dynamics between parent states and their allies in the aftermath of secession. Despite these implications, it should be mentioned that there were also some limitations to this study. First and foremost, the research design bears the question of whether the codes measure what they intend to measure. Moreover, due to my ethnical background, it can not be said with full conviction whether my potential bias influenced the interpretation of the results. Similarly, it is debatable whether the statements from the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs did not contain any misinformation about Kosovo.

## **6. Recommendations**

Drawing on this study, several recommendations for future research can be proposed. To begin, the restricted data hindered the possibility of making comparisons in Serbia's foreign policy before and after Kosovo's secession. It was, therefore, impossible to assert whether a change in foreign policy occurred. One possible recommendation for future research is, thus, to look at Serbia's foreign policy before and after 2009 while following the qualitative content analysis of this study.

Another recommendation is to utilize different sources. In this study, the main sources were the statements derived from the official site of the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Although these statements were substantial, it could also be interesting to analyze different sources, such as newspapers or parliamentary minutes. Perhaps, these sources would demonstrate different findings.

Moreover, this research solely focused on Serbia's foreign policy. It is, therefore, advised to conduct similar research on Kosovo's foreign policy. As such, comparisons could be made between the foreign policy of Kosovo and Serbia.

Lastly, future research could apply a different time frame than the one used here. The used time frame in this research gives a valuable amount of information on the period after the secession. For that reason, it is encouraged to examine whether the results differ when a different time frame is applied.

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## 8. Appendix A: Reference List of the Mentioned Statements in the Results

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