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(Re)Constructing Serbia's Identity
The European Union enlargement process and the place of Kosovo

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“The Yugoslav crisis began in Kosovo, and it will end in Kosovo”
- Noel Malcolm (1998)

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Abstract

The relationship between Serbia and Kosovo has historically been marked by tensions involving the search for recognition of Kosovo's independence since 2008. However, since Serbia began its path to becoming a member of the European Union, one of the conditionalities consists in the normalization of relations with Kosovo, raising questions about the place that the country occupies in the Serbian imagination and identity. Based on a narrative analysis of official discourse and public opinion, this study seeks to understand how Serbian identity is (re)constructed in the process of accession to the European Union, and in particular during the government of Aleksandar Vučić (2017-2023), in light of the conditionality of normalization of relations with Kosovo.

Keywords: Serbia; Kosovo; Construction of Identities; Enlargement of the European Union; Narrative analysis.

(Re)Construindo a Identidade Sérvia: o processo de alargamento da União Europeia e o lugar do Kosovo

Resumo

A relação entre a Sérvia e o Kosovo é historicamente marcada por tensões envolvendo a busca pelo reconhecimento da independência do Kosovo desde 2008. Entretanto, desde que a Sérvia começou o seu caminho para se tornar um membro da União Europeia, uma das condicionalidades consiste na normalização das relações com o Kosovo, levantando questionamentos sobre o lugar que o país ocupa no imaginário e na identidade sérvia. A partir de uma análise narrativa de discursos oficiais e da opinião pública, este estudo busca entender como a identidade sérvia é (re)construída no processo de adesão para a União Europeia, e em particular durante o governo de Aleksandar Vučić (2017-2023), a luz da condicionalidade de normalização das relações com o Kosovo.

Palavras-chave: Sérvia; Kosovo; Construção de Identidades; Alargamento da União Europeia; Análise narrativa.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS

BPB - Balkan Public Barometer	
EB - Eurobarometer	
EU - European Union	
EU-15 - The 15 member states of the European Union before enlargement	
EU-25 - The composition of the European Union from 1 May 2004	
EU-27 - The composition of the European Union as of 1 February 2020, excluding the United Kingdom	
EULEX - European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo	
ICTY - International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia	
IR - International Relations	
SAA - Stabilization and Association Agreements	
SAP - Stabilization and Association Process	
SFRY - Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia	
TEU - Treaty on European Union	
WB - Western Balkans	
WB6 - Western Balkans Six	

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1. Introduction

The year 1981 marks the beginning of the manifestations claiming the creation of Kosovo's Republic in Yugoslavia, an autonomous province, giving rise to the process of independence of the country. However, on May 8, 1989, in Serbia, Slobodan Milošević reached the presidency, repressing the claim for independence in the region and suppressing any kind of autonomy, as foreseen in the Constitution of 1974. This tragic war only ended in 1999, when the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) started a campaign in Serbia, bombing the region.

Since the end of the Kosovo War, a lot has changed in Serbia. Earlier, under Milošević's presidency, the country did not have peaceful relations with its neighbors nor with the European Union, which utterly condemned the conflict and Milošević's actions. With its end, though, and the end of Milošević's term, the scenario started to change for the country, and during the Thessaloniki European Council Summit in 2003, Serbia was granted the status of a possible candidate by the European Union, with the organization claiming that "(...) the future of Balkans is within the European Union" (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2003).

Now, in 2023, this statement is still true for the EU and its enlargement agenda, being reiterated across the years in the format of a promise. Yet, the enlargement, despite being a "geo-strategic investment" (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2022) for Europe, is not without cost, and Serbia, among conditionalities of the accession negotiation, faces a difficult process: the Chapter 35, namely, "other issues - Item 1: Normalisation of relations between Serbia and Kosovo". Kosovo, as it will be explained in this work, is not a light topic for Serbia, and this is also true for its government, foreign policy, and population.

Being considered over the years as more than just a territory, Kosovo has been compared by Serbian politicians and presidents with Jerusalem, with the heart, with the air that Serbia breathes and much more, briefly demonstrating how this region is central to the country's identity. However, the very creation of Kosovo as a foundational part of the identity contrasts sharply with the conditionality imposed in Chapter 35, Item 1, which sets out the normalization of relations with Kosovo as a requirement for Serbia's entry into the Union. This scenario gives rise to a problem in which the enlargement process and the European path demand from Serbia the central core of its identity.

Therefore, in the face of these contradictions, the central path of my argument considers the years between 2017 and 2023, which correspond not only to the most recent period of

enlargement for Serbia, but also to the government of President Aleksandar Vučić. This temporal choice is relevant insofar as Vučić's government presents relevant (dis)continuities in the relationship with Kosovo and the EU, maintaining and modifying Serbia's founding narrative in a context that, as I argued in the conclusions, is ambiguous. In this sense, the government of Aleksandar Vučić (2017 - 2023) and its discourse regarding not only relations with Kosovo but also the relation with the European Union itself, in the context of the accession process, will be examined in this work.

Likewise, an additional central factor for the analysis, which relates to the construction of identity, is narrative analysis, which will be identified through a discourse analysis. Throughout the process, I will think about the State of Serbia in terms of narratives, essential to political life as it creates our own identity. Being briefly defined as stories, Serbia's narratives will be analyzed as part of the construction of Serbia's autobiography and its identity concerning Kosovo, with the enlargement process and normalization conditionality as a background. To analyze the historical construction of Serbian identity, this analysis will draw from sources ranging from websites, statements, and documents from the European Union and its institution; repositories where Milošević's speeches were found; official speeches from Aleksandar Vučić gathered in news and the official website of the Republic of Serbia and bibliography as articles, books, news, and public opinion surveys.

Additionally, throughout the analysis, I will also take into account public opinion based on data and surveys such as the Eurobarometer and the Balkan Public Barometer. This specific look at society is relevant and justified because to understand how a narrative is inserted in a society, becoming possibly hegemonic, we can consider the opinion of Serbian society as a whole since Vučić's speeches and his considerations are not inserted in a vacuum, but rather reverberating in a society with its own opinions. Thus, analyses of public opinion, media reports, and government documents allow us to see more clearly the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo in the normalization and enlargement process.

After this introduction, the second chapter of the monograph, entitled 'European Union, Serbia, and Kosovo: narrating historical relations in the construction of identities', I will follow a historical-conceptual trajectory, first addressing constructivist theory, in which concepts such as identity and discourse analysis are present as central. Likewise, considering just the speeches is not enough, and to truly understand how Serbia's identity is (re)constructed based on the relationship with Kosovo and the enlargement process, it is necessary to look at history, at how Kosovo is built daily in the imagination of the Serbian

population and the minds of their presidents. Therefore, I will start by addressing Milošević's speeches during his presidential term, aiming to establish the basis for the discussion of the narratives. The main objective of this section is to delimit the initial narrative that is constructed around Kosovo, so that it is possible, in 2023, to understand to what extent (dis)continuities exist and how they occur.

However, as briefly explained, Serbia's relationship with Kosovo also permeates the European Union and its enlargement process. This is, in fact, one of the main problems: the enlargement process, as a policy that demands from candidate countries a series of conditionalities and political, institutional, and economic transformations, presents after years of success what can be called fatigue or resistance to enlargement, terms that will be better explored later. Similarly, the process concerning the Balkans is part of what can be said to be 20 years of promises and support for a European future, on a path that has not yet taken place.

This is the general objective of the third chapter, entitled European Union and the enlargement to the Balkans: to explore, looking at the European Union, what enlargement is, how this policy fits into the Balkan contexts and, mainly, how we can relate membership to identity, as I will explore more specifically how the construction of European identity takes place through differentiation.

Finally, in the fourth chapter, we will reach the central part of the analysis, where Serbia's identity will be (re)constructed based on all the analyses presented in the previous chapters. In it, first addressing what the enlargement process means for the population of Serbia, I will indicate, returning to the past of Milošević and his speeches, how the idea of Kosovo is positioned in the Serbian imagination. Considering the government of Aleksandar Vučić, I will then perform a discourse analysis based on news websites, press releases and news, some derived from the Serbian Presidency website itself, to identify (dis)continuities of the place of Kosovo in the founding narrative of Serbia between 2017 and 2023.

Likewise, I will bring the enlargement process back from the normalization of relations, paying special attention to defining this term based on the Agreement proposed by the EU in 2023. Although not yet approved by the parties, the Agreement brings light to the conditionality of the normalization of relations by exposing as one of the indicators of this normalization the recognition of Kosovo's independence and respect for its territorial sovereignty and principle of self-determination. From this comparison, I will argue how Vučić builds his relationship with the European Union and Kosovo ambiguously, positioning himself as a country open to dialogue, calling for peace and stability at the same time as he

fights to keep the territory and represents Serbia as a misunderstood nation. Additionally, it is also highlighted that a possible entry of Serbia into the Union – something unlikely if current conditions are maintained – would mean not only the loss of a territory but also the loss of its founding narrative and identity, transforming it into a new Serbia.

To sum up, in this work, I will investigate how the Serbian identity is (re)constructed in the process of accession to the European Union during Aleksandar Vučić's government (2017-2023), especially in light of demands for the normalization of relations with Kosovo (Chapter 35, Item 1 of accession negotiations). The main focus will thus be on the current relations between Serbia and the European Union in the context of enlargement and accession to the bloc. For this, the government of Aleksandar Vučić is essential to consider this link, and it is interesting to consider Kosovo's role in shaping Serbia's identity, an important turning point between the bloc and the country.

2. European Union, Serbia, and Kosovo: narrating historical relations in the construction of identities

The purpose of the second chapter, entitled 'European Union, Serbia, and Kosovo: narrating historical relations in the construction of identities', is to be historical-conceptual, introducing the basis of the discussion that will be held in the other two chapters, involving, in general, the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo in the European Union accession process. To do this, it will be divided into three subsections, each with its respective objective.

The first subsections numbered 2.1 and 2.2, form the theoretical, conceptual, and methodological basis of the entire work. Starting with a brief discussion of constructivist theory, they aim to introduce the theory and highlight some of its premises, especially concerning the formulation of identities and the constitution of ethnic groups. The introduction of this constructivist basis is essential to understand constructivism more broadly and, subsequently, what can be called strategic constructivism, enunciated by Subotić. In it, identity and discourse are central elements, contributing to the broader study of States and their policies.

Addressing this specific constructivism is also relevant as it helps us understand the theoretical framework of the present work, centered on the analysis of narratives. Best explored in subsection 2.2., narrative analysis focuses on the understanding and analysis of narratives, the autobiography of States, and the construction of their identities. Therefore, the argument developed will be based on discourse analysis to identify the narratives formulated, how they are constructed, and how they shape the identity of the countries.

In turn, the study of these narratives will begin in subsection 2.3, where the historical element of the chapter makes an appearance. Understanding that the present is also a result of the past, the historical part presented aims to enunciate the beginning of the construction of Serbian narratives about Kosovo, formulating the basis for understanding the present. Thus, using an analysis of the speeches of former President Slobodan Milošević, subsection 2.3 addresses over the years how the idea of Kosovo was formulated in the Serbian imagination, initiating a narrative in which Serbian identity and the autobiography of the State is closely linked to Kosovar territory.

2.1. Defining the Essentials: Identity and Narratives in the Constructivist Theory

The field of International Relations (IR) has had, throughout its history, different debates and theories. One of those, which originated from the big debates in the 1980s and 1990s, is constructivism. Firstly introduced by Nicholas Onuf, constructivism has been, as Weber puts it (2010, p.81), adopted and adapted in many ways, by many different authors. In this sense, it's necessary to briefly introduce the major assumptions of this theory, now broadly diffused in the field of IR, and highlight some of its premises and assumptions.

Constructivism is located in the third debate between rationalists and critical theorists since the end of the Cold War, where a new approach to international theory emerged and challenged the positivism and rationalism of neoliberalism and neorealism, introducing a debate about its ontology and epistemology (REUS-SMIT, 2005; NOGUEIRA; MESSARI, 2021; PHILLIPS, 2007). In other words, constructivism was inserted in a broad discussion about the place of ideas and values when analyzing social events and in debates about agency, structures, political action, and identity (REUS-SMIT, 2005; NOGUEIRA; MESSARI, 2021). The dominant discourse in the United States changed, allowing the constructivist school to emerge as an outgrowth of critical international theory (REUS-SMIT, 2005, p.195), as largely motivated by a context where the main existing theories had their explanatory pretensions undermined. (REUS-SMIT, 2005, p.195; PHILLIPS, 2007). In a global order constantly reshaped by systemic transformations, the existing expectations and prescriptions were increasingly contradicted, opening a new scenario of different perspectives, alternative explanations, and new questions about world politics, allowing a distinctive approach to global politics and its study in a time where the IR community failed (PHILLIPS, 2007; REUS-SMIT, 2005). Events such as the Cold War, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the collapse of the Twin Towers, altogether, reflected the need for a readjusting of the IR field, and its assumptions (PHILLIPS, 2007).

In its development, the constructivist theory presents a relationship between agents and structure that is mutually constitutive, and none precedes the other in time and influence (PHILLIPS, 2007; NOGUEIRA; MESSARI, 2021). It is necessary to ask ourselves who we are, and not only what we want, seeing that the former is logically and ontologically prior to our interests. In other words, agents' identities are governed by the structures - normative and ideological - that they inhabit in a world where those same structures sustain patterns of social practice (PHILLIPS, 2007). Those social practices, in this sense, are (re)produced by the actions of the agents, allowing constructivism, when put together, to see the international

system as constitutive (PHILLIPS, 2007). When States are considered in the analysis, it is possible to understand that “States’ conceptions of who they are and what interests they possess as a corollary of these identities derive from intersubjectively shared meaning structures rather than forming prior to social interaction” (PHILLIPS, 2007, p.63). It will be, then, a characteristic of constructivists to have an emphasis on the centrality of shared structures that will define identities, interests, and actions.

In addition, those identities and interests in international politics will not be stable, having no pre-given nature. Therefore, what States do will depend on those identities and interests, which, in turn, can change (PHILLIPS, 2007; WEBER, 2010). In this scenario, with agents and structures co-constituted, the same will happen with individuals and society: according to Nogueira and Messari (2021), we cannot speak of society without also considering the individuals that compose it, and in a two-way street, we cannot speak about individuals themselves without considering the society in which they exist. From this perspective, material causes will not be the only important factors; ideas and values that shape relationships between agents/structures, individuals/society, will also play a central role in creating knowledge about the world (NOGUEIRA; MESSARI, 2021).

These initial understandings of constructivist theory allow us, from now on, to look more carefully at some of its authors. Hence, albeit briefly, the works of authors such as Fierke (2001) and Zehfuss (2002) will be considered (NOGUEIRA; MESSARI, 2021).

Firstly, for authors like Fierke and Zehfuss, the applicability of constructivism and the importance of empirical research return to the main focus of constructivism (NOGUEIRA; MESSARI, 2021). In her argument, Fierke presents several points, or lessons, for research in the field of IR, some of which I will seek to adopt throughout this analysis.

Firstly, Fierke considers it important to address and analyze broader political contexts, rather than just the motivation of certain political actors (NOGUEIRA; MESSARI, 2021). This an essential lesson to consider, since the action of political actors such as Aleksandar Vučić, the current president of Serbia, fits not only into political contexts, but also broader histories and identifications that precede Vučić himself, and can be identified and traced back more than a thousand years. Likewise, secondly, Fierke exposed the importance of considering and identifying patterns within contexts that are socially constructed, also highlighting the importance of language in this process (NOGUEIRA; MESSARI, 2021). Once again, an important lesson within the history and the relationships that the Western Balkans (WB) countries cultivate among themselves, where contexts such as Kosovo's

struggle for independence and, in particular, the Serbian impediments, are discursively maintained, (re)formulated, and strengthened.

Considering now the WB countries and constructivism, it is one of the objectives of the theory to understand how expectations of what it means to be part of a specific society can emerge in certain areas, expectations that encourage – or discourage – certain behaviors and that can be incorporated into one's interests of States (MCDONALD, 2018). These powerful expectations, in turn, will be essential to understand, mainly, the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo, a country that has sought recognition of its independence since its declaration in 2008. In other words, understanding what it means to belong to a Serbian identity and the interests of the Serbian state, presided over by individuals such as Slobodan Milošević and Aleksandar Vučić, can help to also understand and analyze the interests of Serbia. This is particularly important because Serbia does not recognize Kosovo's independence, but also it is on a path to joining the European Union, a path that mainly involves the normalization of relations with the region that has been seeking independence for years.

In this sense, since identity is defined as how a particular group understands itself, its borders, and its values, it's possible to direct the focus to the conception of shared identities at the regional level (MCDONALD, 2018). This focal point becomes essential to the extent that the identity of the EU, for example, can be understood as also constructed from its regional and not just national level. This understanding opens up space for the Union's identity to be guided by a conceptualization of its past and understandings and constructions of the 'other', which influence this very construction of identity. In other words, the European identity can be oriented around a certain concept of its past – a defined 'I' –, against an 'other' that defines its contemporary identity, a topic that will be developed in Chapter 3 (MCDONALD, 2018).

However, it is worth noting that, within the constructivist theory, the debate about the conceptualizations of identity itself is not homogeneous, encompassing conventional constraints and critical constructivists, for example. For my argument, the critical constructivists will be relevant, addressing characteristics of identities.

For them, the main concern when the relationship between identity and security is addressed involves tracing how national identity narratives become dominant and help define the limits of legitimate political actions in certain periods (MCDONALD, 2018). Identity, from this understanding, will be *inherently unstable, contingent, and a place of constant competition*, with representations of security and threat being able to be defined based on the

'self' and the 'other' in which protection is necessary (MCDONALD, 2018). An essential understanding for the study of identities in constructivist theory, this argument reveals, at the same time, how certain narratives will be considered in the present argument. In this sense, as understandings about Kosovo and the European Union are shared among Serbian governments and the population, some narratives will inevitably be privileged from the moment that Serbia's identity is considered and analyzed.

Similarly, critical constructivists seek to make sense of the relationship between political leaders and their domestic audiences based mainly on the role of representation. McDonald (2018) considers language games in which representations – in this case of security policies – must be located in particular communication frameworks to make sense, in a scenario where, within different social contexts, the frameworks themselves change. This understanding is essential for the scenario in Serbia, and can even be related to how we can make sense of the world based on Weber (2010).

In the context of the EU's enlargement to Serbia, just the current president's desire for accession is not enough. For the candidate State to complete its accession, political, administrative, and economic reforms must be made, but it is also necessary a transition to a modern State (ECONOMIDES, 2020). It is from this point that it becomes essential to consider not only Vučić's government, but also the population and how, within this varied group, the EU and Kosovo are perceived and, even more so, how the understanding of Kosovo and their quest for independence, something that shapes Serbian identity, could affect Serbia's path to joining the Union. As Weber (2010) argues, reality can be transformed, produced, and circulated through the media, where identities, interests, and institutions are (re)constructed. Furthermore, it is essential to understand to what extent Kosovo is linked to the Serbian identity and whether, or how, this link has been (re)formulated over the years and governments, that is, as the representation of the region, based on various means, was (or not) changed and how, years later, it influences the process of joining the EU.

Analyzing the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia, especially in recent decades, also requires thinking about the construction of ethnic groups and the narratives of the identities of these groups, something that can lead to the other being understood as hostile and, consequently, ethnic conflicts. Nevertheless, as highlighted by Kaufman (2018), there are different interpretations of what exactly characterizes ethnicity, and some will be more or less useful in understanding the conflict between Kosovo and Serbia. Likewise, it is important to highlight what makes, in fact, a conflict an ethnic one. Therefore, an ethnic conflict is

characterized by the primary distinction of the parties involved based on ethnicity. Often, either one or both sides in an ethnic conflict may consist of a coalition of ethnic groups, rather than a single group. Nonetheless, the conflict is still classified as ethnic since individuals align themselves with one side based on their membership in an ethnic group (KAUFMAN, 2018).

Returning to the ethnic issue, some authors understand *ethnicity as a 'primordial' identity*, arguing that it is essentially immutable. In this case, groups work hard to make their identities permanent and unchangeable and individuals tend to stick to their identities, especially when linked to factors such as language and religion (KAUFMAN, 2018). Based on these factors, ethnic conflicts are seen as based on ancestral hatred, something impossible to eradicate and almost impossible to manage and control (KAUFMAN, 2018).

This placement is important, especially for understanding identities in the period of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) - or simply Yugoslavia -, whose last and best-known president was Josip Broz Tito. During his government, Yugoslavia had a period of relative peace in the sense that wars of independence of international proportions, such as those in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo, did not occur. It is noteworthy, then, that the definition of primordial identities in the sense of almost impossible administrations is not exactly the case in Yugoslavia.

However, one may argue that the Kingdom had different and varied identities and that this must be taken into account. At this point, Kaufman (2018) mentions that multiple identities can exist, whether they are subgroups part of a larger group, or overlapping ones, and that, even more importantly, identities can sometimes change. This is the case of Yugoslavia, which is worth mentioning. Considering that new identities can emerge, while others disappear, especially in times of conflict, it is emphasized that in 1991, with the end of the SFRY, the 'Yugoslavian' identity disappeared, giving way to a multitude of new ones, including the Serbian identity (KAUFMAN, 2018). In short, considering this understanding, what must be strongly remembered involves the fact that *identities can change, and are not something immutable inscribed at birth*.

Therefore, this understanding is an important step toward the study of ethnic conflicts, allowing some scholars to present ethnic identity not as primordial, but rather as *'instrumental'* (KAUFMAN, 2018). In this case, individuals in a society will follow 'ethnic' leaders when convenient, that is, when it is in the interests of those same people to do so. At the same time, leaders will create ethnic solidarity when appropriate, that is, when building

this solidarity serves their interests (KAUFMAN, 2018). From this view, ethnic conflicts can be linked to selfish leaders who mislead the population, in this case, their followers, in their quest for power (KAUFMAN, 2018).

This interpretation is essential as it raises an important question that I will seek to answer in the next chapters: *how can we locate the Serbian population amid all these events?* With the war in Kosovo and Milošević's speeches, how did the Serbian population position itself? And, even more so, nowadays, with the country's accession process to the EU, what is the role of the Serbs in this journey? How do they understand not only themselves but also the EU? These are essential questions that, throughout the argument, I will try to answer. For now, what this interpretation of ethnic conflicts seems to do, applying it to Serbia, is to leave its citizens in a passive position, of individuals who have been and may be being deceived by their respective leaders. Even though opening a new relevant discussion, the objective in analyzing the Serbian identity trajectory, and in particular the contemporary moment, does not involve attributing to Serbs the passive role of being deceived by selfish leaders.

A third point understands ethnic identity as a mixture, emphasizing the level at which individuals create their identities (KAUFMAN, 2018). Therefore, *ethnic identities are socially constructed* and not simply natural. In this sense, what some authors call the 'myth-symbol complex' stands out, that is, a complex that establishes the 'accepted' history of a group, in addition to the criteria for distinguishing who is a member, glorifying symbols of the group's identity and also identifying heroes and enemies (KAUFMAN, 2018). From this establishment, mythologies 'mythicize' history, rewriting real events as morally defining experiences for the population, making them 'chosen traumas' (KAUFMAN, 2018). This is the explanation for a rhetoric that, during the Kosovo war, was very present and articulated by leaders like Milošević. In the years preceding and during the conflict itself, the 1389 Battle of Kosovo was widely used¹, rearticulated, and cited. No matter how the event occurred, these stories and myths are articulated and reinterpreted, or even forged, so that new identities can be created.

Kaufman (2018) even addresses the very creation of Serbian identity following the battle of Kosovo. As explained by him, many Serbs considered their identity as forged from the battle and, as a consequence, conflicts with Muslims are nothing more or less than the result of these primordial 'ancient hatreds' (Kaufman, 2018). Milošević, in turn, used his own

¹ The place of the Battle of Kosovo will be further developed later, still in this chapter, and articulated with Milošević's narratives to analyze the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo during the war.

Serbian ethnic identity to gain his own power, but this identity only worked politically to the extent that it had already been socially constructed (KAUFMAN, 2018).

However, the issue of ethnic conflicts goes beyond merely understanding the construction of identities and their causes. It is also crucial to consider the explanations for ethnic civil wars themselves. According to Kaufman (2018), one way to comprehend those wars revolves around extremist leaders who seek to grab or hold power, stirring up ethnic discord and provoking violence (KAUFMAN, 2018). Alongside the strategies of these leaders, the extremist media is an essential actor, who mobilizes the loyalty of specific groups, presenting issues in terms of 'us' versus 'them' (KAUFMAN, 2018). Combining media with extremist leaders results in a scenario in which the latter provides the heroes who will be promoted by the former, thereby validating the leader and their pronouncements regarding the need for the group to unite against the enemy. In other words, this combination can lead to the creation of an 'us' versus 'them' understanding, fostering societal unity against the enemy and around the extremist leader, who presents the heroes to be exalted. This specific scenario occurred in various places, including Serbia under Milošević, resulting in the upsurge of Serbian national identity and the breakup of Yugoslavia in 1991 (KAUFMAN, 2018).

This interpretation of leaders and the media, however, still does not place the Serbian population in a central position. Because, in this sense, why does the population choose to follow extremist leaders? This is a crucial question, and its answer, according to Kaufman (2018), lies in the theory of symbolic politics, which emphasizes the role of myths, prejudice, and fear. When this complex set of myths and symbols considers the other as an enemy, the result of this process is prejudice against that other, making the population more inclined to hostilities (KAUFMAN, 2018). Symbols are then mobilized to heighten the population's emotions against the 'other' enemy, and, in cases of a sense of danger, actions can also be seen as self-defense (KAUFMAN, 2018).

Therefore, in the first chapter of this work, considering this brief overview of IR's literature on constructivism and ethnic conflict, it is essential to consider two dimensions of the former: the discourse and the identity. In this sense, one of the main focuses of this monograph will consider that language, therefore words, can assume a diversity of meanings, “(...) and the way we interpret reality is dependent on the language or discursive practices employed to describe them” (NOGUEIRA; MESSARI, 2021, p. 206/207. Translated freely²).

² In the original: “(...) a maneira como interpretamos a realidade é dependente da linguagem ou das práticas discursivas empregadas para descrevê-las” (NOGUEIRA; MESSARI, 2021, p.206/207)

To understand the very nature of ethnic conflicts, and primarily their explanations and causes, this alignment with constructivism will be essential in that the language individuals in a society use will determine and motivate their understandings and actions (NOGUEIRA; MESSARI, 2021). Language, therefore, and especially discourse analysis, will be employed as a means to expose the 'accepted' history of a group, namely Serbia, and how its leaders, especially Aleksandar Vučić, mobilize that identity and history in the present day. This is why, within this dimension, Subotić (2020) introduces a new concern within the constructivist theory. In addition to thinking of the State in terms of the 'myth-symbol complex,' it is necessary to think of the State in terms of *narratives*. In other words, one must analyze a State's narratives while considering its actions in terms of history (SUBOTIĆ, 2020). More specifically, three elements of the narrative need to be considered: causal coherence, thematic coherence, and emotional coherence. Analyzing narratives is, therefore, examining whether a story can describe how one event leads to another, whether this story incorporates various elements that are pieced together, and whether this story resonates with the actors' biographical understanding for whom it is told (SUBOTIĆ, 2020).

More generally, narratives go beyond their importance in the analysis of States alone. As Subotić (2020) presents, they are essential for political life, and from them, it is possible to make sense of the world and *create our own identities* (SUBOTIĆ, 2020). By influencing how we observe political reality, narratives also lead individuals to act differently in response to them, and their analysis involves looking at language and discourse (SUBOTIĆ, 2020). Yet, in addition to presenting and articulating essential elements for constructivist theory, narrative analysis advances theory in that it demonstrates *how political actors can strategically manipulate shared narratives for their political ends* (SUBOTIĆ, 2020). In short, then, narratives can be used for political purposes, and in this scenario the very understanding of social construction becomes strategic, addressing the fact that political actors make rational political calculations within a broader social normative scenario that constitutes their preferences and choices (SUBOTIĆ, 2020). In other words, Subotić (2020, p.106) aims to demonstrate “(...) how political actors may pursue consequentialist political behavior, but it is always conditional on broad acceptance of shared narrative frames”.

Complementarily, the analysis of narratives is also useful for analyses beyond the State, that is, in scaling individual biographies to the level of the State. This process involves a focus not only on how States autobiographies are constructed and what is included in them but also on what is forgotten and those who could shape identity (SUBOTIĆ, 2020).

Therefore, the analysis of narratives, which will be considered in the next subsection, within constructivism, can contribute to theory by considering the political use of stories, their construction and, also, their de-activation (SUBOTIĆ, 2020).

2.2. Narrative Analysis in the Serbian Autobiography: where to start?

As briefly explored in the previous topic, narrative analysis can contribute to constructivist theory as it considers not only the stories themselves, but also their *political use*, their construction, and their *(de)activation* (SUBOTIĆ, 2020). Subotić, in this sense, lays the foundation for the study of autobiographies and narratives from different WB countries, including Serbia. Therefore, narratives in their most basic sense can be understood as stories, stories that have meaning, characters, and plotlines (SUBOTIĆ, 2013; SUBOTIĆ, 2016). According to Subotić (2013, p. 306), they are stories about "(...) an event or series of events in the past, about people who participated in or made decisions about these events and about the impact these past events have on those who tell the story in the present".

Complementarily, the analysis of these narratives - or stories - will have as its basic premises the fact that individuals understand and attribute meaning to their lives based on stories, seeking to grasp how they are constructed and what is the purpose of this construction (SUBOTIĆ, 2013). So, briefly, narrative analysis has as its object the story itself, focusing on how actors interpret the past and, subsequently, interpret their interpretations (SUBOTIĆ, 2013).

Thus, for Subotić's (2013) analysis, issues such as collective memory and hegemonic narratives are at the center of the study of narratives. It is interesting to consider, here, those narratives that become overpowering and dominant, to the extent that they encounter little opposition as they stabilize and constitute themselves in society as 'common sense' (SUBOTIĆ, 2013). Hegemonic narratives create a scenario in which alternatives stop making sense and no longer become attractive. The hegemons, in this sense, "(...) deprive alternative ones of the possibility of winning arguments" (SUBOTIĆ, 2013, p.308), constituting themselves as a "self-fulfilling prophecy" (SUBOTIĆ, 2013, p. 309).

For analysis in this monograph, Subotić (2013) presents not only an essential analysis of the hegemonic narrative, but also important questions, adaptable to the contemporary scenario, that must be asked - and which will be addressed in the present work. Starting from the period of Slobodan Milošević's presidency, and the country's human rights policy since

the 1990s, Subotić (2013) asks why Serbia would allow its European future to be held in prison by being reluctant to hand over fugitives guilty of war crimes; and, more fundamentally, why Milošević's government would not embrace the opportunity to leave its past behind. The answer to these questions lies in the construction of the Serbian hegemonic narrative, which permeates the understanding of the nation as a victim, a nation in which its citizens fight for national survival and defense against much more powerful enemies (SUBOTIĆ, 2013). Among the ploys and myths mobilized within this narrative, the Battle of Kosovo of 1389 stands out, a central topic in Milošević's speeches and something that will be explored later.

However, one of the central characteristics of many narratives, including that of Serbia, is the fact that their construction is not simply organic and, in the individual case of Milošević, is linked to a systematic intellectual protection of the elite, with clear political objectives (SUBOTIĆ, 2013). In this way, advancing Serbian national interests and at the same time building the image of a victimized nation that fights in vain becomes not only the objective but also, in the process, incorporated and solidified by new events. In other words, the intervention of NATO³ against Serbia in 1999 is used to solidify the Serbian belief as this victimized nation, which suffers injustices from superior powers such as NATO (SUBOTIĆ, 2013) and, in the future, the European Union, which places the Serbian population and its government in 'unfair' situations.

Years later, it becomes important to highlight how the hegemonic narrative present in Serbia did not dissipate with Milošević's departure from power, pointing to the fact that this narrative had not only become hegemonic but was also not dependent on just one leader. After the turn of the century, Milošević began to be blamed not for having fought the various wars he did, but rather for having lost them. Serbia, in this narrative, did not commit war crimes and, in reality, the real culprits for starting the wars were other nations and other ethnic groups, thus silencing the Serbian quest for regional domination and the brutal wars that were fought with their consequences (SUBOTIĆ, 2013).

This brief contextualization, drawing from Subotić (2013; 2016; 2020), exposes in practice the construction of hegemonic narratives considering mainly Milošević's government, in addition to conceptually advancing another essential issue not only for contemporary Serbian narratives but also for the very construction of the country's identity in

³ On March 24, 1999, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), carried out an aerial bombing campaign against the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia that ended the war in Kosovo (BIEBER; DASKALOVSKI, 2004).

the face of the accession process to the EU. As with Milošević's government, relations with Kosovo are essential for contemporary Serbia, even having consequences for the country's relationship with the Union. How, then, can we understand the role of Kosovo in Serbian identity? Considering Kosovo as central to this identity and, even more so, as part of the country's *founding narrative*, means not only delving into the developments in relations between the two actors but also understanding how this relationship unfolds today. Therefore, this subsection aims to present the theoretical basis, provided by Subotić, to expose Serbia's founding narrative concerning Kosovo, raising some essential questions. The next subsection, in turn, will aim to situate the relationship between these two actors based mainly on Milošević's government, analyzing how the Serbian narrative is constructed and which elements are mobilized.

Consequently, it will be essential in this work to consider not only the language *per se*, but also how it enables the generation of narratives. In this sense, the production of grand narratives will be heavily analyzed in this work, especially from Serbia and how its historical relations with Kosovo and the EU have constructed its identity, in a manner of collective identification as a Nation, and defined its boundaries. Analyzing these historical relationships, this monograph will summarize how Serbia's identity has developed up to the present day (2023) concerning the EU accession and the Kosovo-related conditionalities.

In light of their role in the foreign policy and identity of the State, the autobiographical narratives will be essential to this work. Political actors and Serbian political actors included, strategically, as Subotić (2018, p. 611) argues, “(...) manipulate shared cognitive (narrative) frames for their own political ends”, with narratives, as some constructivists put it, being essential to our understanding of the world and also how we create our identities.

It is fundamental, then, to understand the political and domestic landscape of Serbia, considering not only changes in its foreign policy but also those narratives that permeate the population's daily lives, being *activated and deactivated as needed* (SUBOTIĆ, 2018). These narratives will shape how Serbian society understands and identifies itself concerning the EU when considering the enlargement process and relations with Kosovo.

Starting by exposing this narrative – or this history – thus involves briefly revising the historical relationship between Kosovo and Serbia. Previously part of the same Kingdom, Yugoslavia, Kosovo's quest for independence takes place in the face of the fragmentation of the region after Tito's death. Having an ethnic Albanian majority, as shown in Figure 1, the

quest for Kosovar independence was not – and still not is – accepted by Serbia, which mobilizes diverse historical events to formulate a hegemonic narrative that makes Kosovo a central part of its identity.

Figure 1: Ethnic Majority in Kosovo



Source: The Economist, 2023

However, despite all the construction of Kosovo as a central part of the Serbian identity – a unilateral construction, found only in Serbian political discourse – on February 17, 2008, a declaration of independence was approved by the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of Kosovo, in which it is affirmed that:

1. We, the democratically-elected leaders of our people, hereby **declare Kosovo to be an independent and sovereign state**. This declaration reflects the will of our people and it is in full accordance with the recommendations of UN Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari and his Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement (ISN ETH ZURICH, 2010, p.2. Emphasis added)

This unilateral declaration of independence was not accepted by Serbia, and within the sphere of the United Nations, it also generated repercussions. From there, the United Nations General Assembly requested, through Resolution 63/3 of October 8, 2008, an advisory opinion from the International Court of Justice, where it was questioned whether “Is the unilateral declaration of independence by the Provisional Institutions of Self-Government of

Kosovo in accordance with international law?” (A/RES/63/3, 2008, p.1). As a general conclusion, expressed in resolution A/64/881, the International Court of Justice considered that the Declaration of Independence did not violate international law, thus expressing that:

122. The Court has concluded above that the adoption of the declaration of independence of 17 February 2008 did not violate general international law, Security Council resolution 1244 (1999) or the Constitutional Framework. Consequently the adoption of that declaration did not violate any applicable rule of international law. (A/64/881, 2010, p.46)

In turn, the response of the International Court of Justice was recognized by the General Assembly through the Resolution of September 8, 2010 (A/64/L.65/REV.1, 2010), marking, in international law, that the de facto independence did not violate international law.

Addressing, on the other hand, Serbia and its (non)recognition, the country's first attitude, in 2008, was to deny Kosovo's independence. However, in general terms, the evolution of this relationship took place in 2013, when, once again, the country denied an agreement mediated by the European Union, claiming that the plan was unacceptable as Serb ethnic minorities in Kosovo would no longer have autonomy. In the words of the Prime Minister, Ivica Dacic,

The Serbian government cannot accept the proposed principles ... because **they do not guarantee full security, survival and protection of human rights for the Serbs in Kosovo** (...) Such an agreement could not be implemented and would not lead to a lasting and sustainable solution. (The Guardian, 2013. Emphasis Added)

The agreement, although, was signed after ultimatums from the Union, having in exchange the local autonomy of the Serbian minority. After that, the recognition of the authority of the Kosovar government occurred without the official recognition of the Kosovar State (SUBOTIĆ, 2016). Regarding the population, a survey carried out by the Ipsos agency and B92TV - a news station and broadcaster with national coverage in Belgrade - in 2013 showed that 63% accepted Kosovo as an independent state in practice, understanding that Serbia's role would be to guarantee a better position for Serbs living in the newly independent country, while 32% stated that Kosovo is not independent (BALKANINSIGHT, 2013). However, if a choice were presented, 65% of those interviewed stated that Serbia's priority should be Kosovo, not the EU – a priority for only 28% (BALKANINSIGHT, 2013).

This scenario of partial recognition of independence, together with the surveys among the population, raises essential questions. If Kosovo is so central to Serbian identity, then how, argues Subotić (2016), does a state preserve its identity when its founding narrative is

challenged? In the author's words, "If a policy change undermines the foundational state narrative, then whither the narrative?" (SUBOTIĆ, 2016, p.611). To this problem, though, I add my own question: how does the questioning of Kosovo's fundamental place in the Serbian narrative reflect not only on its identity but also on the country's process of accession to the EU? For greater clarification, it should be noted that, among the extensive conditionalities presented by the Union so that accession can be fully completed, the normalization of relations with Kosovo is one of them.

In this way, I will seek to answer this question, looking at Serbian identity in particular, when considering, as Subotić (2016) explains, that in certain moments, especially those of crisis, *narratives can be selectively activated – or deactivated –* forgetting or emphasizing certain stories in ways convenient for their own political goals. The narratives themselves, in addition to being highly selective and constructed with a purpose, provide a feeling of stability and are embedded in mutually contested relationships, dialogue, and rhetoric (SUBOTIĆ, 2016).

2.3. To Separate the Heart from the Body: Milošević and its Journey to Power

The history of the Balkan Peninsula can be traced back to the period before Christ when the Celts occupied it until the Third century B.C. (FORBES et al, 2004), bringing an idea of the great past that the region has. However, for the present analysis, the history of the Balkans, Serbia, and Kosovo begins recently, in 1986, when Milošević became Serbian regional Communist Party President and advances to 1998 and 1999 - also addressing the Battle of Kosovo in 1398. These specific dates, far from being just random years, represent, each in their own way, important times in the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo and, more especially, in the construction of Kosovo as an *idea*. Far from being just a territory, this section will demonstrate over the years how the State that became independent in 2008 was *built and rebuilt* in the Serbian imagination as a *heart and a dream*.

Starting in May 1986, Slobodan Milošević became Serbian regional Communist Party President, just a year before a service protest in Kosovo (REUTERS, 2006). At the time, led by Serbs, the protest occurred because of alleged persecution by majority ethnic Albanians, and Milošević's prominence escalated in Serbia as he defended protesters against purported mistreatment by predominantly ethnic-Albanian Kosovo police (REUTERS, 2006). This

event marks Milošević's first speech to be analyzed, in which Kosovo is constructed as a major problem for the Yugoslav people that would take time to be resolved:

To everyone today, throughout all of Yugoslavia, it is clear that **Kosovo is a huge problem for our people** that will be very slowly solved. I must, meanwhile, tell you that Kosovo has been the only problem, or at least the only larger problem for the Yugoslav people, that could surely be solved faster and better. (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1987, n.p. Emphasis Added.)

Thus, going through a difficult economic crisis at the time, Milošević's highlighting of Kosovo as a huge problem that will be solved presents not only the Kosovar economic and political situation, but also a first understanding of Kosovo as part of Yugoslavia. The crisis will be solved, then, because the progressive people, which includes Milošević himself, "(...) won't give up Kosovo, nor will Serbia nor will Yugoslavia" (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1987, n.p). Still with an idea of Kosovo strongly linked to the territory, in a scenario where Serbia relied on historical claims to land (MERTUS, 1999), the territory is already seen by Milošević as an integral part of Serbia and Yugoslavia, which suffers not only from poverty and inequality, as well as Albanian separatist and nationalist movements. Tyranny, in this sense, must end – "But they [Albanian separatists and nationalists] need to know, on this plain tyranny will be no more" (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1987, n.p) – being one of the problems in Kosovo that will be solved, albeit slowly.

Therefore, up to this point, a few conclusions can be drawn in advance. The first involves the fact that the link between the two countries is confirmed at the end of Milošević's speech, where he exclaims that "Yugoslavia doesn't exist without Kosovo! Yugoslavia would disintegrate without Kosovo! Yugoslavia and Serbia will never give up Kosovo!" (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1987, n.p), laying the foundations of a discourse that will last until Vučić's government. Similarly, the focus on Albanian separatists and nationalists also exposed in practice an understanding in which Albanians were seen as terrorists, a scenario that played a role in creating the crisis in the Balkans. Additionally, it also developed in the Serbian community the beginning of a feeling of victimization, in which the Serbs – and Kosovo – would be victims of the tyranny of the Albanians at the same time as they fought against it (MERTUS, 1999).

In 1988, Milošević also gave a speech at a Rally in Belgrade, bringing back the issue of Kosovo. At the time, as in the previous speech, Kosovo remained a problem, and the most

important thing at that time was to establish peace and order in the territory (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1988). This is the most urgent task for Serbia, and also for all of Yugoslavia, for Milošević:

The most important thing that we must resolve at this time is to establish peace and order in Kosovo. There is no more urgent task for Serbia, nor should there be any other more pressing task for all of Yugoslavia, because the solidarity of the Yugoslav peoples and especially of Yugoslav workers have always been their greatest and strongest characteristic (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1988, n.p)

In the same way, Milošević also declares that the battle for Kosovo must be won, that Serbia must win it despite having enemies on the outside planning against it (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1988).

Finally, in a more explicit way, Milošević also states the central point of the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo, in which he highlights that the latter is the center of the history of the former, regardless of what the Albanians in Kosovo wish (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1988). Kosovo, in this sense, *must remain* in Serbia, independent of external will as it is its center:

Nobody should be surprised that all Serbia rose up last summer because of Kosovo. Kosovo is the **very centre of its history, its culture, and its memory**. All people have a love which burns in their hearts for ever. **For a Serb that love is Kosovo. That is why Kosovo will remain in Serbia. That will not be at the expense of Albanians** (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1988, n.p. Emphasis added)

Years later, in 1989, Milošević spoke on a significant date: June 28th. Addressing 1 million Serbs at a rally at the Kosova Polje battlefield, the date marks the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kosovo, a myth that permeates the relationship between the two countries exponentially (REUTERS, 2006). On the occasion, Milošević delivered what became known as the Gazimestan speech, one of his most famous, mobilizing the myth of the Battle of Kosovo and its heroes. At this point, so that it is possible to understand the entire speech, we will briefly return to 1389, the year in which the Battle took place.

On July 15, 1398 (July 28 for the Eastern Orthodox calendar), the Ottoman Turks and a grand coalition formed by Serbian, Bulgarian, Albanian, Bosnian, and Wallachian Orthodox Christian forces faced each other on the Kosovo Plain. To this day the winners are disputed within the academy, however under Balkan Orthodox Christian and nationalist historiography, particularly within Serbian narratives, the Ottomans are asserted to have conclusively triumphed over the coalition (MATARACI, 2017). Nevertheless, at the close of the Battle, both the Orthodox Christian and Ottoman forces withdrew, leading the Serbian and Bosnian

forces to claim that they had won, as they held off the Ottoman assault, hailing them as saviors of Christendom (MATARACI, 2017).

In effect, though, the final result was a defeat for Serbia, since the losses within its aristocracy were great, leading it to lose its economic and military resources (MATARACI, 2017). Regardless of who the actual winners were, the relevance of the Battle goes beyond this detail, with it, in reality, wielding considerable influence within the Serbian historical consciousness and functioning as a pivotal instrument in national political propaganda, conjuncting itself as the myth of all myths (MATARACI, 2017).

Faced with this scenario where historical contestation over the facts occurs, we must ask ourselves more than just the details. How can a Battle that is remembered 600 years later remain alive in the imagination of the population? And, even more so, what does the population remember when the Battle, in which historical truths are debatable, is mobilized again? (MATARACI, 2017).

These questions can be answered based on the aforementioned Gazimestan speech, in which it is highlighted that the historical truth about the Battle is not only difficult to tell, but is also no longer important. Milošević's speech, in this sense, explains that it is not just about the Battle and its truths, but about the fact that disharmony reached Kosovo 600 years ago – just as it did at the time of his speech (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1989). If the Battle had been lost by Serbia, continues Milošević, the cause would not only be an advantage of the Ottoman Empire but also a disunity in the leadership of the Serbian State.

Therefore, by mixing memory, history, and continuity, Milošević seeks to unite the Serbia of 1938 with that of 1989, highlighting elements that plagued it in both periods. In both cases, the Serbian population suffers from the lack of unity and betrayal in Kosovo, leading them to agony:

The lack of unity and betrayal in Kosovo will continue to follow the Serbian people like an evil fate through the whole of its history. Even in the last war, this lack of unity and betrayal led the Serbian people and Serbia into agony (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1989, n.p).

Correspondingly, characterizing the field of Kosovo as a symbol of disunity and treason, Milošević also highlights the role of words such as unity, solidarity, and cooperation, emphasizing the negative consequences of disunity (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1989). Also, when foregrounding the conflict that Serbia was facing, Milošević considered the possibility of future Serbians engaging in an armed battle – “Six centuries later, now, we are again being

engaged in battles and are facing battles. They are not armed battles, although such things cannot be excluded yet.” (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1989, n.p), trying to promote a union between the Serbs of 1389 and of 1989 as the two fought for their national survival (MATARACI, 2017).

Finally, also in 1989, in an interview, Milošević emphasized that the small number of fanatics who wanted to separate Kosovo from Serbia would not have their wishes fulfilled. It is here, once again, that Kosovo is highlighted as the heart of Serbia, which will not give up on it:

There still remains a small number of fanatics who believe the borders can be altered to have Kosovo separated from Yugoslavia and annexed to Albania. Their wish to take Kosovo will never come true. By fighting to that end, they can only inflict injuries upon themselves, which is what we see happening. **Serbia simply will not give up Kosovo, and there is no force in this world that can defy that, because Kosovo is the heart of Serbia.** (BORBA, 1996, n.p. Emphasis added)

In short, from the brief speeches analyzed, some basic understandings about Kosovo stand out. Firstly, although under Milošević's government, the importance of the territory of Kosovo is still marked, with historical claims to land, the country is still understood as a fundamental part of Serbia. This consideration remains even after Kosovo declared its independence in 2008, reinforcing the country's characterization as essential, the center of Serbian history, memory, and culture.

In 2009, for example, Boris Tadić, former president of Serbia, declared, just a year after independence, that Kosovo is not a country, and that February 17th was the day on which the authorities in Pristina declared independence illegally (AFP, 2009). According to the former president, “A year later, it's clear to everyone who wants to see the real situation in Kosovo that it's not a state” (AFP, 2009, n.p).

Similarly, the speeches involving Kosovo's relationship with Serbia remain constant and similar, especially when we consider the speech of Vuk Jeremić, former Minister of Foreign Affairs, in 2011 (NARODNA, 2021). On the occasion, Jeremić's speech presents a narrative in which, in 2004, Kosovo Albanians promoted a campaign of ethnic cleansing of the Serbs, recounting events that corroborate views presented by Milošević. In 1987, the former president narrated that Albanian separatists and nationalists promoted tyranny in Kosovo, which would come to an end as soon as Serbia resolved the Kosovo problem (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1987). Jeremić, by presenting a scenario of an attack on the Serbs, an attack promoted by the Kosovar Albanians, appears to reinforce not only the understanding of the Serbian people as

victims, like those who suffer at the hands of the Albanians, for example, but also the severity in which the attacks are carried out, demonstrating how

In less than seventy-two hours, thirty-five churches and monasteries, many of which date back to the 14th century or earlier, were burned, irretrievably lost to mankind. Dozens of people were killed. Several hundred were wounded. Thousands of homes and shops were razed to the ground. More than eight thousand Kosovo Serbs were expelled from their homes. (NARODNA, 2021, n.p)

Later, Jeremić defines the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo by something that has been left implicit in the speeches until now: highlighting that the problem of Kosovo is a struggle for identity, the former Minister expresses Kosovo as the *air that Serbia breathes*. In his words:

For us Serbs, Kosovo is like the air we breathe. It is the lifeblood of our culture and the cradle of our most precious sanctuaries. Kosovo is the land where hundreds of thousands of our ancestors laid down their lives, defending their homeland and freedom. (NARODNA, 2021, n.p)

Additionally, Kosovo is also described as Jerusalem for the Serbs, who have an unbreakable bond with the country. However, in contrast to Milošević's Gazimestan speech, Jeremić highlights that the path to a stable and secure future for Europe lies in *reconciliation with Kosovo*, based on dialogue and forgiveness (NARODNA, 2021). Hence, this difference, despite being simple, may indicate that the characterizations and their implications may vary over time, as will be seen in Vučić's government.

Finally, addressing the normative scenario in Serbia, the 2006 Constitution, currently in force in the country, also stands out. In it, about Kosovo, two articles must be highlighted: Article 99 and, especially, Article 182. In the first article, involving the powers of the National Assembly, it is defined that it can, according to paragraph 2, “decide on changes concerning borders of the Republic of Serbia” [(CONSTITUTION, 2006)]. This decision-making power is essential because, despite Kosovo having already declared its independence, the Constitution still determines, according to Article 182, that Kosovo is an autonomous province of Serbia: “In the Republic of Serbia, there are the Autonomous Province of Vojvodina and the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija” [(CONSTITUTION, 2006)].

This brief introduction to relations between Kosovo and Serbia over the years, with a special focus on Milošević's government, takes the first step towards building the foundational narrative that Serbia shapes concerning Kosovo from different actors, contexts,

and speeches. Thus, its transformation into a hegemonic narrative occurs not only because it is not something contested within the Serbian context, but also because it does not depend on just one leader, or is restricted to a specific historical period. Kosovo, from this systemic construction of its position, becomes central to the founding myth of Serbia – *it is the air it breathes, its Jerusalem, its heart, and its culture* –, also becoming *central to its identity*.

However, Serbia is currently on the path to one day becoming part of the European Union. So, having as one of its conditionalities the normalization of relations with Kosovo, the central objective of the next two chapters will be to understand how these speeches and this understanding of Kosovo fit within the EU and, more specifically, within these conditionalities from the government by Vučić. Therefore, the present place of the foundational myth and Serbian identity in this European trajectory will be the subject of analysis.

3. European Union and the enlargement to the Balkans

The third chapter of this monograph has the general objective of looking at the enlargement process, an essential policy of the EU and seen as a great success, with special attention to the WB countries. The promise made by the Union in 2003, in which it defines that the future of the countries in the region belongs to the European Bloc, adds to the analysis of Kosovo's relationship with Serbia, the role of the EU, and its accession policy. Thus, looking at the relationship between the two countries and the search for recognition of independence also involves looking at the promise of this future and the conditionalities it implies.

The first subsection, numbered 3.1, will develop what exactly the EU enlargement process is, dealing with its history and where this very important policy is today. Hence, this first development is part of the Union's vision, which over the years has expanded and promised to expand even further. After this analysis, topic 3.1.1 looks specifically at the WB, still from the EU's perspective, to understand what this region means for the Union. In short, it is the space to address the promises made and the progress that WB has made over the years.

The second subsection, numbered 3.2, looks at the enlargement of the EU through the formulation of identities. More than a successful policy, the accession of new countries to the Union involves differentiations - who is the 'self' and who is the 'other' - and transitions. More than being an addition, the countries that complete the accession process become, properly speaking, European states, carrying the essential values that the EU possesses. This entire process, which Serbia also follows, results in a fundamental change of identities: where there were identity classifications such as 'Europe but not Europe' or 'Less-Europe', the accession of countries transforms and reforms them into modern and democratic States. The objective of this subsection is to understand how this process is done, and what labels it carries.

3.1. The enlargement process: how to become European

At its beginning, in 1957, the European organization had only 6 members – Belgium, France, Germany, Italy, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands. Today, it already has 27 members, the latest being Croatia. The political process by which the entry of new members is done is

known as the EU enlargement, and it is an important policy for the European Union and a process that involves uniting Europe in the same economic and political project (DE MUNTER, 2023). Having its basis in the Treaty on European Union (TEU) - Article 2 and Article 49 -, the process is guided by the conditions defined in talks between the EU and the candidate countries. The values of the Union are fundamental and must be incorporated by the new members in their trajectory to becoming European. Thus, the Union is founded on the values of respect “(...) for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights, including the rights of people belonging to minorities.” (TREATY ON EUROPEAN UNION, 2012, p.5) - as defined in the Article 2. The Treaty establishes that any European State, if it respects the values presented and is committed to promoting them, can become a member, as defined in Article 49 (TREATY ON EUROPEAN UNION, 2012).

In this sense, the enlargement process of the European Union is described by the Union as the process whereby “(...) states join the European Union, after they have fulfilled a set of political and economic conditions.” (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, n.d). This policy, so essential today, is based on past understandings of the EU in which integrating new members was part of the plan, in a scenario where “the founding fathers were confident enough of their idea to leave the door open for other European countries to join” (EUROPEAN UNION, 2011, p.4). The objective of enlargement, then, can be described as, among other things, helping countries whose vocation is to become members of the EU, promoting economic growth, solidarity, and the strengthening of democratic forces.(EUROPEAN UNION, 2011).

As a result, among its various effects, the enlargement of the EU promotes and benefits European economies in a scenario where its members are mutually dependent. The Union, more than just an integration of countries, is a growing family of democratic European countries committed to values such as peace, prosperity, and freedom (EUROPEAN UNION, 2011). This candidacy, however, is not simple, and the States, once recognized as candidate States, must satisfy and accept the so-called Acquis and the 'Copenhagen Criteria', formulated for new member states (EUROPEAN COUNCIL IN COPENHAGEN, 1993; MOLBÆK-STEENSIG, 2017). The criteria go through the essential conditions for States to become part of the Union, marking a new accession process, while Acquis can be defined as “(...) the body of common rights and obligations that is binding on all the EU member states” (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, n.d), ones that the Candidate Countries must accept before joining the EU, making Union laws part of their national legislation (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, n.d). Therefore, the membership requires

that the candidate country has achieved stability of institutions guaranteeing democracy, the rule of law, human rights and respect for and protection of minorities, the existence of a functioning market economy as well as the capacity to cope with competitive pressure and market forces within the Union. (EUROPEAN COUNCIL IN COPENHAGEN, 1993, p.13)

The accession of new countries, in this sense, occurs from the moment the economic and political conditions are implemented, fulfilling the criteria and harmonizing with the Acquis (EUROPEAN COUNCIL IN COPENHAGEN, 1993; MOLBÆK-STEENSIG, 2017). In other words, considering the Copenhagen Criteria, it is noteworthy that they also include and are strongly related to the Union's values presented in Article 2 of the TEU, making it essential that candidate countries adopt common rules, standards, and policies that make up the body of EU law (DE MUNTER, 2023)

Especially at the time when the Copenhagen Criteria were defined, it should be highlighted that the greatest rapprochement between the European Union and the Western Balkan region occurred concerning Bosnia-Herzegovina, present in Annex III of the document, in which the need for the country's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity was underlined, combined with actions to end the conflict (EUROPEAN COUNCIL IN COPENHAGEN, 1993). It was only years later that the prospect of participation in the EU was announced, with Serbia not being part of the 'first wave' of candidate countries from the WB, only a potential candidate (EUROPEAN UNION, 2011).

Complementarily, it is not just the accession criteria that are considered in the enlargement process. The EU must understand that it is capable of integrating new members without compromising itself and its institutions (EUROPEAN COUNCIL IN COPENHAGEN, 1993; EUROPEAN UNION, 2011). Therefore, the admission of new members is decided based on the unanimous consensus of the Member States, which also decide on steps such as accepting or not the application of a country, recognizing or not that country as a candidate, deciding when access negotiations are satisfactorily completed, and also on what terms access negotiations can be opened or closed in each area (EUROPEAN UNION, 2011).

The history of the Union's enlargements provides context to the political and normative aspects of the accession process. Starting with the expansion in 1973 to include Denmark, Ireland, and the United Kingdom, subsequent enlargements occurred in 1981, 1986, and 1995, bringing in countries like Greece, Portugal, Spain, Austria, Finland, and Sweden.

These enlargements played a role in consolidating democracy in the incorporated countries, taking place with a maximum of 3 countries, or just one as in the case of Greece (DE MUNTER, 2023; EUROPEAN UNION, 2011).

The European Union's enlargement scenario shifted in 1997, aiming to reunite the continent post-Berlin Wall and Soviet Union collapse. Extensive negotiations in the European Council from 1997 to 2004 led to the significant enlargement, incorporating Cyprus, Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia (DE MUNTER, 2023; EUROPEAN UNION, 2011). Bulgaria and Romania joined in 2007 after implementing necessary reforms in corruption and organized crime. This fifth enlargement, seen as a response to post-World War II division, added 10 former communist states to promote continental unity, peace, and stability (DEVIRIM; SCHULZ, 2009). Croatia's accession negotiation in 2013 featured stricter conditionalities aligned with a new European Council consensus on enlargement (DE MUNTER, 2023; EUROPEAN UNION, 2011). However, other Western Balkan countries did not join despite promises of future EU membership.

This entire process involves representatives of the Member States, the European Council, the European Commission, and the European Parliament (EUROPEAN UNION, 2011). Under Article 49 of the Treaty on European Union (2012), countries seeking EU membership must first notify the European Parliament, which, in turn, informs the National Parliaments of existing member states (TREATY ON EUROPEAN UNION, 2012). Following this, the applying state submits its application to the Council, which makes decisions unanimously after consulting the Commission, also, seeking approval from the European Parliament and negotiates admission conditions and adjustments to the Treaties with both member states and the applicant state (TREATY ON EUROPEAN UNION, 2012). In specific cases, as occurs in the WB, the accession process involves the so-called Stabilization and Association Agreements (SAA), which define the rights and obligations of candidate countries in this pre-accession phase.

Therefore, accession negotiations involve “(...) the candidate's ability to take on the obligations of membership” (EUROPEAN UNION, 2011, p.9), focusing on the conditions and timing of candidates' adoption and implementation and the application of EU rules. In this way, negotiations are carried out between the Union and each candidate country individually, with the pace of enlargement depending on each country and its progress in meeting the requirements, with some reforms being considerable, involving the transformation of political and economic structures of the country (EUROPEAN UNION,

2011). As a consequence of these reforms that involve difficult transformations, the European Union *highlights the importance of communication between governments and the population*, with the former having to communicate clearly the reasons for the reforms to the latter, as their support is essential (EUROPEAN UNION, 2011).

Keeping in mind the actual negotiations, the legal body of the European Union as a whole is divided into chapters, with each corresponding to a policy area (EUROPEAN UNION, 2011). Considering that the rules are non-negotiable, the first step in negotiations for accession involves identifying the areas that require alignment, whether in legislation and institutions or the countries' practices. Even though the non-negotiable chapters - 35 of them - are the same for all candidates, covering issues such as the free movement of goods and freedom of movement for workers to foreign, security, defense policy, external relations, and science and research, the needs of alignment are characteristics of each country; and there is even an item - Chapter 35 - reserved for other subjects (EUROPEAN UNION, 2011).

The enlargement process, from a brief description, can be understood as complex and something that requires several stages, many years and political and institutional changes in countries. Furthermore, the process itself depends on the Member States and European institutions understanding that they are capable of absorbing new members and thus allowing new accession processes. This essential characteristic needs to be highlighted, mainly, due to two factors that have characterized enlargement policy in recent years: initially the so-called enlargement fatigue and, now, resistance.

In 2007, the European Union expanded to 27 member states with the entry of 12 new states, leading to a phenomenon known as "enlargement fatigue." This term refers to discussions at academic and institutional levels that could impact the accession process of other states like Croatia, Turkey, and the WB. The debate on fatigue is linked to the perceived democratic deficit within the Union's institutions, where crucial decision-making entities lack direct accountability to an electorate., emerging within European institutions and their documents, despite previous enlargements being seen as beneficial for promoting unity, peace, prosperity, security, and economic benefits (FORGUE; KEHOSKIE, 2007; DEVRIM; SCHULZ, 2009).

However, despite the numerous advantages associated with enlargement, the understanding of it as a necessity of the Union diminished after the fifth round, with a consensus on the imperative of enlargement starting to lack at that time. Invoked as a reason to slow down the enlargement of new members and bringing the domestic to the European

sphere, where internal opinions about the matter were strong, enlargement fatigue can be defined as an unwillingness to grant the EU membership to new states, according to Szolucha (2010)⁴.

Yet, this is not the only definition presented when concerning enlargement fatigue. As Szolucha (2010) considers, the Commission officials also defined fatigue, although in different terms. At the time, in 2007, Olli Rehn, former Commissioner for Enlargement, presented not only the enlargement as a successful history but also the fatigue associated with it as an effect of members' domestic politics (SZOŁUCHA, 2010; MOLBÆK-STEENSIG, 2017). Consequently, in studies involving the motivations for this phenomenon, a relationship between fatigue as a reaction, in part, to the lack of democracy in institutions emerged, all in a panorama where countries such as France, Germany and United Kingdom, had an electorate that did not support the expansion of the union (FORGUE; KEHOSKIE, 2007). Likewise, the unfavorable scenario also raised questions about the Union's expansion limits, that is, whether it is possible to expand indefinitely – or, if not, what are the limits of this expansion (SZOŁUCHA, 2010).

Considering, then, the causes of this change in the defense of the enlargement, one of our first steps is to turn ourselves to the public opinion of European citizens, which can be checked using the so-called 'Eurobarometer' (EB). By definition, the Eurobarometer surveys constitute the official polling mechanism utilized by the European Parliament, the European Commission, and other EU institutions and agencies, being disseminated every season⁵. Complementary, these surveys aim to regularly assess public opinion throughout Europe regarding EU-related issues and attitudes towards political or social subjects, serving as a valuable source of relevant data (EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, n.d). Therefore, firstly, the general scenario among the European population will be presented based on the Standards Eurobarometer, in an analysis from 2004 to 2007. Then, there will be an analysis of studies on fatigue and, later, resistance, and their reasons. The period of 2005 to 2007 is chosen because

⁴ Several hypotheses aim to investigate the reasons for enlargement fatigue, including everything from the failure of the constitutional treaty to the democratic deficit and popular opinion. Considering the central objective of this work as looking at the construction of narratives and identities permeating the discourse, considering the influence of society becomes important, leading us to an analysis based on the Eurobarometer. Likewise, granting that the analyses and hypotheses go beyond public opinion, it is highlighted that this is just one of the several paths of analysis

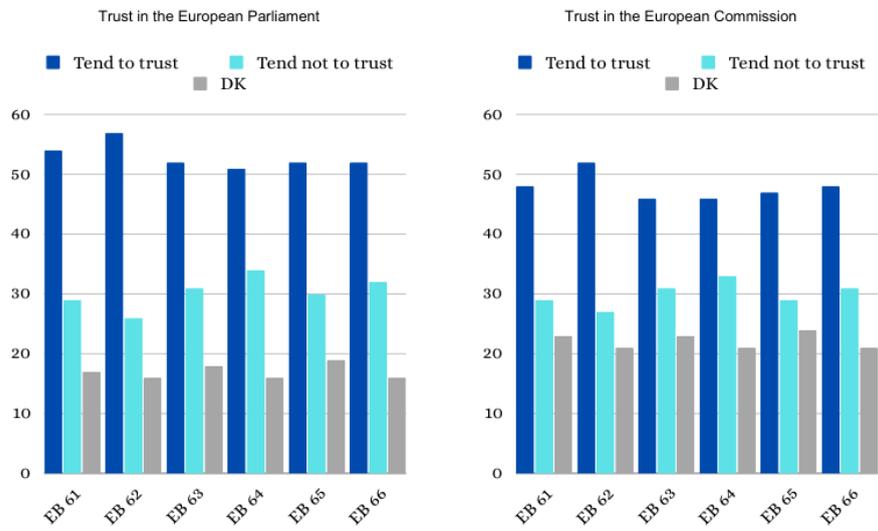
⁵In short, although several Eurobarometers are produced by the European Union and with different themes, the use of research in this monograph will be done through the 'Standards Eurobarometers', which are published based on classifications according to the seasons. The year 2004, for example, had two Standard Eurobarometer: 61, researched between February and March, but published in May - therefore, Spring Eurobarometer -, and 62, with fieldwork between October and November, but published in December - therefore, Winter Eurobarometer.

it marks the entry of 10 new States into the Union and ends in 2007 with the entry of two more States, making the UE, officially, a Bloc with 27 Member States. The objective, then, is to analyze possible reasons for enlargement fatigue in conjunction with the opinions of the European population, seeking to associate allegations of democratic deficit with the percentages of support for the institutions and enlargement itself.

In 2005, the European population's trust in institutions like the Commission and Parliament began to decline, with 46% tending to trust the Commission and 52% tending to trust Parliament. This represented a drop in confidence, accompanied by an increase in the tendency not to trust, reaching 31% for both institutions (EUROBAROMETER 63, 2005). Despite this, support for enlargement remained relatively high, with 50% in favor and 38% against it in the same year (EUROBAROMETER 63, 2005). The subsequent Standard Eurobarometer 64 in 2005 depicted a similar scenario, indicating stable trust in institutions. However, there was a slight decrease in support for future accessions (49% compared to 50% in EB63), and opposition to further enlargements slightly increased from 38% in EB63 to 39% in EB64, reflecting fluctuating opinions across Member States (EUROBAROMETER 64, 2005).

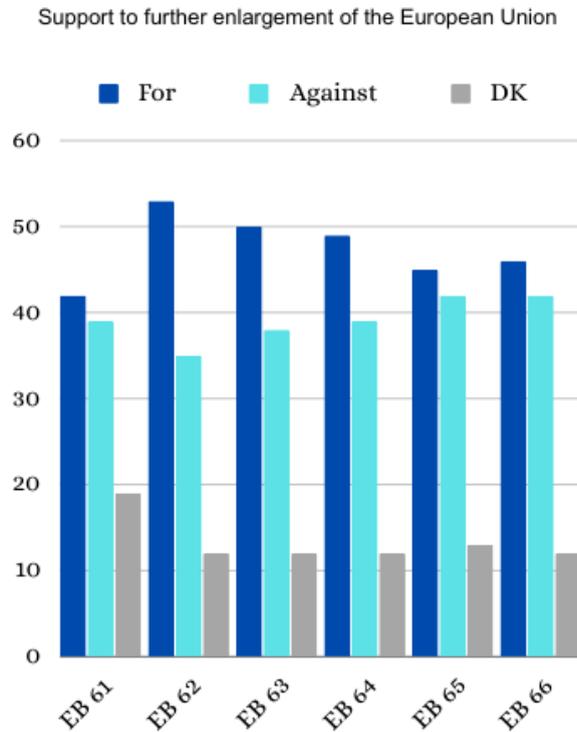
In the transition to 2006, trust in European Union institutions notably increased in Standard Eurobarometer 65 and 66. Trust in the Commission rose to 47% and 48%, respectively, compared to the 46% recorded the previous year. The trend of not trusting witnessed a setback, dropping to 29% in Eurobarometer 65, marking a reversal from the previous trend in 2005. However, in Eurobarometer 66, the tendency to distrust the Commission increased to 31%, reaching one of the highest levels recorded up to that time (EUROBAROMETER 66, 2006). Similarly, trust in the Parliament increased to 52%, rising by 1% from the previous survey. After a peak in the tendency not to trust Parliament at 34% in Eurobarometer 64, this trend decreased to 30% in Eurobarometer 65, only to increase again at the end of 2006 to 32% (EUROBAROMETER 66, 2006). Regarding enlargement, opinions remained volatile and divided, with 42% against future inclusion of new members and 46% in favor (EUROBAROMETER 66, 2006). The trends in trust in European institutions and support for future enlargements are summarized in Tables 1 and 2, showcasing results from Eurobarometer 61 to 66.

Table 1: Trust in the European Institutions: European Parliament and the European Commission



Source: The Author based on Standard Eurobarometer 61 (2004), 62 (2004), 63 (2005), 64 (2005), 65 (2006) and 66 (2006).

Table 2: Support to further enlargement of the European Union

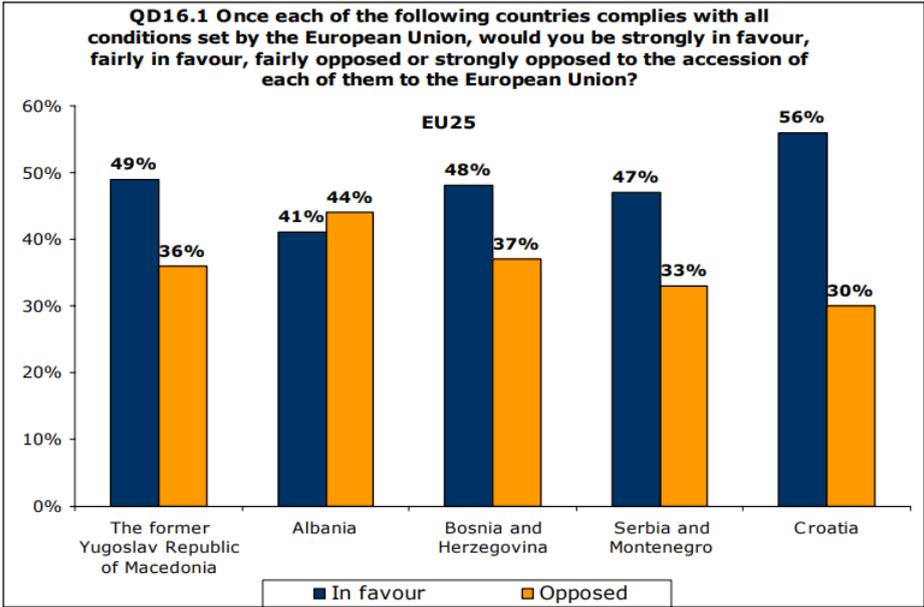


Source: The Author based on Standard Eurobarometer 61 (2004), 62 (2004), 63 (2005), 64 (2005), 65 (2006) and 66 (2006).

This was the European scenario until 2006, with volatile and divided responses. That year, a Special Eurobarometer, number 255, took place to deal only with enlargement, namely 'Attitudes towards EU enlargement'. In it, the European Commission aims to explore, among other topics, the prospect of enlargement for the Western Balkans, asking European citizens whether it would be in the interests of the EU, of the WB countries, of both actors, or of neither (SPECIAL EUROBAROMETER 255, 2006). Following an expected path, given the recurring opinions on the accession of new members, 45% of those asked considered that the possible WB enlargement was primarily in the interest of the countries of this region, with only 9% considering it primarily an interest of the EU and 23% as an interest of both actors (SPECIAL EUROBAROMETER 255, 2006).

As a consequence, the mixture of opinions on this essential policy of the Union - both the increase in the percentage of individuals opposed to enlargement and the understanding of membership as something in the primary interest of the Balkan countries and not of the Union itself - combine into a third factor involving the accession of specific countries in the region to the Union. At the time, according to Special Eurobarometer 225 (2006), only Croatia enjoyed majority support for its accession among European citizens, with 56% in favor. Considering the graph below, where the specificities of each country in the Western Balkans can be analyzed, Serbia's approval stands out, with 47% in favor and 33% against.

Figure 2: Prospect of enlargement to Western Balkans countries in 2006.



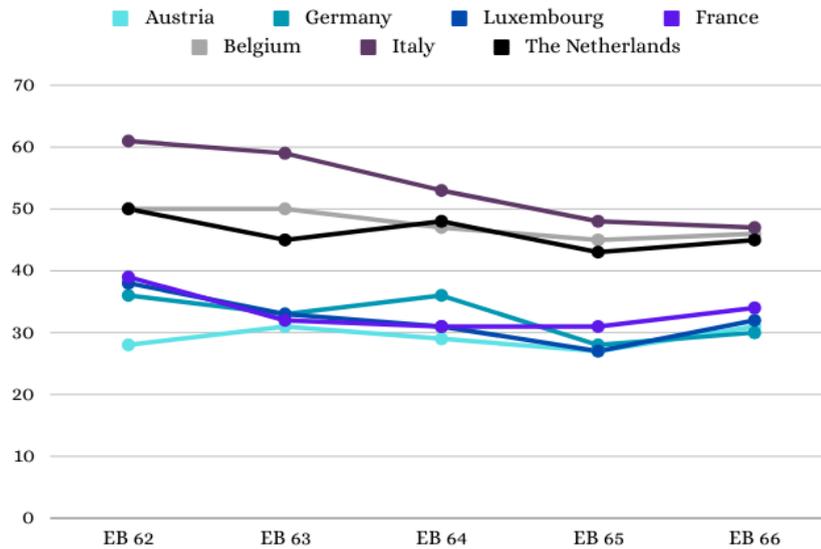
Source: Special Eurobarometer 255, 2006

Thus, even though the percentage of individuals in favor of enlargement had relatively decreased over the years, between 2004 and 2006, and although the majority of European citizens at that time also did not feel sufficiently informed about enlargement - 68% of citizens shared this understanding -, the path for the Balkan countries, if the conditionalities were met, did not appear to be closed (SPECIAL EUROBAROMETER 255, 2006). This initial understanding, from the subsequent years of the Big Bang enlargement, is essential since the discussion about enlargement fatigue is closely associated with the WB. In this sense, considering the fatigue discussion, the public opinion of Europeans is crucial for understanding the position of countries like Serbia in the accession process, especially in times of crisis (SPECIAL EUROBAROMETER 255, 2006).

As Forgue and Kehoskie (2017) develop, indicators of the existence of enlargement fatigue were associated with a relative lack of democracy in European institutions. This understanding can be verified mainly from the Eurobarometer analyzed, especially the last one, EB66, where not only were the levels of trust in European institutions low, reaching a percentage that had not been recorded until that moment, but also the public opinion in favor of the enlargement was divided. This scenario occurred within a broader context in which, after the new wave of enlargement of 2004 and 2007, the institutions of the EU and the Member States highlighted the need for institutional reform before incorporating more states into the EU, as this would safeguard the Union's capacity to act in the future (DEVIRIM; SCHULZ, 2009).

The issue of enlargement fatigue is not solely rooted in the democratic deficit and public opinion. Analysis of Eurobarometer data from 2004 to 2006 reveals diverse perspectives on EU enlargement among Member States. Support for enlargement fluctuated between 53% (EB62) and 45% (EB65) across the 25 Union members (EUROBAROMETER 66, 2006). Newer EU25 members consistently displayed higher support for future enlargement, surpassing the Union average, while founding EU15 members exhibited lower levels of support. Notably, Austria, with historically low support ranging from 27% to 31%, is emphasized in the analysis (EUROBAROMETER 66, 2006). The included table (Table 3) covers Eurobarometer surveys from 2004 to 2006 (EB 62 to 66) and focuses on the founding states of the Union, along with Austria. This nuanced understanding highlights varying attitudes within the Union, underscoring the complexity of enlargement fatigue.

Table 3: Support for Enlargement between the founding members and Austria



Source: The Author based on Standard Eurobarometer 62 (2004), 63 (2005), 64 (2005), 65 (2006) and 66 (2006).

During the analyzed period, the average support for EU enlargement varied, reaching a maximum of 53% in EB62 and a minimum of 45% in EB65. Notably, only Italy among the founding states consistently exceeded the average support for future enlargements among the EU25 countries across all Eurobarometer surveys. Conversely, other founding Member States and Austria demonstrated below-average support, with Germany and France recording the lowest levels, not surpassing 40%. Despite the founding Member States traditionally viewing the expansion as integral to the Union's future, promoting economic growth and strengthening democracy (EUROPEAN UNION, 2011), the period between 2004 and 2006 witnessed surprisingly low levels of support.

One of the possible analyses for this apparent contradiction is the fact that the citizens of these older countries, part of the Union's foundation, have as a great concern the union between enlargement and the possibility of free movement of labor. When integrating new countries, the subsequent opportunity for free movement can, according to these citizens, spark waves of immigrants (FORGUE; KEHOSKIE, 2007). Similarly, when we consider countries in Eastern Europe, the relative uncontrolled organized crime also became a concern for these citizens, who feared its free expansion across the Union countries from the single market (FORGUE; KEHOSKIE, 2007).

For citizens of the Union's oldest countries, it is not just about enlargement: for them, in addition to perceiving themselves as not well-informed, the entry of new members is not seen as a win-win situation. In this understanding, only the new States are favored and there is greater concern about the problems that enlargement can bring than its benefits (DEVIRIM; SCHULZ, 2009). In short, both lack of information and non-consultation can be reasons for dissatisfaction, affecting attitudes towards the enlargement and translation to fatigue (DEVIRIM; SCHULZ, 2009). This differentiation between the understanding of the oldest and newest member states is even seen at the institutional level, more specifically in the European Parliament. Within the Foreign Affairs Committee, Gisela Kallenbach, substitute parliamentarian on the Committee between 2007 and 2009 (EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, n.d), expresses that

New Member States' MEPSs seem to see success of the latest enlargement very differently from those of the old Members States (...) this shows a great problem in communication from the EU to its citizens (...) we need to communicate the political and economics costs of not enlarging the EU, too (REDEI, 2008, p.2)

In this way, much of what was on the agenda at that time was based on more than just the fatigue of enlargement, but was also strongly related to the domestic scenario of the Member States. Given the divergence of support for enlargement between the oldest and newest States, with part of this relationship being verified from Table 3, the distance between the EU and its citizens can first be mapped. The existence of a democratic deficit in institutions, where entities within the Union carrying the power to make decisions were not elected, resulted in a scenario where European citizens did not have the chance to vote on the enlargement of the Union (FORGUE; KEHOSKIE, 2007). This context, together with enlargement not being something that the majority of citizens claimed to understand, generates, as seen above, a scenario where the European population has become increasingly opposed to future enlargements.

Likewise, the institutional level, considering once again the European Parliament, also saw in pronouncements the argument that the Union should see its own limits, having reached a mid-life crisis – a bit old and tired (REDEI, 2008). This is, in a way, the same position as academics at the time, who appeared to see the EU as exhausted, as well as relatively unwelcoming, all these symptoms of fatigue (SZOŁUCHA, 2010). However, this pessimistic scenario is not - or at least did not appear to be – permanent, and there are reasons to believe that enlargement could be seen as favorable again and the fatigue itself would be overcome by the Union.

Enlargement fatigue is a pressing concern within EU institutions and member states, marked by a shift in the official evaluation of enlargement from a success story to heightened awareness of fatigue. Even previously supportive stakeholders have adopted a more cautious discourse (DEVIRIM; SCHULZ, 2009).

The impact of fatigue is evident in post-2007 Eurobarometer surveys, specifically Standard Eurobarometer 68, 69, and 70 for 2007 and 2008. Surprisingly, these surveys lacked questions related to enlargement and its support levels, unlike past surveys that addressed entries and new members. Despite the completion of past enlargements, discussions about the Western Balkans and its future in Europe persisted, as seen through Croatia's status and ongoing Turkey negotiations. However, enlargement was only mentioned in country-specific summaries, with Austria still exhibiting low support for future enlargements in 2008 (EUROBAROMETER 69, 2008).

Considering enlargement fatigue also involves reflecting on the role of the Western Balkans and the European Union, an analysis to be explored in the next section.

3.1.1. The Balkans in the European Union: a never-ending path in a sea of promises

Taking into account the European Union's enlargement policy as a “(...) geo-strategic investment in Europe's peace, security, stability and prosperity” (ENLARGEMENT NEGOTIATIONS, 2023, p.1), the relationship between the Union and the countries of the WB was not always cooperative, especially through events such as the Kosovo War. However, years later, the Union became the region's main donor, investor, and commercial partner, committing, for example, over 29.5 billion euros since 2007 (ENLARGEMENT NEGOTIATIONS, 2023). Therefore, thinking about the relationship between the Balkans and the European Union goes beyond the years of history and enlargement itself, but also addresses the promises and speeches that surround this relationship.

The objective of this section, hence, is to expose the path taken so far by the WB countries in their aim to become full members of the Union, a path embedded in the enlargement fatigue and resistance. The starting point will be a promise that was made in 2003, when the future inside the Union was still uncertain and not at all consolidated. From then on, years have passed, but the promise and the perspective of the Union concerning the WB have not. We will start by looking, in that case, at what the European Union has to say.

The path of the Balkans – at the time still potential candidates – in the EU for the present analysis begins in Greece, in 2003, when the Union was still expanding and the Greek Presidency organized a summit between the European Union and the WB countries (DRAGISIC, 2008; ENLARGEMENT NEGOTIATIONS, 2023). In April 2003, EU representatives commemorated a significant event—the signing of the Accession Treaty with the countries leading to the major enlargement of 2004. The celebration not only marked the expansion of the Union but also reiterated the commitment to a 'One Europe,' reflecting a collective aspiration to foster an inclusive Union with a crucial role in the world (COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, 2003). The Declaration concluded with a fundamental assertion: “Our Europe is a Europe for all” (COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, 2003, p.2).

Therefore, even in 2003, the prospect of enlargement was still strengthened, and not the image of an exhausted and relatively unwelcoming EU (SZOLUCHA, 2010). This favorable scenario inspires and encourages the WB countries to follow the same path, with everyone sharing “the values of democracy, the rule of law, respect for human and minority rights, solidarity and a market economy, fully aware that they constitute the very foundations of the European Union” (EU-WESTERN BALKANS SUMMIT, 2003, p.1). It is against this backdrop that the EU-Western Balkans Summit took place in Thessaloniki in June 2003, marking a promise from the European Union that has so far only been partially fulfilled. On that occasion, the Union expressed “(...) its **unequivocal support to the European perspective** of the Western Balkan countries” (EU-WESTERN BALKANS SUMMIT, 2003, p.2. Emphasis added), claiming that “[t]he **future of the Balkans is within the European Union**” (EU-WESTERN BALKANS SUMMIT, 2003, p.2. emphasis added). Likewise, the determination of European institutions to “(...) fully and effectively support the European perspective of the Western Balkan countries, which will become an integral part of the EU once the established criteria are met” (CONSELHO EUROPEU, 2003, p.11. Translated freely⁶)

Thus, with their future explicitly defined, the only challenge that remained in 2003 - and that remains to this day - was the preparation for integration into European structures and membership based on the adoption of European standards. In this ‘privileged’ relationship (EU-WESTERN BALKANS SUMMIT, 2003), the Stabilization and Association Process

⁶ In the original: “(...) apoiar plena e efectivamente a perspectiva europeia dos países dos Balcãs Ocidentais, que se tornarão parte integrante da UE, uma vez satisfeitos os critérios estabelecidos.”

(SAP), launched in 1999, became central in the Balkan countries' path to accession, serving as an anchor for reforms ahead. Among the necessary reforms, stability, democracy, and economic recovery stand out at the 2003 Summit, in addition to the fight against essential areas such as corruption, organized crime, illegal migration, and the strengthening of the rule of law.

A few years later, in 2005, negotiations began with Serbia, involving the Stabilization and Association Agreement, only to be stopped the following year, in 2006. Serbia's lack of cooperation with the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY)⁷ caused the SAA negotiations to be resumed only in mid-2007, being signed in 2008. In the same year, through the Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council, the European Union highlighted how the countries of the Western Balkans moved closer to the EU, despite the adversities faced. The Community, in a nutshell, had the purpose of reiterating the EU's commitment to the European perspective of the Western Balkans (COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, 2008).

Among these challenges, the maintenance of peace and stability on the continent is reiterated, which also depends on the resolution of the status of Kosovo. In short, generally speaking, the interest of the European Union – and that of Europe as a whole – is that the region should swiftly pursue political and economic reform, foster reconciliation among communities, and advance toward EU integration. In line with these objectives, the EU deployed a comprehensive array of policy instruments to facilitate their realization. Also, the Commission, as added by the Communication, placed particular emphasis on supporting efforts to enhance the rule of law, promoting good governance, implementing judicial and administrative reforms, and fostering the growth of civil society (COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, 2008).

⁷ Although the specificities of the ICTY are not the central objective of this work, it is still necessary to minimally highlight the context behind the demands of the ICTY and the enlargement process for Serbia. The Court was established in 1993 by the United Nations in response to the atrocities that were committed in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, which were brutally attacked by Serbia in its quest for independence when the disintegration of Yugoslavia was still taking place. Among its main objectives, the ICTY aimed to try individuals identified as the primary culprits responsible for heinous acts, including but not limited to murder, torture, rape, enslavement, destruction of property, and other offenses outlined in the Tribunal's Statute (INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL TRIBUNAL FOR THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA, n.d). As a condition for SAA negotiations with Serbia, the EU required collaboration with ICTY demands, even suspending negotiations when cooperation was not considered sufficient. However, in 2007, negotiations were resumed, marking a contradiction of European conditionality concerning Serbia. From the moment negotiations were resumed, Serbia was no longer obliged to arrest certain individuals responsible for those acts in the wars for the SAA to continue. (INTERNATIONAL CRIMINAL TRIBUNAL FOR THE FORMER YUGOSLAVIA, n.d; SUBOTIĆ, 2010)

In this way, the 2008 scenario confirms not only the continuity of the promise made in 2003, but also affirms the Union's commitments for the coming years, reiterating that the future of the Balkans continues in the EU and expressing the intention to maintain the tangible and visible prospect of membership for citizens of Western Balkan countries (COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, 2008). In pursuit of this objective, the EU considered itself to be prepared to expedite pre-accession preparations with all regional countries, contingent upon their fulfillment of the conditionalities.

More specifically, considering the location of Serbia, the Community highlights the essential role that the country has from an economic and political perspective, being important for the stability of the region. The continent, in this sense, would gain advantages from Serbia by being stable and prosperous and fully integrated into the “family of European nations” (COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, 2008, n.p). In turn, the SAA, which at the time had not yet been signed, is seen as beneficial for both actors, and Serbia's candidacy and its European path are seen positively, and could even be accelerated (COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, 2008).

The choice of the Community, in addition to just reiterating the European path opened for Serbia and the promise made by the Union, came at a defining moment in the region. At the beginning of 2008, Kosovo declared its independence, and the Communiqué highlights that the Member States, each in their own understanding, will decide their relationship with the country, being a *sui generis* case (COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, 2008). Furthermore, the Council highlights the readiness of the Union, which was preparing to play a leading role in strengthening stability, adopting the European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo, or EULEX Kosovo (COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, 2008; EUROPEAN UNION RULE OF LAW MISSION, n.d). EULEX, the largest civilian mission under the European Union's Common Security and Defense Policy, is mandated to support rule of law institutions in Kosovo through monitoring, guidance, and advisory activities. Although its executive powers are limited, EULEX enjoys the backing of all 27 EU Member States and five contributing States. The mission operates under two pillars: the Monitoring Pillar and the Operations Support Pillar, with a focus on incorporating human rights and gender mainstreaming standards. Kosovo, like Serbia and other WB countries, shares a "clear and tangible EU perspective" (COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, 2008, n.p).

Fast forwarding to 2017, Trieste, Italy, hosted the Western Balkans Summit, where regional cooperation and measures to connect the region's infrastructure, economy, and individuals were discussed, a broader part of the 'Berlin Process', an initiative to strengthen regional cooperation in the Balkans (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, n.d). Despite focusing on the three topics expressed - infrastructure, people, and economy -, the Summit also reinforced the perspective of a European Union integrated with the Western Balkans, highlighting that the region's countries wish to strengthen their integration with the Union (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, n.d).

The following year, in 2018, the EU-Western Balkans Summit was held in Sofia, resulting in the Sofia Declaration of 17 May 2018. Presenting the conclusion of the European Union leaders, the Declaration highlighted the promise that had stood for 15 years and the confirmations of subsequent reports, reaffirming his “(...) unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans.” (SOFIA DECLARATION, 2018, p.1). Finally, the EU also welcomed the commitment of the WB countries to accelerate the implementation of the *acquis*, essential for the accession process (SOFIA DECLARATION, 2008).

The next step in this path was the Brdo Declaration, resulting from another EU-Western Balkans Summit. For this analysis, the essential part of the Declaration demarcates, once again, that which has already been seen in past scenarios, reaffirming “its [EU] **unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans and welcom[ing] the commitment** of the Western Balkans partners to the **European perspective**” (BRDO DECLARATION, 2021, p.1. Emphasis added). It kept the promise made in Thessaloniki while not providing, concretely, a deadline for the completion of enlargement, only reinforcing its commitment to the enlargement process (BRDO DECLARATION, 2021; EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic, which had a severe impact around the world, also hit WB quickly, impacting society and putting pressure on the job market and sectors such as tourism, which contributed 15% to the overall GDP of WB, supporting industries and jobs in 2019 (OECD, n.d; BRDO DECLARATION, 2021; EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2021). Nonetheless, alongside these negative and severe consequences, the crisis scenario also highlighted the need and advantages of a close and effective partnership between the Union and the Western Balkans (BRDO DECLARATION, 2021; EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2021). The recognition appears not only to involve the support of the WB among themselves and towards the Union, but also with the EU, which offered socioeconomic support in the region totaling EUR3.3

billion, also promoting the sending of 2.9 million doses of vaccine for the region by 2021 (BRDO DECLARATION, 2021; EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2021).

The year 2022, hosting another EU-Western Balkans Summit also presents another challenge, in addition to COVID-19: the invasion of Ukraine by Russia, in February of the same year. Even though it is not the focus of the current argument to address the effects that this invasion had on the relationship with the EU and the consequences for Serbia, I emphasize that, in the Declaration, the invasion puts at risk the security and European peace (TIRANA DECLARATION, 2022), being a key point for the relationship between the WB and the Union. It is within this once again turbulent scenario that the Union reaffirmed its commitment to the membership perspective of the WB, calling for the acceleration of the accession process (TIRANA DECLARATION, 2022, p.1). In short, even though it has not yet been achieved, the path from the Balkans to Europe seems to be certain, strongly supported by the Union, and just a matter of time – now, from 2022 onwards, with expectations of a shorter time, as the EU demands the acceleration of the process.

All the Declarations, Communiqués and Pronouncements listed reveal only one essential issue: the European perspective for the WB is unequivocally supported by the Union, which has maintained since 2003 a promise that the future of the region is in Europe in strategic partnership. However, 20 years after this great promise, where are the Balkans and more specifically Serbia? And, even more essentially, where is the European Union that was suffering from enlargement fatigue? Amid so many promises and expressions of support, has the Union found renewed vigor in the Western Balkans?

To answer the second question, still within the scope of the European Union, I will return to that Union that suffered from fatigue and did not find great support for enlargement among the European population, remaining volatile and unpopular, especially in the oldest countries of the Union. The object, now, involves inserting all the promises and support given in a broader European scenario, of possible fatigue and unpopularity of enlargement.

In 2013, Croatia's accession meant more than just the entry of another country, consolidating the EU27. With the official enlargement to the WB, the European Union becomes physically embedded in the region and the final objective of the 6 countries currently trying to reach the end of the European path, also known by Western Balkans 6 (WB6). The group, made up of Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and Kosovo, has four candidates for the Union – Montenegro, Serbia, Albania, North Macedonia –, while two are potential candidates – Kosovo and Bosnia and

Herzegovina⁸ (EUROPEAN CLUSTER COLLABORATION PLATFORM, n.d). However, as briefly stated in section 3.1, certain factors such as the economic crisis and exhaustive introspection had significant impacts on the progress involving the European path of the WB6 (O'BRENNAN, 2014).

In this way, the Balkans' entry process into the EU was, to a large extent, marked by an enlargement process that was, as O'Brennan (2014) argues, on life support and flat-lining. What we observe, then, are frozen negotiation chapters and uncertain destinations, with constant stagnation despite the promise made in Thessaloniki and its constant confirmations. This is a future that, despite being promised, did not appear to be in a hurry to arrive. The scenario of 2014, just one year after Croatian accession, was marked by skepticism and suspicion directed at aspiring Member States which, at the same time, strived to adopt and implement the extensive body of EU legislation, which compromised nearly 140,000 pages at that time, ahead of their potential membership (O'BRENNAN, 2014).

At the same time, the Union, which was still suffering from enlargement fatigue, encountered a new obstacle that altered the essential characteristics of one of its most important policies. Where enlargement constituted a space in which national interests would traditionally be left aside, in a more community-oriented way, now it's politicization in the domestic arena begins to occur. WB became among those who share hyper-nationalist sentiments, for example, an easy target. As presented in the older countries of the Union, the accession of the WB6 raises fears that new immigrants, poorer and more difficult to integrate, may enter an EU that is very crowded and already faces economic challenges (O'BRENNAN, 2014; FORGUE; KEHOSKIE, 2007). Likewise, as O'Brennan (2014) essentially highlights, the entry of Serbia and Kosovo itself was seen with fear, potentially bringing new interethnic disputes into the Union.

Moreover, the economic crises that shook the consensus on enlargement also affected the WB, which is integrated into the EU economy to the extent that the Union is one of the main investors as well as a financier of billion-dollar socioeconomic support. More specifically, the WB countries had a strong relationship with Greece in their accession process, particularly affected by the euro crisis, entering into a virtual bankruptcy at the time

⁸ Croatia is no longer included in the WB6 group as it is already part of the European Union. Croatia applied for membership in the Union on 21 February 2003, and was in the process of negotiation between 2005 and 2011. The accession treaty was signed on 9 December 2011, and on 1st of July 2013 Croatia became a Member State and the first country in the Western Balkans to officially join the European Union (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, n.d.). In 2023, the country adopted the Euro and became a member of the Schengen area (EUROPEAN UNION, n.d).

(O'BRENNAN, 2014; ZETTELMEYER et al, 2010). Ambassador for the WB in the EU, Greece, following the crisis in which it was inserted, lost its prestige and ability to become the bridge between Brussels and the WB (O'BRENNAN, 2014).

The unfavorable scenario for WB6 was combined with the problem of enlargement fatigue, an internal EU problem that contributed to a change in the way in which new enlargements were considered. Following this fatigue, European Union member states began to demand new restrictions on those who wished to enter the Union, strengthening the conditionalities (MOLBÆK-STEENSIG, 2017). Therefore, the number of Acquis chapters began to adjust to each candidate, increasing not only the number of chapters but also joining new conditionalities such as SAP and SAA, specific to WB (MOLBÆK-STEENSIG, 2017).

In short, the history of the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, in addition to the failure involving the 2005 constitutional treaty, taught lessons to the Union, which, learning from these past and other experiences (SZOŁUCHA, 2010; MOLBÆK-STEENSIG, 2017), strengthened conditionality within the rule of law, making the journey of the WB States longer (MOLBÆK-STEENSIG, 2017). Thus, up to the present moment of the argument, the WB6, as Molbæk-Steensing (2017) argues, only had the misfortune of being late to the party, subject to specific conditionalities and a relatively unwelcoming Union. The question arises, therefore, whether the scenario for the WB, still embedded in the promise made in 2003, could worsen.

In short, the answer to this brief question is yes. After years where the problem involved the Union's ability to absorb new members, the challenge the Union faces is no longer just fatigue, but a resistance in itself. The new obstacles are, this time, existential, concerning the legitimacy and, more importantly, the identity of the Union (ECONOMIDES, 2020). The focus of this resistance lies on the future of enlargement and the consequences they can bring, in a broader scenario where accession becomes something distant – a future that is in no hurry to arrive – since the EU is not ready to accept the WB6 and the Balkan countries themselves are unable and unwilling to complete the accession and pre-accession processes (ECONOMIDES, 2020). Likewise, the domestic scenario becomes crucial, undergoing politicization (O'BRENNAN, 2014; ECONOMIDES, 2020) that leads the EU and its members to worry about internal scenarios, with maintaining their integration and their future, and not with the enlargement itself (ECONOMIDES, 2020). The resistance to enlargement, which replaces the old fatigue, also becomes the result of processes of fragmentation and disintegration (ECONOMIDES, 2020).

From this, within the WB, the sea of promises of the Union that started in 2003 appears to be embedded in a trajectory that is too demanding and, for now, empty (ECONOMIDES, 2020). Inserted in a long process, especially in comparison to other enlargement processes, the WB6 is within a 'pre-accession' accession process (SAP and SAA), where the bar is set very high and the enlargement is limited by the resistance of the Member States of the Union themselves, trapped in questions about what and who Europe is (ECONOMIDES, 2020). Thus, when we consider a Union that is stuck in internal problems, generating resistance to new members, it is also necessary to understand to what extent the WB6 countries find themselves, faced with a Union that appears not to want their integration, postponing promises and old commits.

These new understandings mark the next paths that will be taken in the monograph. Faced with this resistance to enlargement, the essential question now turns to the countries of the Western Balkans, making it necessary to understand what the European trajectory means for them and their populations. In particular, Serbia - and its relationship with Kosovo - will also be objects of analysis, as they are central to the realization of a possible future accession to the Union. However, before this process, the next section will have a space dedicated to exploring how this enlargement process influences the construction of European identity, which is also essential for understanding the Serbian position and its relationship with Kosovo in the enlargement process.

3.2. Constructing Identities in the European Union: how to include the 'other'

As Mälksoo (2010) defines it, the boundary between the self and the other is vague, with the self not being able to exist without the other. It is based on this initial statement that this section seeks to explore not only the border between a 'self' and an 'other', but also how this border acts in the definition of identity, especially European identity. To do this, I will begin by defining how the identity of Europe, and consequently, the European Union, creates categories of definitions that shape 'other', going beyond traditional views about it being solely threatening.

In this way, the central core of the argument about the construction and definition of European identity – and the consequent other – runs through the understanding that there is no 'European' identity that is natural, essential, and available to everyone (MÄLKSOO, 2010). In reality, identities are inherently unstable, contingent, and a place of constant competition

(MCDONALD, 2018), and, more specifically, the 'European' identity will be *constructed as part of discursive practices*. Likewise, the construction and social representations themselves are prescriptive and regulative of collective identities, with the act of building being related to the act of interpreting situations, for example (MÄLKSOO, 2010)

In this sense, I will begin the argument by considering the idealization of European identity based on the creation and delimitation of insiders and outsiders, that is, constituted based on the delimitation of something different, another, which may (or not) be threatening (RUMELILI, 2004). To this end, part of the argument is based on the understanding that identities will always be constituted based on difference, since "(...) a thing can only be known by what it is not" (RUMELILI, 2004, p.29). This understanding, according to Rumelili (2004), is what constitutes the construction of identities in the modern nation-state system, where the construction of these insiders and outsiders is clear, with distinctions drawn between who corresponds to the 'self' and who corresponds to the 'other'.

However, the main problem with this understanding lies in its rigid classification, leaving no room for fluidity. This problem arises specifically from the fact that the boundaries of delimitation of the EU, which creates the understanding of self and other, are fluid at certain times and rigid at others, creating categories that go beyond the simple 'self'/other', 'inside/outside' to build their understanding of other States, which do not necessarily constitute a threatening identity (RUMELILI, 2004).

It is within this fluid zone that European identity will operate and build its understandings, which can be seen through two initial arguments, and two different modes of differentiation: the modern mode of differentiation and the postmodern mode. In the first case, European identity constructs the 'outsider' as inherently different and threatening to its identity, constituting more rigid and more stable border delimitations (RUMELILI, 2004). In turn, postmodern collectivity displaces rigidity and presents a fear that is not of the 'other', but rather a shared fear of disunity. Therefore, as a consequence, the EU creates large transition zones or borders around itself, an understanding that will be essential to understanding the relationship with the Balkans, for example (RUMELILI, 2004).

However, it will also be the objective of this analysis to take a certain distance from the understanding of relationships between the self and the other as inherently threatening or mutually excluded, highlighting, instead, more specific nuances and transition zones. The other, in this sense, will only represent another individual or another State, and the very

constitution of identity about difference will have moving categories within it, being able to address positive and negative identifications (RUMELILI, 2004).

More specifically, when we approach the European Union's relationship with the countries of the Western Balkans, the difference is not constructed based on threats, but rather based on temporalities and acquired characteristics. Thus, places like the Balkans have throughout their history been in the position of being defined, and not those who have the power to define the other. Europe, and more specifically, Western Europe, was the actor that had - and still has - the power to define the other, creating scales and temporalities concerning itself. In this sense, the self - the EU - and the other - Balkans - are defined based on scales of development and, more specifically, modernity. The Union becomes the example of civilization, a truly modern actor, while the Balkans begin to be located further down the scale, becoming bearers of acquired characteristics that place them close to barbarity, backwardness, and the opposite of everything that it is modern and civilizational (ECONOMIDES, 2020; RUMELILI, 2004; MÄLKSOO, 2010).

This new form of differentiation, which constitutes the process of otherness, becomes relevant as it removes the threatening characteristic of the context and adds temporality and scale. Just the fact that these acquired characteristics exist ends up allowing, or at least creating the possibility, that this other is in a position of temporary difference, being able to reach the top of the scale, civilization, and modernity (RUMELILI, 2004). In these cases, when we consider the Balkan countries, their own geographical location becomes relevant. Even though the countries belonging to the region are located territorially and geographically on the European continent, their forced position as 'passive' actors – that is, actors that are defined and do not define – generates a paradox in terms of understanding themselves. At the same time as the WB are on the European continent, their identity is not defined as truly European - this classification is restricted to, for example, the Member States of the European Union. Therefore, with the Union being the actor that has the power to define identities, locations such as the Balkans are invented and help to delimit what is and what is not the EU, in a double spatial and temporal classification. So, the Balkans, despite being located on the European continent, are not properly European, being imposed the identity of '*Europe but not Europe*' or simply '*less-Europe*' (MÄLKSOO, 2010).

However, as the classification of Europe but not Europe and less-Europe does not imply the existence of a threatening other, the Balkans can achieve modernity and become fully European, which requires recognition (RUMELILI, 2004). Association with others, in

this sense, can occur inclusively, with the recognition of superiority (RUMELILI, 2004). In this way, when the other recognizes the self as superior, the construction of identity and difference is done in such a way that the other begins to desire to become like the self, which can provide the ways for this to occur (RUMELILI, 2004).

Therefore, the general relationship between candidate countries more generally and the European Union can be understood based on these differentiations. In other words, the enlargement process in its initial stages also occurs based on the initiative of candidate countries, which must demonstrate to the Union their interest in being part of the Bloc through their candidacy. Inserted within classifications such as 'Europe but not Europe' or simply 'less-Europe', the countries of the Western Balkans, by committing themselves to the future promised by the Union, present not only the desire to become Member States, but also the aspiration to become Europeans, to be part of the EU and adopt for themselves all the values that the position carries, all expressed in Article 2 of the TEU, transforming their identity based on what the Union considers should be changed. Conditionalities and reforms in the enlargement process are discussed between the candidates and the Union, but it is the latter that determines what levels of adaptation and transformation are necessary. That ratifies the power of the Union as the ones with the power to define the Balkans – as those who are not modern, who are lacking and inadequate and non-European, inferior and needing to evolve to reach the top of the scale that the EU defines.

In short, the discussion about the enlargement process and identity becomes relevant as one presents the possibilities for change and classification of the other. Being considered passive in the classification of their own identity, the WB are defined by the EU on a scale of progress and temporality, in which to be part of the European democratic family, committed to values seen as modern and positive (EUROPEAN UNION, 2011), the countries need to meet the requirements defined by the EU, which has the agency to define identities, transforming into a scenario where the European arrogance of considering itself as the ideal of progress and values is present.

4. (Re)constructing Serbia's Identity in the Contemporary World

The title of this last chapter briefly explains its objective. As a section focusing on Serbia and Kosovo in the process of enlargement to the EU, the argument returns to essential concepts presented in previous chapters.

The first subsection, entitled 'The Enlargement Process Nowadays: looking from the Inside into Vučić's Serbia', aims to analyze the enlargement process exposed in greater detail in Chapter 2 – however, this time, seeking to locate and bring Serbia into the center of the discussion. With its European path linked to several conditionalities, Serbia's accession process comes up against 20 years of promises and understandings that are fundamental to its identity. Therefore, the main analysis of this subsection involves trying to understand Serbia's European path, what the population considers of it, and, mainly, how important it is. Likewise, I will also present one of its most important conditionalities: the normalization of relations with Kosovo, a country with which it shares historical ties explored in subsection 2.3.

The last subsection, entitled “‘How Badly We Need Peace’? The Enlargement Process and the Entanglement between Belgrade and Pristina’, relates, in a way, everything that has been analyzed so far. Inserting Serbia and Kosovo in a broader context of the enlargement process and its conditionality of normalization, the objective here is to apply the theoretical framework and analyze, based on different discourses, the narrative that Serbia constructs about Kosovo, and how it shapes your own identity. Starting from Kosovo as more than a territory, but also an imaginary, the argument will aim to compare how the founding narrative and Serbian identity contrast with the need to normalize relations and, consequently, give up on a State that is seen as the heart of Serbia. In the face of this opposition, President Aleksandar Vučić's speeches will be considered at length, truly situating what Kosovo means for Serbia in the present government.

4.1. The Enlargement Process Nowadays: looking from the inside into Vučić's Serbia

In the previous section, ‘The Balkans in the European Union: a never-ending path in a sea of promises’, I explored the promises made by the EU in an enlargement that has not yet materialized, despite all the support, investments, confirmations and feelings of urgency. In

the same way, I also asked where the WB, and more specifically Serbia, were 20 years after a promise that still surrounds the relationship with the Union. Amid so many promises, where was Serbia? What does the Serbian population think of the enlargement process? Aiming to answer these questions, I will seek from this point to return to Serbia, trying to understand its European path, despite not having completed it (yet).

The country now presided over by Vučić began its European path in Thessaloniki, together with the other 5 WB countries, after being identified as a potential candidate in 2003. However, it is also necessary to consider that not all WB countries are in the same process on the European trajectory: even though the promise of Thessaloniki has been reinforced over the years, progress among the WB6 varies greatly. While Montenegro is negotiating with the EU, with accession negotiations open and 3 chapters provisionally closed (EU DATA, 2023), Serbia, which also has accession negotiations open, has 22 of the 35 chapters open and 2 provisionally closed (EU DATE, 2023).

North Macedonia, a country that applied for EU membership in 2004 and had its candidate country status granted in 2005, had accession negotiation opened by the Council in 2020. However, it was only in July 2022 that North Macedonia began the screening process, carried out jointly by the Commission and each of the candidate countries (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, n.d; EU DATA, 2023). The procedural methodology outlined allows candidate countries to familiarize themselves with EU legal principles, facilitating an assessment of their alignment with EU legislation and the formulation of strategic plans for harmonization efforts. Moreover, the screening process aims to identify areas requiring improvement, crucial for ensuring legislative enhancements align with EU norms and regulations (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, n.d). A similar scenario occurs with Albania, which applied for EU membership in 2009, gaining candidate status in 2014 (EU DATA, 2023). Since July 2022, the country has also been undergoing the screening process (EU DATA, 2023).

In turn, Bosnia-Herzegovina followed a slightly different path at the beginning of its trajectory. Signing the SAA in July 2008, the Agreement entered into force only in June 2015, with the country not being an official candidate (EU DATA, 2023). Bosnia's application for EU membership only took place in February 2016, with its candidate status being officially recognized recently: in October 2022 the Commission recommended that the Council provide candidate status to Bosnia, which occurs in the same year, in December (EU DATA, 2023).

Finally, Kosovo's trajectory is the one that presents the most difficulties and obstacles, which go beyond Serbia itself. Although the country declared its independence in 2008, its recognition internationally is not a consensus. In addition to Serbia, China and Russia do not recognize the country, with the latter even vetoing Kosovo's membership in the United Nations (AJLABS, 2023). Within the EU, despite the recognition being more expressive, 5 member states do not recognize Kosovo's statehood - Spain, Slovakia, Cyprus, Romania, and Greece - which contributes to Kosovo's path to EU membership being halted (AJLABS, 2023). As a consequence, its path began only in 2011, with the beginning of dialogues with Serbia, namely the EU-facilitated dialogue between Pristina and Belgrade (EU DATA, 2023). A few years later, in 2016, the SAA came into force, and the most recent update of the Kosovo-EU relationship occurred in 2023, when the Council and Parliament adopted regulations involving the path to visa liberalization (EU DATA, 2023). In summary, the current situation of the WB countries on the path to becoming members of the EU can be seen below, in Figure 3

Figure 3: West Balkan EU accession candidates



Source: KREIZER, 2022.

Officially, Serbia's European path began in December 2009, when former president Boris Tadić formally applied for the Union's candidacy (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, n.d; EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2023). From that moment on, the Council adopted as one of its conclusions the renewed consensus on the enlargement of 2006, reaffirming that the future of the WB lies in the EU (COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, 2010; CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION SERBIA, 2014). Progress along this path, however, depends on individual efforts to comply with the Copenhagen Criteria and SAP conditionalities. Likewise, the Council also highlights that regional cooperation is essential, stressing the EU-facilitated dialogues between Belgrade and Pristina and cooperation with the ICTY as essential conditions for Serbia to become a member of the EU (COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, 2010).

Despite the obstacles placed by Serbia concerning cooperation with the ICTY, in 2012 the European Council highlighted the considerable progress that the country has made regarding the Copenhagen political criteria and the SAP, also reaching a considerable level of cooperation with the ICTY (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2012). When the relationship with Pristina is considered, the Council also welcomed the re-engaged dialogue with the independent State (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2012). Therefore, in March 2012, the European Council agreed to grant Serbia the status of candidate country, which occurred on 1st March (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2012; EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2023).

From the moment Serbia became a candidate country, the next major milestone in its relationship with the Union occurred in June 2013, when the European Council decided to open accession negotiations through intergovernmental meetings, the first being planned with a deadline of January 2014 (EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2013). In the first of the meetings, with an opening statement, the start of negotiations with Serbia is seen as a historically important moment, with enlargement remaining a key EU policy (CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION SERBIA, 2014). In this sense, despite enlargement still causing fatigue in the Union, the promise of Thessaloniki was present in the statement, with the accession negotiations being “(...) a clear testimony of the EU's continued commitment to the European perspective of the Western Balkans” (CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION SERBIA, 2014, p.2). Likewise, it is also the EU's objective to highlight its role and its commitment to enlargement and candidate countries, positioning

itself as an actor that “delivers on its commitments” (CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION SERBIA, 2014, p.2).

Additionally, the negotiations framework also covers the principles and specifications of the Serbian path throughout the accession process, and it is important to highlight that the negotiations were opened with the basic understanding that Serbia respects and is committed to promoting the values in which the Union is founded, that is, the values presented in Article 2 of the TEU, which include, but are not limited to, freedom, democracy and equality (CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION SERBIA, 2014). Thus, considering that Serbia is part of a “(...) shared European history, heritage, values and culture” (CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION SERBIA, 2014, p.3), the Union, by anticipating the intensification of already shared ties, also determines that the *acquis* must be broken down into chapters covering specific political areas (CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION SERBIA, 2014).

The SAA, in turn, entered into force in September 2013 after intense dialogues, highlighting in its preamble the importance of the Agreement to establish and consolidate a stable European order based on cooperation and the Union's availability to integrate Serbia into the European political and economic context (EUROPEAN UNION, 2013). It is the Union's expectation, in this sense, that the SAA would create a better climate for economic relations between those involved. Additionally, the SAA also emphasized, in its Article 6, the Serbian commitment to continuing and promoting cooperative and good neighborly relations with other countries in the region, with this commitment being a determining factor in the development of relations between Serbia and the EU that also contributes to regional stability (EUROPEAN UNION, 2013).

From the moment negotiations are opened, through accession negotiations, Serbia can officially begin its European journey, requiring the completion of conditionalities and the *acquis*. Even though the process has not yet been completed, Serbia's accession process to the EU was, at the time, already the country's main priority, according to former President Boris Tadić in an interview in 2010 (STGALLENSYMPOSIUM, 2010). Tadić, in the same interview, highlights that he would do everything to join Serbia in the EU as soon as possible, despite considering that the process should not take place for a while due to financial problems that affected several countries and the need for dialogue, expecting to last at least 5 years at the time (STGALLENSYMPOSIUM, 2010).

It is within this favorable context, in 2015, that Serbia opened two of its first chapters, including Chapter 35: Other Issues, Normalization of Relations between Serbia and Kosovo. In 2016, it opened two more, involving the Rule of law – Chapter 23 and Chapter 24 (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, n.d; EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, 2023). Moreover, at the same time, in 2016 and 2017, Chapters 5, Chapter 25, Chapter 20, and Chapter 26 were opened (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, n.d; EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, 2023).

Therefore the scenario of Serbian conditionalities in 2023 can be summarized in a relatively favorable way, despite still being incomplete. Until this year, the country has opened 22 of the 35 necessary chapters, including also the chapters on the fundamentals of the process and those involving a Green agenda and sustainable connectivity, in addition to having provisionally closed two of them (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, n.d; EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, 2023). However, regardless of the current scenario, and the fact that no new chapter has been opened since 2021, Serbia's future integration remains strongly linked to Kosovo. As a consequence, it is necessary to consider the dialogue between Serbia and Kosovo, mediated by the EU, as essential and a way of determining the pace of the negotiations (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, n.d; EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, 2023; EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2023).

Notwithstanding, as in the case of the EU, the accession process also affects the Serbian population and may be an accepted policy - or not. The 35 Chapters which Serbia must address are not only part of broader institutional reforms aimed at various sectors but also involve the incorporation of fundamental values of the Union and the satisfaction and adoption of common rules, standards, and policies that permeate and form the body of EU law (EUROPEAN COUNCIL IN COPENHAGEN, 1993; MOLBÆK-STEENSIG, 2017; DE MUNTER, 2023; EUROPEAN UNION, 2011). All these processes, when completed, are expected to result in the transformation of the candidate State – a transformation that can be difficult — into a *modern State*, member State of the European Union (ECONOMIDES, 2020). This certain arrogance on behalf of European institutions, as Subotić (2011) adds, reveals a scenario in which states supposedly, for the EU, would naturally accept becoming members of the Union because of its various benefits, undergoing profound normative and political changes (SUBOTIĆ, 2011).

As a consequence, this series of changes and normative transformations also affect the population and their daily lives, actors whose support is essential for the completion of the European path. In this context, if the country's accession is completed, its population becomes

members and citizens of a modern member state of the European Union, a title that includes respect for a series of fundamental values, which the country had to go through profound transformations to adopt. The fact that these reforms permeate the population's daily lives explains the need to look more closely at the Serbian population, which presents different opinions from European citizens when the agenda is the accession process.

Thus, to assess the position of the Serbian population, I will use as a basis the 'Balkan Public Barometer' (BPB) released by the Regional Cooperation Council, a comprehensive cooperation framework that works to develop and maintain a political climate of dialogue, reconciliation and openness to cooperation to enable the implementation of regional programs aimed at economic and social development for the benefit of the region's population⁹ (REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, n.d).

Covering between 2015/2016 and 2023, the BPB has among its indicators questions involving EU membership and accession, which correspond, respectively, to the questions “Do you think that EU membership of ECONOMY would be good, neither good nor bad, or bad?” and “When do you expect the accession of your economy to the EU to happen?”, with ‘ECONOMY’ being the country in which the research is aimed, i.e Serbia (REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020).

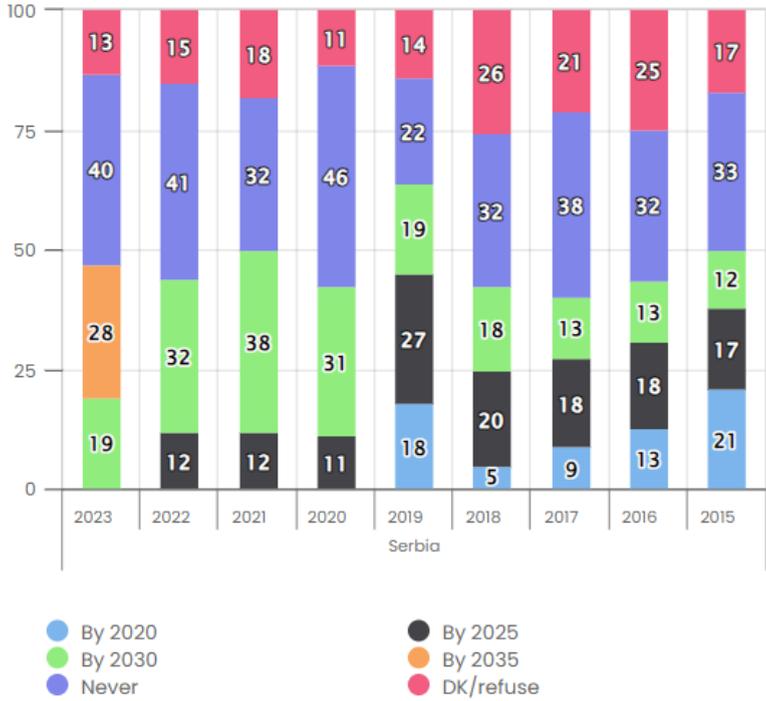
Addressing the first question – ‘When do you expect the accession of your economy to the EU to happen?’ – the scenario exposed in the BPB is characteristic and contrasts sharply with the promise originally made in Thessaloniki and reaffirmed over the years. Analyzing first the years 2015 and 2016, in which Vučić still wasn't the president, the understanding that circulated among the Serbian population, according to the data, was pessimistic. At the time, a considerable part of Serbian citizens – 33% in 2015 and 32% in 2016 – believed that Serbia's accession to the EU would *never happen*; a relative number – 17% in 2015 and 18% in 2016 – believed that it would happen by 2025 and 12% (2015) and 13% (2016), believed that Serbia's accession to the EU would happen by 2030 (REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020).

Since 2020, a pessimistic outlook on Serbia's accession to the European Union has persisted. In that year, a record-high 46% of Serbs believed accession would never happen, with 31% expecting it by 2030. The situation remained similar in 2022, with a slight decrease to 41% not believing in accession and a 1% increase in those expecting it by 2030

⁹ Complementary, the RCC, co-founded by the European Union, was officially launched at the meeting of the Ministers of Foreign Affairs of the South-East European Cooperation Process) in Sofia, in February 2008 (REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, n.d).

(REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020). In 2023, the percentage skeptical about accession decreased to 40%, marking the third-highest level recorded, albeit lower than in 2020 and 2022. Despite this, the percentage of individuals optimistic about accession remains higher, with 28% expecting it by 2035 and 19% by 2030 (REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020). as can be seen more specifically in Table 4 (REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020).

Table 4: EU Accession in Serbia (2015 - 2023)



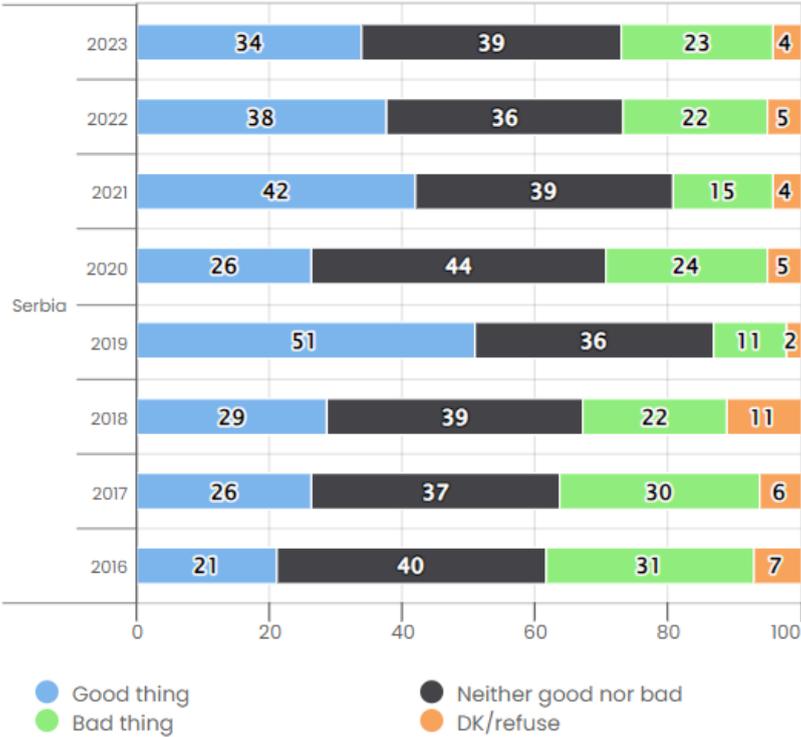
Source: REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020.

Similarly, the BPB also analyzes the understanding of how advantageous (or not) the entry of the WB6 into the EU would be, here in particular Serbia, based on the question “Do you think that EU membership of ECONOMY would be good, neither good nor bad, or bad?” Between 2016 and 2018, public opinion on Serbia's European Union (EU) membership was largely impartial, with around 39% to 40% believing it would neither be good nor bad. The year 2019 marked a positive shift, with only 11% perceiving membership negatively, 36% neutral, and a majority of 51% viewing it positively (REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020). However, this positive sentiment reversed in 2020, with a significant drop

to 26% considering membership positive. Conversely, the percentage perceiving it as negative increased from 36% to 44%, and the neutral stance also rose from 11% to 24% (REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020).

While the current outlook is neither highly pessimistic nor overly positive, over 20% of individuals still view EU membership negatively, with this figure reaching 22% in 2023. Notably, the percentage of individuals considering EU membership negatively has reached 34%, the fourth-highest recorded. Additionally, 39% of individuals express a neutral stance, neither perceiving it as positive nor negative (REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020). (REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020). In short, the specific understandings between 2016 and 2023 can be seen in more detail in the Table below (Table 5), which also includes the percentage of those who do not know or refuse to answer the question.

Table 5: EU Membership in Serbia (2016 - 2023)

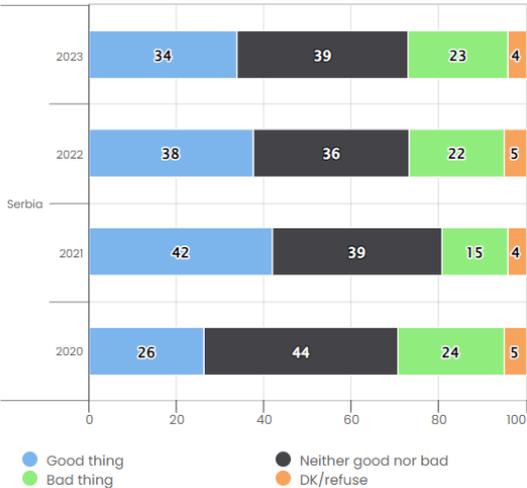


Source: REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020.

From 2020 to 2023, analyzing the two graphs below (Table 6 and 7) reveals preliminary insights into Serbia's perception of its EU membership. The first graph indicates that while EU membership was generally viewed positively or neutrally, negative sentiments

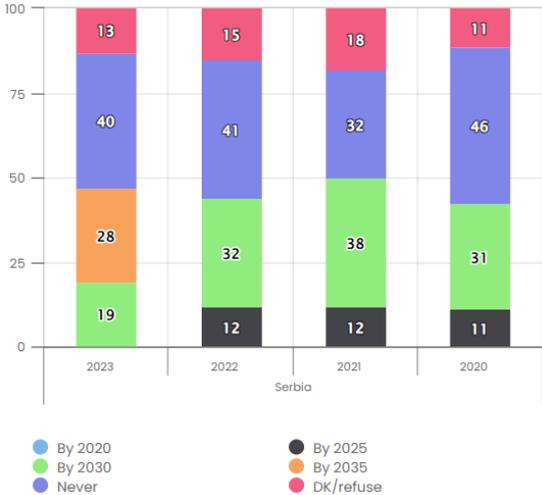
did not exceed 24%. Nonetheless, the prevailing belief was that Serbia's EU accession would never happen, with only 2021 showing a forecast for 2030 greater than the prediction for never. When simplified to a 'yes' or 'no' response, the majority anticipated Serbia completing its European trajectory, except for 2020. In 2023, 40% believed Serbia would never join the EU, 28% expected accession by 2035, and 19% by 2030. Furthermore, 39% considered membership neutral, 34% positive, and 23% negative (REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020).

Table 6: EU Membership in Serbia (2020 - 2023)



Source: REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020.

Table 7: EU Accession in Serbia (2020 - 2023)



Source: REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020.

This scenario may seem, at first, strange for a country that has the European path in its future and the weight of 20 years of promises that the Union unconditionally supports its entry into the European Bloc. This initial thought takes us back to questions already indirectly presented, especially in section 3.1.1 – 'The Balkans in the European Union: a never-ending path in a sea of promises' –, where the understanding of what enlargement is and its advantages to the Union were presented. At the time, I considered the advantages that this successful policy could bring, not only to the EU itself and its member states or candidates, but also to the continent as a whole.

The EU's enlargement policy is considered a potent tool, promoting profound political transformations in Candidate Countries and ensuring peace and stability (DEVIRIM; SCHULZ, 2009). Described by the Union as a geo-strategic investment in the peace, security, stability, and prosperity of the European continent, it is guided by the Union's fundamental values (ENLARGEMENT NEGOTIATIONS, 2023; TREATY ON EUROPEAN UNION, 2012). The EU, built on values of respect, freedom, democracy, equality, and human rights, expects new members to integrate these values on their path to European membership (TREATY ON EUROPEAN UNION, 2012). Becoming an EU member involves joining a community dedicated to values like peace, prosperity, and freedom (EUROPEAN UNION, 2011). It signifies embracing fundamental values of equity, democracy, and the rule of law, integrating into a large democratic family where members mutually depend on each other, and economies are mutually benefited and promoted (EUROPEAN UNION, 2011; TREATY ON EUROPEAN UNION, 2012). With this brief recap, highlighting the positive sides that the Union and enlargement appear to bring to the new Member States, the question arises, once again, where Serbia is, and what promises were made by the EU and this large democratic family.

Seeking to answer this question in brief, we can indicate that Serbia's path, beyond all bureaucratic reforms and conditionalities, can be summarized as 20 years of identical promises, as demonstrated in the last chapter. From 2003 to the present day, in several Summits, Communications, and Press Releases, Serbia is *part of a future that has not yet arrived and that is in no hurry to arrive*. By considering Serbia as part of a shared European history, values, and culture, the Union highlights that the European continent would benefit to the extent that Serbia is stable, prosperous, and fully part of the family of European nations (COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, 2008; CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION SERBIA, 2014). Therefore, the Union's interest

can be translated into the fact that Serbia should swiftly pursue political and economic reform and advance toward EU integration (COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES, 2008), transforming it, after all, into a modern member State of the European Union, with a population that is also modern and a member of the EU that carries, in a broader scenario, the respect for a series of European fundamental values (ECONOMIDES, 2020).

All these desires, and the understandings and speeches about the advantages that enlargement can bring to Serbia and the European continent, are summarized in the promise made in 2003. By expressing that the future of the WB lies in the Union and that this perspective has the unequivocal support of the EU, we can argue that all the benefits that enlargement can bring, all expressed above, will automatically be translated to Serbia as soon as the conditionalities are met and the country becomes an EU Member State. We must consider, therefore, that, if the opportunity presented itself, all States on the European continent would naturally wish to become members of the Union and take advantage of all the benefits that enlargement presents, from democracy and respect for European values to the economic benefits of a large European family. Membership, for citizens of candidate countries, would be something positive and the expectation of accession would be as quick as possible. Why, then, does BPB not reveal this very positive scenario? Why, according to the Union's reasoning, would Serbia not want for itself all the benefits that participating in the European family can bring? Even more specifically, why do the tables considered currently present a scenario where membership in the EU is seen as good by 34% and neutral by 39%? Why do 40% consider that Serbia's accession will never occur, and another 28% and 19% consider that it will occur in 2035 and 2030, respectively, which would take Serbia's European path to last at least 21 years (REGIONAL COOPERATION COUNCIL, 2020)?

Marked by divisions and promises that appear to become increasingly empty, the opposition between European considerations and the position of the Serbian population not only reflects the perception of arrogance on the part of European institutions, but also opens up a space to consider, in a more specific way, the imbrications that cover Serbia's European trajectory, going beyond benefits that, in the Serbian case, may be in the background compared to more urgent issues.

Therefore, in general, this scenario reveals a lack of momentum from the EU, which waited too long to bring the WB countries into its orbit, according to the considerations of Tanja Mišćević, Serbia's Europe minister, in November 2023 (SORGI, 2023). Likewise, this

delay also materialized with President Aleksandar Vučić's speech in 2023, where he highlighted that Serbia was “not enthusiastic” about EU membership anymore, adding to the already pessimistic scenario – he also added he was “pessimistic” about Serbia entering the Union any time soon – the fact that the Union is not that enthusiastic about Serbia as it thought it was (PREUSSEN, 2023). Pessimism is also reflected in the population, which reflected the consideration of its president in that 44% of individuals were against Serbia's EU membership, and only 35% were in favor (SEKULARAC; EMMOTT, 2022). Therefore, when considering the implications that run through Serbia's European trajectory within this pessimistic scenario, marked by a contradiction between understandings – on the one hand, the promises of the EU and the benefits of enlargement, and on the other, Serbia's European trajectory marked by pessimisms – I will return to central elements of the Serbian conditionalities imposed by the Union. In this sense, considering the 20 years of promises and stories between the two actors involves returning, in general, to the 35 essential Chapters for the realization of the Serbian trajectory and, in more specifically, to Chapter 35: Item 1. This is the remaining objective of this section and, mainly, the object of the next one, central to the analysis of this monograph. However, for now, I highlight how the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo is placed within the Union, and what tools the EU uses to dialogue with the two States.

In this sense, it is necessary to briefly discuss what normalization means for the EU. From the Common Position of the European Union (2015), it is defined that the advancement of Serbia's EU accession negotiations will be guided by its progress in preparing for accession. Nevertheless, this progress will be measured by, among other elements, Serbia's continued engagement toward a visible and sustainable improvement in relations with Kosovo. In other words, what is expressed by the Union involves the fact that Serbian progress involves advancing normalization with Kosovo based on continuous engagement, moving towards a path with normal, good-neighborly relations with each other based on equal rights (EUROPEAN UNION EXTERNAL ACTION, 2023).

Likewise, so that it is possible to explicitly consider what normal and good-neighborly relations are that advance Serbian progress in its European trajectory, we will briefly return to the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue. Although not yet accepted by the parties, the European Union proposed, in February 2023, an Agreement on the path to normalization between Kosovo and Serbia, which presents in its articles essential indicators to analyze how the normalization of relations is understood by Serbia and, more specifically, by Vučić in his

speeches. For this, I will look at Articles 2 and 4, where the latter defines that “Serbia will not object to Kosovo’s membership in any international organization.”, and the first that

Both Parties will be guided by the aims and principles laid down in the United Nations Charter, especially those of the sovereign equality of all States, respect for their independence, autonomy and territorial integrity, the right of self-determination, the protection of human rights, and non-discrimination. (EUROPEAN UNION EXTERNAL ACTION, 2023, n.p. Emphasis added)

Considering the normative field, when we consider Chapter 35 of the acquis - ‘Other Issues’ -, it’s Item 1 about the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Pristina. Thus, when we bring up the location of Kosovo, the Union highlights that positive progress has been made since the first agreement in the implementation of its main elements, which permeate full respect of the principles of inclusive regional cooperation, dialogue and spirit of compromise to resolve outstanding issues, cooperation with EULEX and implementation in good faith of all agreements reached in the dialogue with Kosovo (CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION SERBIA, 2014). In this case, the role of the Commission and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy/Vice-President of the Commission also stands out, who will monitor closely and continuously the efforts that Serbia promotes in normalizing relations with Pristina, and will also be tasked of the Commission and the High Representative to report at least twice yearly to the Council (CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION SERBIA, 2014; EUROPEAN UNION EXTERNAL ACTION, 2022; CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION SERBIA, 2015).

Finally, the Union also highlights that, by the time of the Conference in 2014, Serbia had reached the required level of adherence to the membership criteria, particularly highlighting the crucial priority of initiating measures for a noticeable and lasting enhancement of relations with Kosovo (CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION SERBIA, 2014). In a complementary way, with Chapter 35 Item 1, Serbia, as the EU highlights, fully understand “(...) that the **EU accession process and normalisation process should run parallel and support one another (...)**”, while the country also “(...) will **remain entirely committed** to the continuation of the normalisation process and its dialogue with Pristina” (CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION SERBIA, 2015, p.2. Emphasis added).

Despite all the advances mentioned, which will also be developed later, the basis for understanding the beginning of relations between Serbia and Kosovo in the EU is in the Conference document itself. In it, as emphasized, Serbia demonstrates its understanding of the complementarity and parallel that exists between the accession process and the normalization process. Therefore, for the country's European trajectory to be achieved, Serbia must necessarily normalize relations with Kosovo and must remain committed to the continuation of the normalization process and its dialogue with Pristina (CONFERENCE ON ACCESSION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION SERBIA, 2015). The coordination between the two processes can also be confirmed in the speech of the former foreign minister of Germany, Sigmar Gabriel, in which he confirms that to enter the European Union, Serbia must necessarily accept the independence of Kosovo, highlighting that this is a condition central in the path towards Europe (BYTYCI, 2018) and the normalization of relations.

Within the scope of the EU, one of the tools used in the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo is the 'Belgrade-Pristina Dialogue', where the EU facilitates dialogue between the two States aiming to achieve a comprehensive legally binding normalization agreement so that it is possible for each one to pursue their respective European path (EUROPEAN UNION EXTERNAL ACTION, 2022; BOJOVIĆ; BURAZER, 2018). This process began in 2011 with the so-called technical dialogue, resulting in agreements involving integrated border/boundary management and representation of Kosovo in regional forums, for example. Ending in 2012, the technical dialogue gave way to political dialogue, which has lasted until the present day and had as its milestone the Brussels Agreement of 2013 (BOJOVIĆ; BURAZER, 2018). This agreement, which has 15 points, outlined the fundamental principles and structure of the normalization process, thereby establishing a groundwork that would underpin all subsequent negotiations. However, it is highlighted that it was largely unimplemented, being a point of contestation, despite it being necessary for Serbia to engage in reaching further agreements, furthering the normalization in good faith (EUROPEAN UNION, 2018; BOJOVIĆ; BURAZER, 2018).

Therefore, to date, understandings between the EU and Serbia reveal some basic premises concerning Kosovo: the normalization of the relationship between Belgrade and Pristina is essential for the European trajectory that Serbia has been following, being part of the *acquis*. Thus, from the moment it is included in the conditionalities, as highlighted by the Conference on Accession to the EU (2015), the normalization process and the EU accession process are closely linked and must continue in parallel, supporting one another.

However, as already analyzed at other times, the relationship between Kosovo and Serbia is not only deep and historical, intertwined with different narratives and disagreements, but also not “normalized” most of the time. What the European Union's pronouncements reveal, first of all, is the trajectory and the final result of a European path that Serbia must follow: as soon as the conditionalities are met, and its membership in the Union is accepted, Serbia would become not only be part of the EU, but also have normalized relations with Kosovo, a state that is considered the core of its identity. Anyway, beyond the pronouncements and expectations of what the final result should be, both Serbia and the EU face very particular general scenarios, which have a direct effect on all the understandings presented here.

Starting with the Union, which faces a process of resistance to enlargement, some relevant elements of this process permeate the Candidate States themselves, which may display behaviors of non-compliance with the conditions that were set or by the EU. Despite having different sources, a general understanding of non-compliance can address a scenario where the candidates or prospective members lack the capacity, whether political or administrative, to fulfill the conditions set forth by the EU (ECONOMIDES, 2020).

Arising from domestic causes, non-compliance is also related to compliance processes that can be difficult to achieve as they are vague and over-generalized, making their monitoring, consequently, inaccurate; after all, it is not possible to know when a condition has been reached if it is ill-defined (ECONOMIDES, 2020). However, to more precisely address the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo, compliance will be considered not from its definition, but from the willingness of the WB State to comply with the conditionalities. Non-compliance, as strongly determined by a lack of political will, also relates to highly political and politicized conditionalities, presenting a dangerous side in which political and economic elites may be reluctant to fulfill the conditionalities (ECONOMIDES, 2020).

The difference, however, for Kosovo's relationship with Serbia will not only be in a lack of will and the reluctance of economic elites, but in something more essential for Serbia. The Serbian refusal to recognize Kosovo runs through a lack of will, however, more than that, it is the result of a particular understanding and construction of what Kosovo means for Serbia and, mainly, what the recognition of independence and normalization of relations would mean. Thus, what is at stake for Serbia is not just a territory, but its foundational narrative that shapes and builds its identity, something that directly clashes with the need to normalize relations.

In this sense, even though Serbia appears more pessimistic, and not as enthusiastic about its European trajectory, its accession is still essential and continues to occur. As a consequence, the normalization of the relationship with Kosovo and the Belgrade-Pristina Dialogues continue to take place, key points for the completion of this trajectory. Therefore, from this scenario, what I will seek to analyze in the next section is how Serbian identity is (re)constructed based on the narratives that are mobilized by Vučić, taking into account the enlargement process and its conditionality of normalization with relations with Kosovo. In other words, I will analyze Vucic's speeches to understand how normalization does (not) present itself. By not recognizing Kosovo's independence, Serbia's European trajectory is risky from the moment that one of the main indicators of the normalization of relations – essential conditionality – is not fulfilled and, even more so, challenged. The objective will be to understand why this trajectory is challenged and how important Kosovo is for Serbia. I will therefore look at the construction of Serbia's foundational narrative through discourses on normalization, also seeking to understand how Serbian identity is shaped through narratives.

4.2 “How Badly We Need Peace”? The Enlargement Process and the Entanglement between Belgrade and Pristina

Aleksandar Vučić, the current president of Serbia, born in 1970 in Belgrade, has a distinguished political career that predates the Kosovo War and EU negotiation processes. Notably, he served as a deputy in the National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia in 1993 and held the position of General Secretary of the Serbian Radical Party from 1994 to 2008. In 1998, he was appointed Minister of Information by Slobodan Milošević. In 2012, Vučić, along with Tomislav Nikolić, founded the Serbian Progressive Party, assuming the role of Vice-President (PREDSEDNIK, n.d; WORLD ECONOMIC FORUM, n.d). That same year, he was appointed Minister of Defense, First Deputy Prime Minister, and unanimously elected president of the Serbian Progressive Party.

Among the acts described in his biography, there is a mention of his participation in the negotiations between Belgrade and Pristina under European supervision, where the 2013 Brussels Agreement was signed, creating a realistic basis “(...) for Serbian people living in Kosovo and Metohija (...)” (PREDSEDNIK, n.d, n.p). Between 2014 and 2016, Vučić served as Prime Minister of Serbia, becoming the country's president in 2017, where he governed for

5 years, until 2022, and was re-elected for a second term. Also in his biography, his vision of Serbia stands out as

(...) an economically reconstructed, organized, modern European country; regional leader in economy, politics, infrastructure, energy, stability of any kind, affirmation of human rights and freedoms but also in education, culture, science, enlightenment sports and natality (PREDSIEDNIK, n.d, n.p).

As with previous Serbian governments, the issue of Kosovo, and also the process of enlargement to the European Union, occupy central positions on the country's foreign policy agenda. Understanding Kosovo's position in Serbian identity and its implications for the process of accession to the Union requires that some of the questions posed by Subotić (2016) be returned.

According to Subotić (2016), narratives are stories and, more specifically, stories with specific political purposes. When we think about the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo, we then return to discourses covered in section 2.3, presenting the relationship between the two States over the years. After Kosovo declared independence, the 'heart' and the 'body' were separated, and how can Serbia – the 'body' – continue to exist after losing its 'heart'? How does Serbia continue to exist, even after losing such a foundational and essential part of its identity? And even more so, considering the contemporary scenario, how does Serbia preserve its identity in the accession process, and more specifically Chapter 35, in which the normalization of relations with Kosovo is essential? According to Subotić (2016, p.611), “If Kosovo - the core of Serbian state identity – is gone, then whither Serbia itself? If a policy change undermines the foundational state narrative, then whither the narrative?”

In this sense, understanding narratives as schematic templates in which certain elements are (de)activated also allows us to emphasize specific characteristics of a story. Furthermore, conceptualizing narratives as those templates comprising distinct elements and layers enables us to trace how political actors strategically invoke certain elements of the narrative while suppressing others (SUBOTIĆ, 2016). Although the proposed policy change must align with the overarching narrative schematic template for public comprehension, it can be formulated in a manner that accentuates specific aspects of the story while conveniently overlooking others (SUBOTIĆ, 2016). In another sense, the narratives are also highly selective and purposefully constructed, with states in need of a sense of autobiography, a story about their origin, and what unites them as a group. This autobiography then allows States to have a

feeling of stability as narratives do not exist in isolation, but rather are inserted into everyday life and, mainly, into discourse (SUBOTIĆ, 2016).

At a certain point, the fabricated narratives reach a tipping point when a significant number of social actors embrace and adopt it as a social reality. At this juncture, the narrative becomes hegemonic. Employing discursive coercion, political actors rhetorically constrain each other within the established narrative, and, consequently, identity claims evolve into a manifestation of power enacted through the narrative gun (SUBOTIĆ, 2016). To understand whether narratives are deeply embedded within a society, certain alternatives can be adopted, considering mainly in this analysis public opinion surveys of the general public, careful textual analysis of selected media reports and government documents.

From the analysis of public opinion, media reports, and government documents, it is possible to understand more clearly the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo especially in the scenario of enlargement into the European Union. How does Serbia rebuild its identity when inserted into an accession process that requires the normalization of relations with the State that is understood as foundational to its history? How is this (re)construction taking place under the government of Aleksandar Vučić, president of Serbia?

First, to begin to understand and answer these questions, one must first understand the meaning that Kosovo, the *idea of Kosovo*, presents to the current President Vučić. Therefore, analyzing the speech given by the president when he took office in 2017 can provide insights to begin this analysis. So that discourse analysis can be properly developed, certain fragments - related to Kosovo, Serbia, and even the Union - will be highlighted, also identifying their contexts.

When Vučić assumed the presidency for the first time in 2017, his oath of office demarcated not only how the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo would occur but also reiterated Serbia's founding narrative, briefly exposed in a larger context in section 2.3. Thus, in Serbia's oath of office, the president promises to “(...) dedicate all my energies to the **preservation of sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Republic of Serbia, including Kosovo ... as its integral part (...)**” (PREDSIEDNIK, 2017. Emphasis added).

The consideration of Kosovo as an *integral part of Serbia*, even after the country's independence, reveals not only that Serbia considers it as an integral part of its territory, but also that independence is seen as illegitimate. For Serbian identity and foundational narrative, Kosovo still appears to fit into the same categories that were observed under Milošević's government and after, marking a continuity in certain elements of the narrative. This is

essential to demarcate a first element in the foundational narratives of Serbia that is *still activated* across time, which also constructs and shapes its identity.

Likewise, in the Statement delivered at the National Assembly in 2017, Vučić highlights how

Divided Serbia and Serbia crushed down by interests cannot reach anywhere. Torn by ambition, divided by vanities, in fight over ideology, religion, party, nation, club, this and any other country does nothing else but signing the eternal act of remaining forever small, forever and in every sense poor one and forever free from any hope for better tomorrow (PREDESDNIK, 2017, n.p. Emphasis added.)

Just as in Milošević's government, the lack of unity, a characteristic also associated with the Battle of Kosovo, hindered the Serbian path, leading the population to agony, as Milošević expressed when he announced that “the lack of unity and betrayal in Kosovo **will continue to follow the Serbian people like an evil fate through the whole of its history.**” (MILOŠEVIĆ, 1989, n.p. Emphasis added). That makes unity and division contexts that profoundly affected Serbia in the Battle of Kosovo, in 1989 and 2017, with Vučić already in office, marking a second element that *still is being activated* in the foundation narrative of Serbia, suffering from a unity/division scenario.

In a way, by highlighting the need for unity, and how divisions hold the country back, a shift and continuity in the founding narrative can occur. Firstly, when union is constructed as necessary and a divided Serbia as something that goes nowhere, while Kosovo is understood as an integral part of the territory (even in legislation), the speeches involving this union can help guarantee the maintenance of the understanding of Kosovo as part of Serbia. Talking about unity, then, is talking about Serbia and Kosovo, as a *whole*, united in a single territory. However, the discourse of unity, if related to a broader context where Serbia understands and recognizes the need for dialogue, could mark a fundamental difference with some of Milošević's positions. By declaring in his speeches that Serbia will not give up Kosovo, Milošević does not rule out, especially when we remember the Gazimestan speech, the possibility of armed conflicts, a prediction that later proved to be correct. Therefore, if this scenario materializes in other speeches, that may indicate a *fundamental change* in how relations with Kosovo are constructed in Serbian foreign policy, from being previously open to armed conflicts to a Serbia that *favors negotiation and dialogue*.

Likewise, the consideration of Serbia as a people who have been victimized seems to be undergoing a change, and could be understood as a characteristic that will be deactivated under Vučić's government. On that occasion, in his inauguration speech in 2017, Vučić

admitted that the Serbian people are not a chosen people – “(...) neither the biggest nor the smartest, that we do not live in some kind of a heaven (...)” (PREDSIEDNIK, 2017, n.p) - and that it is time to face the challenges and believe in themselves and Serbia. Still, if this understanding of the Serbian people as a people victimized by great powers can be deactivated, what would be activated in its place? Throughout Vučić's speeches to the National Assembly and the General Assembly, Serbia's role in promoting peace and dialogue is highlighted at various times. Addressing a more general scenario, Vučić first accentuates how he, in his first term, will *speak to everyone*. In this way, this can be the first way to understand the role of Kosovo in the identity and autobiographical narrative of Serbia today and, also, how this is reflected in the normalization process.

Therefore, to understand to what extent the foundational narrative of Serbia as a State victim of great powers may be changing, it is necessary to consider, as mentioned, what it is transforming into. Throughout the Statement at the National Assembly in 2017 and the 71st Session in the General Assembly, also in 2017, Vučić underlines how he will “(...) talk to everyone, offer solutions, insist on dialogue and compromise (...)” (PREDSIEDNIK, 2017, n.p) for believing that this is the basis for all progress and every secure future (PREDSIEDNIK, 2017). The essence of its political actions, in this sense, will involve peace and stability and, despite safeguarding the integrity of Serbia, the discussion with the Kosovo Albanians *will always be accepted*, as, from this, it is possible to preserve and defend peace (PREDSIEDNIK, 2017). In turn, in the 71st Session, Vučić develops that the “Condition number one for the prosperous future of and for all us in that region is how to preserve peace and tranquility” (REPUBLIC OF SERBIA, 2017, p.2), something that Serbia promotes because, according to the president, it is also an actor that *invests a lot of efforts* in stabilizing the situation in the region, an investment in a better future (REPUBLIC OF SERBIA, 2017).

Therefore, the Serbia apparently being built with Vučić's arrival in power is a Serbia that promotes and believes in dialogue to resolve problems and promote stability and peace in the WB region. Given this, considering the importance of dialogue concerning Kosovo and the EU, I will also return to how Vučić places Serbia in favor of peace in the discussion. Still based on the Statement and the 71st Session, Vučić calls attention to the fact that there should be no doubts about the European path, to which Serbia is committed, and that the country will continue on its path (PREDSIEDNIK, 2017). However, when Vučić addresses the relationship with Pristina within the Union, some initial contradictions appear, but all within what can be considered the foundational narrative and Serbian identity. Thus, reaching a political solution

to the Kosovo problem is a national priority for Serbia, but Vučić quickly recalls that the unilateral declaration of independence of “(...) so called 'Kosovo' (...)” (REPUBLIC OF SERBIA, 2017, p.2) is not recognized. This point marks a turning point with the former identification of Serbia as a victim, giving way to something more. Vučić highlights that he “(...) will not speak about disrespect for our territorial integrity and sovereignty (...)” (REPUBLIC OF SERBIA, 2017, p.2), but rather about his efforts to resolve a centuries-old problem, raising two claims that reinforce and possibly modify Serbian autobiography and identity.

First, by referring to Kosovo with the term ‘so called’ and stating that its illegitimate independence is a disrespect to the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Serbia, Vučić places Kosovo as *inherently part* of Serbia, making future scenarios of recognition impossible. At the same time, when he wishes to point up his efforts to solve the problem, the autobiography of the Serbian state begins to change slightly, from a victimized state relatively isolated from the rest of the continent to a state that has the initiative for action and agency to dialogue and progress, as desired. This new understanding, however, does not mean that Serbia may, through its efforts, be inclined to recognize Kosovo's independence. In addition to the statements accentuated above, which make clear the place of Kosovo in Serbian autobiography and identity, one more speech by Vučić can be added to this panorama. In his Statement in 2017, the current president recognizes that he wants to open an internal dialogue “(...) on the issue of Kosovo and Metohija, with all our differences, with no prejudice (...)” (PREDSIEDNIK, 2017); yet, he adds that this dialogue must be carried out in compliance with the Constitution of Serbia, the same that recognizes Kosovo as an autonomous province of Serbia and an integral part of the territory. Opening an internal dialogue respecting the Constitution, therefore, simply involves creating a channel of communication in which Kosovo returns to its provincial status, despite its independence.

In addition, at the 71st Session, Vučić put the Brussels Dialogue on the agenda, where he stated that everything that was achieved was the result of difficult compromises and unambiguous concessions (REPUBLIC OF SERBIA, 2017). However, the turning point comes from the moment Vučić admits that concessions and compromises were made “(...) but still mostly on our [Serbian] side” (REPUBLIC OF SERBIA, 2017, p.3). This declaration, together with the new understanding of Serbia as an actor now fighting for peace, dialogue and stability, alters its foundational narrative and identity as Serbia becomes not a victimized

state, deactivating this understood, but rather a *state possibly misunderstood*: despite all their efforts and concessions, they are still the ones who *gives in the most*.

Nevertheless, considering Serbia and its relationship with Kosovo in isolation is not enough to understand the State's autobiography and the definition of its identity, since both States, but mainly Serbia, are inserted in accession processes to the EU, each in their own way. After analyzing contemporary updates in the Serbian foundational narrative and European identity seen in Vučić's discourse, it is time to analyze enlargement and its conditionalities, with a focus on normalization, to understand the place of these processes in the (re)construction of Serbian identity and formulation of narratives.

Considering the entire path outlined to date, from the history of enlargement to European promises and the path of the WB6, the normalization process will be briefly recapped, bringing back what is essential to the analysis. The analysis of Serbian identity and narratives, starting in 2017, is intricately connected to the EU's commitment in 2003, affirming steadfast support for the European perspective of WB countries, including Serbia (EU-WESTERN BALKANS SUMMIT, 2003). Despite these assurances, candidate countries like Serbia are obligated to fulfill negotiated conditionalities, notably the normalization of relations with Kosovo, a critical aspect of Chapter 35, Item 1, and a fundamental component of the accession process (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, n.d; EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, 2023; EUROPEAN COUNCIL, 2023). However, the ongoing lack of normalization, particularly Serbia's refusal to recognize Kosovo, remains a significant hurdle to achieving normalized relations.

For conceptual reasons, aiming for a clearer definition of what normalization means for the European Union, and consequently for Kosovo and Serbia, I consider as an example the Agreement on the path to normalization between Kosovo and Serbia of 2023. The pending Agreement, proposed by the Union and awaiting acceptance, stipulates Serbia's non-opposition to Kosovo's international organization accession and both parties commit to principles emphasizing sovereign equality, independence, autonomy, territorial integrity, and the right of self-determination (EUROPEAN UNION EXTERNAL ACTION, 2023). Fulfilling these conditions is pivotal for Serbia's EU accession, implying the eventual recognition of Kosovo's independence.

This recognition, however, has not yet been achieved, and at certain moments during the enlargement process, relationship between the two States became more tense, despite the EU's efforts. In 2018, for example, with the creation of the Kosovo army, Vučić accused the

country of forming it illegally, focusing only on force and attacks on Serbia. Likewise, Vučić, when considering the dialogues in Brussels, highlights that Serbia continued the dialogue processes, desiring a compromise, *putting itself at risk for more peace*, which was much needed (PREDSIEDNIK, 2018). Vučić's speech, in this sense, appears to add to the normalization process the characteristic that developed in his autobiography from 2017 onwards: that of a country intensely involved in dialogue, putting itself at risk - "I put myself at risk, both personal and political, and everyone, saying how badly we need peace. I was the target of the entire Serbian public (...)" (PREDSIEDNIK, 2018, n.p) - to reach peace and *not be reciprocated* by the other side, abdicating and taking much greater risks.

At the same time, the narrative of Serbia as a country that is a victim of great powers was mobilized again in 2018, considering the relationship with Kosovo. On that occasion, in a conversation with university students, Vučić argued that, in the realm of politics, Serbia faced a considerable challenge when contending with major global powers. The struggle is not directed against Pristina and its political representatives; rather, it is Pristina that engages in conflict with Serbia, collaboratively with entities such as Washington and London, who assert their influence worldwide, in every corner of the globe (TANJUG, 2018). In this way, compared to the international, Serbia's autobiographical narrative and its identity are nuanced in a way that not all elements are deactivated all the time, and other elements can be activated when appropriated and deactivated when not important, like the image of Serbia as a victimization nation.

Nonetheless, when we consider again the EU facilitated dialogue with Priština, Vučić, over the years, continued to emphasize being committed to regional cooperation, in addition to highlighting, at other times, that Serbia needed to continue its European path (PREDSIEDNIK, 2019; PREDSIEDNIK, 2019). This is essential insofar as we understand that, although the victimization narrative is nuanced across Vučić, being (de) activated at times, the new narrative of Serbia as committed to peace, stability and dialogue appears to be more prominent in the Serbian narrative, being constantly activated across the speeches. When related to the broader scenario, Vučić once again brought up Serbia as one that "(...) seeks peace and stability in the region (...)" (PREDSIEDNIK, 2019, n.p), accentuating the Serbian commitment to maintaining stability in WB (PREDSIEDNIK, 2020). At other times, determined to resolve the relationship between Belgrade and Pristina through dialogue, Vučić emphasized that "A compromise solution observing the interest of stability and the future of

the entire region can be achieved through acknowledgment of the legitimate interests of Serbia” (PREDSEDNIK, 2019, n.p).

The Serbian position presented so far, open to dialogue, and desiring peace and stability in the region appears to be, at least in the foreground, in line with EU conditionalities and, mainly, the normalization of relations through dialogue. Then, the change in the Serbian narrative and identity may also be related to an interest in the Union and its enlargement process. This was a partial shift away from a representation of a Serbia which found itself the victim of conspiracies that wanted to destroy it, taken by a feeling of victimhood and a sense of injustice, in deep isolation from Europe (SUBOTIĆ, 2010; SUBOTIĆ, 2011); and towards a representation of Serbia as a peace-desiring WB country that remains misunderstood by its neighbors. Thus, in previous governments, even though Serbia's national priority was to enter the Union, identification with Europe was not immediate and was not a 'taken-for-granted' attribute (SUBOTIĆ, 2010). In this sense, despite arguing that this identification *remains not immediate or taken for granted*, the way the Serbian presidency narrates the country's identity appears to have changed to some extent, at least while the enlargement process maintained its momentum.

Yet, when we consider the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo in the normalization process, what appears to be emerging is a scenario of an *ambiguous identity and narrative*. While Serbia claims to promote dialogue at all times and seek peace and stability, little progress involving normalization – even Serbia's European trajectory as a whole – appears to be made. Even though the conditionality of Serbia's entry into the EU – a path that lasts years and promises that last even longer – is firmly linked to the normalization of relations, the trajectory still appears not to advance, and sometimes even to retreat.

In short, approaching the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo within the EU is to consider the (de)activation of several narrative elements that shape Serbian identity, in addition to the mobilization itself of what we can understand as normalization of relations. Vučić, by opening himself to dialogue with Kosovo, however emphasizing that this must occur under the Constitution and Serbian interests, disputes the meaning of normalization presented by the EU, of what can be understood by normal and good-neighborly relations with Kosovo: for him, normalization must occur within Serbian legislation, with a good relationship being one in which Kosovo continues to be an integral part of Serbian territory. At the same time, a context in which Serbia goes through situations of union and division

continues to be activated in its narrative, relating to the narrative constructed in Milošević, of a Serbia crushed down and turned up, eternally persecuted due to the lack of union in Kosovo.

However, in comparison to Milošević's government, in which the conflict was constantly activated and seen as a possible tool to keep Kosovo in Serbia, Vučić partially deactivates this narrative in favor of a discourse centered on peace, stability, and dialogue of a Serbia that gives in a lot and becomes misunderstood, making sacrifices and putting itself in danger.

In opposition, one last point, but still essential, must be added. Vučić, more than the current president of Serbia, an authoritarian leader with strong ties to Russia or a politician based on far-right nationalism, was also information minister during Milošević's government, between 1998 and 2000. This fact, together with other situations in Serbia under Vučić's government, reveal continuities in Serbia's relationship with Kosovo, going beyond the EU and the speech presented by the current president. Thus, even though Vučić has claimed to be in favor of dialogue, peace, and stability over the years, Kosovo's independence continues to be emphatically and definitively denied, mainly by Vučić. By mobilizing the country's Constitution, Vučić expresses that the country's independence will never be recognized, at the same time that he foments discord by mobilizing key points from its past: “(...) I always repeat, that Kosovo is a part of the Republic of Serbia, it is written in the Constitution. It was and will be” (KOSOVO ONLINE, 2023, n.p). What is happening in practice, then, beyond negotiations with the EU, is the denial of Kosovo's right to become independent, forcing it to constantly seek recognition, at the same time that the country's history is attacked by Vučić, for example, when denying the veracity of the Rečak/Račak massacre¹⁰ (PRISHTINA INSIGHT, 2019; BALKAN INSIGHT, 2019). In 2019, the massacre was denied by Vučić, who declared it as something fabricated – “(...) I am repeating it now: the crime in Recak was fabricated” –, a statement he says he defends every day (PRISHTINA INSIGHT, 2019).

Similarly, the year 2023 was also marked by tensions and pronouncements by Vučić that only highlight that, in practice, his pronouncements of peace, stability, and dialogue only hold up to a certain point. After attacks on a monastery near Kosovo's border with Serbia and an ambush by Serbian paramilitaries on a Kosovan police patrol (O'CARROLL, 2023;

¹⁰ The Rečak/Račk Massacre occurred on January 15, 1999, by Serbian forces, resulting in the execution of forty-five Kosovo Albanians and no justice or conviction (SENGUPTA, 2019). Subsequently, international investigations were carried out, and the UN Security Council found the Serbian security forces guilty of the murder of the innocents. The Massacre also contributed to the NATO campaign on the territory of Serbia (WILESMITH, 2019; SENGUPTA, 2019)

ALJAZEERA, 2023), the presence of Serbian forces on the border increased exponentially, indicating the escalation in relations which led to the involvement of the White House, which called for the drawdown of the Serbian military forces (ROGERS, 2023; BORGER, 2023). By declaring that “You can kill us all. Serbia will never recognize the independence of Kosovo, that monster creation that you made by bombing Serbia” (O’CARROLL, 2023, n.p. Emphasis Added), together with the above scenarios, Vučić at the same time deactivates his narrative in favor of dialogue and activates a continuation with the Milošević government by mobilizing authoritarian positions that spread and foment hate speech and discord in an already fragile relationship, making it possible to demarcate nuances and narrative disputes that permeate the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo.

5. Conclusion

Even after all this trajectory, concluding about the (re)construction of the Serbian identity considering enlargement to the EU is not a simple task, much less one that can be done temporarily or based on a single reasoning.

One of the first ways to approach the relationship between Serbia and the Union occurs through an ambiguous construction. In this scenario, returning to the various speeches analyzed in section 4.2, one question stands out: why, despite Vučić's openness to dialogue, and the EU's support in mediating the relationship between the two countries, little progress in the normalization of relations has been made? I believe that the main answer to this question lies in the ambiguous construction of the relationships that Serbia has shaped over the years, contributing to the (re)construction of its identity and the (re)formulation of its founding narrative as it exports itself as an actor open to dialogue, peace, and stability in the region, with the issue of Kosovo as a national priority, and, at the same time, causes and promotes discord and hate speeches in the country.

At the same time, together with this openness to dialogue and calls for peace, Serbia constantly denies recognizing Kosovo's independence (as required by one of the clauses present in the Agreement presented by the EU), shaping its discourse in such a way that the 'guilt' is on the other. The country, in reality, is the one that gives in more than the others, that makes more concessions, and is misunderstood, thus disputing the very understanding of what the conditionalities are. Using the language that Subotić provides us from the analysis of narratives, it can be concluded that, in this ambiguous relationship, Serbia maintained the founding narrative of Kosovo as an integral part of the country constantly activated, resorting to justifications such as the Constitution, at the same time in which it activates other elements that place it in the position of a country that desires peace and stability, being, deep down, a misunderstood nation, all of this while, in practice, promoted old misunderstandings and wounds by, for example, denying the very event of the Rečak/Račak massacre.

It is worth noting that, from 2022 onward, the European continent faced increased security concerns due to the Russian invasion of Ukraine. In response, the EU sought to expedite the enlargement process, particularly for the WB6 countries. However, this effort unfolded against a backdrop of broader challenges, encompassing both resistance to enlargement within the EU and a lack of enthusiasm from candidate countries. This has led to

a pessimistic scenario, with minimal progress in the enlargement process (EUROPEAN COMMISSION, 2022; NECHEV; JUDAH, 2022; PREUSSEN, 2023).

In 2022, a shift in Serbia's stance marked a departure from the previous years' emphasis on dialogue and normalization of relations with Kosovo. This change is particularly evident in Serbia's reluctance to support Kosovo's membership in international organizations, as outlined in the EU-proposed Agreement's Articles 2 and 4. The principle of normalization, which was once a focal point, now faces challenges from Serbia when these articles are contested. Notably, in 2023, Serbia opposed Kosovo's entry into NATO and reiterated its refusal to recognize Kosovo's independence, emphasizing that such recognition is against its Constitution (JELISAVAC, 2023; EURONEWS, 2023; TASS, 2023).

The emphasis on other factors, – additionally the influence of the Russian invasion on the European continent and resistance to enlargement – also raises new questions. With a Serbia that is no longer as enthusiastic about enlargement (PREUSSEN, 2023), and maintaining the EU conditionalities set out in the 2023 Agreement, how can Serbian identity be localized again? This question opens up two scenarios of answers: if Serbia continues its European path and recognizes the independence of Kosovo – something that is, at the very least, unlikely nowadays –, its identity will be transformed, not being the same Serbia of today, 2023, or at least not just it. Entering the Union and recognizing Kosovo does not just mean losing a territory, but rather a central part of what's constructed as its identity and its founding narrative, while transforming into a modern Serbia, a member of the European Union, which carries within itself the values of the Bloc after the various transformations – but, in any case, a Serbia without its heart.

What is at stake, therefore, is more than territory, but rather the foundational narrative that builds, shapes, and constructs Serbian identity around Kosovo. It is something bigger than the EU and the accession process, it is what is understood to be the heart of Serbia and the center of its history and memory, something reflected in Vučić's speeches and in the Serbian population itself. The aforementioned ambiguity, in this sense, is maintained by Vučić in view of the population, which is not passive and has its own views. Kosovo, in this sense, is more important than mere classifications such as 'Europe but not Europe' and 'less-Europe' insofar as Serbia disputes what it understands by normalization – which is, for them, not incompatible with maintaining Kosovo as an autonomous province – and does not recognize the country's independence, making little progress in this conditionality and in the enlargement process as a whole.

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