

Critical Approaches to Southeast Europe



**STIGMA,  
FEAR AND  
FOREIGN  
POLICY** SERBIA'S  
DESTIGMATIZATION  
DILEMMA IN THE  
WESTERN BALKANS

Milan Krstić

 CEU PRESS

## Stigma, Fear and Foreign Policy

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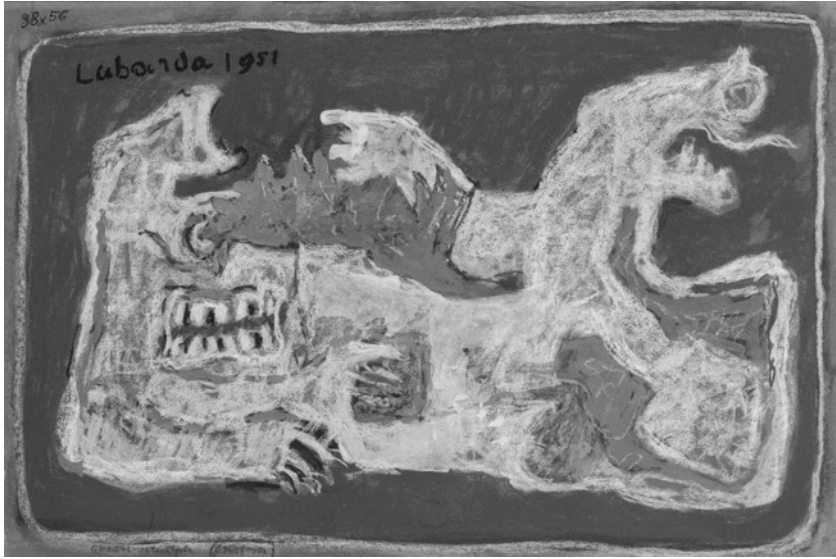
# Stigma, Fear and Foreign Policy

*Serbia's Destigmatization Dilemma  
in the Western Balkans*

*Milan Krstić*



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# List of Abbreviations

VRS	Army of Republika Srpska
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
CEFTA	Central European Free Trade Agreement
CSCE	Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe
CSO	Committee of Senior Officials
DOS	Democratic Opposition of Serbia
DPS	Democratic Party of Socialists
DS	Democratic Party
DSS	Democratic Party of Serbia
EBRD	European Bank for Reconstruction and Development
EC	European Community
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
EPC	European Political Community
EPP	European People's Party
EU	European Union
EUC	Council of the EU
FATF	Financial Action Task Force
FBiH	Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina
FRY	Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GSP	Generalized System of Preferences
HDZ	Croatian Democratic Union
ICJ	International Court of Justice
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ICTY	International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGOs	International NGOs
IR	International Relations
JNA	Yugoslav People's Army
KFOR	Kosovo Force
KLA	Kosovo Liberation Army
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
NDH	Independent State of Croatia

OHR	Office of the High Representative
OIC	Organization of Islamic Cooperation
OSCE	Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe
PA	OSCE Parliamentary Assembly
PIC	Peace Implementation Council
RS	Republika Srpska
RSK	Republic of Serbian Krajina
SAA	Stabilization and Association Agreement
SAMs	Sanctions Assistance Missions
SAP	Stabilization and Association Process
SCG	State Union of Serbia and Montenegro
SFOR	Stabilisation Force in BiH
SFRY	Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia
SNP	Socialist People's Party
SNS	Serbian Progressive Party
SPS	Socialist Party of Serbia
SAO	Serb Autonomous Region
SVK	Serb Krajina Army
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNMIK	United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo
UNPROFOR	UN Protection Force
UNSC	UN Security Council
US	United States of America
WEU	Western European Union
WTO	World Trade Organization

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# 1. Introduction

**Abstract:** The introductory chapter explains the importance of the research on stigma in the context of Serbia's foreign policy and outlines the main goals which this book aims to achieve. It also introduces the main concepts, outlines theoretical and empirical contributions which the book aims to deliver, and presents the structure of the book. Special attention is devoted to the destigmatization dilemma model, which is developed in the book.

**Keywords:** stigma, security, destigmatization dilemma, Serbia, Western Balkans

In a speech broadcast on numerous Serbian television channels in mid-July 2024, the president of the Republic of Serbia, Aleksandar Vučić, accused “various actors from the region” of attempting to carry out what he referred to as the “moral mutilation” and “Wehrmachtization of Serbia.” He described this as the initial phase of a so-called plan allegedly devised by Serbia's adversaries, with the goal being nothing less than “the end of Serbia.” President Vučić pointed to the portrayal of Serbia as a “Russian agent,” “warmonger,” “undemocratic,” and “anti-Western” as a prelude to direct actions against the country (Insajder 2024). The speech was delivered in Belgrade, a city that for months had been covered with government-sponsored billboards and graffiti bearing the slogan, “We are not a genocidal people.”

The address formed part of a broader narrative promoted by Serbian political leaders which presented Serbia as the “target of stigmatization” by certain regional and Western actors. This narrative peaked in the spring of 2024, in the context of the adoption of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) resolution establishing the International Day of Reflection and Commemoration of the 1995 Genocide in Srebrenica (UNGA 2024). The rhetoric surrounding this discourse even extended to Serbia's allies, with European Union (EU) commissioner for enlargement, Oliver Várhelyi from

Hungary, expressing his opposition to what he termed the “stigmatization of the Serbian people” (Politika 2024).

Derived from the ancient Greek word for scar, the term “stigma” is not something that naturally resonates with ordinary citizens as an explanation for the country’s international standing and its position in the international (geo)political context. Its broader usage in the social sciences began in the twentieth century, notably with the publication of Erving Goffman’s book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1963) which introduced the concept into symbolic-interactionist scholarship. In Serbia, the term was traditionally confined to sociological, psychological, and medical discourses, typically used to describe the marginalization or mistreatment of people with mental or physical illnesses or of certain ethnic and social groups.

The application of the concept to International Relations (IR) as a scientific discipline emerged more recently, spurred by the increasing incorporation of sociological theories into the study of global politics (Adler-Nissen 2016). However, the adoption of this concept within policymaking and political rhetoric has been slower. Consequently, the use of “stigma” as a framework for understanding or analyzing geopolitics has remained relatively rare in political discourse over the past few decades. Why, then, has the term gained such traction in the Serbian context? How did a foreign term, with a meaning that is both complex and primarily familiar to experts in sociology, psychology, or medicine, come to resonate so strongly in a domain where it is not typically part of everyday global geopolitical discourse?

A glance at Serbia’s position in the international context during the mid-2020s reveals a country that is neither isolated nor particularly burdened by material or moral pressures. Serbia remains an EU candidate engaged in accession negotiations and a member of the recently established European Political Community (EPC). It has nine strategic partnerships with countries worldwide, ranging from global powers like China and Russia to EU member states such as France, Italy, Greece, and Hungary, as well as a strategic dialogue with the United States of America (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). This reflects a considerable degree of international recognition, including acknowledgment from the West. Furthermore, Serbia has demonstrated notable—albeit contentious—economic progress. This progress is partially attributable to its economic convergence with the EU and the broader region. More than 60 percent of Serbia’s foreign trade of goods is with the EU, which is also its biggest investor (EU in Serbia 2024). Given Serbia’s current level of international integration and recognition, which implies a lack of isolation or sanctions typically associated with

stigma, it is striking that the concept remains so deeply embedded in the country's political narrative.

Some of the most deeply held beliefs about the world often emerge from personal experiences of suffering. One of the most profound generational traumas for Serbian citizens stems from the events of the 1990s. During this period, Serbia was subjected to intense stigmatization. It was labeled as a norm breaker, leading to its isolation and punishment through a series of concrete actions. These ranged from United Nations (UN) and EU economic sanctions (starting in 1991) to a cultural, scientific, sports, and transportation blockade (1992–1994), followed by expulsion from international organizations (1992–1993), and culminating in the direct use of force during the NATO bombing in 1999.

Following the ousting of the Milošević regime in October 2000, the removal of this stigma—or destigmatization—became one of the primary objectives of Serbian foreign policy. However, stigma is deeply entrenched and difficult to eliminate. Despite some initial rapid successes in the years immediately following the regime change, managing Serbia's stigma evolved into a long-term, continuous process. It became both an integral part and a significant driver of Serbian foreign policy. The enduring impact of the stigmatization Serbia experienced in the 1990s, coupled with the aspiration for destigmatization, helps explain why the concept of stigma has gained such prominence in Serbia. This historical context sheds light on its widespread use in public discourse by 2024.

This book tells an important, previously untold story about the stigmatization of Serbia and, more specifically, how this stigma has been managed.<sup>1</sup> It aims to contribute to the theoretical understanding of the foreign policy of stigmatized states by exploring the processes through which such states select stigma-management strategies in their relations with former adversaries—an aspect that has been insufficiently addressed in stigma research within the field of IR. In doing so, the book also seeks to enhance the empirical understanding of political dynamics in the Western Balkans in the twenty-first century through the lens of stigma—a perspective notably absent in previous studies of the region. The regional dimension of stigma management in the context of Serbian foreign policy

1 The book builds upon my previous, unpublished broader research titled *Strategije destigmatizacije u spoljnoj politici država: studija slučaja spoljne politike Republike Srbije od 2001. do 2018. godine* [Strategies of destigmatization in state foreign policy: case study of the Republic of Serbia foreign policy from 2001 to 2018] (Krstić 2020a). While retaining some of its arguments and content, this book further develops the theoretical foundations of the model, incorporates new empirical insights, and extends the temporal scope of the analysis.

is particularly compelling, given that, since 2000, Serbia has employed nonlinear and at times contradictory approaches. Serbian policymakers have simultaneously apologized to former adversaries and sought to compensate for past transgressions, while also denying sole responsibility for violations of international norms during the 1990s.<sup>2</sup>

The book argues that Serbian decision-makers faced a “destigmatization dilemma” during the first two decades of the twenty-first century. At the heart of this dilemma lies the perception that the very actions which, in the long term, facilitate Serbia’s destigmatization within the international society could simultaneously also undermine its security in regional relations with former adversaries—namely, with the Republic of Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina. This perception led them to a dilemma whether to prioritize destigmatization or security concerns.

Drawing on recognition theories (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021), this book argues that states strive to have their status and identity recognized. Considering that stigma conveys the message of a state identity being spoiled, in certain situations states tend to prioritize the goal of destigmatization in their policy. This has been the case for Serbia in the twenty-first century, following the defeat of Milošević’s policy in the late 1990s. Serbia aimed to destigmatize through acting on different stages and demonstrating its “normalcy.” Relations with these former adversaries served as a critical stage for Serbia to demonstrate its role as a state that adhered to international norms. The aspiration to achieve destigmatization pushed Serbia to make compromises and display goodwill toward its former adversaries. These actions were favorably regarded by the primary (de)stigmatizing actors—members of the “audience of normals” within the international society. However, there was a counterbalancing fear among Serbian leaders—the concern that these adversaries might (mis)use Serbian compromises to shift the entire blame for past conflicts onto Serbia or to resolve key unresolved bilateral issues in ways that conflict with Serbian interests. This fear heightened Serbia’s security concerns and drove its leaders toward a contrasting approach—one of denying responsibility and accusing former adversaries of their own violations of international norms.

The outcome of this complex situation was a trade-off in Serbia’s foreign policy. Serbia typically combined elements of both conciliatory compromise and denial, aimed at maintaining a delicate balance in its relations with former adversaries. The relative predominance of either a more compromising

2 This is not unique for Serbia. In my most recent article, I analyzed similar behavior of Croatia (Krstić 2025).

or a more denying stigma-management strategy depended on two key perceptions of decision-makers: the perceived threat posed by the former adversary, and the perceived importance of the bilateral relationship for Serbia's broader destigmatization goals.

Research on stigma in IR is still relatively young. Over the past fifteen years, however, an increasing number of constructivist and critical scholars have applied the concept of stigma, originally developed by the renowned symbolic interactionist sociologist Erving Goffman (1963). Despite this, significant questions about the processes of stigmatization and stigma management in the international arena remain unanswered. This book seeks to address some of these theoretically significant gaps, offering new insights and perspectives. By analyzing Serbian behavior and the conditions that shaped it, the book proposes a novel framework for examining the foreign policies of stigmatized states, featuring distinct contributions.

First, to explain the factors influencing Serbia's trade-offs, the book introduces the original model of the destigmatization dilemma. This model helps clarify how states choose stigma-management strategies in their relations with former adversaries. The model posits that the relative influences of decision-makers' perceptions of the importance of certain relations for their recognition (destigmatization) and the perceived fear coming from a particular actor shape their chosen strategies. When the perceived threat level is low and the perception of the importance of a particular relation for stigma management is high, states tend to adopt more compromising approaches. Conversely, when the perceived threat level is high and the perception of the importance of a stage is low, states are more likely to rely on strategies of denial. When both perceptions are at high level, states pursue all strategies concurrently.

Second, by examining Serbia's relationships with Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) as a "stage" for stigma management in foreign policy, the book highlights the relational aspect of stigma. Stigma is often shared among multiple actors—particularly former adversaries in conflict—who may attempt to shift the burden of stigma entirely onto others. At the same time, reconciling with former adversaries serves as a critical signal of adherence to international norms. This model emphasizes the interconnectedness of processes of stigmatization and stigma management among former adversaries.

Third, the book develops a broader theoretical-methodological matrix for analyzing stigma imposition and stigmatization in international society. This matrix is applied to the analysis of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination of Serbia during the 1990s, as well as its initial

reaction. Additionally, the matrix, which explains variations in choice of stigma-management strategies, is tested using the case of Serbia.

Fourth, the book underscores how the legacy of stigma functions as a sociolinguistic contextual factor that facilitates the future securitization of a “discreditable” state in the international arena. By connecting stigmatization studies with securitization theory, initially developed by the Copenhagen school of security studies, the book bridges critical security approaches with the dynamics of stigma in IR.

Fifth, by incorporating elements of dramaturgy theory, another symbolic interactionist framework, the book develops new analytical tools for understanding (de)stigmatization. One key contribution is the classification of various stages on which stigmatized actors perform their new roles as reputable members of international society, striving to convince the global audience that their identity is unblemished. Equally significant is the unpacking of different audience groups that the stigmatized state seeks to persuade of its “normality.”

Sixth, the book also contributes to the study of Serbian foreign policy in the twenty-first century. Several authors have acknowledged that stigma (Visković 2018, 21) or “a political and psychological consequences of the wars in former Yugoslavia and the several-year international isolation of the country” (Vekarić 2005, 26) is a factor which substantially determines Serbian foreign policy and drives it to “change its image” (Đukanović 2015, 118). However, only a few published studies have so far addressed Serbian stigma management, focusing on narrower aspects of the process such as roles of the EU integrations (Krstić 2022), regime change and democratization (Krstić 2020b), mutual apologies and accusations in relations with Croatia (Krstić 2025), official public diplomacy (Cox 2012), or Serbian diaspora (Vico 2022) in this process. Other important studies that explored how Serbia aimed to change its international image also narrowly focused on the role of cultural diplomacy in this process (Rogač Mijatović 2014; Mujović 2020). Therefore, a systematic illumination of this aspect of Serbia’s foreign policy is the key contribution that fills the gap in the empirical literature.

Finally, this research aims to provide a foundation for future studies on stigmatization and stigma management within the broader context of the Western Balkans. While Serbia serves as the most paradigmatic recent case of stigmatization and stigma-management efforts, the entire Balkan region has been subject to various negative labels and stereotypes in global narratives, making states from the region more susceptible to stigmatization. For instance, Montenegro, Croatia, and North Macedonia have also experienced stigmatization during 1990s, albeit to a lesser extent

than Serbia, and have engaged in foreign policy strategies aimed at stigma management. The model proposed in this book could serve as a useful framework for explaining their foreign policy choices in future research.

The primary method of data analysis employed in this book is interpretive process tracing (Guzzini 2012). The analyzed data includes an extensive archive of daily bulletins featuring key foreign policy news and speeches by decision-makers published by the Serbian/Yugoslav Ministry of Foreign Affairs since 2001. This is complemented by official reports and news published on the websites of the Serbian government, the president, and the ministry of foreign affairs during this period. Additionally, the research incorporates insights from eleven interviews conducted with relevant foreign policy actors from this period, alongside a review of pertinent secondary literature in the field.

The first chapter provides an overview of the literature on stigma in IR, highlighting the relevance of these concepts for the research of contemporary world politics and identifying existing gaps and debates. The second chapter presents the destigmatization dilemma model as the main theoretical contribution of this book. The third chapter analyzes how stigma was imposed on Serbia during the 1990s. The fourth chapter presents the main characteristics of Serbian destigmatization efforts since 2001 and situates the importance of relations with former adversaries (Croatia and BiH) within this context. The fifth and the sixth chapter apply this model to understand Serbian foreign policy toward Croatia and BiH (the most important former adversaries) between 2001 and 2020. The concluding chapter summarizes the study findings and suggests potential avenues for future research in this field.

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## 2. “Every Scar Tells a Story”

### Stigma in International Relations

**Abstract:** The second chapter presents a critical review of literature on stigma in international society. It identifies main streams of research on stigma in the discipline of International Relations. The chapter delivers a thorough analysis of how the literature defines stigmatization, stigma imposition, and destigmatization, how it assesses the functions of stigma in the international realm, and how it relates stigma to concepts such as power, identity, status, and emotions. It also thoroughly analyzes different answers in the literature on questions why, when, and how states manage their stigma, as well as which factors influence their choice of stigma management strategies.

**Keywords:** stigmatization, stigma imposition, stigma management, destigmatization, international society

Manzo (2004, 401) famously describes stigma as both an “underdefined and overused concept.” Initially rooted in sociology, the concept has since been adopted by various disciplines, particularly social and clinical psychology. The foundational definition of stigma was provided by symbolic interactionist sociologist Erving Goffman. In his seminal work, Goffman (1963, 3) defined stigma as an “attribute that is deeply discrediting,” emphasizing its power to diminish the value of the individual who possesses it. According to Goffman, such attributes are typically associated with “deviant” behavior, lineage, or status (referred to as tribal stigma) or certain physical characteristics. Another widely acknowledged premise is that stigmatization takes place within specific social and cultural contexts, making it fundamentally a social construct (Pescosolido and Martin 2015).<sup>1</sup> This idea

<sup>1</sup> However, there are certain differences when it comes to the relative importance of social construction. Evolutionist scholars are, in that regard, closer to the objectivist spectrum than other

is also rooted in Goffman's pivotal work, which highlights that an attribute becomes discrediting only within the framework of its relationship to a social stereotype (Goffman 1963, 4). Consequently, Goffman positions "processes of social construction as central" to analysis (Yang et al. 2007).

Research on stigma has grown significantly since the 1990s (Major and O'Brien 2005, 394). Many scholars have highlighted the role of power imbalance as a precondition for stigmatization (Link and Phelan 2014). The function of stigmatization within the power structures of society—namely to enforce norms, exclude deviant behaviors, and suppress transgressive individuals—has been further explored (Phelan, Link, and Dovidio 2008). More critical studies have examined the discrimination that stigmatization produces within society (Tyler 2018). Over time, various branches of literature have emerged. Clair (2018, 319) categorizes approaches to stigma in the literature (based on their focus on different levels of analysis) into three distinct branches. The first, micro-level, branch focuses on individual characteristics (attributes) and the psychological management of stigma. The second, meso-level, branch addresses cultural motivations, the foundations of stereotypes, identity issues within groups, psychosocial resources, and similar topics. The third, macro-level, branch examines power, institutional practices, and discriminatory policies.

It is important to note that stigmatization is not treated as a unidirectional process. Goffman (1963) explored the ways in which individuals attempt to cope with their stigma—either by avoiding it or overcoming it through various stigma-management mechanisms. Further research has emphasized that individuals targeted by stigma are not merely passive recipients but actively participate in the process (Toyoki and Brown 2014). However, once imposed, stigma is persistent and challenging to overcome, even though individuals strive to manage it. Goffman (1963, 128) further argued that in American society at that time only a small group was not a potential object of stigmatization, while the majority, viewed as "less than perfect" by societal norms and standards, were at risk of being "discreditable." This underscores the significance of studying the processes of stigmatization and stigma management.

researchers on stigma. While acknowledging the existence of social construction, evolutionist scholars reduce its importance by claiming that certain attributes are prone to be stigmatized in all societies at all times, therefore putting the spotlight only on the attribute itself (Major and O'Brien 2005, 395). On the other hand, a bigger group of scholars treat stigma primarily as "a label attached by society" (Major and O'Brien 2005, 395) and focuses on the social aspect and what makes certain behaviors or characteristics treated as "deviant" or "normal" in different social contexts, thereby putting equal or even bigger emphasis on stereotypes than on attributes themselves (Jones et al. 1984).

Considering these developments, many authors have moved beyond the minimalist definition of stigma as "an attribute that conveys devalued stereotypes" (Clair 2018, 318). A particularly influential definition is provided by Link and Phelan (2001), who conceptualize stigma as the outcome of the co-occurrence of four processes: 1) labeling, 2) stereotyping, 3) separation, and 4) status loss and discrimination. In a subsequent paper, they also introduced the emotional response of the stigmatized individual as a key component (Link et al. 2004). This approach integrates social processes (labeling, stereotyping, separation), psychological reaction (emotional response), and the material/structural dimension (status loss and discrimination), making it a comprehensive framework (Yang et al. 2007).<sup>2</sup>

While symbolical interactionism is a "birthplace" of stigma studies, it is not the only sociological approach which focuses on the process of stigmatization. The research on stigma is essentially connected with other sociological streams of research on deviance and normality. Federic Merget (2013, 288–290) theoretically positions research on stigmatization to the "sociology of deviance" whose founder is Emile Durkheim. Dušan Marinković (2009, 163) claims that Foucault's research of (the history of) the social construction of abnormality in human societies presents the second and more structuralist stream in the research on stigmatization (Goffman's interpretivists stream focusing on micro-practices being the first).

To distinguish between similar concepts, this book builds on Rogstad's delineation and understands *stigma* as a social mark which signals discredited/discreditable status. *Stigma imposition* is understood as "the (attempted) imposition of such a mark on an actor" from the "audience of normals." *Stigma management* refers to an actor's attempt to manage and cope with the attempted imposition or with the already imposed stigma (to achieve *destigmatization*). The *stigmatization process* is the overall process encompassing all the components (2022a, 4–5).<sup>3</sup>

Considering that the focus of the book is on stigmatization in an international context, the following chapter provides a more thorough discussion of the application of this concept in the IR field, occasionally drawing on

2 However, many authors still disagree with such an approach, claiming that only labeling, stereotyping, and consequential separation are part of stigmatization, while psychological reactions or discrimination might only be their consequences (Andersen, Varga, and Folker 2022).

3 Rogstad (2022a, 4–5) also claims that stigmatization "if successful should lead to the strengthening of the norm transgressed against." While acknowledging the importance of the normative function of stigmatization in international society, the effect which stigmatization has on norms is not in the focus of this study.

literature from other fields to fill the gaps in the IR literature. It also positions the book's theoretical approach within the existing debates in the literature.

## Stigma in International Relations: Main Streams of Research

Comprehensive research on stigma in IR has emerged relatively recently, within the past two decades. Prior to this, stigmatization was only sporadically referenced in IR studies (primarily within constructivist approaches) without further theoretical development of the concept.<sup>4</sup> Although not entirely distinct and overlapping significantly, the literature can be categorized into three primary streams, each originating from three seminal studies on stigma in IR.<sup>5</sup>

The first studies addressing stigmatization in IR were Nina Tannenwald's article (2005) and her book *The Nuclear Taboo* (2007). Tannenwald analyzed the processes that led to the establishment of a taboo surrounding the use and development of nuclear weapons in international society, highlighting the stigmatization effects associated with breaking this taboo. However, while stigmatization was frequently mentioned in her work, it was not explicitly defined, and the distinction between taboo and stigma remained ambiguous. Nevertheless, this book gave rise to a stream of literature focusing on the stigmatization of specific material objects in international relations. The stigmatization of nuclear weapons was further theorized in Michael Smetana's studies (2019, 2020), which engaged more directly and comprehensively with theoretical literature on stigmatization in the social sciences, as well as in the works of other authors (Shamai 2015; Sauer and Reveraert 2018; Saha 2022).

The second stream originated with Ayşe Zarakol's seminal book (2011), which examined "how the East learned to live with the West" through the stigmatization processes within international society. This line of research emphasizes the structural significance of stigmatization in the international society of states. Stigmatization is regarded as a crucial process that "held international society together," arguing that it was stigmatization rather

4 One such example is a brief mentioning of stigma as the possible consequence of the norm-breaking behavior in the seminal work of Martha Finnemore and Catrine Sikkink on the dynamics of international norms (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

5 Some authors have used stigma as an assistant tool in their studies, focusing on similar processes in international society, such as humiliation (Badie 2017), naming and shaming (Biersteker 2015; Haufler 2015), rebranding (Rivera 2008; Cox 2012), reputational costs of economic sanctioning (Early and Jadoon 2016), or transitional justice (Merget 2013; Lugano 2017).

than the socialization of norms that played a pivotal role in its expansion (Zarakol 2014). Recent studies in this stream have continued to explore the sociological functions and effects of stigmatization on international society, norms, and the liberal international order (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; Rogstad 2022b). Additionally, they have increasingly focused on how stigmatization creates and perpetuates hierarchies in the global order (Zarakol 2017; Adler-Nissen 2017; Saha 2022).

Finally, the third stream focuses on the psychological effects of stigma on stigmatized states and how they attempt to cope with these stigmas in international society. While this approach builds upon Zarakol's (2011) study of how Turkey, Japan, and Russia managed their stigmas after defeat, the seminal works in this area are Rebecca Adler-Nissen's studies (2014a, 2014b). Research into stigma management in various contexts has become a productive field within IR, with scholars classifying different stigma-management strategies and analyzing their logic and consequences (Chwieroth 2015; Rousseau 2018; Smetana 2019, 2020; Sauer and Reveraert 2018; Kurowska and Reshetnikov 2021; Rogstad 2022a, 2022b; Kim 2024; Speyer 2025).

In their comprehensive review of stigma literature in IR, Rogstad, Adler-Nissen, and Koschut (2025) classify approaches using two analytical dimensions: micro (agential)/macro (structural) and explanatory/explained. The first dimension largely corresponds to the distinction between the second and third streams mentioned earlier. However, the authors rightly emphasize that no studies are purely micro or macro, and that all acknowledge some interplay between agents (micro) and structures (macro). The second dimension differentiates between treating stigma as a factor that explains other phenomena and viewing it as a phenomenon in need of explanation, noting that most IR research views stigma as a factor explaining state behavior (Rogstad, Adler-Nissen, and Koschut 2025, 13).

Regarding the first analytical dimension, this book leans more towards the micro perspective (and consequentially to the third branch of the literature presented above) as it primarily focuses on how states manage stigma. Specifically, it aims to understand how Serbia has sought to address its stigma in its relations with former adversaries. It is also micro in its emphasis on the discourse and practices of political elites as evidence of perceptions surrounding stigmatization and security. However, it acknowledges the influence of broader structures that shape international stigmatization and create hierarchies within international society. Therefore, it is positioned on the micro side of the axis, but closer to the center. Regarding the second analytical dimension, the book treats stigma as an explanatory factor, using it to better understand Serbia's policies towards Croatia and BiH.

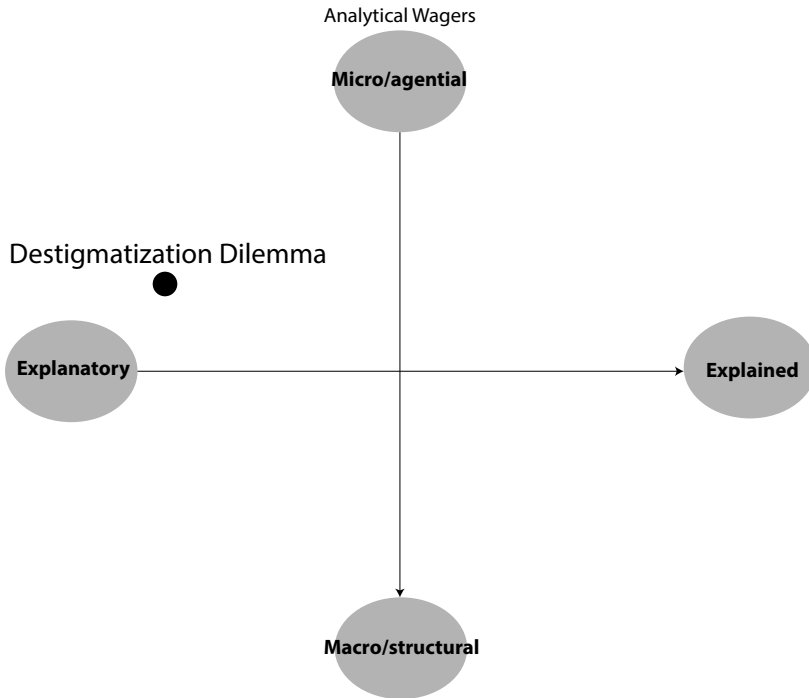


Figure 1: The relative position of the destigmatization dilemma model in the diagram created by Rogstad, Adler-Nissen, and Koschut (2025, 13)

## Stigma Imposition and Stigma Removal (Destigmatization) in International Society

Effectively employing the concept of stigma as an analytical tool in IR requires a clear definition of its components. Most studies conceptualize stigmatization as a relational process that can be analytically divided into two main components which often occur simultaneously: stigma imposition and stigma management (Smetana 2019). Since stigma management is the primary focus of this study, it will be addressed in a separate subsection of this chapter.

Stigma imposition in IR literature has generally been analyzed using the well-structured framework developed by Link and Phelan (2001) which consists of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination (Rogstad, Adler-Nissen, and Koschut 2025, 3). A key strength of this approach is its ability to distinguish stigma imposition from other similar processes, such as naming and shaming, othering, or stereotyping. By emphasizing

the negative material and status-related sanctions involved in stigma imposition, this framework differentiates it from simple “othering,” which may arise from negative labeling and stereotyping alone (Adler-Nissen 2014a, 146). However, a potential limitation of this approach lies in its rigidity, potentially excluding less structured and less intentional instances of stigma imposition from the scope of analysis. To address this, Rogstad (2022b, 2–3) introduced a distinction between “direct” (structured) and “diffuse” (less structured) stigma imposition, acknowledging that stigma can sometimes be unintentionally imposed—particularly when it stems from the reproduction of social hierarchies rather than specific norms violations.

Some authors adopt a more narrowly focused perspective of stigma. Similarly to Andersen, Varga, and Folker (2022), they do not consider material sanctions resulting from discrimination to be a part of the stigmatization process (Early and Jadoon 2016). Friman (2015a, 2015b, 205–217) argues that, while material sanctions may accompany stigmatization, stigma can also result from material (economic) sanctions due to their subtle “naming” effect. Biersteker (2015) similarly explores stigmatization through the lens of “naming and shaming” processes in international society. In this view, naming refers to the political process of identifying an actor as deviant, while shaming describes the reaction of the labeled actor. For these authors, stigmatization is a possible outcome of naming, making naming the starting point of stigma imposition. The second element of stigma imposition involves public condemnation of the actor and reduction in societal interaction. According to this approach, stigma is imposed when labeling results in separation, without necessarily encompassing status loss and discrimination as components of the process.

While stigma imposition is relatively well-defined, albeit with some variations in interpretation, fewer authors have addressed the process of stigma removal—commonly referred to as destigmatization. Rogstad, Adler-Nissen, and Koschut define destigmatization as “the process by which an actor sheds stigma” (2025, 6). One of the seminal contributions in this regard is Smetana’s study on India (2020), where he conceptualizes destigmatization as actual “normalization” and highlights the critical role that the most powerful actors in international society play in facilitating successful destigmatization. In my previous work (Krstić 2022), I explored the conceptual relationship between Europeanization and destigmatization within the European context. Studies focusing on stigma management by actors in international society also address destigmatization as a key policy objective. However, a common issue is the lack of a clear definition

of the process, with the precise elements that constitute destigmatization remaining unclear.

A crucial analytical concept for understanding both stigma imposition and destigmatization is the *audience of normals*.<sup>6</sup> As noted, stigmatization can only occur when there is a shared perception of normalcy within a group, which is then disrupted by the discreditable attributes or behaviors of an actor (Rogstad 2022b, 2). This discredited actor is subsequently labeled, stereotyped, separated, deprived of status, and discriminated against by the audience. This audience comprises members of society aiming to protect “normalcy” (Zarakol 2011). However, drawing on Alder-Nissen (2014) and Link and Phelan (2001), Rogstad (2022b, 2) broadens the concept to include “the group of individuals, states, etc., upholding ‘normal’ behavior.” This approach suggests that the audience is a broader group, encompassing non-state actors, such as NGOs, international organizations, media, and individuals, alongside states. Membership in this group is fluid, meaning that an actor belonging to it today could be discredited and excluded tomorrow (Speyer 2025).

This book starts from the framework developed by Link and Phelan (2001) in analyzing stigma imposition. Regarding destigmatization, this book seeks to further theorize the process. The criteria for successful destigmatization are treated as the inverse of those for successful stigma imposition. If stigma is considered imposed only when all elements (including status loss and discrimination) are implemented, then stigma can only be deemed fully removed when even the least severe elements (such as stigma labels) are eradicated. However, since stigma exists on a continuum, destigmatization may be partial, with certain aspects being addressed without completely eliminating stigma. The concept of the “audience of normals” also requires further theorization. While states remain the primary actors in international relations, they are not the sole members of this audience. To better distinguish the roles of different states and non-state actors within this audience, an analytical matrix is developed in the following chapter.

6 Disclaimer: the use of term “normal” and “deviant” in this context is borrowed from the standard vocabulary of stigma research, developed initially by Goffman (1963), for strictly analytical purposes, and it does not present the attitude of the author about any state being deviant, or (more or less) normal.

## Situating Stigma to Important IR Concepts: Power, Identity, Status, and Emotions

The concept of stigma is fundamentally tied to the concept of power. A power disparity between the audience of normals and the transgressive actor is considered a necessary precondition for stigma imposition in sociology (Goffman 1963). Scholars in the IR discipline similarly recognize that the smaller the power disparity, the more challenging it becomes to impose stigma (Chwieroth 2015; Rivera 2008; Merget 2013; Adler-Nissen 2014a; Smetana 2020). Elise Rousseau (2018, 325) succinctly summarizes this notion: "Stigma is indeed dependent on an asymmetrical relationship where powerful dominant actors (presenting themselves as not having the stigmatized attributes) discriminate socially, economically, and politically against subordinate actors (presented as having these attributes)." Smetana (2020) highlights the importance of the relative distribution of power within the "audience of normals" for stigmatization. He introduces the concept of a "stigma contest" to explain how various labels proposed by different members of the "audience of normals" compete with one another.

In sociology, the power to impose stigma is defined by Link and Phelan (2014) as "stigma power." Since stigma's theoretical roots lie in symbolic interactionism, "stigma power" is logically linked to what Bourdieu (1987) refers to as "symbolic power"—the ability to impose one's vision of the world on others as legitimate. In the context of international society, Early and Jadoon (2016) argue that "moral authority"—encompassing international legitimacy and a positive global reputation—is a more suitable term than "power," which is more commonly associated with material capabilities. Nonetheless, since stigma imposition involves not only narrative elements, such as labeling and stereotyping, but also tangible sanctions, like status loss and discrimination, the sociological approach of Link and Phelan (2001, 375–376), which emphasizes social, economic, and cultural power, remains more comprehensive.

Power disparities are not only a precondition for stigmatization, but also one of its consequences. Some scholars assert that the most immediate consequence of stigma in international society is the reduction of the stigmatized actor's "soft power" (Cox 2012; Lugano 2017). Others argue that the primary impact is the deterioration of the stigmatized actor's reputation and attractiveness (Rivera 2008; Early and Jadoon 2016). A third group of scholars posits that stigma affects more than just soft power, negatively impacting a discredited actor's overall power. This argument was initially developed by Zarakol (2011) in reference to Elias and Scotson's (1994) distinction between

the “established” and “outsiders.” It has since been reinforced by studies examining stigma as a factor that either produces or sustains hierarchies in international society (Zarakol 2017; Adler-Nissen 2017; Rogstad 2022a; Krstić 2025).<sup>7</sup>

The second concept intrinsically connected to stigma is identity. As the title of Goffman’s (1963) seminal book indicates, stigma “spoils” the identity of its bearer. In the international context, a state’s identity is externally challenged when it is stigmatized. Identity is based not only on self-perception, but also on recognition of this identity by the members of society. Authors such as Zarakol (2011) draw on theories of recognition and ontological security, arguing that states facing stigma strive to preserve their stability and biographical (identity) continuity. This perspective helps explain why stigmatized states do not always follow the material rationalist logic of consequences. At the same time, domestic (re)articulations of a state’s identity influence its response to stigma (Adler-Nissen 2014a, 154). Consequently, identity becomes an important contextual factor that shapes both the process and impact of stigmatization.

The third important concept is status.<sup>8</sup> While many authors agree that the loss of status is one of the elements of stigma, there are varying interpretations of what this entails. Rousseau argues that for a process to qualify as stigmatization it must involve a more severe outcome regarding the loss of status—not merely a loss of relative position within a group, but the loss of membership in the group altogether. In this context, she distinguishes stigmatization (where the actor loses membership) from “reintegrative shaming” (where the actor only loses relative standing) (Rousseau 2018,

7 In this domain, there are somewhat differing opinions within the discipline of IR. It is questionable whether stratification arising from stigma can be subsumed under the concept of power, or if it constitutes a distinct form of stratification. Moreover, different theorists debate whether stigma and similar stratification processes can even be referred to as a hierarchy in international relations, and they present serious critiques regarding the use of this term (Zarakol 2017). This debate also exists in sociological research, but the latest trends lean toward separating these two concepts. In their chapter in the *Oxford Handbook of Stigma*, Lucas, Ho, and Kerns (2017) propose the thesis that stigma is a distinct type of social stratification that arises in the context of power disparities, which can disappear along with these disparities, but which has its own unique characteristics and cannot be subsumed under the broader concept of power.

8 Even though the border between status and power or identity is blurry, very few authors that write on stigma in an international context precisely define it. Here, Rousseau is an exception, adopting the definition of status from the renowned foreign policy theorist Deborah Welch Larson, who defines status in international relations as “collective beliefs about a state’s position regarding valued attributes,” adding that it “manifests in two different but interconnected ways: as membership in a particular club of actors, and as a relative position within that club” (Rousseau 2018, 325).

325). Other scholars, however, believe that a relative tarnishing of a state's reputation or *image*<sup>9</sup> can also be understood as a loss of status (Wood 2018; Cox 2012; Rivera 2008). In this sense, the consequences for status are often treated as synonymous with the consequences for what Nye (2004) terms as state's "soft power."<sup>10</sup>

Finally, similar to Link et al. (2004), several authors emphasize that an emotional reaction from the stigmatized actor is a necessary element of stigma imposition. Zarakol (2014, 314) argues that for stigma to be effectively imposed, the targeted actor must "come to see themselves through the eyes of another, as failing to meet 'normal' expectations." She contends that isolation or discrimination are harmful in themselves, but do not qualify as stigma unless the discredited actor internalizes their treatment to at least some extent (314). Similarly, Rogstad, Adler-Nissen, and Koschut (2025) regard some form of emotional response as essential for stigmatization to occur. While "shaming" is often used synonymously with the emotional reaction to stigmatization, nuanced studies suggest a wider range of reactions, including guilt, embarrassment, and shame (Subotić and Zarakol 2013), as well as anger and resentment (Zarakol 2011). Other authors do not consider emotional reactions as a necessary element. For instance, Merget (2013, 287) explicitly rejects the idea that emotional reactions are required, claiming that social opprobrium alone is sufficient for stigma to be imposed.

This book adopts the position that stigmatization is a relational and power-related concept, occurring within contexts of power disparity while simultaneously reinforcing and reshaping power hierarchies in international society. Stigmatization negatively affects the identity and status of

9 *Image* could in the simplest terms be described as "picture of somebody in the public" (Mujović Prajs 2019, 120). In this sense, an image represents the perceptive aspect of identity, though reduced to more basic characteristics. Negative labels and stereotypes, as elements of stigma, could therefore be viewed as elements of an international image of a country or of its reputation. Therefore, building a negative image of a country is a part of stigmatization.

10 Another term that recently became often used in the context of state reputation and "soft power" in international relations is *brand*. The Anholt-Ipsos Nation Brands Index (Ipsos 2023) identifies six key aspects essential for branding a nation: exports, governance, culture, people, tourism, immigration, and investment. While the literature on this topic is becoming rich, some prominent authors in this field acknowledge the blurriness of application of this concept to the field of IR. See Anholt (2011, 289), who earlier claimed that "despite studying the topic for many years, I'm not at all sure I even know what 'branding' is." Nevertheless, this concept is used more for a positive side of international image (and ways to make it even better) and it is not inherently linked to the concept of stigma, which focuses on spoiled identity and negative image. Therefore, while acknowledging that building a successful brand of a country could be seen as an achievement of destigmatization, we will not direct further attention to this concept in the study.

a state—not necessarily resulting in the complete loss of status but often leading to a significant reduction in its “relative position within a club” (Rousseau 2018, 325). While emotional reactions in the pure form of shame, guilt, anger, etc., or psychological loss of self-esteem are not treated as essential elements, at least some form of behavioral reaction is considered necessary for stigma imposition to be termed successful.

### Functions of Stigma in International Society

Except for works that primarily examine the effects of stigma without exploring its functional role in international relations (Cox 2012; Early and Jadoon 2016; Lugano 2017), most studies conceptualize stigmatization as a process intrinsic to international society, just as it is in any other societal context. Goffman's assertion that the function of stigmatization is to shield society from those who do not conform to its norms is taken as one of the starting points in theorizing functions of stigma in international society.

Building on this logic, Virginia Haufler argues that international stigmatization fulfills a dual function. The first function is to mark and isolate the violator, while the second is to alert the public to the norm violation and mobilize other actors to act against the violator (Haufler 2015, 189). Both functions aim to influence and change the behavior of the stigmatized actor. However, Thomas Biersteker suggests that when behavioral change is unattainable stigmatization's alternative objective becomes punitive—to achieve the maximum possible isolation of the violator, thereby mitigating their negative influence and reducing potential harm (Biersteker 2015, 167–168).

Several authors (Zarakol 2011, 2014; Adler-Nissen 2014a; Merget 2013; Badie 2017) adopt Émile Durkheim's sociological perspective, asserting that deviance and society's response to it can enhance societal cohesion, delineate permissible behavior, and establish new norms. In addition to Durkheim, Smetana (2020, 537–539) references other prominent symbolic interactionists, a theoretical tradition that includes stigma research in sociology. Rebecca Adler-Nissen (2014b) incorporates Pierre Bourdieu's sociological framework. Additionally, some authors, without directly referencing sociological theories, emphasize the role of stigmatization in shaping norms (Chwieroth 2015; Ker-Lindsay 2018).

Ayşe Zarakol contends that stigmatization, rather than the socialization of “good norms” in peripheral states, has been a pivotal mechanism in constructing and expanding modern society from the eighteenth to the

twentieth century. Zarakol (2014) distinguishes the stigmatization model from the two dominant norm diffusion models in IR. The rational choice model suggests that states act based on the logic of consequences, making cost-benefit calculations. Meanwhile, the constructivist socialization model posits that states internalize norms and behave in accordance with them, following the logic of appropriateness (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998). Zarakol critiques these models and introduces a "stigmatization model," characterized by norm internalization without corresponding behavioral change. Zarakol concludes that norm internalization through stigmatization has contributed more to the spread of modern international society than processes driven by learning proper behavior (logic of appropriateness) or adopting norms out of rational self-interest (logic of consequences). This highlights stigmatization as a critical mechanism for norm diffusion and global ordering.

Ellise Rousseau (2018) and Rebecca Adler-Nissen (2014a) also emphasize the importance of stigmatization in the diffusion of norms. Rousseau, while critiquing existing models of human rights norm diffusion, advocates for the inclusion of a stigmatization model and introduces an additional model of "reintegrative shaming." She argues that both variants fall under the broader concept of international denunciation, a key mechanism influencing the dispersion of norms in international society (Rousseau 2018, 324–326). Both models lead to norm internalization, contributing to the expansion and consolidation of the global normative order.<sup>11</sup>

On the other hand, Adler-Nissen builds on Zarakol's assertion that stigmatization is a critical process in the construction of international society. She emphasizes that the creation of a "constitutive other" or a "deviant" antithesis is a key process that reinforces international society. Adler-Nissen (2014a, 149–150) further argues that the impetus for stigmatization in international relations does not originate from a belief in shared norms but rather from insecurity regarding the stability of international society—an ontological security threat. To constantly reaffirm its identity and avoid threats to its stability, international society relies on stigmatization to strengthen its foundations and renew awareness of its core principles and boundaries (Adler-Nissen 2014a, 147–150).

11 The key differences between the two models are: a) goal—reintegrative shaming aims for a temporary loss of status for someone who violates a norm, with the goal of their reintegration following a change in behavior, while stigmatization aims for permanent exclusion; b) labeling—in reintegrative shaming, only the behavior of a specific subject is labeled as deviant, whereas in stigmatization both the behavior and general characteristics of the subject are labeled as such (Rousseau 2018, 324–326).

Beyond its role in norm diffusion and the construction of modern society, scholars also highlight another function of stigmatization in international relations—the establishment of hierarchical relations (Zarakol 2010, 2011, 2014; Adler-Nissen 2014a, 2014b). This claim is grounded in the critique of the concept of anarchic international relations, which some argue represents an uncritical adoption of Kenneth Waltz's premises (Waltz 1979) in *Theory of International Politics* (Zarakol 2017a, 2). Zarakol identifies two groups of theorists studying hierarchies in IR: those adopting a “thick hierarchy” approach, which sets high criteria for patterns of relations to qualify as hierarchies, and those studying “thin hierarchy” (Zarakol 2017a, 4–10). The “thin hierarchy” approach considers stigmatization as one mechanism for hierarchy building in international society, with stigma serving as a form of stratification.

Zarakol examines hierarchies arising from stigmatization using Norbert Elias's stratification mechanism, dividing society into “the established” and “the outsiders” (Elias and Scotson 1994; Zarakol 2011, 58–62). Adler-Nissen argues that this hierarchy exists even before the full imposition of stigma (i.e., the parallel operation of all subprocesses from labeling to discrimination). She suggests that hierarchy is established through the initial stigmatization processes of labeling and stereotyping (Adler-Nissen 2017, 200–203). These scholars align with a growing sociological trend that views stigma as a counterpart to power and status as forms of stratification (Lucas, Ho, and Kerns 2017).

Despite this alignment, there are significant differences in how theorists interpret stigma's function. Ayşe Zarakol links stigmatization to the characteristics of modernity as an epoch, arguing that the process reflects the nature of modern state society (2011, 49–56). Conversely, Rebecca Adler-Nissen sees stigmatization as “a general and continuous phenomenon in international relations” (Adler-Nissen 2014a, 149). Frédéric Merget, drawing on Durkheim's sociology and practice theory, similarly views stigmatization as a continuous feature of international relations (2013, 291–292). Bertrand Badie, however, is temporally stricter than Zarakol, asserting that stigmatization (in its narrow sense) has become prominent in international relations only since 1989 (Badie 2017, 60).

Perhaps the most comprehensive synthesis of stigmatization's functions comes from Phelan, Link, and Dovidio (2008) who argue that the function of stigma is to keep actors “in,” “out,” and “down.” This phrasing echoes the famous simplified definition of NATO's Cold War function: keeping “the Americans in, the Russians out, and the Germans down” in Europe. “Keeping out” refers to the exclusion and isolation of norm violators until

they reform; "keeping in" highlights stigmatization's role in fostering cohesion and maintaining norms within society; "keeping down" emphasizes the stratification created by stigma. This study adopts this threefold classification of stigmatization's functions for its analysis.

## Why Do States Manage Their Stigma?

Stigma carries many negative effects for those who bear it, as previously discussed. Consequently, actors often seek to avoid stigma or to actively manage it. This idea, initially developed by Goffman (1963) in sociology, is highly applicable to the dynamics of world politics. This is particularly evident when the international system is viewed through the lens of the English school of IR (Bull 1995; Wight 1978) which conceptualizes the international realm as a society of states and focuses on the societal nature of interstate relations (Simić 2009). However, the concept of stigma is versatile and can be integrated into almost all IR theoretical frameworks; that is one of its strongest analytical advantages. That said, different theories provide varying explanations for why attempts at stigma imposition prompt responses in the form of stigma-management activities.

Theorists within the rationalist camp who emphasize the logic of consequences focus on the negative material impacts that stigmatization may have on a stigmatized actor. Discrimination, as the final and harshest phase of stigmatization, directly harms the stigmatized actor, prompting them to rationally attempt to avoid such outcomes through stigma-management activities. Realists focus on these direct material consequences, treating them as independent variables that cause the rational actor (the punished state) to react. However, earlier elements of stigma imposition, such as labeling and stereotyping without tangible material consequences, are often dismissed as unimportant by structural realists. That said, some classical realists, like Hans Morgenthau, did consider certain labeling processes in international relations (Friman 2015c, 5).

Liberals would share the rationalist assumption about the material impacts of stigma but would also highlight the significance of institutional frameworks within international societies and the existence of "thin" hierarchies (Lake 2011). For liberals, the consequences of stigmatization extend beyond immediate material sanctions to include longer-term political, economic, and security repercussions for states excluded from key institutions and forums in international relations. Hence, the desire to avoid stigmatization arises as soon as institutional separation begins,

even before direct material sanctions are imposed. Liberals with a stronger focus on norms would argue that even the initial stages of stigma, such as labeling and stereotyping, could trigger stigma management. Rational actors, they contend, recognize that being labeled as a norm breaker can lead to separation and sanctioning in subsequent phases, which they seek to avoid (Moravcsik 1995).

By contrast, scholars in the constructivist camp who emphasize the logic of appropriateness argue that even the initial phases of stigmatization can provoke stigma-management responses from targeted actors. The extensive literature on “naming and shaming” in international relations explores how labeling norm breakers influences their behavioral normalization (Risse, Ropp, and Sikink 1999; Friman 2015c). Even in the absence of direct material sanctions, states often adjust their behavior or invest significant effort to demonstrate that they are not violating norms. Both actions are forms of stigma management. States may engage in these activities even when they are not materially advantageous, driven instead by normative considerations. This marks a key distinction between constructivist and rationalist approaches.

Many recent approaches combine a general constructivist framework with psychological insights. Ontological security theory posits that states aim to protect their identity and maintain “biographical continuity” (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008). Stigmatization is considered a “critical situation” in that it causes a state to perceive that its identity is no longer accepted by others (Ejdus 2018). This triggers a response in which the state seeks to preserve its identity continuity, reacting to stigmatization attempts through stigma-management activities. This approach to stigmatization and stigma management was acknowledged in some of the seminal works on the subject in IR, such as Ayşe Zarakol’s study (2011) which uses ontological insecurity as one of the factors triggering stigma-coping mechanisms in Japan, Russia, and Turkey. Similarly, Adler-Nissen (2014a, 2014b) integrates this perspective in her analyses.

Other approaches, drawing on social psychology, focus on status rather than identity. Many IR theorists consider status seeking one of the primary drivers of state behavior (Zarakol 2018, 849–850). More nuanced perspectives refine this concept by explaining status seeking behavior in greater detail. For instance, scholars applying social identity theory to world politics (Larson and Shevchenko 2010, 2014, 2019) argue that actors do not always seek to improve their status universally but aim to achieve equal or higher status relative to those they perceive as their peers. In the context of stigma, this implies that states actively work to prevent status loss or the reduction of

their standing as part of stigmatization. Consequently, states targeted by stigmatization attempt to employ stigma-management strategies as soon as they perceive their status is at risk.

Critical theorists in IR, however, view stigma as an inherently negative phenomenon. Tyler (2018) argues that research on stigma is fundamentally biased as it perpetuates discriminatory power structures and reinforces the dichotomy between "normal" and "deviant" maintained by those in positions of power. This critique is echoed by many critical, postcolonial, and Marxist theorists in IR who perceive stigmatization as a tool of domination, or the "machinery of inequality" (Tyler 2020) employed by hegemonic states in international society. These scholars do not focus on stigma management, as they view such actions as reinforcing the stigma itself. Instead, they advocate for normative behaviors that alter power relations and dismantle the structures that produce or reproduce stigma as a form of negative capital. Despite their revolutionary stance, these theories still acknowledge stigma's negative relevance and the necessity of overcoming it.

This book adopts a synthetic approach grounded in general constructivist premises. While recognizing that managing stigma is often a rational choice due to the burdens (or costs) it imposes on power and status, often including physical and material security concerns, states occasionally take measures to overcome stigma that do not align with the most advantageous cost-benefit calculations. The starting premise is that the motivations for stigma management arise not only from concerns about physical security but also from sociological and psychological dimensions of state behavior. States manage their stigma because their identity matters to them since they want it to remain stable, recognized, and unspoiled. Therefore, this book develops a matrix which would connect conventional security factors (military, political, and economic threats) with identity security aspects in stigma management, which is something that existing scholarship lacks.

### **When Do States Manage Their Stigma?**

Goffman (1963) argues that the only scenario in which an actor could remain completely indifferent and not react to stigma is when entirely separate value systems exist, so that stigma in one system has no impact on an actor belonging to another. Zarakol (2014, 314) acknowledges this in the international context, noting that actors may avoid stigma "if they are unaware of their stigma and/or do not share the same societal belief system that stigmatizes

them.” This situation is theoretically possible, especially in contexts where distinct value systems prevail in different parts of the world. However, in earlier stages of global development, when entirely separate civilizations emerged in different regions, there was no international stigmatization as we understand it today. Thus, most scholars view stigmatization in IR as a relational phenomenon that inherently involves the dialectical interplay between stigma imposition attempts by the audience of normals (or some of its members) and the stigma-management activities of the discredited/discreditable actor (Rogstad 2022b, 3).

Stigmatization practices in the international realm are generally linked to the establishment of the modern Westphalian international society, developed primarily in its Western core (Zarakol 2014). This system requires at least a minimal shared value set for stigmatization to emerge, which also facilitates the system’s expansion. In the context of the current crisis of the international liberal order (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021; Rogstad 2022b), there is a theoretical possibility of the emergence of distinct orders with separate value systems. However, this possibility is not as immediate as it might seem. While the liberal aspects of the order are under strain, its basic principles and the multilateral institutions underpinning it (such as the UN) remain active, with most actors seeking reform rather than abandonment.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, increasing globalization and technological advances that facilitate global connectivity reduce the likelihood of autarchic societies.<sup>13</sup> As a result, a parallel system in which attempted stigma imposition fails to trigger any form of stigma management is unlikely in the foreseeable future.

A key question is when states begin to manage stigma. Literature offers different perspectives on this issue. Scholars focusing on the consequences of stigmatization typically consider the successful imposition of stigma as the starting point for stigma management. In contrast, most scholars that emphasize the relational nature of stigma argue that stigma management begins alongside the first stigma imposition attempts (Toyoki and Brown 2014). In this view, stigmatization is a dynamic process in which the audience of normals (or some of its members) attempts to impose stigma, while the targeted actor responds with stigma-management acts.

12 Using the English school of IR terminology—even if the *solidarist* conception of the international society (connected to liberal cosmopolitanism) is in crisis, the existence of the *pluralist* conception (focused on interstate order, sovereignty, and non-intervention), at least in its minimal form, continues to exist (Buzan 2014, 15-16).

13 Very helpful for understanding this dynamic is the recent study by Miloš Vukelić (2024) which explains how post-digital cultural wars in the West affect international society.

Terminology varies depending on when the process begins. If stigma management follows a state's "defeat," Zarakol (2011) uses the term "stigma-coping," suggesting that stigma has already been established. If the aim is to overcome established stigma, such efforts can be described as "destigmatization" (Smetana 2019).<sup>14</sup> However, both forms fall under the broader umbrella of "stigma management," which often starts with the initial stigmatizing attempts (Adler-Nissen 2014a).

Some theorists argue that stigma management is a widespread phenomenon (Dinnler 2024). Drawing on Goffman's observation that almost all actors are discreditable, these scholars suggest that many states engage in some level of stigma management to address the possibility of being discredited. This does not imply that all such states are fully stigmatized, but they are aware of their discreditable status (Goffman 1963). Given the deep roots of stigmatization in the modern international order (Zarakol 2014), it is unsurprising that stigma-management practices are so prevalent. Basic stigma management often begins in response to lower-level denunciations, such as labeling or stereotyping. These practices can even occur among states within the same security community, as evidenced by tensions between Greece and Germany during the EU financial crisis in the early 2010s (Adler-Nissen 2017).

This book adopts a broader approach to stigma management. Stigmatization is conceptualized as a relational process, shaped through the interaction between stigma-imposition attempts and stigma-management reactions. Consequently, stigma management begins at the very onset of the stigmatization process. Drawing on Rogstad's (2022b) distinction between direct and diffuse stigmatization, this study assumes that direct stigmatization requires more deliberate and strategic stigma management. Thus, the term "stigma management" is more appropriately applied to cases of direct stigmatization, where the risk of stigma is significant. In more diffuse cases, responses might better be categorized as "impression management" (Goffman 1956). This distinction allows for a more nuanced understanding of stigma and impression management based on the nature of stigmatization. The book focuses on stigma-management practices in case of direct stigmatization, where states seek destigmatization as their goal.

14 Certain authors write the term with a hyphen ("de-stigmatization"), as I did in my most recent article (Krstić 2025). However, in this book I applied the suggestion of a linguist to use the term "destigmatization."

## How Do States Manage Their Stigma?

Link and Phelan (2014) argue that actors generally have two options when managing stigma: they can either attempt to change the power mechanisms that underpin the stigma or directly cope with it. In the field of IR, altering the power balance can be motivated by stigma but also by various other factors. Such behavior is typically associated with more powerful actors capable of initiating changes in power relations. However, even less powerful actors may challenge the norm underlying their stigmatization, thereby seeking to alter the power hierarchy. Based on the actions that states undertake and their positioning toward the norm and international normative order, scholars have proposed several classifications of stigma-management strategies.

Most classifications in international society build upon Goffman's (1963) framework, which identifies three main strategies: (1) stigma acceptance and correction of deviance; (2) passing and hiding (compensation for "deviance"); and (3) breaking out of reality. Rivera's (2008) analysis of how states manage stigma in the international realm aligns closely with these categories. Zarakol (2011, 96–99) refines this framework, distinguishing between two main strategies: (1) achieving normalcy, either by correcting deviant characteristics or "passing" by excelling in other significant areas to obscure deviance; and (2) stigma embracing, either by breaking out of reality with resentment through unconventional interpretations of identity or by reframing stigma as a source of pride.

The most influential classification in IR was proposed by Adler-Nissen. In her study of Danish and British diplomats, she identified four strategies: (1) challenge and exclusion; (2) camouflage and compensation; (3) missionary strategies; and (4) self-limitation strategies (Adler-Nissen 2014b). Later, in a seminal article, Adler-Nissen (2014a, 153–156) adapted this framework for state behavior, introducing three strategies: (1) stigma acceptance—accepting deviance and attempting to overcome it through behavioral changes, such as public apologies and self-reflection (e.g., Germany post-WWII); (2) stigma rejection—resisting accusations of deviance and challenging the norm underlying stigmatization (e.g., Austria when the Freedom Party of Austria entered the government in 2000); and (3) counter-stigmatization—reframing one's stigma as a badge of pride and portraying others as deviant (e.g., Cuba post-revolution). The last strategy seeks to establish a parallel system of pride and shame (Adler-Nissen 2014a, 165–169).

Building on Adler-Nissen's work, Chwieroith (2015, 47–50) added camouflage and compensation as a distinct strategy. This approach involves

accepting the normative order but challenging stigmatization indirectly by passing as normal. Chwioroth highlights that rejecting stigma can not only question the moral cohesion of international society but also transform norms within the audience of normals. Similarly, counter-stigmatization may create two opposing camps, but can also foster rapprochement between the audience of normals and deviant actors, ultimately transforming norms and increasing their flexibility. Examples include South Korea’s rejection of stigma imposed by international financial institutions (Chwioroth 2015, 58–62) and Brazil’s counter-stigmatization of IMF rules (Chwioroth 2015, 54–58), both of which led to changes in international norms governing capital flows.

Rousseau (2018) expanded Adler-Nissen’s classification, adding stigma adaptation, akin to camouflage and compensation strategies. Synthesizing Adler-Nissen’s work with Meisenbach’s (2010) framework, Sauer and Reveraert (2018) proposed a twofold logic: whether the actor accepts or challenges public perceptions of stigma and whether it accepts or rejects the stigma’s application to itself. Rogstad (2022b, 3–4) refined this further into four strategies: (1) stigma acceptance/recognition—accepting both public understanding of stigma and its application; (2) stigma rejection/avoidance—accepting public understanding but challenging its application; (3) stigma evasion—accepting the label’s application but challenging the public understanding of the norm; and (4) counter-stigmatization/stigma reversal—challenging both public understanding of stigma and its application.

**Table 1 Stigma-management strategies according to Rogstad (2022a, 5; 2022b, 3)**

	<i>Actor accepts stigma’s application to self</i>	<i>Actor challenges stigma’s application to self</i>
<i>Actor accepts public understanding of stigma</i>	Stigma acceptance/recognition	Stigma rejection/avoidance
<i>Actor challenges public understanding of stigma</i>	Stigma evasion	Counter-stigmatization/stigma reversal

Authors acknowledge that these models represent broad ideal types, and empirical cases may reveal situations that fall between these categories (Rogstad 2022b, 4). Several scholars have further explored previously unidentified strategies that cannot be neatly categorized within the existing ideal types. For example, Kurowska and Reshetnikov (2021) introduced the concept of “trickstery” to describe Russia’s strategy in responding to

stigmatization attempts within international society. Focusing on India's approach to managing nuclear-related stigma, Saha (2022) identified the strategy of "stigma redaction," which lies between full acceptance and recognition of stigma on one hand and "passing" (avoidance) on the other.

Counter-stigmatization is one of the broadest categories, encompassing several more precise subtypes that can be further delineated. Besides the most conventional defining of this strategy as reframing one's stigma as a badge of pride and portraying others as deviant, there are also other types of stigma reversal. One of them could be what Speyer (2025) terms as "replicative self-stigmatization" (a practice adopted by Poland in response to stigmatization related to backlash against EU law) in which a country claims to be a long-term victim of stigmatization to deflect recent negative labels and incriminations. Another type involves practices that Kim (2024) describes as "stigma shifting," in which a stigmatized state "takes a role of a stigmatizer" towards those of lower status, aiming to affirm its normality. This is similar to what Zarakol terms as the "arriviste priesthood" approach (Zarakol 2011, 107).

While recognizing the significant contribution of Rogstad's (2022a, 2022b) classification of ideal types, this book adopts Chwieroth's (2015) classification as its primary framework, particularly due to the relevance of the "camouflage and compensation" strategy. Considering the focus on Serbia's post-2000 trajectory, the relationship to the public understanding of stigma is less critical than the degree to which stigma is accepted by the actor itself. In the context of the relatively stable international liberal order at the start of the twenty-first century—and given Serbia's relatively limited capacity to fundamentally challenge norms in the international arena—this aspect is of secondary importance.

Accordingly, this study simplifies the various strategies into two fundamentally distinct categories:

1. Compromising strategies, which consider acknowledging or adapting to the stigma (stigma acceptance and camouflage and compensation)
2. Denying strategies, which entail resisting or actively challenging the stigma (stigma rejection and counter-stigmatization)

In addition to classifying strategies, it is crucial to highlight that existing research on stigma in IR lacks comprehensive frameworks for systematically analyzing this complex process. Many studies on stigma management tend to overlook a detailed examination of the stigma-imposition process, often presuming the existence of stigma without exploring its origins or underlying mechanisms. A thorough analysis of the processes involved in

stigma imposition is essential for understanding how states manage their stigmas. Furthermore, these studies frequently fail to recognize that stigma management is typically a prolonged and dynamic process. Different aspects of this process may fluctuate in relevance over time influenced by shifts in various international and domestic factors.

This book seeks to address these gaps by providing a more systematic framework for analyzing the distinct elements and stages of the stigma-management process, as well as for assessing their relative significance. It also sheds additional light on the question of where states manage their stigma—at which stages—a topic that has remained undertheorized. Finally, it extends the articulation of “counter-stigmatization,” to include not only actions aimed at reversing stigma toward the stigmatizer or shifting it to the low-ranked actor, but also efforts to transfer a (part of) the stigma to a former adversary.

### **How Do States Choose Stigma-Management Strategies?**

Understanding the factors influencing how states respond to stigmatization attempts by the audience of normals is one of the most challenging tasks. Based on the assumption that only actors entirely detached from shared societal values can remain untouched by stigma, the cohesiveness of the normative order and the stigmatized actor's attachment to it are often starting points in analyzing this dynamic. While a complete autarchy in which states are indifferent to stigmatizing norms remains mostly theoretical (partially exemplified only by extreme cases like North Korea), Krasnodębska (2021, 37–39) notes that stigmatization is more impactful when the targeted actor shares the system of values to a significant extent, as they are more affected by denunciation attempts. However, comprehensive classifications of different factors (ideational and material, external and internal) remain rare in literature.

Drawing from influential studies on human rights norms, one school of thought emphasizes factors such as aspirations for normative status and prestige, political elites' attitudes toward norm violations, and general vulnerability of states as determinants of how states respond to stigma (Biersteker 2015; Friman 2015c). These authors often distinguish stigmatization from material sanctions, although they acknowledge that material costs frequently follow stigmatization.

Incorporating material elements and examining how differences in resources influence policy responses, Adler-Nissen (2014a, 154) identifies

three key factors that shape stigma-management strategies. The first is the degree of shared values: states that believe in the legitimacy of the norm they are accused of violating are more likely to feel compelled to address the stigma immediately. The second are material and social resources: states with fewer domestic and international resources have limited options and are more likely to choose stigma acceptance strategies. Finally, the third are domestic political debates: decisions on stigma-management strategies are shaped by domestic political processes which influence the interpretation of factors affecting the state and strategies deemed most suitable.

Lauren Rivera and Ayşe Zarakol also propose frameworks for understanding how specific factors influence the choice of stigma-management strategy. Consistent with their emphasis on identity-related factors, both include material considerations without excluding them entirely. Rivera's earlier framework is particularly detailed, presenting four criteria within a dichotomous structure. These criteria, along with their specific characterizations, determine the strategy that a state will select.

Rivera distinguishes between four criteria (2008, 616–17). The first is certainty of the stigma, where she distinguishes between “discredited” and “discreditable” actors (based on Goffman's framework). Discredited states are more likely to adopt strategies of commemoration or isolation, as concealment options are limited. Discreditable states, with less public awareness of their deviations, are more likely to choose concealment strategies.

The second is severity of the stigma, which she divides into categories of “high” or “low.” If stigma severity is high and it significantly obstructs desired social rewards, states tend to conceal it. If stigma's impact is low, strategies of commemoration or isolation become more viable. However, this dynamic changes when the international society offers incentives for self-reflective or commemorative behavior.

The third is the timing of the stigma. Rivera establishes a dichotomy between “long-past” and “recent” stigmas, suggesting that states dealing with stigma resulting from long-past behavior are more likely to adopt isolation or commemoration strategies, while states grappling with recent stigmas tend to choose concealment or, again, isolation.<sup>15</sup>

15 This distinction stems from the assumption that states stigmatized long ago are often socialized into their role as outsiders. As a result, they find it easier to acknowledge their difference and either isolate themselves or employ commemorative practices to bridge the gap. On the other hand, states that are newly stigmatized—particularly those accustomed to perceiving themselves as “normal”—are expected to respond by concealing their deviance or isolating themselves while denying their mistakes.

Rivera further examines the degree of control that state elites exercise over societal narratives, categorizing it as "low" or "high." In cases of high narrative control, states are more likely to adopt concealment or isolation strategies, as these require cohesive messaging. Conversely, in situations of low narrative control, such strategies are less viable, making commemorative strategies more likely (Rivera 2008, 617).<sup>16</sup>

Ayşe Zarakol provides an alternative framework for understanding factors that influence stigma-management strategies. She highlights four factors (2011, 104–107):

1. **National habitus:** Drawing on Bourdieu's concept, Zarakol argues that the national habitus is shaped by a state's historical experiences, lessons, myths, and analogies. States with a "glorious past" or previously high international status are more likely to feel frustration with stigma and to pursue destigmatization rapidly. For example, invoking a "golden age" or emphasizing a state's historical contributions to international society can help bypass problematic aspects of its past.
2. **Actor's imagination:** This factor reflects the self-perception of the stigmatized state regarding its role. If alternative discourses or value systems allow stigma to be reframed as a blessing rather than a curse, the state may adopt strategies that do not prioritize rapid destigmatization.
3. **Actor's capabilities:** Referring to material and social capital, Zarakol suggests that states with fewer resources have more limited stigma-management options. Material performance, for instance, can serve as a foundation for regime legitimacy, offsetting domestic legitimacy issues stemming from international stigma.
4. **Broader normative context:** Greater social mobility within the international system increases the likelihood of destigmatization efforts. Conversely, when mobility is constrained, states are less likely to pursue destigmatization.

This book acknowledges that both ideational and material factors, as well as both external and internal factors, influence the choice of stigma-management strategies. However, in the case of Serbia, many of these factors remained constant throughout the studied period, while the pursued strategies varied over time. The objective is to explain these

<sup>16</sup> This conclusion draws on dramaturgical theory, which emphasizes that successful impression management requires uniform messaging. When dissonant tones emerge from within the state, concealment or isolation becomes difficult to implement effectively, increasing the appeal of commemorative strategies.

fluctuations. While Adler-Nissen (2014a) observed that states can change their strategies, and Rogstad (2022b, 4) noted that states can pursue parallel strategies, the existing literature does not explain why states shift strategies or simultaneously pursue seemingly contradictory ones. The book seeks to address this gap by developing a model to understand how Serbia chose its stigma-management strategies in relations with former adversaries and why it sometimes employed both compromising and denial-based strategies parallelly, even when they appeared contradictory.

## Summary

This chapter identifies the main theoretical streams in the research on stigmatization within IR and connects it with the research on stigma in social sciences, focusing on those theorists who approach stigma through the lenses of social hierarchization. It also outlines how theorists approach the most important analytical concepts (stigma imposition, destigmatization, and audience of normals) and delineates the relation of stigma to the associated concepts (power, identity, status, and emotions). Special attention is devoted to the process of stigma management, through a thorough literature review on why, when, and how states manage their stigmas in the international realm, as well as how they choose a particular stigma-management strategy. Some questions (such as which strategy is the most effective or morally appropriate) are not thoroughly reviewed, as they are not the focus of this book.

This chapter also identifies several critical gaps in the existing literature on stigma in IR. First, the process of stigma impositions remains analytically underdeveloped in IR, with certain actors and elements of the process being undertheorized. Second, the stigma-management process also remains analytically underdeveloped considering the lack of instruments to assess the complexity of this relational process, which occurs across multiple stages that may differ significantly in nature and importance. Third, there are no developed theoretical matrixes that integrate the relative influence of conventional security issues (military, political, and economic threats) and the need for identity security as factors driving states to manage their stigmas and achieve destigmatization. Finally, the existing scholarship lacks more comprehensive tools for understanding why states alter their stigma-management strategies over time and why they sometimes pursue multiple, even contradictory strategies simultaneously. The objective of this book is to create a model that addresses these identified gaps.

Based on the key points outlined in the concluding paragraphs of each subchapter, we can summarize that this book conceptualizes stigma as a special kind of relationship between an attribute and a stereotype, which emerges in the complex social process of stigmatization. This process is relational and dynamic, consisting of two main components—stigma imposition and stigma management. Stigma imposition is considered successful once all its constitutive elements are successfully enacted—labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination. Stigma management, as a form of reaction, starts from the very beginning but becomes more “strategic” once stigma is successfully imposed and when states develop a distinct motivation to achieve destigmatization. This desire is driven not only by material considerations, but even more so by identity-related factors. States employ various strategies to overcome their stigmas—sometimes simultaneously pursuing strategies based on different logics. Using Serbia as a case study, this book seeks to develop a theoretical explanation of why this occurs and how states choose stigma-management strategies in their relations with former adversaries.

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### 3. “Should I Cool It or Should I Blow?”

#### The Model of Destigmatization Dilemma

**Abstract:** The third chapter introduces the model of destigmatization dilemma as a tool for understanding how stigmatized states choose stigma-management strategies in their relations with former adversaries. The chapter elaborates the theoretical underpinnings of the model, which belongs to social constructivism in International Relations, and briefly presents securitization theory, recognition theory, and dramaturgy theory, which are integrated into the model. Afterwards, it presents the logic of the model, with the starting assumption that state leaders are motivated with two most important factors in their choice: the need for recognition and the need to protect security. The relative variation in these two factors leads to different choices of strategies. The chapter ends with an explanation of the book’s methodology.

**Keywords:** destigmatization dilemma, recognition, securitization, dramaturgy, constructivism

Should I admit to having made certain mistakes in the past? Do I feel responsible to confront my actions and take responsibility? What if I do not believe I am fully responsible, or at least not the only one fully responsible? Should I openly acknowledge and apologize for my actions, or should I only quietly correct my behavior in the future and try to stay under the radar? Will society accept my new behavior and forget the past? And if it does, will that acceptance leave a lasting mark on my image in society? Or should I reject the negative claims and invest the energy and resources in convincing others that it is not my responsibility for these wrongdoings? Should I aim to persuade society that someone else bears greater responsibility? Should I compromise or stand firm? Should I cool it or should I blow, as the Clash would say?

This dilemma is present among many people with spoiled identity. The same dilemma is equally relevant for leaders of states with spoiled identity.

Sometimes, the answer is—let's do both. And why do states choose to pursue both, even when these strategies are logically contradictory? This chapter will offer a theoretical foundation for a novel model of destigmatization dilemma, aimed at improving our understanding of how states choose stigma-management strategies.

This chapter begins by outlining the key elements of securitization, recognition, and dramaturgy theories, which are then integrated into a broader social-constructivist framework. It will explain how all the mentioned theoretical images correspond to the research of stigmatization in IR. As previously elaborated, the aim is to integrate the perspectives focused on identity with those focused on more conventional security (military, political, and economic threats). However, both are explored through the intersubjective perspective of social constructivism, which will be elaborated on in this chapter. The final section presents the analytical framework for the research on stigmatization and stigma management.

Finally, when it comes to pursuing a particular stigma-management strategy at the stage of relations with former adversaries and extracting factors and conditions under which a certain stigma-management strategy is more likely to be adopted, this framework outlines the model based on two most important factors. The first factor is a tendency to overcome stigma and achieve destigmatization, driven by the desire for recognition of identity. The second factor is a tendency to preserve the state's security. The interaction between these two factors results in the pursuit of different strategies in international relations.

## **Theoretical Underpinnings of the Model**

In the broadest sense, as previously mentioned, this study belongs to the paradigm of social constructivism in IR. The core premise of this theory, as defined by Onuf (1989), is that “the world is what we make of it.” Flockhart (2016, 81–82) identifies three characteristics of this theoretical approach: a focus on ideational and material structures (particularly the former) and social norms; a focus on the role of identity in shaping decisions and behavior; and a focus on practice and action, adopting Giddens's structuration theory, which posits that actors and structures mutually constitute each other. As Vucetic (2018) points out in his review, there are significant variations among authors regarding how identity is linked to foreign policy in previous research. Given our focus on the study of stigma, this work is closest to the third generation of social constructivists, who explored the effects of

shame and stigma and similar state behavior in international relations and examined various forms of stratification and hierarchy (Adler-Nissen 2016, 33).

The foundation for integrating stigma into social constructivism in IR lies in the assumption that there is an international society, and, thus, the relations between states are essentially social in character.<sup>1</sup> Stigma as a social phenomenon plays an important role in international society. Stigma fits into all four mentioned key characteristics of social constructivism: as a social construct or "social fact"; as a process or practice of actors, which simultaneously creates new norms and emerges under their influence; as an ideational structure that stratifies at the international level; and as a phenomenon that significantly influences a state's identity and its foreign policy actions.

In methodological and epistemological terms, this work draws from the findings of conventional social constructivist theorists such as Stefano Guzzini and Jutta Weldes. The premise is that for social and political outcomes the external objective reality is not relevant; what is more important is the interpretation of that reality by key (foreign policy) actors who observe and interpret events through the lens of their own identity, national memory, and everything that Weldes (1996, 1999) refers to as the "national security imaginary."

Building on Guzzini's (2012) analysis of the revival of geopolitics in Europe after the Cold War, the focus of this study is not on the very facts but on their interpretation by actors. This means that the research starts from broader discursive-identity structures (most importantly—national habitus) to answer how and why a certain event is interpreted. Additionally, stigmatization of Serbia is thoroughly explained in a separate chapter to delve into all aspects of this negative identity legacy that Serbia sought to shed after 2000.

1 The concept of the international society did not originally emerge within social constructivism but was first introduced into analysis by theorists of the English school of IR, which is why this approach is sometimes referred to as the "international society school." The most influential author in this school, Hedley Bull, defined international society as existing when "a group of states, conscious of certain common interests and values, form a society in the sense that they accept being bound by a set of rules in their relations with one another and participate in common institutions" (Adler-Nissen 2014, 148). Another influential conceptualization is offered by Barry Buzan (1993) who claims that international society has two forms of genesis: one organic, which stems from common civilizational and cultural foundations, and the other contractual and constructed, which arises from a basic consensus on rules and equality of actors within them. This represents the well-known sociological distinction between community and society or *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* (Buzan 1993, 333).

### *Lenses for Understanding Security-Impacted Behavior: Securitization Theory*

Security threats, regardless of their nature (military, political, economic, etc.), are approached in this study as intersubjective phenomena, in accordance with securitization theory. This theory was initially developed within the scope of the Copenhagen school of security studies. The core premise of this school is the view of security as a category that is neither entirely objective nor completely subjective, but intersubjective (Buzan, Waever, and De Wilde 1998, 30–31). Securitization is a process in which a particular issue is designated as a security threat using a speech act (the securitizing act) by a specific actor (usually a political entity).

By framing an issue as a security matter, it is removed from the usual political arena, thereby legitimizing the use of special measures to combat the perceived threat. The key elements of this process are, therefore: the securitizing actor who performs the securitization, the functional actor who influences the dynamics of securitization, the referent object whose security is portrayed as being threatened, the securitizing act—the speech act through which securitization is carried out—the audience to whom the securitization message is directed, and special measures which would not be considered legitimate in the normal political process (Ejdus 2017, 107).

The factors that determine the success of securitization, according to Buzan, Waever, and De Wilde (1998, 31–32), are primarily the use of security grammar, the possession of social capital by the securitizing actor and the preexisting degree of conviction among the audience that something indeed poses a threat. This analytical framework immediately draws attention to gaps in the conceptualization of the processes of stigmatization and destigmatization. The theory itself is ontologically and epistemologically linked to the basic assumptions of social constructivism, though in certain respects it could also be classified within post-structuralist IR theory.

It is evident that there is a logical and theoretical connection between stigmatization and securitization. Namely, stigmatization, just like securitization, begins with the use of speech acts that assign a certain negative meaning to an actor (*labeling* and *stereotyping*), presenting them as the other and as a threat (*separation*) to win over the audience for the final act—the application of special measures (*discrimination* and *loss of status*). Thus, the logic is almost identical, and the conditions for the success of both processes are similar. Stigmatization often requires the use of security grammar to discriminate against the labeled actor.

However, there are certain differences between these two processes. The first difference is that stigmatization does not necessarily involve only the

grammar of security, but also the grammar of deviance or delinquency, which is not required in securitization. The second difference is that stigma lasts longer and remains a long-lasting scar in the biography of the stigmatized, making destigmatization far more demanding than de-securitization. Still, this connects stigmatization and securitization on another level. As mentioned, the audience's perception that a certain threat is real, as well as the broader sociopolitical and sociolinguistic context, play a significant role in determining the success of securitization. The fact that an actor is stigmatized will therefore facilitate the success of any future securitization, as long as the stigma remains unresolved. Thus, stigma is an important factor in the securitization process, and it is practically impossible to view stigma separately from the security dimension.

### *Lenses for Understanding Identity-Impacted Behavior: Recognition Theory*

Another important theoretical approach that belongs to the broader social-constructivist paradigm and will be used in this study is recognition theory. The starting assumption of this approach is that states aim to have their identity and status accepted and appreciated by other members of international society (Zarakol 2018). Based on Hegelian philosophy and the political theory of authors such as Markell (2003) and Taylor (1992), many scholars assume that the desire to be recognized is the main driver of the political behavior of states in international society (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021, 614–616; Berenskoetter 2008, 151–152).

The importance of recognition as a driver of behavior was especially emphasized in critical international theory (Haacke 2005), and in social constructivism in IR (Wendt 2003). In these approaches, recognition is conceptualized broader than legal formal recognition. This broader understanding can be distinguished as “thick recognition” (Strömbom 2014) or “existential recognition” (Zarakol 2018, 850). Identity is a relational phenomenon constructed in relation to other members of society, which is why states, like individuals and groups, seek recognition from others. Recognition theories particularly focus on “misrecognition” cases in which states feel that their perception of identity is not recognized by international society, prompting a reaction from the state aimed at becoming recognized (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021, 614–616).<sup>2</sup>

2 Recognition theories are closely associated with ontological security theory. Leading authors applying the recognition approach to stigma studies also recognize the relevance of ontological security in their work (Zarakol 2011; Adler-Nissen 2014). This concept denotes “a

Stigma is one of the most evident examples of misrecognition. Focusing on recognition helps us understand why stigmatized states strive to overcome stigma, improve their status, and become fully recognized as normal actors in international society. This desire can lead states to pursue policies that may not be beneficial from a materialistic or realistic perspective but could expedite recognition (Zarakol 2011). Achieving recognition as a state also allows individuals within that state to feel that their individual identity is more fully recognized, even if challenges persist in that regard (Adler-Nissen and Zarakol 2021, 615).

In the context of stigmatization, the desire for recognition is particularly important for countries that once held a higher status but lost it. In the liberal international order, this is especially relevant for states in the semi-periphery. Historically, many of these states made substantial material or security concessions to regain their status, which is contrary to the conventional logic of the materialist IR theories. Zarakol (2011) illustrates this with examples such as Japan rejecting the US proposal to remilitarize during the emerging Cold War and Turkey abolishing the Ottoman caliphate in 1924, a major source of Turkish influence among Muslims worldwide. This approach is useful for understanding similar decisions and practices in Serbia's behavior.

### *Lenses for Understanding Relevance of Different Policy Areas: Theory of Dramaturgy*

The theory of dramaturgy represents another major contribution to sociology made by Erving Goffman, in addition to his work on stigma.<sup>3</sup> In his key work for the development of this theory, titled *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), Goffman draws an analogy between theater dynamics and human social interactions. The starting assumption of this approach

need of individuals for trust in and constancy of relationships with significant others" (Ejdus 2017, 24). Giddens (1991, 92) interprets ontological security as "the trust that most people have in the continuity of their self-identity and the stability of the surrounding social and material environments of action." Scholars adopting this theoretical approach in IR argue that states, in critical situations, compromise material interests to protect their sense of continuity (Mitzen 2006). Stigma imposition represents a significant critical situation. It causes insecurity for the state's identity, as "identity is not best understood as a set of properties or a core essence that we simply have, but as a social construct, formed and sustained via practices and relations with others, including our embeddedness in social structures" (Mitzen and Larsson 2017, 3).

3 Following the ideas of the founder of interactionism, George Herbert Mead, Kenneth Burke laid the foundations of dramaturgy in sociology (Manning 2016, 1226–1227). Besides symbolic interactionists, theorists from other directions subsumed under interactionism, such as Harold Garfinkel and his ethnomethodology, and even critical theorists like Jürgen Habermas, contributed to the development of this theory (Giddens 2009, 85).

is that individuals are motivated to make the best possible impression in their "display behavior" on those around them (the "audience"), and they therefore adapt their behavior to the "role" they wish to play (8). Goffman refers to this behavior as a "performance" (10).

In addition to the individual playing a specific role observed by the audience, Goffman emphasizes the team participating in the performance as an important analytical factor influencing the behavior of actors during the performance (Goffman 1956, 47). A key consequence of this micro-sociological view of individual behavior in society and its interaction with others is the pluralistic understanding of individual identity, as well as the notion that a common intersubjective perception of reality is formed through the interaction of different actors on these stages.<sup>4</sup>

One of the most important distinctions for analyzing individual behavior in dramaturgical theory is the division between "front stage" (or "front region") and "backstage" (or "back region"). By the term "region" Goffman defines any space limited by physical barriers to visibility (Goffman 1956, 66–68). In other words, the region encompasses all actors who can observe behavior on a particular stage. Social behavior on the front stage/region is subordinated to the desired identity or role and involves efforts to play it convincingly before the audience, while there is no audience in the backstage/region. The first impression is critical (5), but not fixed as the performance continues, and the impression varies. Therefore, actors develop practices and skills of "impression management" (132–151).

This theory is intrinsically connected with stigma. Goffman considers stigma management as a form of impression management. However, in the study of stigma in IR, key elements of dramaturgical analysis such as the concepts of front and back regions have not been extensively utilized. This is surprising, considering evidence that dramaturgy theory is highly compatible with both the concept of stigma and the broader social constructivist framework. Certain aspects of this theory will be applied in constructing the destigmatization model to address existing gaps in the IR literature on stigma.

4 As emphasized by Rogač (2009, 135–136)—in the context of Goffman's symbolic interactionism, focus on the "display behavior," and the relation between an actor's identity and relevant identifiers in the public context—"identifiers form the basis for the emergence of stereotypes—simplified and value-laden representations—that social groups establish both about themselves and about other groups." In that sense, stereotypes as a simplified assumption about the characteristics of groups are mutually constitutive with the culture—they shape it, but they are also shaped by the cultural context in which they are developed (136). Therefore, the broader cultural and normative context of the society is very relevant for the actor's representation in society.

## Integration of Different Lenses: Destigmatization Dilemma Model<sup>5</sup>

This study conceptualizes stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” (Goffman 1963, 3). It does not inherently classify stigma as good or bad but views it as a construct within international society, shaped by the process of stigmatization. Stigma is contextual and historical, arising from the specific social and historical circumstances in which it develops (Tyler and Slater 2018, 732). It is enduring and detrimental to those who bear it, relegating them to a lower tier within the hierarchy of international society (Adler-Nissen 2017). The process of stigma imposition comprises the following main subprocesses: labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination (Link and Phelan 2001). While there are different takes on whether (and what kind of) emotional reaction from the discredited actor represents the fifth element of stigma imposition (Link et al. 2004), this model acknowledges that at least some sort of reaction in behavior is necessary to conclude that stigma is being imposed.

The foundation of the destigmatization dilemma model lies in the assumption that leaders of stigmatized states are aware of the detrimental effects of stigma. It imposes numerous costs, lowers their international status, and places them at the lower echelons of global hierarchies. Moreover, since leaders (foreign policy elites) share a common national habitus that shapes their worldview (Zarakol 2011), they are likely to perceive the stigmatization of their country as a misrecognition of their national identity. Consequently, they seek to resolve this complex situation, both rationally and emotionally, through various stigma-management strategies, ultimately aiming for destigmatization.

Stigma management occurs on various stages, affecting both domestic and foreign policy. The importance of each stage depends on the source of the stigma. For instance, when stigma arises from armed conflict, bilateral and multilateral relations with former adversaries take center stage in the efforts to influence the audience of normals. At this stage, the stigmatized actor must demonstrate whether it has altered its behavior and seeks compromise or rejects responsibility for alleged wrongdoings.

5 The name comes from an analogy with the “security dilemma” concept (Herz 1950). However, I don’t claim that the destigmatization dilemma is a subtype of the security dilemma. While there are some similarities, these two concepts differ in important aspects, starting from the assumption that the need for recognition is so important for states that they are prepared to sometimes compromise their physical security for this goal.

Foreign policy interactions of stigmatized states with former adversaries are primarily influenced by two factors:

1. *The Need for Recognition*: Stigmatization conveys that a state's identity is tarnished, motivating it to adopt compromising strategies to eliminate the stigma swiftly. The greater the perceived importance of a particular stage for destigmatization, the more likely states are to act in a compromising manner. Conversely, when a stage is deemed less critical due to the influence of other factors, such as incoherence among the audience of normals, states have fewer incentives to compromise.
2. *The Need to Protect Security*: Relations with former adversaries, particularly those from recent conflicts, often involve unresolved issues. This dynamic may lead states to resist compromising strategies, fearing that adversaries could exploit these compromises to reinforce stigma rather than alleviate it. The more threatening leaders perceive their former adversaries to be, the less inclined they are to employ compromising strategies. Conversely, reduced perceptions of threat increase the likelihood of compromise.



Figure 2: Factors influencing stigma management in relations with former adversaries

Both symbolic and material context affects how stigmatized states respond. Those with greater symbolic and material resources have more options, such as constructing a parallel interpretation that maintains identity continuity despite stigma or persisting with “deviant” policies despite the material costs of stigma. Furthermore, states subjected to less cohesive stigmatization

within international society will have greater flexibility in their responses. Drawing from Zarakol's (2011) classification, this model suggests that states facing severe stigma combined with limited resources, especially after (major) defeat, prioritize destigmatization.

The model identifies two primary types of stigma-management strategies:

1. Compromising Strategies:
  - *Stigma Acceptance*—symbolical gestures of recognizing (part or whole) responsibility, such as public apologies, memorialization, etc.
  - *Camouflage and Compensation*—efforts to compensate for past wrongdoings without explicitly acknowledging responsibility.
2. Denying Strategies:
  - *Stigma Rejection*—attempts to convince others that no norms were broken, and stigmatization is unwarranted.
  - *Counter-Stigmatization*—shaming the audience of normals as deviant or relativizing stigma through labeling peers, especially former adversaries.

Counter-stigmatization is understood in this model slightly differently than usual, considering the focus on relations with former adversaries. Instead of a focus on attempts to shame the audience of normals, counter-stigmatization is understood mainly as acts conducted to present a former adversary as “actually deviant,” or “more” or “equally” deviant. This is a form of socialization and relativization of its own stigma, through efforts to present that there was somebody who was worse, or who was also bad—signaling that the norm was widely neglected and not only by the discredited actor. Since these accusations contain an active attempt to reverse or transfer the stigma, they are classified as “counter-stigmatization.”

The choice of stigma-management strategies, therefore, depends on the interplay of these two key factors: the perceived importance of the stage for destigmatization and the perception of threat. These variations determine the approach states adopt in managing their stigma. The following outcomes are possible:

1. *Low Importance of Stage and Low Perception of Threat:*  
In this scenario, states deprioritize destigmatization efforts for that specific stage. Stigma-management strategies are pursued only marginally, with minimal emphasis on addressing the imposed stigma. There are no incentives either to compromise, or to escalate and deny.
2. *Low Importance of Stage and High Perception of Threat:*  
States primarily employ denying strategies. While incentives for compromising are lower, higher perception of threat drives states to respond

sharply, through rejecting the stigma or counter-stigmatizing the former adversaries. While denying strategies dominate, states may engage in limited compromising gestures, such as camouflage or compensation, to minimize potential costs of entirely neglecting the stigma.

- 3. *High Importance of Stage and Low Perception of Threat:*  
When the stage is perceived as highly significant for destigmatization and the threat level is low, states favor compromising strategies. These include accepting the stigma through actions like apologies, public acknowledgment, or compensation. However, even in this case, some elements of denial are likely to persist as a trade-off to mitigate residual risks tied to the application of compromising strategies.
- 4. *High Importance of Stage and High Perception of Threat:*  
States face conflicting priorities: pursuing destigmatization through compromising strategies versus avoiding compromises that could be exploited by adversaries. In such cases, states often adopt a dual approach, simultaneously employing both compromising and denying strategies to balance the competing demands of reducing stigma and safeguarding against potential threats.

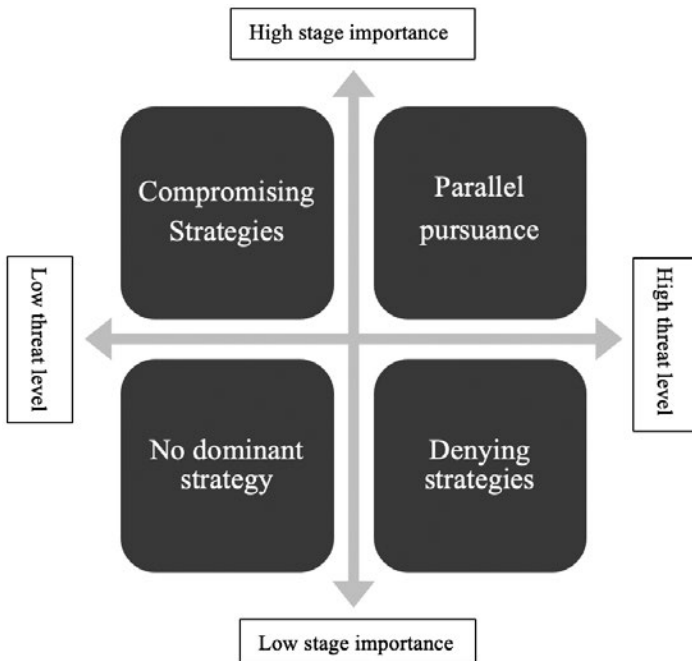


Figure 3: Destigmatization dilemma matrix of dominant strategy choice

This matrix illustrates the strategic choices available to states depending on their perception of threat and the importance of the stage for their destigmatization goal. By integrating both compromising and denying approaches, states navigate the complex dynamics of stigma management in international society. While the immediate application of the model lies in analyzing stigma-management behavior in relations with former adversaries, its theoretical scope is far broader. The principles and mechanisms it outlines can be adapted to explore other contexts where perceptions, interpretations, and social hierarchies intersect.

## Methodology

To fully grasp the methodological dimension of this study, three essential characteristics of its ontological and epistemological framework must be emphasized. These features illuminate the interpretive depth and analytical flexibility of the model, offering a nuanced approach to understanding the processes it examines.

First, the model's categories are conceptualized as analytical ideal types. Rather than representing fixed or clear-cut distinctions, they serve as endpoints along a continuum. For instance, perceptions of threat or the importance of a particular stage for destigmatization do not fall neatly into binary categories such as "high" or "low." Reality is more complex, with these perceptions existing on a spectrum ranging from negligible to critical. This continuum allows the model to reflect the intricate and often fluid nature of decision-making processes. It recognizes that leaders' interpretations are rarely static and are shaped by evolving circumstances. This study aims to identify variations along this spectrum and trace the processes through which these perceptions change over time.

Second, a core premise of the model is that the behavior of states is not driven by the objective reality of threats or opportunities but by how these are perceived by their leaders. This does not imply, however, that perceptions are purely subjective. Leaders operate within a shared, intersubjective framework of a collective understanding of phenomena shaped by historical, cultural, and institutional contexts. As such, the study of threat perceptions and the relative importance of stages for achieving destigmatization must focus on how decision-makers as a group interpret these factors. Within these interpretive communities, not all voices carry equal weight. Certain individuals exert greater influence in shaping shared perceptions. This dynamic further underscores the model's foundation in intersubjectivist

ontology and its reliance on interpretivist epistemology. It is not merely the views of isolated individuals that matter but how those views are formed, contested, and shared within broader decision-making networks.

Third, unlike strict positivist models that seek to establish deterministic cause and effect relationships, this model is designed to explore social mechanisms. Drawing on Guzzini's (2012) approach to interpretive process tracing, it examines the conditions under which certain social processes are possible and the factors that make them more or less likely to occur. This shift in focus from rigid causality to the exploration of possibility allows the model to address "how possible" questions rather than "why" questions. For example, rather than asking why a particular state adopts a certain stigma-management strategy, the model investigates the conditions that make such a strategy viable or preferable.

The methodological approach of this study emerges naturally from its ontological and epistemological foundations. At its core, the model seeks to understand how decision-makers, both as individuals and as collectives, interpret the world around them. It asks which factors shape these interpretations and, most importantly, how these interpretations manifest in policy outcomes. With these questions in mind, the study adopts a qualitative methodology, placing particular emphasis on interpretivist process tracing, as articulated by Guzzini (2012). This method not only aligns with the theoretical underpinnings of the model but also provides the flexibility required to explore the nuanced processes of stigma imposition and management across two distinct yet interrelated dimensions.

### *Tracing Stigma Imposition: Serbia/Yugoslavia (1991–2000)*

The first dimension of the research examines the stigmatization of Serbia/Yugoslavia during the turbulent period between 1991 and 2000. This phase is marked by a concerted process of stigma imposition by the international society or "audience of normals." The focus lies on understanding how international actors interpreted Serbia's behavior and responded to it, tracing the chronological evolution of this stigmatization through different phases.

To capture this dynamic process, the research delves into five aspects of stigmatization: labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination, as well as reactions from the Serbian side. The study focuses on the occurrence of these processes in the most important international forums, such as the UN, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the EU, extracting and classifying narrative and material aspects of stigmatization which are documented in the formal acts of these organizations. Main labels, stereotypes, and concrete acts of separation,

status loss, and discrimination are classified and elaborated, while the acts which witness reaction from Serbia's sides are chronologically presented.

Various supportive methods are employed to conduct thorough research into these different aspects. Labeling is examined through discourse analyses of official documents from relevant international organizations. Given the complexity and more diffuse nature of stereotyping, it is primarily analyzed through the review of relevant studies focused on building of stereotypes regarding Serbia and the Balkans in the public domain (particularly in the West). Separation, status loss, and discrimination are analyzed through content analysis of the relevant primary sources which envisioned such acts, and through analysis of historical and empirical literature which analyzed these acts from the 1990s. Serbia's reactions are researched through analysis of primary sources, such as the official foreign policy speeches of Yugoslav/Serbian foreign policy decision-makers, in addition to relevant secondary sources on Serbian/Yugoslav politics and policy during this period.

The study's approach draws on securitization theory, adapting and modifying its framework to unpack the category of the "audience of normals" in this context and to identify the main stigma-imposing actors and the functional mechanisms of stigmatization. In these settings, the stigmatizing actors—the architects of stigmatization—played a critical role, alongside those who either supported or opposed this process. In doing so, it reveals the complex interplay between the imposing agents and the audience's reactions, which ranged from outright support to active resistance, focusing on its chronological variances throughout the process.

### *Tracing Stigma Management: Serbia and Former Adversaries (2001–2020)*

The second dimension shifts the focus inward, examining how Serbian decision-makers interpreted two pivotal factors in their foreign policy toward Croatia and BiH between 2001 and 2020: 1) the importance of these relationships as stages for destigmatization; 2) the perceived level of threat from these former adversaries. These interpretations are not static but evolve over time, influenced by shifts in context, leadership, external pressures, etc. By tracing these variations, the study seeks to uncover the connections between these interpretations and the specific stigma-management strategies employed by Serbia.

Considering the intersubjectivity of the model, this methodological approach begins with an analysis of structural factors influencing the position of Serbia's decision-makers regarding stigma and regarding a strategic objective of destigmatization. For this purpose, analysis of relevant historical, anthropological, and IR literature is conducted to outline the main elements of Serbian national habitus as an ideational context in which Serbian

decision-makers operated, also analyzing their imagination, capabilities, and broader international normative context.

Subsequently, the study narrows its focus to examine how Serbia's decision-makers defined stigma and destigmatization as a goal, and how important the relations with BiH and Croatia were for them in this regard. For this purpose, a discourse analysis of the most important foreign policy speeches of decision-makers and official foreign policy documents is conducted. Out of the three discourse analysis models developed by Lene Hansen (2006, 59–65), the approach of this book aligns with Model I, focusing on the analysis of the texts of foreign policy officials. The findings from this analysis help us to trace the genesis of the perception of stigma and destigmatization as a goal, and to assess the perceived importance of relations with Croatia and BiH from the prism of decision-makers.

In the next stage, discourse analysis of numerous foreign policy statements of Serbian decision-makers between 2001 and 2020 is conducted to trace the genesis of their perception of threat coming from Croatia and BiH. Adopting and modifying Alexander Wendt's (1999) classification of different dominant roles which states play in different cultures of anarchy, perceptions of relations with BiH and Croatia are classified into four different patterns: enemy, rival, partner, and friend.<sup>6</sup> In this schema, an enemy represents a state perceived as an imminent threat, while a rival poses a moderate one. Partners, by contrast, are seen as moderately low threats, while friends are perceived as posing little to no threat. Considering that this study mostly focuses on variations between the two moderate categories of rivalry and partnership, to make a clearer analytical distinction it groups rivals with enemies under the broader category of "higher threat," while partners and friends are categorized as "lower threat" (table 2).

**Table 2** Perceived threat levels in ideal types of interstate relations (modified and updated source: Wendt 1999) ↵

Character of relations	Perceived level of threat
Enmity	High
Rivalry	Moderately high
Partnership	Moderately low
Friendship	Low

6 At the annual International Studies Association conference in 2021, I presented a coauthored modification of Wendt's (1999) cultures of anarchies (*Hobbesian*—based on the dominant role of enemy; *Lockean*—based on the dominant role of rival; *Kantian*—based on the dominant role of friend) in which a fourth distinct, *Benthamite*, culture (based on the dominant role of partner) was incorporated (Krstić, Nedeljković, and Dašić 2025).

Finally, to test the destigmatization dilemma model, variations in these two factors over time are compared with changes in concrete stigma-management strategies applied during different phases between 2001 and 2020. Concrete stigma-coping acts are extracted mostly from news analysis and then classified to the matrix of different stigma-management strategies. In order to further test the connection between two factors and concrete strategies, findings from analyses of various texts in the previous phases (foreign policy documents, speeches, news, etc.) are complemented with an analysis of interviews conducted with Serbian key decision-makers in the given period, offering a behind-the-scenes perspective on the perceptions that may not have been fully reflected in public articulations.

Several data collection methods are conducted in the scope of the research. Desk research was conducted to collect relevant primary and secondary sources about Serbian foreign policy between 2001 and 2020. The main source for assessing the perception of destigmatization as a goal, as well as the consequential relative significance of relations with Croatia and BiH as stigma-management stages for achieving this goal, are the main program speeches of Serbian foreign policy such as the official parliamentary exposures of programs of prime ministers and foreign ministers, and inauguration speeches of presidents or relevant national strategies. The main source of texts that indicate the level of threat which Serbian leadership perceived in its relations with Croatia and BiH are the institutional webpages (government, parliament, foreign ministry, and president) and foreign policy reports of relevant media outlets.

Extensive archival research is also undertaken for this purpose. Given that archives of official documents from this period in Serbia remain still classified and inaccessible to the public, the focus is placed on the archive of daily bulletins of the Serbian (Yugoslav/Serbia and Montenegro) Ministry of Foreign Affairs covering the years from 2001 to 2019. The archive contains foreign policy speeches and interviews of key decision makers, as well as media reports on main foreign policy activities that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs deemed relevant enough to include in the official bulletin. This source is also instrumental in collecting data on how Serbian foreign policy towards Croatia and BiH was practically implemented. Since the archive records conclude in 2019, comprehensive desk research on relevant media news on Serbian foreign policy towards Croatia and BiH is conducted, thereby compensating for the absence of archival sources from this period.

In addition, semi-structured anonymous interviews were conducted with eleven foreign policy decision-makers from this period to reconstruct

their perception of Croatia and BiH in the given period. This data collection method is particularly valuable in assessing the perceived relative importance of relations with Croatia or BiH for Serbian stigma management, as it provides the most direct insight into the perceptions of decision-makers. It also tests whether publicly articulated positions were genuine and reliable. Moreover, this method is relevant for the collection of insights about the less known aspects of implementation of Serbian foreign policy towards Croatia and Bosnia in this period.

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Taken together, these methodological tools enable the study to weave a rich narrative of Serbia's experience with stigma, both as a target and as a manager. From the imposition of stigma in the 1990s to the evolving interpretations of threat and opportunity in the 2000s, the research illuminates the complex interplay of perception, interpretation, and action. This narrative exceeds beyond a mere reaction, highlighting instead a story of agency in which decision-makers sought to navigate a challenging process of stigma management, with the final aim to overcome it.

This book adopts a value-neutral stance, treating stigmatization as a processual phenomenon of social construction without delving into the analysis of norm transgression and the ethical issues concerning stigmatization. This approach leaves room for moral criticism from two positions. First, by treating stigmatization as a social construction of deviance occurring within power asymmetry, the study may relativize the responsibility of the actor (Serbia) as the alleged norm breaker. Second, it may relativize the adverse consequences of stigmatization for populations (citizens of Serbia). While acknowledging that these issues should also be analyzed in the future, this study deliberately sets them aside to focus on the examination of the social mechanism—a task already substantial and complex in scope.

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## 4. “Balkan’s Coming Home”

### Stigmatization of Serbia during the 1990s

**Abstract:** The chapter traces the stigmatization of Serbia during the 1990s by analyzing processes of labeling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination. It outlines the labels attached to Serbia, analyzes developed and previously existing stereotypes, presents means of separation, and concrete acts of depriving status and discrimination in the international realm. The focus is on agency in the most important international forums (UN, OSCE, EU) of the three main groups of actors: main stigma imposers, opponents of stigmatization, and functional actors who facilitated stigmatization. Finally, the chapter also presents the reaction from the Serbian side on stigma imposition attempts during this period.

**Keywords:** international organizations, labels, stereotypes, sanctions, war crimes

In the contrast to the stereotypes about the Balkans as “the powder keg of Europe,” the region remained largely peaceful and stable from the end of the Second World War, until the final decade of the twentieth century.<sup>1</sup> (Re)creation of Yugoslavia after the suffering of the Second World War seemed to be a solution which established a sustainable “brotherhood and

<sup>1</sup> There were several cases of crisis and the limited use of violence in interstate relations, such as in tensions between Yugoslavia and Italy regarding Trieste and tensions between Bulgaria and Turkey regarding the treatment of the Muslim population by the government in Sofia. However, neither of these crises escalated to the level of interstate conflict. The most vivid example of the use of violence in domestic politics was the coup d’etat in Greece in 1967 and the rule of military *hunta* until 1974, which presented to a big extent a spillover of the civil war in Greece between 1944 and 1949. However, this did not escalate to the typical “balkanization” in the sense of partition of Greece but could be more classified as an example of authoritarian dictatorship supported by foreign actors (mostly the US) in the context of the Cold War containment doctrine to prevent the spread of communism.

unity” between different Balkan south Slavic nations, in the scope of the joint federal state. The late 1980s also witnessed the reestablishment of the institutionalized forms of the Balkan multilateral political cooperation (Lopandić and Kronja 2010), accompanied by the initial democratization of former socialist countries in the region. Through the lenses of prevailing stereotypes, it seemed that the Balkans appeared to have been to a good degree “debalkanized.”

The dissolution of Yugoslavia abruptly reversed this process. While the fall of the Iron Curtain reduced the tensions and fostered integration processes across the rest of formerly divided Europe, in contrast to this development, Yugoslavia as a Cold-War oasis of peace, was torn apart in the flame of civil war. This was followed with the freezing of democratic political transition in many of its former republics (which was partially introduced only in 1989/1990), leading to severe abuses of different human rights—ranging from restriction on freedom of speech to violation of minority rights. To paraphrase the famous English chant from the period when they hosted the European championship (1996) about “football coming home”—many in the international society started developing the perception that eventually “Balkan is coming home.”

In this context, Serbia became perceived by much of the international society as the “most Balkan state.” Negative labeling and stereotyping were accompanied by several separation and sanctioning acts by leading international actors. Consequently, during the 1990s, the Republic of Serbia and the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (FRY) were heavily stigmatized.<sup>2</sup> While the full manifestation of stigmatization, with all its components, emerged from 1992 onward, the initial processes of labeling, stereotyping, and ostracism directed toward Serbia began roughly two years earlier. This stigmatization was deeply intertwined with entrenched stereotypical narratives about the Balkans as a volatile and aggressive internal other positioned in contrast to more “civilized” parts of Europe.

The culmination of this stigmatization process occurred when Serbia and the FRY experienced outright discrimination and a near-total loss of status within the international society. The extent of isolation imposed on

2 Notably, the terms “Serbia” and “FRY” are used interchangeably in this context. In its early years, the FRY was not formally recognized as a sovereign state by many international actors. The term “FRY” was often avoided, placed in quotation marks or replaced and supplemented with “Serbia and Montenegro.” Regardless, the FRY was treated as an entity dominated by Serbia, and in practice its actions were equated with those of Serbia by Western nations. Legally, Serbia is considered the successor state to the FRY, which later transitioned into the State Union of Serbia and Montenegro (SCG).

the FRY between 1992 and 1994 was unparalleled, drawing comparisons to the global efforts to isolate South Africa and Rhodesia during the Cold War due to apartheid—although such parallels were neither entirely accurate nor sincere. By the late 1990s, economic sanctions against the FRY were supplanted by military intervention, culminating in NATO's bombing campaign in 1999. Unlike the sanctions, this intervention lacked UN approval and faced open opposition from major international players such as Russia and China.

The subsequent sections illustrate how Serbia/the FRY met all the criteria necessary to be labeled as stigmatized and how processes such as labeling, stereotyping, ostracism, status loss, and discrimination unfolded within the international society. The discussion will also explore Serbia's response during this period. To effectively trace these processes throughout the 1990s, the focus will be on the agency of three key groups of actors: (a) main stigma imposers, (b) opponents of stigmatization, and (c) functional actors who facilitated stigmatization.

The analysis centers these actors' activities within the primary forums for stigmatization during this period. While other international organizations are also considered, the primary focus is on the following three international organizations:

1. The UN, as the most important universal international organization.
2. The OSCE, the most inclusive organization which encompasses actors with the most direct impact on European security from Vancouver to Vladivostok.
3. The European Community (EC)/EU, the most exclusive regional organization, perceived in the 1990s as the core entity that nearly all actors aspired to join and which functioned as the region's primary audience of normals.

**Table 3 The main actors responsible for imposing stigma on Serbia during the 1990s**

<b>Stigmatization forums</b>	<b>Main imposers of stigma</b>	<b>Main opponent to stigma</b>	<b>Functional actors</b>
UN, OSCE, EU, Council of Europe, NATO	Germany, US, EU, UK, France	Russia (since the late 1990s), China	Media, INGOs, international monitoring missions, etc.

## Labeling of Serbia

Labeling can be defined as a discursive act in which certain negative epithets or labels are assigned to a specific actor. This process becomes successful when it permeates public discourse, meaning a significant number of societal actors adopt and propagate these labels as a fact. Typically, those initiating labeling possess significant social capital—such as power, influence, and reputation—within the international community. During the 1990s, this role was predominantly held by the US, which, in the unipolar world order of the post-Cold War period, wielded considerable influence. As a result, labels originating from the US often achieved global resonance.<sup>3</sup> However, for a label to gain widespread or global acceptance, even during the era of US dominance, it also required confirmation within multilateral forums.

During the Cold War, the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY) enjoyed the status of an exemplary member of the international society. Its non-aligned stance and independence from Moscow since 1948 enabled it to avoid the Western stigmatization of communist states. Instead, the West pursued a “wedge strategy” to support Yugoslavia, exemplified by efforts to “keep Tito afloat” (Lees 2010). Simultaneously, Yugoslavia’s communist leadership and its support for global anti-US movements (ranging from Palestine to Vietnam) rendered it an acceptable partner for the USSR after Stalin’s death. Within this geopolitical framework, Yugoslavia largely escaped negative labeling and enjoyed respect among various international actors.

However, this dynamic surrounding Yugoslavia changed dramatically after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the democratic transitions across Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991. The West’s perception of Yugoslavia shifted, with the country no longer seen as the “best part” of the Communist Bloc, especially as Eastern European states rapidly embraced liberal democracy. With this shift, issues previously overlooked by the West, including the political crises in Kosovo and escalating tensions among Yugoslav republics, resurfaced. Concurrently, the decline in Western geopolitical interest in Yugoslavia created space for actors advocating a tougher stance on both Yugoslavia and Serbia (Kovačević 2007, 73–74).

While numerous minor labels emerged in response to Serbia’s actions during the 1990s, most failed to achieve international recognition. For instance, some Western actors attempted to portray Serbia as a Communist

3 In one of my previous studies, I elaborated on how the US being one of the main imposers of stigma on Serbia was important for US public diplomacy which aimed to demonstrate respect to Serbian history in the late 2010s through the campaign “You Are the World” (Krstić 2021).

or even Bolshevik state resistant to reform. Although these efforts did not reach the level of global societal labeling, they significantly influenced domestic political discourse in certain countries, particularly the US, where triumphalist narratives about the "end of history" dominated post-Cold War discussions. These narratives, along with other perceptions of Serbia's actions, contributed to the stereotyping process—one of the key elements of stigmatization that is further discussed in the following section.

This section identifies the most significant international labels assigned to Serbia during the 1990s and outlines how these labels catalyzed broader stigmatization processes. The subsequent sections examine the specific labels attached to Serbia and the FRY during this period, including:

1. Human rights violator
2. Aggressor
3. Perpetrator of war crimes
4. Genocide perpetrator/accomplice
5. Violator of international obligations

The discussion explores the origins and meanings of these labels, focusing on the actors who introduced them, those who contested them and the forums in which these labels were affirmed.

### *The Label of "Human Rights Violator"*

The first label attached to Serbia and to then still existing SFRY during this period was that of a "human rights violator." This label evolved through four distinct phases during the 1990s.

#### – Phase One: Early Accusations (1990–1992)

The initial phase began with the arrival of US Ambassador Warren Zimmerman in Belgrade. He was among the first to accuse Serbia and Yugoslavia of potentially violating international human rights norms, particularly minority rights, as outlined in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act of the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). These accusations primarily centered on the Kosovo issue. At this stage, the label was not yet associated with stereotyping, separation, and sanctioning. However, by late 1990, it became evident that these accusations were not simply a signal of dissatisfaction or an attempt to subtly pressure Serbia into policy changes through "naming and shaming." Instead, they carried the potential for tangible political repercussions. This was underscored by the US Congress adopting the Nickles amendment, which allowed the suspension of US

economic aid until the human rights situation for the Albanians in Kosovo improved (Kovačević 2007, 73).

Austria soon joined the effort by initiating mechanisms under the human dimension of the CSCE to monitor minority rights in Yugoslavia (Aćimović 2001, 99–102). Fact-finding missions conducted by the CSCE further accelerated the labeling of the FRY as a violator of minority rights. By 1992, the US had taken a more active role as a stigma imposer, and this label became officially recognized within the CSCE framework. In July 1992, the Budapest Declaration explicitly stated that Serbia denied basic rights and freedoms to ethnic Albanians in Kosovo and other minorities such as Hungarians and Muslims (CSCE Parliamentary Assembly 1992, 10). The label was reinforced during subsequent meetings, including the CSCE Committee of Senior Officials (CSO) in Prague (August 1992) and the CSCE Council in Stockholm (December 1992), which highlighted Serbia's systematic violations of minority rights (CSCE CSO 1992, 4).

The EC also embraced this perspective. By mid-1992, it called on Serbia to “refrain from further repression in Kosovo,” labeling it a repressive actor and a violator of minority rights (Hill and Smith 2000, 366). The UNGA further legitimized this label through eight resolutions between 1992 and 1995, condemning Serbia for human rights violations in Kosovo, Sandžak, and Vojvodina (UNGA 1992d, 1993d, 1993b, 1994a, 1994c, 1994d, 1995a, 1995b). In 1994, the UN introduced annual reports specifically focusing on Kosovo's human rights situation (UNGA 1994a, 1995a). The most vocal proponents of this label included the US, Western European countries, Arab states, and neighboring countries such as Hungary, Bulgaria, BiH, and Croatia. The UN Commission on Human Rights special rapporteur reports were critical functional actors in this stigmatization process, as cited in commission resolutions like Resolution 7/1993, expressing “deep concern over the human rights situation in Serbia, particularly in Kosovo, as well as in Sandžak and Vojvodina” (ECOSOC UN 1993, 52–57).

#### – Phase Two: Decreased Intensity (1995–1998)

The second phase of this labeling, from 1995 to early 1998, witnessed a decline in its intensity. During this period, Serbia was even praised for its role in stabilizing the region, particularly regarding conflict resolution in BiH. For example, the 1996 agreement between Milošević and Ibrahim Rugova, mediated by the Vatican's Sant'Egidio order, allowed for the return of parallel Albanian educational institutions to Serbia's integrated school system (Simić 2000). However, the “human rights violator” label did not disappear

entirely. The US maintained the issue through its "outer wall of sanctions," blocking Serbia's reintegration into international organizations until the Kosovo issue was resolved. This label was revived during bilateral meetings such as US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's visit to Belgrade in 1997 (Nikšić 1997). Similarly, the EU continued linking Serbia's rapprochement with improvements in Kosovo's human rights situation (Hill and Smith 2000, 376).

During this period, the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly (PA) issued declarations that sustained focus on human rights in Kosovo, Sandžak, and Vojvodina, albeit in a less severe tone. For example, the 1997 OSCE PA Warsaw Declaration emphasized the need for improved conditions in Kosovo, dialogue with Albanians, and the return of the OSCE's long-term mission to these regions (OSCE PA 1997). UNGA reports on Kosovo also softened their language, occasionally commending steps taken by Serbia, such as the Milošević–Rugova agreement. However, the reports still documented ongoing violations against minority groups and raised concerns about the political rights of Serbian citizens (Hill and Smith 2000, 386).

Moreover, political rights of Serbian citizens and the state of democracy became a significant aspect of labeling Serbia for the first time.<sup>4</sup> A crucial functional actor in this labeling process was a special OSCE reporting mission led by former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez. In its report dated December 26, 1996, the mission explicitly addressed the opposition's victory in key Serbian cities, thereby officially recognizing the regime's attempts at electoral fraud. The mission's 1997 reports further highlighted serious violations of media freedom and judicial independence in Serbia, while also pointing at unfair amendments to Serbian electoral law as an additional concern (OSCE 1997). International NGOs and global media also played significant roles as functional actors who focused considerable attention on civil and student protests in Serbia from 1996 to 1997.

The most influential driver of this labeling process remained the US. Outgoing Secretary of State Warren Christopher addressed a letter to Slobodan Milošević, explicitly condemning violations of citizens' electoral rights. His successor, Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, continued to build on this narrative (Kovačević 2007, 183–189; Krstić 2015, 195). Multilateral forums, such as the UNGA echoed and validated these labels. The assembly's resolutions on the human rights situation in the FRY, BiH, and Croatia from

4 One of the rare exceptions during the previous period was the labeling of the Milosevic regime in the CSCE due to the arrest of opposition leader Vuk Drašković and his wife Danica in 1993 (Aćimović 2001, 102; CSCE PA 1993, 20).

December 1996 to 1997 emphasized serious concerns about political rights violations in the FRY, particularly highlighting the lack of media freedom (UNGA 1996, 1997b).

The OSCE also played a pivotal role in confirming these labels. Conclusions from the 1997 OSCE Ministerial Council and PA emphasized the lack of democracy in Serbia and stressed the importance of ensuring fair elections and conditions for functioning of free media (OSCE Ministerial Council 1997, 3; OSCE PA 1997, 16). By this phase, the issues related to political rights and democracy had become as central to Serbia's international stigmatization as its treatment of minorities.

– Phase Three: Focus on Kosovo (1998–1999)

The third phase began in March 1998, when the issue of minority rights, with an exclusive focus on Kosovo Albanians, returned to the forefront of labeling Serbia. A signal for entering this phase came in December 1997, when the UNGA (1997a, 2) adopted more specific condemnations of Serbia's actions, particularly regarding violence against protesters in Pristina, and the EU criticized convictions of Albanians for terrorism, which were reportedly obtained through coercion (Hill and Smith 2000, 386–387). From March 1998, as the conflict between Serbian security forces and the so-called Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) escalated, terms such as “excessive use of force” began to dominate discourse, accompanied by references to Albanian civilian suffering and the growing number of refugees. The strongest proponents of this labeling process were the US.

The key documents labeling Serbia as a systematic violator of Albanians' human rights were adopted within the Contact Group—an informal forum of influential states including the US, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, and Russia. After its meeting in Bonn on March 25, 1998, the Contact Group issued a statement emphasizing that the FRY could not reintegrate into international bodies or improve its international standing until it addressed the “serious problems” concerning human rights in Kosovo (Contact Group 1998a). A similar message had been delivered after the meeting held on March 9, 1998 (Contact Group 1998b). Important functional actors during this period included NGOs, observer missions from international organizations, and global media outlets which extensively covered the Kosovo conflict. Many drew analogies with BiH, a comparison echoed by numerous policymakers (Hehir 2006).

This labeling process was soon validated in key forums. The OSCE's Permanent Council (1998) adopted Decision 218 on March 11, 1998, calling

for an end to the excessive use of force against Kosovo Albanians and violations of their human rights. While human rights issues in other parts of the FRY, such as Vojvodina and Sandžak, were only indirectly mentioned through calls for the return of long-term mission to these regions, the focus was entirely on Kosovo. The UN Security Council (UNSC), in Resolution 1160 adopted on March 31, 1998, condemned the "extensive use of force" by Serbia against civilians and peaceful demonstrators in Kosovo, alongside with the "acts of terrorism by the Kosovo Liberation Army." The resolution highlighted human rights concerns in Kosovo (UNSC 1998a). This was the first UNSC resolution condemning force used against Albanian civilians in Kosovo and marking the violation of their human rights. On the same day, the EU issued a condemnation of large-scale military police violence against civilians (Hill and Smith 2000, 387).

By the summer of 1998 and especially during the fall, the "human rights violator" label was increasingly paired with more severe accusations, including "war criminal" and "aggressor," against Albanians. This shift was evident in the EC's statement on Kosovo from June 1998 (Hill and Smith 2000, 388), OSCE PA documents from mid-1998 (OSCE PA 1998), the UNGA (1998b) resolution on the human rights situation in Kosovo in December 1998, and, most significantly, Resolutions 1199 and 1203 of the UNSC (1998b, 1998c). The OSCE Ministerial Council's decision from October 1998, though milder, also referenced crimes and human rights violations (OSCE Ministerial Council 1998), reinforcing the EU's October press statement on Kosovo (Hill and Smith 2000, 389–390).

Although overshadowed by the focus on Kosovo, the "human rights violator" label relating to the political rights of all Serbian citizens did not fade during this period. On the contrary, it became more prominent. The UNGA (1998a, 6) resolution on human rights in the FRY, BiH, and Croatia explicitly addressed issues affecting FRY journalists and universities. Furthermore, Resolution 1203 of the UNSC (1998c, 2), for the first time, labeled the FRY as a violator of its citizens' political rights, specifically criticizing the closure of independent media.

– Phase Four: Focus on Democracy and Political Rights  
(June 1999–October 2000)

The fourth phase began after the end of the NATO bombing of the FRY in June 1999 and lasted until October 2000, marked by a focus on the violation of the political rights of Serbian citizens. During this phase, there was a significant change in terms of the opponents of labeling and the forums

in which labeling was confirmed. Since the beginning of the bombing in March 1999, Russia and China shifted their stance from compromise to outright opposition against most documents labeling the FRY. This led to a blockade of any resolution that would label the FRY within the UNSC. Additionally, no political decisions labeling the FRY were made in the OSCE until the end of 1999. The only exception was the Declaration of Istanbul of the OSCE Summit at the end of 1999, which mentioned democratic deficits in the FRY and the need for respect for basic rights and freedoms, emphasizing democratization, media freedom, and conditions for free and fair elections (OSCE 1999, 47). This document also referred to “years of repression, intolerance and violence” in Kosovo, highlighting the desire to build a multiethnic society while condemning the exodus of Serbs following the arrival of international forces (OSCE 1999, 46–47). As a result, the key labeling during this period was conducted through forums where decisions were made by majority vote, such as the OSCE PA and the UNGA.

The main drivers of labeling during this period were Western states, with EU member states (primarily Germany, France, and the UK) taking on a more pronounced role. The US and Canada also remained significant actors. The UNGA resolution on the human rights situation in the FRY, BiH, and Croatia at the end of 1999 explicitly and in detail addressed the democratic deficits in Serbia and called for the holding of free and democratic elections (UNGA 1999b). Declarations of the OSCE PA from 1999 and 2000 also emphasized the lack of democracy in Serbia, underscoring that democratization was essential for regional stability (OSCE PA 1999, 6; OSCE PA 2000, 22).

In the Bucharest Declaration from the summer of 2000, Russia was directly labeled for the first time for its support of the “undemocratic regime of Slobodan Milošević” and its failure to arrest General Ojdanić, who had been indicted by the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY) during his stay in Moscow (OSCE PA 2000, 14). This labeling coincided with Moscow’s approach to developing a partnership with Belgrade which began after its disappointment with the NATO bombing of the FRY in the spring of 1999 and intensified after Boris Yeltsin’s withdrawal on the last day of 1999. Previously, in the Saint Petersburg Declaration of July 1999, the holding of free and democratic elections had been emphasized as a precondition for Serbia’s return to the OSCE. This represented a significant shift from earlier demands largely focused on minority rights, particularly the situation in Kosovo, which were effectively sidelined following Resolution 1244 and the introduction of international administration in the province (OSCE PA 1999).

However, minority issues were not entirely omitted during this period. In addition to the general reference to earlier human rights violations in Kosovo in the Declaration of Istanbul of the OSCE Summit, the UNGA (1999b) resolution on the human rights situation in the FRY, BiH, and Croatia from December 1999 also addressed these concerns, as did a separate resolution on the human rights situation in Kosovo adopted on the same day (UNGA 1999a). The resolution on human rights in the FRY reiterated concerns about the state of human rights in Vojvodina and Sandžak (UNGA 1999b, 7–8). A notable addition to the resolution addressing the situation in Kosovo was the inclusion of the human rights of Albanian prisoners who had been transferred from Kosovo to prisons in central Serbia (UNGA 1999a, 4). Concerns over these transfers, the harsh conditions in prisons, unlawful detention, lack of fair trials, and denial of access to these prisoners by international organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) were highlighted in the Saint Petersburg (OSCE PA 1999, 4–5) and Bucharest Declarations (OSCE PA 2000, 22–23).

Nonetheless, discrimination against minorities, previously a central aspect of Serbia's labeling for human rights violations, became secondary during this period. Instead, the focus shifted to undemocratic practices and the violation of the political rights of all Serbian citizens by the regime, which were now presented as crucial for the stability of the entire region. By this phase, labeling efforts were clearly directed toward achieving a fundamental change of the regime.

### *The "Aggressor" Label*

The "aggressor" label emerged practically in parallel with the "war crime" label, although the attempts at labeling in this domain occurred slightly earlier. Semantically, this label underwent certain variations. The essential significance of this label pertained to the legal domain of *ius ad bellum*, addressing the critical question of who in the former Yugoslavia was the aggressor (waging a war contrary to international legal norms) and who was engaged in self-defense (fighting a defensive and just war). This question was of vital importance for shaping the positions of external actors toward the Yugoslav crisis and determining which side would bear responsibility for the outbreak of conflicts,<sup>5</sup> particularly given the stigma typically associated with aggression in international society (Rogstad 2022, 5–6).

5 For critical review of explanatory approaches to the disintegration of the SFRY, see study by Dejan Jović (2001).

– Phase One: Initial Ineffective Accusations for the War in Croatia (1991–1992)

The first phase was brief and relatively ineffective in terms of outcomes. During this phase, efforts focused on identifying the party responsible for the outbreak of conflicts in the SFRY, specifically in Slovenia and Croatia. This label was crucial as it provided answers to two important questions. First, it sought to determine whether the SFRY republics had a right to secession. Second, it raised the issue of the legitimacy of the Serb rebellion in Croatia—whether Serbs in Croatia had the right to declare the Serb Autonomous Regions (*Srpska autonomna oblast*—SAO) and to later attempt secession through the Republic of Serbian Krajina (RSK).

Germany was the primary driver behind labeling Serbia, Montenegro, and the Yugoslav People's Army (JNA) as responsible for the conflicts. Germany was one of the first states to recognize Slovenia and Croatia in December 1991 (effective January 15, 1992), with the Vatican also announcing recognition in the same month. German officials emphasized that Serbian leadership bore primary responsibility for the conflicts and encouraged European states to adopt this perspective. On the other hand, the US, the Soviet Union, France, and the UK initially opposed such labeling, arguing that responsibility for the conflicts was shared among all sides. Serbia claimed that it was not involved in the conflict as a republic, but that the federal state, through the JNA, protected the constitution from secessionists in other republics.

By August 1991, the EC began to shift its stance. A declaration by EC foreign ministers explicitly condemned “Serbian paramilitary forces” for attempting to resolve the crisis through military means. The declaration accused Serbian leadership of controlling the JNA and called on the federal government to prevent this “illegal use of force” (Hill and Smith 2000, 363). This indirectly labeled Serbian leadership as primarily responsible for the escalation of violence, though it did not lead to significant changes in the EC's approach to the legality of secession.

However, two key developments in early 1992 changed the dynamics of this phase. The first was the persistence of German diplomacy in securing recognition of Slovenia and Croatia, with Germany leveraging its position during negotiations over the Maastricht Treaty to compel France and the UK to recognize these republics (Dinan 2009). The second was the Badinter Commission's opinion, which concluded that the SFRY had dissolved into its constituent parts. While the conditions for recognizing Slovenia were met, Croatia's recognition required guarantees for the protection of Serbs, according to the Badinter Commission. Despite these reservations, both

Slovenia and Croatia were recognized by EC member states and numerous other countries in January 1992, followed by Russia in February. The US remained passive in this phase, leaving leadership to Europe, but still resorting from the recognition of independence of Slovenia and Croatia.

From the summer of 1991 to the spring of 1992, labeling efforts were largely bilateral, with some involvement from the EC, and were primarily aimed at garnering support for recognizing Slovenia and Croatia. In multilateral forums, however, this label did not gain traction. Resolutions during this period called on all parties to exercise restraint and adhere to ceasefire agreements which were frequently signed and violated, particularly in Croatia.

– Phase Two: Labeling for Actions in BiH (1992–1995)

The second phase began in May 1992, following the admission of Croatia, BiH, and Slovenia to the UN and the escalation of conflict in BiH, where the JNA was still present. These developments created conditions for Serbia and the newly formed FRY to be labeled as committing aggression by violating the sovereignty and territorial integrity of internationally recognized states. The US, initially opposed to labeling, became the primary driver of this process, viewing stigmatization as a deterrent against further Serbian actions in BiH. EC countries and Muslim-majority nations joined these efforts, with minimal opposition from Russia and China.

Labeling in the UNSC during this phase became more diffuse. Resolution 752, adopted on May 15, 1992, called for the withdrawal of the JNA from BiH, effectively accusing the FRY of violating BiH's sovereignty (UNSC 1992d). Resolution 757, adopted on May 30, 1992, reaffirmed this stance by demanding the cessation of interference in BiH's affairs (UNSC 1992e). However, these texts avoided explicitly using the term "aggressor." Subsequent resolutions, such as Resolution 787, mentioned threats to BiH's territorial integrity without directly attributing them to Serbia (UNSC 1992m, 1). Later resolutions, like Resolution 819, demanded an end to the FRY's support for the Serb forces in BiH, highlighting a connection between these actors but stopping short of outright labeling (UNSC 1993c).

For the situation in Croatia, labeling was milder and more indirect. For instance, in Resolution 762, the JNA and the local Serb territorial defense forces in Croatia were urged to respect the UN peace plan and disarm or withdraw from Croatian territory, but there was no explicit mention of a violation of Croatia's territorial integrity. Simultaneously, Croatia was labeled for aggressive actions against UN zones (UNSC 1992f). A similar

approach was taken by the EC. In April 1992, Serbia (together with Croatia) was first labeled as an actor interfering in BiH's internal affairs and later as primarily responsible for the war, albeit with the acknowledgment that all parties bore some responsibility (Hill and Smith 2000, 366–367). This clause on shared responsibility, despite Serbia being labeled as the primary actor, resulted from France's opposition under President Mitterrand to fully assign responsibility solely to Serbia (Dinan 2009).

Within the OSCE framework, the situation was different. In 1992, two decisions adopted by consensus explicitly labeled Serbia as an aggressor. The document from the August 1992 meeting of the CSCE CSO stated that BiH was a victim of aggression and condemned "aspirations for territorial expansion" by Serbia and other actors (CSCE CSO 1992, 2). Similarly, the decisions of the Stockholm 1992 CSCE Council referred to "systematic aggression" against both BiH and Croatia. They highlighted that Serbian forces in BiH and the leaderships of Serbia and Montenegro bore primary responsibility for the conflict (CSCE Ministerial Council 1992, 4). The CSCE PA documents were even more direct. The Budapest Declaration of 1992 accused the Serbian side of bearing the greatest responsibility for the conflict (while acknowledging shared responsibility) and referred to the presence of the JNA near Dubrovnik and in the "pink zones" of Croatia (areas outside the UN mandate) as an occupation (CSCE PA 1992, 10–11). Later documents continued this trend, with the Helsinki Declaration of 1993 referencing "continuous Serbian aggression in Bosnia and Herzegovina" (CSCE PA 1993, 19).

The UNGA resolutions were the most direct and forceful in using the "aggressor" label. Resolution 46/242, adopted in the summer of 1992, explicitly stated that BiH was a victim of aggression and accused the Yugoslav army of facilitating ethnic cleansing in BiH (UNGA 1992a, 6). Resolution 47/121 from April 1993 described Serbs in BiH as surrogates of Serbia and Montenegro and unequivocally labeled Serbia and Montenegro as aggressors against BiH (UNGA 1992c, 2). By late 1993, Resolution 48/88 extended these accusations to Serbs in Croatia, stating that Serbia, Montenegro, and their paramilitaries were responsible for violations of Croatia's state borders (UNGA 1993d, 1–2). In 1994, one resolution explicitly referred to "the situation in the occupied territories of Croatia," accusing the FRY of supporting Serb forces and expansionist policies (UNGA 1994b).

After the cessation of armed conflict, the term "aggression" was no longer used in any forum for conflicts in either Croatia or BiH. The label was least explicit in the UNSC, more direct in CSCE bodies (though largely limited to 1992), highly explicit and consistent in the CSCE PA, and most direct in the UNGA. Additionally, the label was applied more prominently to Serbia's

actions in BiH than in Croatia. In Croatia, actions were explicitly labeled as aggression or occupation only in UNGA and CSCE PA documents and were limited to specific contexts, such as the JNA's presence near Dubrovnik and the "pink zones." Croatia itself also received certain labels, albeit less intense, for violating ceasefires and UN agreements between 1992 and 1995, which somewhat balanced Serbia's labeling in this context.

– Phase Three: Narrow Labeling Regarding Kosovo (1998–1999)

The third and shortest phase of the use of this label occurred during the armed conflict in Kosovo in 1998–1999. During this period, Serbia was not labeled as an aggressor in terms of violating another state's territorial integrity, as the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija was universally recognized as a part of Serbia, and the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the FRY were emphasized in nearly all documents adopted in multilateral forums regarding Kosovo. The right of the FRY to defend its sovereignty and territorial integrity was not disputed. However, the term "aggression" was repurposed to accuse Serbian and Yugoslav forces and authorities for the systematic targeting of the Albanian population, including civilians. This usage implied organized military actions against a protected group, effectively accusing Serbia of committing war crimes.

For example, the EU conclusions from March 24–25, 1999, stated in the context of Serbian behavior in Kosovo that "aggression must not be rewarded" and that "the aggressor must know it will have to pay a high price" (Hill and Smith 2000, 393). Similarly, the Copenhagen Declaration of the OSCE PA referred to "military aggression against the Albanian population of Kosovo, including sieges and destruction of villages" (OSCE PA 1998, 2). In this context, the "aggressor" label emphasized responsibility for the outbreak of armed conflict and the systematic commission of war crimes against civilians. This terminology was likely chosen deliberately to delegitimize Serbia's claims of combating only the KLA insurgents and to highlight the broader implications of its actions. Still, this label was not used in any UN bodies in this period, which indicates its narrower acceptance among the global audience of normals.

*The Label of "Perpetrator of War Crimes"*

The label that closely followed "human rights violator" (and which emerged simultaneously with the "aggressor" label) can be referred to as the "perpetrator of war crimes." This label included several sub-labels specifying the war crimes or crimes against humanity allegedly committed by agents of the

labeled state, such as ethnic cleansing, rape, shelling of civilian targets, sieges of cities, mistreatment of prisoners, and similar offenses. Labeling Serbia within this context can be divided into two distinct phases.

– Phase One: Sharp Labeling (1991–1995)

The first phase began with the outbreak of conflict in the SFRY, when initial attempts to assign war crimes labels to Serbia emerged. From the outset of the war, all sides competed to accuse each other of responsibility not only for initiating armed conflicts, but also for committing war crimes. Some of Croatia and Slovenia's key allies, such as Germany and Austria, began emphasizing alleged Serbian and JNA war crimes during the Yugoslav conflicts. Germany used this argument to persuade other EC members to recognize the secession of these republics. Germany and Austria were key drivers of this labeling process. Simultaneously, global media coverage, particularly regarding the sieges of Vukovar and Dubrovnik, played a significant functional role in increasing the chances of labeling the Serbian side and JNA as perpetrators of war crimes. However, this label did not yet garner a serious majority for explicit application. The still-existing Soviet Union maintained a support of Yugoslav unity, the US also advocated for unity of the state and condemned all sides in the emerging conflict, while France and the UK expressed some empathy for Serbia's arguments during the break-up crisis (Dinan 2009).

The first instances of war crimes labels against the Serbian side within a multilateral forum appeared under the framework of the EC. The EC condemned "unacceptable threats and use of force against the population of Dubrovnik" as an example of "indiscriminate bloodshed" (Hill and Smith 2000, 365). However, the statement did not explicitly name the perpetrators (though the JNA was implied) and it avoided using the term "crime," instead appealing to all parties in the conflict to respect ceasefire agreements. A more substantive label emerged with the UNSC (1992e) Resolution 757 in May 1992, mentioning the expulsion of non-Serb civilians from certain areas in Croatia, which was a clear reference to actions by local Serb forces, although not explicitly stated. The resolution also mentioned "ethnic cleansing" in BiH but did not specify which side was responsible, resulting in a milder label than those that followed (UNSC 1992e). Similarly, the European Council's Lisbon Declaration of June 1992 highlighted that the prevailing "humanitarian situation" in BiH was primarily the responsibility of Serbian leadership and the Yugoslav army under its control (Hill and Smith 2000, 366).

More explicit accusations of the expulsion of non-Serb civilians from BiH were articulated in the Budapest Declaration of the CSCE PA in July 1992 (CSCE PA 1992, 11). In August, the CSCE CSO (1992, 4), alongside the UNGA (1992a, 6), explicitly accused both Bosnian Serbs and Serbia, along with the JNA, of conducting or assisting in "ethnic cleansing" against non-Serb populations in BiH. However, within the UNSC, this label remained indirect until late 1992. For instance, Resolutions 769, 770, and 771, all adopted in August 1992, condemned numerous crimes without explicitly identifying the perpetrators (UNSC 1992g, 1992h, 1992i). Still, references to reports on violations of international humanitarian law, such as in Resolution 771, generally pointed to Serb forces as violators, indirectly advancing the labeling process (UNSC 1992i). These developments underscored the functional role played by reporting missions, such as those led by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali's special rapporteurs, the UN Commission on Human Rights, and the ICRC, as well as media reports, particularly from Sarajevo.

It was not until Resolutions 787 in November 1992 and 798 in December 1992 that the Serb side was explicitly identified as perpetrators of war crimes (UNSC 1992m, 1992n). However, these resolutions did not directly target Serbia or the FRY but referred to "Serbian paramilitaries" in BiH, primarily the Bosnian Serb Army (Army of Republika Srpska—VRS). Other resolutions and reports highlighted connections between these forces and the FRY, allowing the label to be indirectly associated with Serbia. Nonetheless, from 1992 to 1995, no UNSC resolution explicitly accused Serbia or the FRY of direct responsibility for war crimes, despite extensive documentation implicating Serbian forces in BiH (UNSC 1992e, 1992m, 1992n, 1993b, 1993c, 1994a, 1994b, 1995l, 1995b, 1995c, 1995e, 1995i).

The EC also indirectly linked the FRY to the actions of Bosnian Serbs. For example, after a Brussels meeting in January 1993, EC foreign ministers called on the FRY to use its "undeniable influence" to convince Bosnian Serb leaders to halt acts of violence and unspeakable brutality against the population of Bosnia and Herzegovina," particularly against Muslims (Hill and Smith 2000, 368). Explicit references to Serbia's involvement were more common within the CSCE/OSCE and the UNGA PA declarations (CSCE PA 1992; CSCE CSO 1992; CSCE PA 1993, 1994, 1995) and ten UNGA resolutions between 1992 and 1995 labeled Serbia and the FRY as complicit in war crimes (UNGA 1992a, 1992c, 1992d, 1993a, 1993b, 1993d, 1994c, 1994d, 1995b, 1995c).

Some resolutions explicitly emphasized the Serb side's primary responsibility for war crimes. For instance, UNGA (1994c) Resolution 49/10 acknowledged crimes on all sides but highlighted the primary responsibility of the Serb side, naming leaders of Bosnia's and Croatia's Serbs alongside

the FRY leaders. This explicit labeling placed Serbia at the forefront of stigmatized entities in the region, influencing the eventual outcome of the conflict.

– Phase Two: Renewed Labeling During the Kosovo Conflict (1998–1999)

The second phase began in 1998 with the onset of armed conflict in Kosovo. Between 1996 and 1998, war crimes were primarily mentioned in the discussions of past events and legacies, as well as in the context of the necessity for cooperation with the ICTY (a subject analyzed under the separate label of “violator of international obligations”). During this period, however, no new labeling occurred. After a two-year hiatus, the renewed conflict in Kosovo reignited the process of labeling Serbia as a perpetrator of war crimes.

The initial signs of this renewed labeling emerged in March 1998, when the most severe accusations of human rights violations against Albanians in Kosovo were made. During this period, discussions centered on the “excessive use of force,” police and military brutality against civilians, and similar accusations. However, terms like “war crimes,” “violations of international humanitarian law,” or “crimes against humanity” were not yet employed.

There were two key reasons for this. First, in March 1998, the Kosovo conflict was still in its early stages, and questions remained about whether it constituted an armed conflict at all. As a result, the terminology remained rooted in the realm of international human rights law rather than international humanitarian law. Second, as discussed earlier, during this phase a larger group of international actors opposed labeling Serbia more than they did during the conflicts in Bosnia and Croatia. This opposition made it more difficult to adopt harsher terms, such as “war crimes,” in forums that required consensus. Thus, documents like UNSC Resolution 1160 (UNSC 1998a) and OSCE Council Decision 218 (OSCE Permanent Council 1998) implied labeling that went beyond “human rights violator” but fell short of “war criminal.”

The situation began to shift in the summer of 1998. By then, it became increasingly evident that the situation in Kosovo constituted an armed conflict, as recognized by the ICTY president (Caruso 2007, 98). Simultaneously, the US and the UK, acting as key drivers of labeling, adopted a firmer stance against Serbia and launched a strong diplomatic campaign. This shift was accompanied by a significant change in their position toward the KLA, which had previously been labeled as “undoubtedly terrorists” in early 1998, but now began to be recognized as a legitimate party to the

conflict (Krstić 2015, 195–198). These developments led to explicit labeling of Serbia as a perpetrator of war crimes during this period.

However, the scope and intensity of labeling in this phase were less pronounced than during the first half of the 1990s. Explicit accusations were largely confined to forums where majority decision-making was possible. Within the UNGA, the annual resolution on the human rights situation in Kosovo, adopted in December 1998, directly accused the FRY of violating international humanitarian law and engaging in "systematic terror against the Albanian population" (UNGA 1998b, 2). This label was reiterated in Resolutions 54/183 and 54/184, adopted in December 1999, albeit in more general terms and without the phrase "systematic terror" (UNGA 1999a, 2000). Similarly, the Copenhagen Declaration of the OSCE PA in the summer of 1998 referred to Serbian "military aggression against the Albanian population in Kosovo" and enumerated acts violating international humanitarian law (OSCE PA 1998, 2–4).

In contrast, other OSCE documents, such as the conclusions of the Istanbul Summit in 1999, merely acknowledged the existence of crimes without specifying the perpetrators (OSCE 1999). Similarly, UNSC Resolution 1203 did not attribute responsibility directly but noted the broader context of the violations (UNSC 1998c). The only partial exception was UNSC Resolution 1199, which explicitly stated that the FRY had violated international humanitarian law, albeit in relatively mild terms. The resolution referenced the ICTY's determination that Kosovo was experiencing an armed conflict and condemned the FRY for "excessive and indiscriminate use of force" that resulted in significant civilian casualties and over 230,000 refugees (UNSC 1998b, 1).

The terminology used in this phase was milder than that employed in the early 1990s. The EU was somewhat more direct. Nevertheless, even within the EU, milder terms were initially used, such as "unacceptable civilian suffering" (Hill and Smith 2000, 387) or "indiscriminate violence by FRY and Serbian security forces" (Hill and Smith 2000, 388). It was not until 1999, on the eve of and during NATO's bombing campaign, that harsher terms like "massacre" (in reference to Račak), "humanitarian catastrophe," and "crimes against humanity" began to appear in official discourse (Hill and Smith 2000, 393–394).

### *The "Genocide Perpetrator/Accomplice" Label*

This label holds a unique place due to its gravity. Genocide is not an "ordinary" war crime; it represents a series of systematic physical crimes committed with the intent to exterminate a specific group, making it the

gravest crime in both legal and moral terms. Consequently, accusations of genocide carry serious weight and severe negative implications for the reputation of state. The labeling of Serbia as a violator of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide began in 1992 and remained active in multilateral forums until 1995, primarily in the context of the conflict in BiH. This dynamic continues to persist at the bilateral level even today. Additionally, the case of the 1995 Srebrenica massacre led to the designation of this event as genocide, a label later solidified through rulings by the ICTY and the ICJ. Two other cases—attempts to label genocide during the conflicts in Croatia (1991–1995) and Kosovo (1998–1999)—were less successful. While the latter two remain topics of political discourse, particularly among Albanian politicians in Kosovo, they lack significant multilateral confirmation.

– Phase One: Accusations for Genocide in BiH (since 1992)

The most substantial labeling of Serbs, the FRY, or Serbia as a committer or supporter of genocide relates to the conflict in BiH. As early as 1993, the UNGA (1992c, 2) adopted Resolution 47/121, explicitly stating that “ethnic cleansing” in BiH (previously attributed to Serbia and Montenegro) constituted a form of genocide. Subsequent UNGA resolutions, including Resolutions 48/143 and 49/205, condemned crimes of rape and violence against women and children, asserting that “systematic violence” against these groups was part of ethnic cleansing, itself a form of genocide (UNGA 1993a, 2; 1995c, 2). Similarly, Resolution 48/153 described systematic crimes in BiH as genocidal acts (UNGA 1993b, 2).

These resolutions aimed to outline three key points: (a) the existence of ethnic cleansing; (b) Serbia and the FRY’s responsibility for ethnic cleansing in BiH; and (c) the classification of such acts as genocide. The main proponents of this labeling included BiH, Croatia, Muslim-majority countries, and some Western nations. Russia and other states, particularly those with their own histories of similar practices, opposed classifying ethnic cleansing as genocide, fearing the broader implications of such a precedent. Consequently, this label never gained consensus in multilateral forums requiring unanimity.

At the legal level, BiH seized the opportunity to file a lawsuit against the FRY in 1993 before the ICJ, accusing it of violating the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide. The ICJ’s provisional measures ruling that same year required the FRY to cease arming and assisting Bosnian Serbs to prevent genocide. This obligation

was reinforced in UNSC Resolution 819, which suggested the potential for genocide, even if it did not confirm it as occurring at the time (UNSC 1993c). However, accusations of genocide in BiH against Serbia or the FRY relating to the 1992–1995 period were ultimately overturned by judicial rulings.<sup>6</sup>

– Phase Two: Srebrenica (since 1995)

The labeling of the Srebrenica crime as genocide began after the war's conclusion. Unlike the broader accusations of genocide throughout BiH in 1993, which were overturned by later court rulings, the Srebrenica case achieved legal recognition primarily through judicial decisions rather than political forums. Following the Dayton Agreement, multilateral forums avoided addressing this issue to support the peace process, delegating responsibility to judicial institutions like the ICTY and ICJ.

The ICTY issued its first genocide-related verdict in 2001, convicting Radislav Krstić, a general in the VRS, of genocide in Srebrenica (ICTY 2001). Subsequent ICTY rulings, including those against Ratko Mladić and Radovan Karadžić, indicted the involvement of the Bosnian Serb leadership in orchestrating genocide in Srebrenica (ICTY 2016, 2017). The ICJ's 2007 ruling also contained the legal qualification of genocide for massacres committed in Srebrenica in summer 1995 but held Serbia responsible only for failing to prevent it and to prosecute the perpetrators (ICJ 2007). Notably, Serbia became the first country in history found responsible of violating the genocide convention for failure to act, rather than for direct perpetration.

Western nations, alongside Bosniak representatives in BiH, have continued efforts to affirm this label in political forums. For example, in 2015 the UK proposed a UNSC resolution designating mass crime in Srebrenica as genocide and condemning its perpetrators, but it was vetoed by Russia (Živković 2015). Despite such setbacks, the Srebrenica genocide label remains active, though interpretations vary across political and legal contexts. The last example was the adoption of the mentioned resolution on Srebrenica from May 2024 (UNGA 2024).

6 First, the ICTY did not convict any Serb leader for genocide in BiH (outside of Srebrenica). Second, the ICJ's 2007 ruling claims that genocide occurred only in the municipality of Srebrenica in July 1995, while explicitly exonerating genocide elsewhere in BiH. The ICJ acknowledged Serbia's failure to prevent the Srebrenica genocide and to punish the perpetrators but ruled out its responsibility for committing or supporting genocide (ICJ 2007).

- Phase 3: Unsuccessful Labeling for Wars in Croatia and Kosovo (since 1999)

Following BiH's example, Croatia filed a genocide lawsuit against the FRY in 1999 before the ICJ, citing crimes allegedly committed by Serbs during the 1991–1995 war. Interestingly, no international body had previously characterized these actions as genocide. Croatia's claims, alongside Serbia's counterclaims, were dismissed by the ICJ in 2015, removing the issue from the international agenda (ICJ 2015).

During the Kosovo conflict, Western officials occasionally invoked analogies with Srebrenica and the Holocaust, raising concerns about potential genocide (Krstić 2013; Hehir 2006). Albanian leaders frequently labeled Serbian actions as genocide, while Serbian officials similarly accused the KLA of genocidal actions against Serbs. However, no multilateral document ever labeled the actions of either side in Kosovo as genocide. Western states mostly refrained from directly employing the term, opting instead for accusations of systematic human rights violations and war crimes. The exception were the US officials, who occasionally used this term during the bombing of the FRY.<sup>7</sup> The ICTY did not issue any indictments or convictions for genocide in Kosovo, nor has the claim received significant multilateral support.

While some Albanian politicians continue to promote the genocide label for events in Kosovo, these efforts have not succeeded in achieving broad international recognition. This lack of confirmation mirrors the relative failure of Croatia's genocide accusations, highlighting the difficulty of substantiating such claims in the absence of strong judicial or multilateral backing.

### *The Label of "Violator of International Obligations"*

The "violator of international obligations" label is less stigmatizing compared to previously discussed labels but was nevertheless assigned to Serbia during the 1990s. This label served as one of the foundations for further stigmatization measures against Serbia. Unlike labels addressing violations

7 One of the examples in this regard is the release of the US State Department from March 31, 1999, in which it is claimed that "there are indicators that Yugoslav forces also are engaged in genocide." However, this claim was further relativized with the following statement: "We will make a decision on whether Yugoslav actions against ethnic Albanians constitute genocide once we have sufficient information on which to base a judgement" (Department of State 1999). When the bombing ended, the US officials ceased to use these terms even in the context of possibility.

of international human rights law, international humanitarian law (*ius in bello*), or the right to war (*ius ad bellum*), this label primarily concerned breaches of other international obligations derived from substantive norms of international law or international treaties. Two distinct periods can be identified in the application of this label. The first spanned from 1991 to 1995, focusing on violations of ceasefire agreements in BiH and Croatia. The second, more serious period, began in 1995 and gained momentum in the late 1990s, centering on Serbia's noncooperation with the ICTY and failures to implement agreements, such as the demilitarization of the Prevlaka peninsula.

– Phase One: Ceasefire Violations (1991–1995)

The first period began with the adoption of various resolutions calling on all parties to uphold ceasefire agreements. These resolutions, issued by the EU (Hill and Smith 2000, 363–365) and UNSC (e.g., Resolution 713 from September 1991), did not specify the responsible parties. This approach indirectly labeled all sides, including Serbia, as violators of their international obligations (UNSC 1991a).

As the conflict progressed, more explicit mentions of breaches emerged. In UNSC Resolution 740, it was noted that not all parties had fulfilled conditions for the deployment of a UN mission. While the resolution implied Serbia's involvement, it refrained from explicitly naming it, instead praising Croatian President Franjo Tuđman for progress on obligations (UNSC 1992a). Similarly, Resolution 749 highlighted ceasefire violations in BiH but did not explicitly identify Serbia or the Serbian side as the violators (UNSC 1992c). An EC statement in April 1992 called on all parties to support the Principles for Peaceful Settlement Agreements in BiH but indirectly accused Serbia and Croatia of interfering in BiH's internal affairs (Hill and Smith 2000, 366).

Between 1992 and 1995, resolutions became more explicit. For example, the FRY was labeled as a violator in Resolutions 762 and 871 for failing to respect ceasefire agreements with Croatia (UNSC 1992f, 1993j). Similarly, Bosnian Serbs were accused of breaching agreements or showing a lack of willingness to negotiate, as highlighted in Resolution 942, which accused the Serb side in BiH of obstructing peace efforts (UNSC 1994c). Despite these developments, the label during this period remained relatively mild. Ceasefire violations, though significant, are not uncommon in conflict settings and were overshadowed by more serious labels, such as those related to war crimes and genocide.

- Phase Two: Transitional Justice and Noncooperation with the ICTY (since 1995)

The second period began after the conflicts in BiH and Croatia ended, with transitional justice becoming a central issue. The ICTY, established by the UNSC, became the most important mechanism for retributive justice at the international level. Noncooperation with the ICTY became a major focus for labeling Serbia as a violator of international obligations.

Resolutions 52/150 and 53/163 of the UNGA (1997c, 1998a) explicitly labeled the FRY for its lack of cooperation with the ICTY, demanding compliance. The OSCE PA also emphasized this issue in its 1997 Warsaw Declaration (OSCE PA 1997). The EU tied further engagement with the FRY to fulfill international obligations, particularly those related to the Dayton Agreement, which included cooperation with the ICTY (Hill and Smith 2000, 377). On a bilateral level, the US strongly criticized the FRY for its noncooperation, as exemplified by Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's visit to Belgrade in 1997 (Nikšić 1997).

This labeling culminated in UNSC Resolution 1207, adopted in late 1998. The resolution specifically addressed the FRY's lack of cooperation in investigating crimes committed in Kosovo, further solidifying the label of a violator of international obligations (UNSC 1998d).

- Phase Three: Violations Concerning the Prevlaka Peninsula (1999)

In 1999, the label of "violator of international obligations" was extended to Serbia's actions regarding the Prevlaka peninsula. Resolutions 1222 and 1252 of the UNSC (1999a, 1999c) accused the FRY of breaching its agreement with Croatia by failing to demilitarize the peninsula. While more specific than earlier accusations, this aspect of the label did not immediately result in significant consequences. However, it became a crucial and complex issue following the 2000 political transition in Serbia and subsequent efforts toward destigmatization, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

## **Stereotyping of Serbia**

The process of stereotyping is inherently more elusive and challenging to analyze compared to labeling. Unlike labels, stereotypes rarely find explicit confirmation in the official documents of international organizations. Even when stereotypes are pervasive, they are often masked with euphemisms or

omitted altogether from formal records, reflecting the socially unacceptable nature of overt stereotypical generalizations by the late 1990s. However, stereotypes persist as an undercurrent, influencing political discourses and shaping the perceptions and actions of key actors in international and societal contexts.

While acknowledging that a more detailed analysis of stereotyping is required for solid claims about the nature and the scope of stereotypes attached to Serbia and Serbs, this study conducts a digested outline of the most important aspects of this process. As explained in a methodological framework section, such a study would require a separate, robust analysis of many different actors (politicians, media, cultural actors, influencers, etc.) for which there would not be enough room in this book. Therefore, this section contains only some illustrative examples of this process. However, these examples are enough to conclude that this process existed and that they influenced the position of Serbia in international society.

It is important to emphasize that stereotypes are usually considered to be value neutral, even though the etymology of the concept is usually connected with a negative connotation (Rogač 2009, 136). However, in the context of stigmatization, stereotypes are almost entirely negative. That also does not mean that they are completely made up—they usually contain references to some actual events and facts, but then they derive from these simplified conclusions about the “essence” of a certain group, as well as about their future expected behavior. For instance, in the context of Serbia, Ljiljana Rogač Mijatović (2014, 117) outlines the three most important stereotypes developed during the 1990s: the Balkans as an uncivilized region, Serbs as aggressive and primitive people, and communists as evil (implying that Serbs or their leaders are communists).

During the 1990s, all three stereotypes were mixed, and Serbia was classified as “Balkan,” “communist,” and a “state of aggressive and primitive people” by many actors. The following section presents a digested overview of the historical foundation of these stereotypes, the main actors that shaped them (media, politicians, and other actors), and some of the main aspects of how they functioned (generalization of guilt and politicization of these stereotypes).

### *Historical Foundations of Stereotyping*

Stereotyping of Serbia during the 1990s was built upon preexisting biases that were revived and expanded during this period. One prominent element of this identity was Serbia's association with the Balkans, a region stereotypically perceived as “Europe's internal other,” characterized by backwardness,

irrationality, and uncivilized behavior (Đukanović 2019, 57–60; Todorova 2009; Golubović 2003).<sup>8</sup> Maria Todorova's (2009) seminal work, *Imagining the Balkans*, traces the genealogy of Balkanism and the perception of the Balkans as Europe's semi-periphery. Drawing from concept of orientalism (Said 1978), Todorova explains how the Balkans are framed as a less rational counterpart to Western Europe. One of the most dominant parts of this stereotype is the perception of the Balkans as a “powder keg” where people more often resort to the use of force than in the rest of Europe (Rogač Mijatović 2014, 110). The discourse is further divided into three narratives, as outlined by Lene Hansen (2006): the “Byronic Balkans” (exotic and authentic), the “Balkan civilization” (underdeveloped but transformable through Western intervention), and the “threatening Balkans” (unchangeable and dangerous, warranting isolation).

Considering that culture and stereotypes are mutually constitutive (Rogač Mijatović 2014, 87), changes to the dominant culture in the West, from very exclusively focused on the occidental core, to the more inclusive conceptualization of “progressive civilization” in the later twentieth and early twenty-first century, also affected the relative decrease of value in the negative Balkan discourse. It became politically incorrect to claim that a nation's regional heritage would determine its behavior in the long term, considering the universalist character of the modern liberal order. However, stereotypes about the Balkans as backward survived and remained very active (Simić 2013, 133–134), only with somewhat modified content. Instead of being inherently connected with the geographical region, they became a characteristic behavior of certain Balkan states, at the same time framing those that did not follow this pattern as “Europeanized” or “de-balkanized” despite remaining geographically in the Balkans.

The dominance of these narratives in Western debates during the 1990s significantly shaped perceptions of Serbia, particularly as Western states played key roles in stigmatizing the region. Moreover, the stereotyping of Serbia cannot be isolated from the broader discursive articulation of the Balkans as a whole. Whether the region was seen as collectively backward or Serbia alone was singled out as the source of deviance influenced the emphasis and focus of the stereotypes. It could be said that Serbia was portrayed as the “deep Balkans” at a meso-level of interactions in international society. In the competition over who could appear less “Balkan” and “oriental,” Serbia lagged behind other former Yugoslav republics in what Bakić-Hayden

8 The discourse on the Balkans also has a different layer, being portrayed often as an “exotic” destination. This discourse was developed in different spheres—from English literature (Goldsworthy 1998) to music (Nenić and Nikolić 2025, 39–40).

(1995) conceptualized as "nesting orientalism." While the resonance of geographical stereotypes about the Balkans was decreasing in the context of global cultural changes in which room for open geographical and racial denunciation was getting smaller, it seemed that Serbia was an ideal "heir" for the broader Balkan prejudices. The content of stereotypes remained the same, but the justification shifted—from a broader geographical assumption of the backward Balkans to a more narrowly defined "behavioral" assumption of a backward Serbia.

Still, although these stereotypes were partially narrowed to Serbia during the 1990s, broader stereotypes about "Balkan Ghosts" (Kaplan 1993) remained present in the public discourse throughout the decade. These stereotypes continue to present an obstacle for the image of other Balkan states even today, including those formal "insiders" that are now part of the EU (such as Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Greece, and to a lesser extent Slovenia). Stereotypes about "lazy Greeks," deeply connected with the general stereotype about the "backward Balkan" served as one of the elements for the attempted stigmatization of Greece in the context of the Eurozone crisis (Adler-Nissen 2017). The persistence of such stereotypes in the broader cultural discourse particularly eased the potential stigmatization of these states with a "failed socialization narrative," currently more commonly associated with the Central European EU states (Lovec, Koči, and Šabič 2021). This factor is also important for the context in which Serbia aimed to manage its stigma in the twenty-first century.

### *The Role of Media and Cultural Narratives*

The media and broader public discourse played a pivotal role in constructing and reinforcing stereotypes about Serbia during the 1990s. The post-Cold War global context provided fertile ground for these stereotypes. Thinkers like Francis Fukuyama, Samuel Huntington, Robert D. Kaplan, and John Mearsheimer offered competing visions of the emerging world order, ranging from "the end of history" (Fukuyama 1992) and "back to the future" (Mearsheimer 1990) to "the clash of civilizations" (Huntington 1996) and "the coming anarchy" (Kaplan 1994). Within this landscape, Serbia was conveniently positioned as the other against which Western institutions and values were defined.

Building and deepening of stereotypes against Serbia occurred in the context of the decade in which the twenty-four-hour live TV news media gained unprecedented influence over the public than was the case at any previous point in history. Therefore, media actors gained additional influence in shaping foreign policy, including the power to (de)construct stereotypes

regarding certain nations or regions. Theorists remained divided on the extent of the media's agency in this process—from claiming that they have important independent agency in the process, usually defined as the “CNN effect” (Robinson 1999), to contending that media remained primarily instruments in the hands of political elites, functioning to “manufacturing consent” (Chomsky and Herman 1988). Regardless of their autonomy, the media undoubtedly became more influential than ever before.

Studies have highlighted how various actors—artists, writers, historians, academics, and particularly journalists—contributed to stereotyping Serbia. Jovo Bakić (2011) examined how the Yugoslav wars were framed, contrasting the “clash of civilizations” narrative with a “Serbo-centric hypothesis” that placed sole blame on Serbia. Ljiljana Glišović (2011) analyzed the German media's role in perpetuating stereotypes. Lene Hansen (2006) explored how travelogues, biographies, and paradigmatic books of the 1990s reinforced Balkanist discourses. Dejan Dašić (2015) explored the role of cinematography in creation of negative stereotypes about Serbs.

Summarizing the studies on the role of media in creating stereotypes on Serbia, Ljiljana Rogač Mijatović (2014, 117–121) underscores significant differences in how Italian, French, British, and American media built these stereotypes, depending on the degree of previous knowledge about Serbia in their respective cultures and public opinions. However, the common ground was that most of the Western media simplified and reduced Serbia and Serbs to a binary category of “bad,” projecting an image of inherent deviance. Tomislav Longinovic (2011) comprehensively analyzed how the Western media portrayed Serbs as “a vampire nation,” associating them with violence, blood, and soil.

### *The Politicization of Stereotypes*

Stereotyping Serbia was not limited to societal discourse, but extended to political rhetoric, where it served as a tool for legitimizing certain actions. Statements by influential leaders often reinforced stereotypes. For example, in his address announcing NATO's bombing of the FRY, US President Bill Clinton subtly linked the Balkans to a history of global conflict, indirectly implicating Serbia's conflict-prone behavior as a sub-context (Clinton 1999). More overtly, the idea that “Serbs only understand the language of force” became prevalent during the Kosovo conflict in the late 1990s (Krstić 2013). Such rhetoric, rooted in historical analogies, influenced foreign policy decisions and public perceptions.

In the context of German internal political debates, these analogies referenced Germany's own history but with subtle or direct drawing of

analogies between Nazi Germany and Serbia during the late 1990s. While attempting to justify the first direct engagement of German military outside of its borders during the bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, foreign minister Joschka Fischer claimed that German policy should be in principle "never again war," but that even more important was "never again Auschwitz" and inferring that a similar scenario could happen in Kosovo if NATO did not prevent such an outcome (Fischer 1999). This narrative was followed with the fake leak of documents about the "Horseshoe" operation for the expulsion of Kosovo-Albanians (allegedly planned by the Yugoslav army) and other similar acts which Marie-Janine Čalić (2019, 534–535) describes as "clever propaganda strategy."

These analogies, though often flawed, became a mechanism for perpetuating stereotypes. The US approach to Slobodan Milošević in 1999 exemplified this, as it drew on incorrect parallels with BiH. Assumptions that Kosovo would witness a new Srebrenica or Auschwitz, or that Milošević would capitulate after bombing, mirrored earlier stereotypes of Serbian behavior (Krstić 2013). While referring to undoubtedly factual crimes during the war in BiH and in early phases of the Kosovo war, they extended expectations that Serbian leadership would behave as Nazi Germany in the future if not prevented. This stereotypical framework extended labels from the 1990s, using them as explanatory tools for Serbia's behavior in a different context.

Explicit or implicit analogies were not reserved for official political actors, but also for some other functional actors that contributed to this process. For example, the report of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (CEIP) Commission for the Balkans from 1996 included explicit references to a similar report from 1913 (about the First and Second Balkan Wars, 1912–1913), with the underlying message that the Balkans at the end of the twentieth century looked similar to the end of the nineteenth century (Simić 2013, 133). Both reports put particular emphasis on the behavior of Serbia, contributing to the perception of it as the "most Balkan" of all Balkan states, whose behavior has not changed for a full century, thereby implicating Serbian norm-breaking behavior as something essential that should also be expected in the future.

### *The Generalization of Guilt*

Stereotypes, unlike labels, tend to blur boundaries between various categories such as the state, its regime, and its people. While labels often target specific entities (e.g., the Milošević regime, the JNA), stereotypes generalize responsibility to entire groups, fostering notions of collective guilt. For instance, the perception of "Serb guilt" encompassed Serbia, Republika Srpska (RS), and the

Serb people. This dynamic was amplified by the fact that Milošević's regime had been initially elected in relatively free (although they were certainly not fair) elections, which lent a semblance of legitimacy to these generalizations.

Besides equating the ruling regime and its policies with state and ethnic groups, generalization of guilt also includes the stereotypes that one side is undeniably the only "bad guy" in the conflict, while other participants were "good guys" or victims. Serbia was categorized to the first group by many cultural and political actors in this period, as the only guilty party for all negative events in the 1990s (Đerić 2005; Naumović 1999; Vuković 2009).

Functional actors in stereotyping processes such as politicians, media, and cultural artefacts contribute to the amalgamation of different labels into a singular stigma of deviance. This stigma transcends categories, shifting from the regime to the state and the nation, and is perceived as a natural, permanent state rather than a temporary deviation.

### *The Consequences of Stereotyping*

Stereotyping of Serbia had profound implications for its treatment on the international stage. It prolonged and reinforced labels from the early 1990s, projecting them onto future actions and justifying measures such as sanctions and military intervention. However, these stereotypes were not universally accepted. Opposition to them existed, both within the international society and in Western public discourse, though such dissent was less powerful than the forces driving stereotyping.

At its core, stereotyping represented a departure from objective analysis of Serbia's actions, although many acts of leadership in Belgrade were undoubtedly negative and norm breaking. Instead of adopting a nuanced approach with precise labeling of the concrete acts of leadership, Serbia was framed as intrinsically and irredeemably deviant, solidifying its status as a pariah. This perception influenced the actions of international actors, who, despite the formal unacceptability of stereotypes, often allowed these biases to shape their policies and decisions.

### **Separation of Serbia**

When the process of separation is defined as a procedure in which new, specific, and separate measures are established for a particular actor, or special monitoring of their behavior is set up, this process seems to be very similar to status loss and discrimination. The important distinction is that separation involves placing someone's behavior under special scrutiny and

monitoring, i.e., establishing procedures through which specific discriminatory measures could be applied—but not the application of measures themselves in terms of discrimination and status loss.

The institutional measures of separation applied to Serbia (the FRY) during this period ranged from the creation of special diplomatic mediation frameworks over the establishment of arbitration procedures and monitoring missions, to the establishment of special international civil and military administrations in parts of Serbia's territory. The following paragraphs review separation measures adopted in international forums, explain their legitimization basis (labels used for justification), and identify the initiators and opponents of these measures.

### *Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe*

The CSCE (later OSCE) was the first international forum to introduce forms of separation in connection with Serbia, primarily tied to the label of "human rights violator." Monitoring of human rights conditions in Yugoslavia by the CSCE began as early as the 1980s (Perry 1998, 1), and, in 1990 at Austria's initiative, a mechanism under the "human dimension" was activated to monitor the state of human rights in Kosovo (Aćimović 2001, 99–102).

#### – Human Rights Monitoring

A significant step in this separation process was the establishment of the Long-Term Mission for Kosovo, Vojvodina, and Sandžak. This mission was tasked with monitoring human rights conditions and aiding authorities and communities in these areas. The establishment of this mission was driven by countries with minority populations living in the FRY (such as Hungary, Albania, BiH, and Croatia), alongside Austria, Germany, the US, and other Western states. No opposition to this form of separation was recorded within the CSCE. The mission received the FRY's consent, despite the FRY being excluded from the CSCE, and operated on its territory from the summer of 1992 until mid-1993 when its mandate was not extended (Aćimović 2001). Following the mission's departure from the territory, the CSCE/OSCE continued to pressure Belgrade for its return until the end of 1998. This maintained the perception of Serbia's isolation in this domain, even though the mission ceased operating. Another institutional measure tied to the Kosovo situation was the appointment of Max van der Stoep as the OSCE special representative for Kosovo (OSCE Ministerial Council 1997).

In October 1998, the OSCE established the Kosovo Verification Mission as part of the Milosevic–Holbrooke agreement (OSCE Ministerial Council

1998). This mission, led by US General William Walker, functioned until March 1999. Its justification extended beyond the “human rights violator” label to include labels of potential “preparator of war crimes” and, to a limited degree, “aggressor,” as previously elaborated. NATO states, particularly the US, were the primary drivers behind this measure. The US issued an ultimatum in October 1998 that a failure to accept the agreement and establish the mission would result in the bombing of the FRY. Russia played a critical role in ensuring that this process of separation occurred within the OSCE framework rather than through another organization more aligned with Western states. Thus, the Contact Group nations emerged as the key formal initiators of this measure.

After the summer of 1999, the OSCE maintained its involvement in Serbia’s separation through participation in the international administration of Kosovo. This administration, including the OSCE, EU, and other organizations, operated under the framework established by UNSC Resolution 1244. As such, this measure of separation will be examined further in the context of actions initiated at the UN level.

Other initiatives of separation within the framework of the CSCE (later OSCE) were tied to attempts at mediating and ending the war in the former SFRY. The first significant decision in this regard involved activating the CSCE crisis situation mechanism in 1991 as a response to the escalating conflict in Yugoslavia. This initiative was spearheaded by Luxembourg, which held the presidency of the EC at the time (Hill and Smith 2000, 362). On the same day, the CSCE approved the establishment of the Good Offices Mission for Yugoslavia, which was tasked with facilitating political dialogue among the conflicting parties. However, the mission’s effectiveness was severely hampered, as its mandate required formal approval from the federal government, which never granted it (Libal 1997, 18).

Throughout 1991, the CSCE sent multiple delegations to monitor the situation across the SFRY, including Serbia and areas of Croatia under Serb control. These missions were initiated not only in response to accusations of Serbia being a “human rights violator” but also to investigate allegations forming the basis for the label of “war criminal.” However, these early measures were taken with the explicit consent of the federal government and the FRY representatives within the CSCE, which significantly mitigated their stigmatizing effect.

– “Consensus Minus One”

A more decisive and impactful form of separation emerged in 1992, when the CSCE introduced a novel decision-making procedure referred to as

"consensus minus one." This approach excluded the state under investigation (in this case the FRY) from participating in decision-making processes that directly concerned it. This procedural innovation marked a significant shift, as it opened the path toward status loss. In the summer of 1992, the FRY was formally expelled from CSCE membership following the organization's refusal to recognize its claim to continuity with the former SFRY (OSCE 1992). By establishing these mechanisms, the CSCE institutionalized a framework of separation that not only served to isolate Serbia diplomatically but also paved the way for further measures of exclusion in subsequent years.

#### – Military Monitoring

The third form of separation was military in nature and, although not directly, was tied to the label of "aggressor" attributed to the FRY during the early 1990s. The basis for this form of separation emerged from the Dayton Peace Agreement, to which the FRY was a signatory. Annex 1-B of the agreement introduced a framework for maintaining a regional arms balance (OSCE 1995, 7–9). This framework was later operationalized through the Agreement on Sub-Regional Arms Control, signed in Florence in 1996 between the FRY, the Republic of Croatia, and BiH (OSCE 1996a).

The key feature of this agreement was the establishment of quotas for arms possession by each state, calculated based on a ratio five (the FRY): two (Croatia): two (BiH). While the agreement was negotiated with the consent of all parties and mediated by the OSCE, its implementation introduced external supervision over the military capabilities of the states involved. The OSCE was appointed as the supervisory body responsible for ensuring adherence to the established arms limits. This arrangement effectively imposed an upper limit on the armament of the Yugoslav army, as well as the military forces of BiH and Croatia. Additionally, it established a military-security regime that was subjected to external oversight.

The underlying rationale for this form of military separation was rooted in the principle of balance of power,<sup>9</sup> coupled with the implicit assumption that the Serbian side's military superiority during the war had contributed to more aggressive behavior and a reliance on military solutions for conflict resolution. By enforcing external supervision and limiting military capacities, the agreement sought to prevent the recurrence of such dominance.

9 For more on how the balance of power logic has evolved in IR theory as well as in the practice of world politics from Thucydides to the present, see: Nedeljković 2025.

The main proponents of this form of separation were primarily the US, which played a leading role in advocating for arms control measures in the Balkans. However, this initiative garnered broad support from the international society, underpinned by the pervasive view of the Balkans as a “powder keg” of instability.<sup>10</sup>

– Monitoring of Democracy

The fourth form of separation was linked to the democratic deficit in the FRY, which was an aspect of the label “human rights violator.” At the end of 1996, following a political crisis in Serbia and widespread protests after disputed local elections, a fact-finding mission was dispatched to Belgrade under the leadership of Felipe González. The mission’s primary objective was to investigate the events surrounding the local elections in November 1996 and propose a resolution to the ongoing political crisis (OSCE 1996b). The mission’s findings and González’s mediation efforts ultimately resulted in the adoption of a *lex specialis*, which facilitated the recognition of the opposition’s victory in most contested cities by the Serbian authorities. The key actors driving this initiative were OSCE institutions alongside support from countries such as Spain and France.

In the following year, the process of institutional separation was further advanced by appointing González as OSCE special representative for the FRY. Additionally, the OSCE monitored the presidential elections in Serbia and Montenegro during the fall of 1997—an activity carried out at the invitation of the authorities in Belgrade and Podgorica. The acceptance of González’s mission in Serbia became one of the preconditions for normalizing relations and potentially unblocking discussions about the FRY’s membership in the OSCE during 1998 (Perry 1998, 5–6). The Copenhagen Declaration initiated a proposal for establishing a permanent OSCE mission to the FRY. However, this proposal was not implemented, as the FRY rejected the idea until its formal return to membership (OSCE PA 1998).

– Membership Conditionality

The final form of separation of the FRY by the OSCE involved establishing special conditions for its desired return to membership. The CSCE PA’s 1995 Ottawa Declaration outlined specific prerequisites for the FRY’s recognition.

10 This agreement remained under OSCE supervision until 2014, when it was transferred to regional ownership and this form of separation through external monitoring ceased to function.

These included the recognition of Croatia and BiH by Belgrade, the return of the long-term mission to the FRY, and the initiation of political dialogue with Kosovo Albanians (CSCE PA 1995).

Subsequently, in 1997 the OSCE PA's Warsaw Declaration refined these conditions into three specific requirements: 1) improvement in human rights, particularly in Kosovo; 2) the reinstatement of the long-term OSCE mission; and 3) cooperation with the ICTY (OSCE PA 1997, 2). Following the Kosovo War, the St. Petersburg Declaration by the OSCE PA simplified the demands, focusing on the holding of fair and democratic elections. The 1999 Declaration of Istanbul reaffirmed this stance, making democratization of the FRY the sole condition for its reintegration into the international community (OSCE 1999, 47).<sup>11</sup>

### *European Union*

The second forum under consideration is the EC/EU. This forum, which is also an actor, was given relevance at the beginning of the crisis, as the UN, the most important global forum for stigmatization (and in general), formally transferred leadership to the EC in managing the Yugoslav crisis during 1991. Therefore, the separation measures (and other stigmatization processes) implemented by the EC could be considered, in a way, as separation measures on behalf of the entire international society.

#### – Crisis Monitoring and Mediation

The EC involvement in mediating among the Yugoslav republics in mid-1991 represented an early form of separation. Initially, these measures targeted not only Serbia but all Yugoslav republics. The EC's engagement in the Yugoslav crisis began in March 1991 with a declaration issued during informal meeting of foreign ministers as part of European Political Cooperation (Hill and Smith 2000, 362). Following a promise of assistance from the Delors Commission, the formal involvement of the EU "troika" in mediating among the SFRY republics commenced, culminating in a cessation of conflict in Slovenia (Hill and Smith 2000, 362).

11 These conditions straddled the line between additional special requirements, which could be seen as discriminatory (for instance, Turkey was not conditioned to engage in dialogue with the Kurds, nor was Belarus excluded due to democratic deficits), but they are classified as forms of separation, as they stemmed from the principles on which this organization is based and did not, at least formally, represent special discriminatory demands but rather an establishment of a special procedure, in this particular case based on general rules.

The first institutionalized form of separation of the SFRY, including Serbia, was the establishment of the EC Monitoring Mission in early July 1991, which was done with the consent of the federal government and the presidency of the SFRY (Hill and Smith 2000, 359, 363). The mission initially included non-EC member states such as Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia (Hill and Smith 2000, 359). Its activities began in Slovenia and later, after Serbia's initial opposition ended, extended to Croatia in September 1991 and subsequently to BiH in 1992. Formally, the mission remained active until December 31, 2000, with regional centers spread across Yugoslavia, including Belgrade. The mission also played a role, albeit limited, during the Kosovo crisis from 1998 to 1999 (Hill and Smith 2000, 390).

A further example of "special monitoring" as a form of separation emerged in the late 1990s with the creation of the positions of EU special representative for the FRY and EU special envoy for Kosovo. These representatives monitored the situation in the FRY, reported back to the union, and acted on its behalf (Hill and Smith 2000, 394–395). Another form of separation was the establishment of the conference on Yugoslavia in August 1991. This negotiating process between the republics of the SFRY was mediated by the EC and chaired by Lord Carrington (Hill and Smith 2000, 359). Beginning in March 1992, Lord Carrington also chaired a specialized peace conference for BiH under the EC's auspices (Hill and Smith 2000, 360). This framework remained central to negotiations until August 1992, when the International Conference on Former Yugoslavia (ICFY) was created, cochaired by the EU and the UN.

In 1992, the ICFY formed the working group on ethnic and national communities and minorities, which included a special group on Kosovo (Caruso 2007, 104). The ICFY's influence began to wane in 1994 when the Contact Group assumed a more prominent role in resolving conflicts in BiH and Croatia. By the eve of NATO's 1999 bombing campaign, the EU had a formal role in the Rambouillet negotiations. However, these negotiations were characterized by their ultimatum-like approach, a distinct form of separation compared to standard diplomatic engagements. Despite its formal involvement, the EU, alongside Russia, played a secondary role, with the US exercising primary control.

#### – Arbitration Mechanism

The second form of separation, introduced concurrently with the establishment of the ICFY, was the creation of a specialized arbitration mechanism. During the autumn of 1991 and the winter of 1992, the Badinter

Commission—a body composed of the presidents of the constitutional courts of France, Germany, Spain, Italy, and Belgium—became operational. This commission was established by the EC and the presidency of the SFRY to address contentious issues within the domain of international law (Caruso 2007, 9).

The primary objective of the Badinter Commission was to provide legal opinions on disputed matters arising from the disintegration of the SFRY. By introducing this arbitration mechanism, the EC sought to resolve contested issues impartially. The decisions of the Badinter Commission had significant implications for how the nature of the conflict in the SFRY was understood and for the recognition of new states emerging from the territory of the SFRY (Hill and Smith 2000, 374). The EU effectively positioned itself as a neutral and authoritative arbiter in the conflict, thereby placing its role above that of the parties involved.

#### – Military Monitoring of the WEU

The third element of separation pertained to the consideration of utilizing the military resources of the Western European Union (WEU) in September 1991. This initiative was spearheaded by France, the Netherlands, and Germany, which advocated for the establishment of WEU intervention forces. These forces were envisioned as a specialized organizational structure capable of directly intervening between warring parties if necessary. However, the UK strongly opposed employing such measures, leading to a decision merely to consider the potential use of WEU resources rather than implementing them (Hill and Smith 2000, 364–365).

On September 30, the WEU proposed several measures, including the establishment of a peacekeeping mission which would have constituted a separate institutional form of differentiation. However, these proposals failed to gain unanimous approval from all WEU and EC members, and the tasks were ultimately transferred to the UN (Hill and Smith 2000, 359).

Despite these limitations, WEU mechanisms were employed on two notable occasions. First, they were utilized to oversee the implementation of sanctions in the Adriatic in coordination with NATO, a measure that will be explored further in the section on discrimination. Second, in 1998 the WEU Satellite Center was employed to monitor compliance with the Milošević–Holbrooke agreement concerning Kosovo (Hill and Smith 2000, 391–392). This instance exemplifies separation as a form of stigmatization, particularly regarding the meticulous monitoring of behavior using advanced technological means such as satellite imagery.

The deployment of satellites as a military tool encountered opposition from Denmark, which exercised opt out right and chose not to participate in this action (Hill and Smith 2000, 392). This scenario highlights the controversial nature of the perceived necessity of military-based separation measures and the diverse perspectives among WEU and EC member states.

– Stabilization and Association Process

In the second half of the 1990s, another form of separation emerged with the establishment of a distinct Stabilization and Association Process (SAP) for the Western Balkan countries (Lopandić and Kronja 2010, 226–229). While the final aim of this process was to associate these countries with the EU (which is opposite to separation in the long term), what made the SAP also an instrument of separation in the short term was the fact that it was specifically designed to differ from the accession frameworks developed for the former socialist countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Accompanying this was the creation of the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe in 1999 (Lopandić and Kronja 2010, 76–77). These initiatives highlighted the region's post-conflict legacy, distinguishing it from the more normalized states of the ex-Eastern Bloc.

This differentiation in approach underscored the EU's perception of the region's distinct challenges. The SAP and the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe represented efforts to stabilize and gradually integrate the region into broader European frameworks while acknowledging its complex political dynamics. This form of separation extended beyond Serbia to encompass the entire region. Unlike other measures that faced varying degrees of contention, this approach encountered no active opposition. Its primary advocates were Germany, Austria, France, and the UK, reflecting their shared interest in the long-term integration of the region to the EU.

– Conditionality Policy

A sixth and arguably the sharpest form of separation specifically targeted the FRY. Unlike the broader Western Balkans region, the FRY was excluded from most regional projects established during this period. Beyond the lack of inclusion in transitional aid programs available to other states in the early 1990s, the FRY was subjected to a formalized policy of conditionality from 1995 onward, tied to its cooperation with the EU (Lopandić and Kronja 2010, 224).

This policy was particularly emphasized in the declaration on the recognition of the FRY issued by the EU in April 1996. While the EU recommended that member states recognize the FRY and commended its establishment of diplomatic relations with Macedonia, it also set strict preconditions for further progress in relations: 1) mutual recognition with other states of the former Yugoslavia; 2) fulfillment of provisions of the Dayton Agreement, including cooperation with the ICTY; 3) agreement on succession issues with other former Yugoslav republics; 4) implementation of the agreement on Eastern Slavonia; 5) full respect for human and minority rights, including the provision of significant autonomy for Kosovo (Hill and Smith 2000, 377–378).

These demands were framed as requirements for compliance with established international obligations. As such, they linked the FRY to the labels of “violator of international obligations” and “violator of human rights,” reinforcing its separation from the broader regional integration processes. Occasionally, Greece expressed dissonant views within the EU, showing more understanding for the FRY, particularly in the mid-1990s. However, these gestures did not translate into active opposition to the EU’s policies of separation.

From 1999 onward, the EU decided to deepen its direct engagement in the region through the Stability Pact for Southeastern Europe. However, the FRY was explicitly excluded from this initiative. EU documents clarified that the FRY could only be included upon fulfilling specific conditions related to democracy and human rights (Hill and Smith 2000, 397–398). Certain pact programs were accessible to the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) administration in Kosovo and the government of Montenegro, effectively isolating only the governments of Serbia and the FRY. This form of separation was tied to accusations of human rights violations and democratic deficits, further stigmatizing Serbia and reinforcing its exclusion from regional integrations. Finally, the EU’s participation in the international administration of Kosovo after 1999 marked another significant form of separation. This involvement will be further analyzed in the subsequent section addressing measures of differentiation within the UN framework.

### *United Nations*

Chronologically, the third forum through which the separation of Serbia was conducted was the UN. However, considering the relevance of this universal international organization, it became one of the most important forums for adopting these measures.

– UN Mediation and the ICFY

The initial forms of separation under the UN framework were marked by the appointments of special envoys of the UN secretary-general for (former) Yugoslavia. Starting in the fall of 1991 with the appointment of Cyrus Vance, these envoys, including Thorvald Stoltenberg and Yasushi Akashi, played crucial roles in monitoring the situation and mediating among the warring parties until the end of the conflict. Cyrus Vance's efforts were instrumental for the signing of the Geneva Accord in November 1991 and the subsequent Implementation Agreement in Sarajevo in January 1992, which introduced a ceasefire in Croatia.

This form of separation was initiated by the UN secretary-general and encountered no significant opposition from other UN bodies or member states, including the still officially existing SFRY. It represented an institutionalized form of UN mediation that gained additional prominence when UN representatives joined a formalized negotiating process, until then exclusively controlled by the EC. This collaboration resulted in the creation of the ICFY in August 1992, cochaired by representatives of the UN and the EU. The ICFY aimed, among other objectives, to end the war in BiH through initiatives like the Vance–Owen and Owen–Stoltenberg plans in 1993 and 1994.

The UN's deeper involvement in this process stemmed from initiatives by the US and other UN member states, including Turkey, Hungary, and several Arab countries, which were dissatisfied with the EC's handling of the conflict. Within the ICFY framework, Serbia was specifically targeted for human rights concerns, leading to the establishment of a special group for Kosovo. This initiative, primarily driven by countries like Germany, faced internal resistance within the ICFY from figures such as Lord Owen, a British cochair representing the EU who opposed a more active role for this group.

– Peacekeeping Mission (UNPROFOR)

Another prominent form of separation was the establishment of peacekeeping missions in the field. The Geneva Accord of November 1991 laid the groundwork for the UN Protection Force (UNPROFOR) which was supported by the UNSC through resolutions 721, 724, and 740 (UNSC 1991b, 1991c, 1992a). UNPROFOR was officially established by UNSC Resolution 743 in February 1992, and its deployment began in zones controlled by the JNA and Serbian territorial defense in Croatia. These areas were designated for demilitarization (UNSC 1992b).

Over time, UNPROFOR's mission expanded to include monitoring the "pink zones" and the demilitarization of Prevlaka in Croatia, as well as territorial extensions into Macedonia and BiH. In BiH, the mission undertook a range of activities, becoming a key international actor engaged in the region. Resolutions governing the mission's work received unanimous support within the UNSC. However, contributions to the mission varied significantly by country: France and the UK made the largest contributions, with notable participation from Canada, India, and Nordic countries, while the US and Germany expressed skepticism about providing personnel (Economides and Mayall 2007).

Although UNPROFOR did not operate on Serbia's territory, there are substantial reasons to consider this mission as part of Serbia's separation process. First, the mission's mandate was expanded by Resolution 781 to monitor compliance with the no-fly zone over BiH, which included the inspection of airports located in the territory of the FRY (UNSC 1992k). This special supervision at FRY airports was endorsed in Resolution 786 (UNSC 1992l). Second, the deployment of observers along the border between the FRY and BiH, announced by Resolution 837 in mid-1993 and welcomed by the FRY (UNSC 1993h), was another form of monitoring. Observers assessed whether the FRY was respecting BiH sovereignty and adhering to the UN sanctions imposed on territories under Serb control in BiH and Croatia.

Finally, the broader scope of UNPROFOR's activities, primarily focused on territories under the control of the VRS and the Serb Krajina Army (SVK) in Bosnia and Croatia, indirectly implicated the FRY. These forces were frequently associated with the FRY and often perceived as its proxies, suggesting that the entire UNPROFOR mechanism contributed to a broader process of separating and monitoring the FRY, even if indirectly.

#### – Military Operations and Monitoring

The third form of Serbia's separation was linked to military elements, particularly the establishment of procedures enabling military operations against Serbian forces or the monitoring of their activities. During the war in BiH, these actions primarily targeted Serb forces in BiH (and partially in Croatia) rather than directly addressing the armed forces of the FRY and Serbia.

The first significant step was granting UNPROFOR the mandate to militarily defend "safe areas" through Resolution 836 and authorizing the UN member states to conduct military air operations to protect these areas by Resolution 844 (UNSC 1993g, 1993i). In effect, these authorizations

paved the way for potential military action against the VRS, as seen in the defense of the Bihać safe area, and in certain cases against the SVK. These resolutions were initiated by the US, with opposition coming from Pakistan and Venezuela, who abstained from voting on Resolution 836 (UNSC 1993g). While countries like Russia, the UK, and France expressed reservations, they ultimately supported these measures.

Another measure was the deployment of the UNPROFOR Rapid Reaction Force under UNSC Resolution 998 in June 1995. This military formation was tasked with potentially conducting ground operations to protect UNPROFOR missions or the UN-protected zones (UNSC 1995l). This decision received unanimous support, with the UK and France taking leading roles, not only as initiators but also as significant contributors to the formation under the UN flag.

The UNSC (1998c) further legitimized direct monitoring of Serbia's military activities with Resolution 1203, endorsing measures already agreed upon in the Milošević–Holbrooke agreement and formalized through arrangements between the Serbian government, the OSCE, and NATO. Under these agreements, on-ground monitoring of Serbian and Yugoslav security forces in Kosovo was assigned to the OSCE's Kosovo Verification Mission, while aerial monitoring was conducted by NATO's Air Verification Mission (Simić 2009, 124–125).

#### – Transitional Justice and the ICTY

The fourth and a particularly significant form of separation was judicial, linked to the labels of war crimes and genocide. The process began with UNSC (1993a) Resolution 780, which established a commission of the UN experts tasked with investigating alleged war crimes on the ground and providing recommendations for further action. The findings of this commission, alongside reports from the UN secretary-general on violations of the Geneva Conventions, were instrumental in prompting the creation of an ad hoc tribunal for war crimes. This tribunal was formalized through Resolution 808 in February 1993 (UNSC 1992d) and officially established by Resolution 827 in May of the same year (UNSC 1993f).

This judicial separation was particularly impactful as it introduced the ICTY, whose jurisdiction superseded domestic judicial systems. In doing so, Serbia, along with other states involved in the conflict, was effectively deprived of a part of judicial sovereignty. Although this measure borders on discrimination, it is classified as separation because it did not directly target the state but rather sought to hold individuals accountable for their actions.

Besides that, the FRY, like Croatia and BiH, explicitly accepted the obligation to cooperate with the ICTY by signing the Dayton Peace Agreement.

While this measure formally applied to all states, its practical effects were disproportionately felt by Serbia. Most indicted individuals were Serbs (ICTY 2024). The main proponents of this judicial separation were Western countries supported by the UN bodies, including the secretary-general and the expert commission. China abstained from voting on the resolution to establish the expert commission (UNSC 1993a) but later supported the two UNSC resolutions establishing the ICTY (UNSC 1993b; 1993f).

– International Administration for Kosovo—UNMIK and KFOR

The fifth and most significant form of Serbia's separation was the establishment of a special civil and military administration for Kosovo by the UN from June 1999 under Resolution 1244 of the UNSC (1999b). This resolution effectively transferred full civil administration over the southern Serbian province to the UNMIK, while military administration was delegated to the Kosovo Force (KFOR), operating under the UN flag but led primarily by NATO. Additionally, land and air security zones were established along the administrative borders between Kosovo and central Serbia, placing also parts of central Serbia under a special security regime. This imposition of a *de facto* protectorate over part of Serbian territory represented the most severe form of separation, bordering on discrimination.

Resolution 1244 explicitly guaranteed the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the FRY, but it did not establish a time limit for the mission's duration or provide clarity on the post-mission outcome. Instead, it stated that a "final solution" would be reached, leaving open the possibility of a resolution not involving reintegration into Serbia. Such a resolution, however, would require the consent of the UNSC to comply with international law. Concurrently, the UNMIK was tasked with establishing "provisional self-government institutions" in Kosovo, with significant roles in governance and institution building assigned to NATO (primarily for military operations), the EU, and the OSCE. Considering these factors, the UN mission in Kosovo was a severe form of separation—and perhaps even punishment—imposed on a sovereign country.

The US was the most vocal proponent of this separation, consistently advocating for even stricter measures, including at the Rambouillet negotiations in early 1999 (Kovačević 2004, 298–309). Although Russia did not initially strongly oppose such actions, as demonstrated by the passive stance of its representative at Rambouillet (Simić 2000), it preferred international

engagement under the UN flag in Kosovo. Through the mediation of Russian representative Viktor Chernomyrdin and EU representative Martti Ahtisaari, the Kumanovo Agreement and UNSC Resolution 1244 formally placed both civil and military engagement under UN authority. Russia leveraged this framework to deploy its contingent from the Stabilisation Force in BiH (SFOR) to Pristina's Slatina Air Base and to participate—although in a limited capacity—in the KFOR mission until 2003.

Hence, in the broader process of stigmatization, the most direct consequences for a state are sanctions implemented as punishments for perceived deviance, which often result in the loss of status and discrimination. Serbia experienced a loss of status in nearly all international forums, with a full spectrum of sanctions imposed against it (diplomatic, economic, cultural, and military measures). The following sections will detail how Serbia was stripped of its status and the various forms of discrimination (sanctions) it faced in the key forums for stigmatization (UN, OSCE, and EU) as well as in other forums where relevant measures were implemented.

**Table 4 The separation of Serbia across different international organizations**

Organization	CSCE/OSCE	EC/EU	UN
<b>Separation measures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Human rights monitoring (OSCE Missions)</li> <li>– “Consensus minus one”</li> <li>– Military monitoring (Florence Agreement)</li> <li>– Monitoring of democracy</li> <li>– Membership conditionality</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Crisis monitoring and mediation</li> <li>– Arbitration mechanism (Badinter Commission)</li> <li>– Military monitoring of the WEU</li> <li>– Stabilization and association process</li> <li>– Conditionality policy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– UN mediation and the ICFY</li> <li>– Peacekeeping mission (UNPROFOR)</li> <li>– Military operations and monitoring</li> <li>– Transitional justice and the ICTY</li> <li>– International administration for Kosovo (UNMIK and KFOR)</li> </ul>

## Status Loss and Discrimination Against Serbia

In the broader process of stigmatization, the most tangible consequences for a state are sanctions imposed based on perceived deviance. They are often manifested through the revocation of status within international forums and overt forms of discrimination. Serbia experienced such consequences across multiple dimensions during the 1990s, including the loss of status in almost all international organizations and the imposition of a wide array of

sanctions—from diplomatic and economic penalties to cultural and even military measures.

The following analysis explores the ways in which Serbia's status was revoked and the various forms of sanctions imposed on it, focusing on primary forums of stigmatization—the UN, the OSCE, and the EU. Additionally, other relevant forums and their measures contributing to Serbia's stigmatization will be reviewed. This analysis aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the isolation and punitive measures directed at Serbia during this critical period.

### *United Nations*

The UN implemented some of the most consequential punitive measures against Serbia during the 1990s. The process of status loss within the UN began in May 1992, marking a significant turning point for the general international recognition and reputation of the FRY. This was followed with specific sanctioning measures imposed on the FRY, especially during the first part of 1990s, when the UN were the most important forum for sanctioning of the FRY/Serbia.

During the late 1990s, Western states, particularly the US and the UK, pushed for the adoption of additional punitive measures against the FRY through the UN. These measures included proposals for military intervention, specifically airstrikes on the FRY during late 1998 and early 1999. However, these efforts were met with strong opposition from Russia and China. The prospect of a veto from these permanent members of the UNSC effectively prevented these proposals from being formally tabled. As a result, the punitive measures adopted during this phase were limited to the arms embargo, which is addressed in this section.

#### – Membership Suspension

On May 15, 1992, for the first time, the representative of Yugoslavia was not invited to attend a security council meeting concerning the Yugoslav crisis (UNSC 1992d). This action symbolized a de facto rejection of the FRY's claim to automatically succeed the SFRY. Shortly thereafter, the UNSC formalized this position.

In late May 1992, Resolution 757 explicitly noted that the FRY's claim for automatic continuity with the SFRY "was not generally accepted" (UNSC 1992e, 14). Subsequently, UNSC Resolutions 777, adopted in September 1992, and 821, issued in March 1993, reinforced this stance. Resolutions asserted that the FRY could not be recognized as the automatic successor of the

SFRY. They stipulated that the FRY should apply for membership in the UN as a new state and recommended that the UNGA and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) bar FRY representatives from participating in their proceedings (UNSC 1992j, 1993e).

Acting on these recommendations, the UNGA passed Resolution 47/1 in September 1992 and Resolution 47/229 in April 1993. These resolutions officially suspended the FRY's participation in both the UNGA and the ECOSOC (UNGA 1992b, 1993c). This marked the culmination of a series of measures that effectively marginalized the FRY within the UN, significantly undermining its international standing during this period of stigmatization.

The primary advocate for the full-scale implementation of these measures was the US, which sought the total revocation of the FRY's status and its complete isolation within the UN. However, this push encountered significant opposition, particularly from Russia, which consistently argued for a more lenient approach toward the FRY. Russia was notably resistant to the expulsion of Yugoslav representatives from UN bodies and abstained during the voting on UNSC Resolution 821 (UNSC 1993e). Similarly, India and Pakistan abstained on Resolution 777, while China abstained on both occasions (UNSC 1992j, 1993e). However, neither Russia or China vetoed these resolutions.

This confrontation of different positions led to a compromise outcome. While the FRY was required to reapply for UN membership and was stripped of its right to participate in plenary sessions of the UNGA and the ECOSOC, the decision allowed for future review. Furthermore, the FRY's mission to the UN was permitted to continue its operations, and Yugoslav representatives retained the ability to participate in other UN bodies. Consequently, although the FRY lost significant aspects of its status within the UN, it was not entirely excluded.

#### – Arms Embargo

Apart from this partial loss of status, the FRY as well as Serb forces in Bosnia and Croatia were also punished with the adoption of a series of measures within the UN. The first phase was marked by the introduction of the arms embargo through UNSC Resolution 713 on September 25, 1991 (UNSC 1991a, 43). The intended effect of this resolution was to stop the conflict by preventing the parties from acquiring additional arms. The measure was directed not only at Serbia, but also at other republics of the SFRY, with unanimous UNSC support.

Critics of this measure, particularly in Germany and other Western countries, argued that it not only failed to specifically penalize Serbia but rewarded it by allowing the military superiority of the JNA to remain unchallenged due to the arms export ban to other republics. Some politicians, particularly in the US, advocated lifting the embargo for BiH and Croatia later in the war, as part of the "lift and strike" strategy (Hansen 2006, 102–131). However, Russia's opposition to this measure prevented its adoption. The embargo remained in effect until the end of the war, when it was officially revoked in 1996 (UNSC 1996).

In the context of the Kosovo crisis in 1998, an arms embargo was reimposed. This measure was primarily driven by the "war criminals" label, reinforced by the "human rights violator" label and, to a lesser extent, the "aggressor" label (albeit in its modified interpretation, as previously discussed). The arms embargo against the FRY was imposed in Resolution 1160 on March 31, 1998 (UNSC 1998a, 2). This UNSC resolution was proposed by the Contact Group. The rationale behind the embargo was twofold: first, to limit the supply of weapons that could be used aggressively by the FRY and Serbian security forces; and second to address the activities of the KLA, whose actions were explicitly labeled as terrorist in the resolution. This resolution represented a rare instance of consensus among the major powers in the UNSC, reflecting shared concerns over the escalating violence in Kosovo.

#### – Economic, Diplomatic, and Cultural Blockade of the FRY

The first attempts to economically penalize and discriminate Yugoslavia (including Serbia) within the UN occurred in November 1991 when the EC, alongside its separate measures against the SFRY, initiated the adoption of a global oil export embargo on Yugoslavia. This proposal was officially submitted by the UK, France, and Belgium on behalf of the EC (Montalbano 1991). However, due to the lack of clear support for such a measure from Washington and Moscow, this embargo was not adopted. President Bush stated that further consideration of the measures was needed, while Canada was the only actor to immediately support the EC and implement certain bilateral measures (Montalbano 1991).

The introduction of more direct punitive measures against the FRY waited until the end of May 1992, when UNSC (1992e) Resolution 757 enacted an array of harsh sanctions that encompassed diplomatic, economic, and cultural dimensions. The sanctions were primarily justified by the labels of "aggressor" and "perpetrator of war crimes" in the context of the war

in BiH. The diplomatic sanctions mandated by the resolution included a call for UN member states to downgrade their diplomatic presence in Belgrade by reducing the level of their mission chiefs and the diplomatic staff present (UNSC 1992e, 15). On the economic front, the resolution enforced a comprehensive economic blockade of the FRY, prohibiting all imports and exports involving the country, a measure binding for all UN member states (UNSC 1992e, 14–15). Cultural sanctions isolated the FRY from international cooperation in the fields of culture, science, and sports. FRY citizens were permitted to participate in such activities only as individuals acting in their personal capacity (UNSC 1992e, 15–16). Additionally, Resolution 757 also introduced bans on technological cooperation, the suspension of civilian flights to and from the FRY and prohibitions on servicing Yugoslav aircraft (UNSC 1992e, 15–16).

Subsequent measures further intensified these sanctions. Resolution 787, adopted in November 1992, extended the sanctions regime by imposing a ban on the transportation of goods through or in transit via the FRY by ship, except under special authorization. It also expanded restrictions to include vessels owned by Yugoslav nationals, regardless of the flag they flew (UNSC 1992m). This was followed by Resolution 820 in April 1993, which introduced even more rigorous economic and transit sanctions. These included a prohibition on services involving legal entities from the FRY (except for postal, telecommunications, and legal services), the freezing of FRY assets held abroad, a ban on FRY vessels navigating international waters, the blockade of Yugoslav seaports, restrictions on river transit through the FRY (except under special permission, particularly for the Danube), and the seizure of FRY ships outside its territorial waters (UNSC 1993d).

Starting with Resolution 820, the scope of sanctions was extended beyond the FRY to include Serb-controlled territories in BiH and Croatia. The territorial reach of the sanctions was extended to impose an economic blockade on these areas unless trade was authorized by the governments of Sarajevo and Zagreb (UNSC 1993d, 3). These measures aimed to inflict substantial economic repercussions while intensifying the sense of isolation for the FRY.

The period from 1994 to 1996 was marked by a gradual easing, suspension, and eventual lifting of sanctions imposed on the FRY. Resolution 943 of the UNSC, adopted in September 1994, temporarily lifted certain sanctions, including those related to sports, cultural activities, and transit. This resolution unblocked Belgrade's international airport and the Montenegrin port of Bar, allowing Yugoslav sports and cultural representatives to participate at global events (UNSC 1994d). However, measures were temporary and subject to constant review, serving as a reminder to the FRY that sanctions

could be swiftly reimposed if deemed necessary, while other sanctions against the FRY (including the economic blockade) persisted during this period. However, the suspension of cultural and transit restrictions was reaffirmed through subsequent Resolutions 970, 988, 1003, and 1015, (UNSC 1995j, 1995k, 1995a, 1995d).

Simultaneously, harsher sanctions targeted Bosnian Serbs during this period. These included measures such as travel bans for their leadership, freezing of financial assets abroad, and a prohibition on engaging in political talks with their representatives (UNSC 1994c). However, these sanctions were not direct measures against the FRY. Notably, the FRY aligned with some of them, including through imposing a blockade on parts of BiH under Serb control in 1994, as part of its compliance with international demands. This compliance was one of the factors leading to the partial lifting of sanctions against the FRY. Moreover, the UN took a more aggressive stance against Bosnian Serb forces during this time. Due to the "war criminal" label, the UN authorized military sanctions under Chapter VII of the UN Charter. These sanctions were primarily enforced by NATO during 1994 and 1995, although UNPROFOR forces occasionally employed force on the ground, but only in exceptional cases.

The signing of the Dayton Peace Agreement on November 21, 1995, marked a significant turning point. The following day, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1022, suspending all sanctions imposed on the FRY since 1992 for a period of one year (UNSC 1995g). Preceding this, Resolution 1021 called for a phased lifting of arms trade sanctions against all former Yugoslav states (UNSC 1995f). These measures culminated with Resolution 1031, adopted on December 15, 1995, a day after the Paris signing of the peace agreement, confirming the lifting of sanctions against the FRY (UNSC 1995h). By the end of 1995, active discriminatory measures against the FRY had ceased, though technically some sanctions remained frozen as a form of leverage over Belgrade. The final step came with Resolution 1074 in October 1996, which definitively lifted all sanctions against the FRY (UNSC 1996).

### *European Union*

The EU actions concerning Serbia's status differed somewhat from those of the UN and the OSCE, as the FRY was never a member of the EU/EC. Nonetheless, one important form of status deprivation was the refusal of member states to recognize the FRY as a state. Additionally, the EU implemented several discriminatory measures and sanctions, directed firstly against the entire FRY, and by the late 1990s more specifically against the ruling regime in Serbia and the federal state level.

### – Recognition Conditionality

At the end of 1991, the EU defined criteria for recognizing newly established states in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, and subsequently for recognizing emerging Yugoslav republics (Hill and Smith 2000, 375). Among the criteria for recognition were standards for minority rights and renouncing expansionism toward neighbors. The recognition of the FRY as one of the successors to the SFRY (though not the sole successor) was withheld for full four years, as the EU deemed that the FRY did not fulfill necessary criteria to attain the status of a fully recognized state due to its “human rights violator” and “aggressor” labels.

The shift in policy occurred only in April 1996, after the Dayton Agreement. At that time, the Council of the EU (EUC) adopted a declaration on the recognition of the FRY, recommending member states to recognize this state according to their own procedures (EUC 1996). In this way, through the EU as a forum, the recognition (or non-recognition) of the FRY’s status as a sovereign and equal state was effectively decided, although the final word was left to the member states. Some countries, such as Greece, had already established closer relations with FRY leadership prior to this declaration.

### – Suspension of Trade and Economic Aid and Agreements

The initial phase of economic sanctions began in the autumn of 1991. After initial warnings in early October 1991 that sanctions might be imposed against parties obstructing the peace process (Hill and Smith 2000, 359), the EC decided in November to withdraw from the trade and cooperation agreement with the SFRY. This agreement had been particularly beneficial to Yugoslavia, granting it preferential trade treatment.

Additionally, the EC suspended economic aid programs for the SFRY and introduced quantitative restrictions on textile imports from Yugoslavia (Montalbano 1991). Although these initial measures were formally directed against all the republics of the SFRY, it was evident at the time of adoption that Serbia was the primary target. Compensatory measures were soon introduced for cooperative republics.

By the first days of December 1991, compensatory positive measures were adopted for all SFRY republics except Serbia and Montenegro (Hill and Smith 2000, 365–366). This explicitly singled out these two republics for punitive measures, reflecting the perception that they bore primary responsibility for the failure to reach a peaceful solution. This perception was tied to the emerging labels of “aggressor” and “war criminal.” Consequently, Serbia

and Montenegro, still formally part of the SFRY, faced clear discrimination by the EC.

Germany played a leading role in advocating these measures, maintaining this stance since the summer of 1991, when conflicts in Slovenia had begun. Beyond the sanctions implemented, Germany pushed for stricter measures, including freezing the assets of Yugoslavia's central bank abroad and imposing embargoes on oil, coal, and steel exports to Serbia. However, France and the UK were vocal opponents of these harsher measures (Montalbano 1991). Despite their opposition, these countries partially conceded to the German initiative during the final months of 1991, enabling Serbia and Montenegro to become the primary focus of the EC sanctions.

To prevent the escalation in BiH, the EC attempted to use the promise of lifting these sanctions as an incentive. In a declaration on April 6, 1992, the EC outlined provisions for extending the economic benefits granted to the other former Yugoslav republics to Serbia, conditional upon reaching an agreement on how this would be implemented (Hill and Smith 2000, 377).

#### – Trade Embargo and Economic Isolation

The second phase of sanctions began in May 1992, coinciding with the escalation of open conflict in BiH. This phase was predominantly based on the label of "aggressor" attached to the FRY in connection with the war in BiH. At this time, the EC not only withdrew its earlier offer to extend trade benefits to Serbia but also left all previous sanctions in place. Additionally, on May 27, 1992, the EC imposed a trade embargo on the FRY as an additional form of pressure (Hill and Smith 2000, 360).

In January 1993, the European Political Cooperation's declaration on the former Yugoslavia issued a stark warning to the FRY, stating that it faced complete isolation with long-term severe consequences if it did not comply with international norms (Hill and Smith 2000, 367–368). Although this complete isolation was not fully implemented within the EC framework, it was carried out through further tightening of sanctions by the UNSC in the spring of 1993. During this phase, the EU played a significant role in optimizing the effects of UN sanctions by overseeing their implementation. These oversight activities were conducted in collaboration with other organizations, such as the OSCE and NATO, which will be further discussed later.

The trade embargo imposed by the EC on the import and export of goods to and from the FRY was eventually suspended in late 1995 and formally lifted in 1996. However, despite announcements, negotiations for a new

trade agreement with the FRY did not commence in the years that followed (European Commission 1996). Consequently, the measures from this phase remained in effect until the regime change in Belgrade at the end of the twentieth century.

Germany emerged as the primary proponent of these measures, supported by other major powers, particularly as the war in BiH intensified and the labels of “aggressor” and “war criminal” gained prominence. While Greece expressed some sympathy for the FRY and, at certain moments, France and the UK exhibited minor differences in their positions, these nuances were largely ineffective in altering the overall sanctions regime.

Additionally, at the outset of this phase, the Schengen Area countries introduced visa requirements for FRY citizens. This measure not only impacted the quality of life for FRY citizens but also contributed to their personal sense of isolation and stigmatization, reinforcing the perception that their country was being stigmatized and cut off from the international society.

#### – Targeted Economic and Political Sanctions

The third phase of discriminatory measures against Serbia began in 1998, coinciding with the intensification of the Kosovo conflict. These measures were primarily tied to the “human rights violator” label, which gradually escalated into the “war criminal” label. On March 19, 1998, the EUC’s common position on restrictive measures against the FRY introduced several sanctions. These included a continuation of the arms embargo, an embargo on goods potentially used for “internal repression or terrorism” (targeting activities linked to both the Belgrade authorities and the KLA), a moratorium on government-financed export credit support for trade or investments in Serbia (not the entire FRY), and a visa ban for senior FRY and Serbian officials deemed responsible for repressive actions in Kosovo (EUC 1998a). These sanctions were conditional and subject to review, contingent upon the FRY withdrawing special forces from Kosovo, ceasing actions against civilians, granting access to humanitarian organizations and diplomats, and committing to dialogue with Kosovo Albanians (EUC 1998a).

As the “war criminal” label gained traction, the EU escalated its measures. On May 7, 1998, the EU froze the assets of the FRY and Serbia in European banks (EUC 1998c). This was followed on June 8 by a ban on investments in Serbia (EUC 1998b). By July 24, 1998, regulations were expanded to prohibit the transfer of funds to accounts held by the governments of the FRY or Serbia, as well as to individuals and legal entities based in Serbia. Exceptions

were allowed only for projects promoting democratization, humanitarian efforts, educational initiatives, or media independence (EUC 1998d).

The onset of the "aggressor" label in the spring of 1999 intensified these measures. In late April and early May 1999, the EU expanded the visa ban to include President Milošević, his family, senior officials of the FRY, and Serbian governments and individuals supporting Milošević's regime. The asset freeze was extended to include individuals associated with Milošević and companies controlled by or acting on behalf of the FRY or Serbian governments (EUC 1999a). The existing arms embargo was expanded to include oil, goods, services, technology, or equipment that could repair damage from airstrikes or support the FRY government's policies of internal repression (EUC 1999a). Additionally, the EU imposed a ban on commercial and private flights to and from the FRY and introduced provisions discouraging FRY participation in sports competitions, though this was not enforced in practice (EUC 1999a).

This phase marked a shift toward more targeted and precise punishing measures compared to the broad sanctions earlier in the 1990s. General bans on imports and exports were replaced by sector-specific restrictions aimed at the government rather than the general population, although measures like the oil embargo still had effects on civilians. Most sanctions applied specifically to Serbia and the FRY government, while Montenegro faced indirect sanctions, such as the flight ban, but no direct measures. By May 1999, the EU acknowledged Montenegro's unique position and pledged assistance due to the "burden it bears because of the Kosovo conflict" (EUC 1999a). This differentiated approach stemmed from Milo Đukanović's policy shift since 1997–1998. The UK played a leading role in advocating these measures. France and Greece expressed caution but ultimately aligned with the sanctions.

– "Smart Sanctions"

The fourth phase of discriminatory measures began after the conclusion of the military conflict in Kosovo in June 1999. While similar to the previous phase, these measures were now justified by the democratic deficit of the Serbian government. This was seen as another aspect of the "human rights violator" label, no longer tied to the treatment of Albanians or war crimes.

On June 15, 1999, just five days after the adoption of UNSC Resolution 1244, the EU Council adopted a regulation freezing of funds and banning investments concerning the FRY, replacing previously existing measures (EUC 1999b). Essentially, the new measures retained the sanctions already in

place but refined them to more precisely target companies and individuals linked to the regime, while allowing exceptions for transactions directly impacting ordinary citizens. Thus, sanctions were not reduced, but revised to align with the new circumstances, focusing primarily on the “undemocratic regime” rather than the entire population. Mechanisms were also clearly defined for exempting certain transactions from sanctions, facilitating the EU financial engagement with opposition actors in Serbia, including local governments, political parties, trade unions, and independent media (EUC 1999b).

The sanctions adopted during this phase had a narrower scope compared to earlier measures. They did not apply to the entire FRY, as the Republic of Montenegro, the province of Kosovo under UN administration, and specific actors within Serbia were explicitly exempted. The EUC stated that the goal of these measures was to “maximize pressure on President Milošević” without “punishing the Serbian people” (EUC 1999b). This approach also opened avenues for increased financial activity in Montenegro and Kosovo. To further refine this approach, in April 2000 the EUC introduced amendments to these measures (EUC 2000a). These amendments reduced restrictions on private companies in Serbia that were not connected to the regime, providing limited normalization of their interactions with EU entities.

The primary proponents of these measures included Germany, the UK, and France, along with broad support from all other EU member states. There was no opposition to this approach, as a consensus existed within the EU regarding the necessity of such measures. On September 18, 2000, in its “Message to the Serbian People,” the EU Council expressed its readiness to lift all sanctions and bring about a “radical change” in its policy towards the FRY if democratic changes were realized in the elections scheduled for September 24, 2000 (EUC 2000b).

### *Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe*

Unlike the measures of separation, in which the OSCE/CSCE was as active as the UN and the EU in terms of adopting discriminatory measures (sanctions), the OSCE was much more lenient toward the FRY than other international forums. However, certain measures were adopted in the scope of this forum as well.

#### – Membership Suspension

The most significant sanction imposed by the then CSCE on the FRY was the suspension of its membership. Initially, on May 12, 1992, the “consensus

minus one" principle was applied in response to violations of CSCE principles. Under this arrangement, the FRY delegation was excluded from decision-making processes concerning the crisis in the former Yugoslavia until June 30, 1992 (Perry 1998, 3). Subsequently, on July 10, 1992, the FRY was suspended from participation at the CSCE Summit in Helsinki and other CSCE format meetings. This suspension was intended to last until the FRY demonstrated full respect for its obligations (Perry 1998, 3). The suspension was extended multiple times throughout the 1990s, leaving the FRY's seat vacant at meetings.

It is important to note that the FRY was not officially deprived of membership. The suspension was temporary and applied solely to participation in meetings. Diplomatic communication between the CSCE/OSCE and the FRY continued during this period. All official documents were delivered to FRY representatives, and the FRY delegation retained the ability to distribute its materials to other delegations. Additionally, the CSCE emphasized that its principles remained binding on the FRY (as it had not formally ceased to be a member), as it was required to pay its CSCE membership fee. This was a compromise between countries advocating for the FRY's expulsion (former SFRY republics, Albania, and Western states that viewed the FRY as a new state requiring reapplication for membership) and countries opposing radical expulsion (primarily Russia, which later advocated for ending the suspension). The suspension measure remained in effect until the regime change in the autumn of 2000.

#### – Logistical Support to Sanctions

In its role within the discrimination framework, the OSCE primarily provided political and logistical support for the implementation of UN sanctions against the FRY. These activities were closely coordinated with the EC/EU. Toward the end of 1992, Sanctions Assistance Missions (SAMs) were established in Bulgaria, Romania, and Hungary to facilitate on-the-ground enforcement of sanctions against the FRY, maximizing their impact and aiding neighboring countries in this effort (Caruso 2007, 90). In February 1993, the CSCE senior officials council introduced the sanctions coordinator to enhance sanction implementation and provide necessary assistance (Caruso 2007, 88). Antonio Napolitano was appointed as the CSCE/EU sanctions coordinator (Carisch, Rickard-Martin, and Meister 2017, 58).

In the spring of 1993, additional SAMs were established in Albania, Croatia, Macedonia, and Ukraine. A Sanctions Assistance Missions Communication Center (SAMCOMM) was created in Brussels by the CSCE and the EU to

improve coordination and communication (Carisch, Rickard-Martin, and Meister 2017, 58–59). These missions supported the enforcement of restrictive measures, even continuing their activities after the formal lifting of sanctions to investigate approximately eight thousand suspected cases of sanctions violations (Caruso 2007, 89). All these actions were carried out in cooperation with the UN. Aside from the suspension of membership and accompanying sanctions support mechanisms, no additional significant sanctions were adopted against the FRY within the CSCE/OSCE forum.

### *Other Relevant Forums*

Significant measures of status deprivation and discrimination against the FRY/Serbia were implemented in other international forums as well. Regarding the removal of status, the key issue revolved around whether the FRY could automatically continue the SFRY's membership in international organizations as the de facto successor state or whether the SFRY had ceased to exist entirely, requiring the FRY to reapply for membership alongside the other states emerging from the SFRY dissolution.

#### – The Non-Aligned Movement

In the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), a key organization for the foreign policy identity of the former Yugoslavia, there were conflicting views on how to handle the FRY's membership. A group of countries, particularly those in the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), opposed the FRY's automatic continuation of the SFRY membership. Their position was primarily a reaction to the war in BiH and what they perceived as aggressive actions by the FRY. Conversely, a larger bloc of African and Latin American nations supported a more favorable stance towards the FRY and opposed its exclusion (Damian-Lakićević 2009, 498–500). The resulting compromise downgraded the FRY's delegation to "low profile" status on September 30, 1992, with the final decision indefinitely postponed. Despite this compromise, the FRY was effectively excluded from the movement's activities, as its delegation was not invited to key meetings throughout the 1990s (Damian-Lakićević 2009, 500).

#### – Economic and Financial Organizations

Several weeks later, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) formally acknowledged the dissolution of the SFRY, effectively barring the FRY (Serbia and Montenegro) from participating in its activities.

The EBRD had suspended funding for Yugoslav projects since the autumn of 1991. It also defined conditions under which successor states could inherit the former Yugoslavia's membership, but the FRY did not meet these conditions until the end of the decade (Sanders 2001). Germany was the primary proponent of the initial credit blockade, while the rejection of the FRY's continuity claim was widely supported by other actors. By 1992, the FRY's disputed claim to continuity with the SFRY was also addressed in the framework of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). As a result, Belgrade was excluded from this major international trade organization.

A further significant instance of status deprivation for the FRY occurred within major international financial organizations, where Yugoslavia had held a founding membership since the Bretton Woods Conference of 1944. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) effectively excluded the FRY from participation. On December 14, 1992, the IMF's board of directors adopted a decision recognizing the dissolution of the SFRY and outlining conditions under which the successor states could inherit the SFRY's membership in the IMF (Narodna banka Srbije 2024). However, the FRY did not meet these conditions until the regime change in Belgrade in 2000. A parallel outcome occurred in the World Bank. In February 1993, the World Bank recognized the dissolution of the SFRY and ceased to acknowledge the FRY's representation (World Bank 2002, 21). This move further deepened the FRY's exclusion from international economic and financial networks.

#### – Security Organizations

One of the most important global security organizations, Interpol practically excluded the FRY from membership when the Interpol General Assembly in Aruba in the fall of 1993 decided that the FRY could not succeed the SFRY's membership and must reapply for it, just like all other states that emerged from the disintegration of socialist Yugoslavia (Interpol 2017, 9). Similarly, membership was suspended or ceased in numerous other international organizations, including some regional ones such as the Central European Initiative.

In terms of discriminatory measures imposed on the FRY/Serbia by other organizations, NATO stands out as the most prominent. The first measure that can be classified in this category was the establishment of Operation Sharp Guard in the Adriatic Sea, which was launched in collaboration with the WEU in 1993, with the task of effectively blockading the FRY by sea, maximizing the effects of sanctions (NATO 1996). The WEU also

had a similar policing mission on the Danube River, aimed at preventing smuggling in this area (NATO 1996).

The second punitive measure was the use of force by NATO against the forces of Serbs in Bosnia. Under special procedures and the mandate of the UNSC, NATO established Operation Deny Flight in the spring of 1993 to enforce the no-fly zone over BiH and act against violators. In practice, this led to the downing of Serb aircraft over Banja Luka in early 1994. NATO also intervened on several occasions at the request of UNPROFOR, targeting Serbian positions around the so-called safe zones in 1994 and 1995, with limited airstrikes (NATO 1996).

In early 1994, after the first Markale marketplace massacre, NATO issued an ultimatum threatening a rapid commencement of a broader airstrike campaign against the RS unless heavy artillery was withdrawn from Sarajevo. The initiation of this measure was driven by the US, while open opposition came from Greece, which refused to participate in the attacks, though it did not veto NATO's decision. This campaign was avoided thanks to Russian diplomatic efforts and a temporary compromise (Simić 1996, 144). However, after the second Markale marketplace massacre on August 28, 1995, NATO carried out Operation Deliberate Force, targeting VRS forces throughout BIH and inflicting significant damage on the Bosnian Serbs. It is worth noting that these measures were only indirectly applied to the FRY and Serbia, as the targets were the Serbs in Bosnia.

Thus, the most discriminatory move which was undoubtedly directed against the FRY and Serbia as the harshest of all measures used during the stigmatization was the NATO bombing of the FRY. In October 1998, NATO decided on the possibility of launching airstrikes due to the labels of "war criminals" (and even "aggressors" toward civilians), but this was not activated due to the Milošević–Holbrooke agreement. On March 24, 1999, Operation Allied Force commenced, lasting seventy-eight days, causing big material and human casualties. What significantly differentiates this discriminatory measure from the previous two groups of measures is that it was carried out without the approval of the UNSC, which alone had the legal mandate in this context to authorize such use of force against a sovereign state. This discriminatory measure was the result of aggressive advocacy by the US and the UK as the key proponents, with the subsequent acceptance of this operation by other countries—especially Germany, Italy, Greece, and the Czech Republic—as the most skeptical countries. Luxembourg and Iceland, which do not have air forces, and the new NATO members the Czech Republic, Hungary, and Poland did not participate in the operation. The only old member of the alliance

which had air forces but did not participate was Greece. However, since these countries did not veto the decision, they cannot be categorically classified as opponents.

– Effects of Measures

These forums are certainly less important for stigmatization than the UN, and even the OSCE and the EU—especially for a European country during 1990s. However, they are by no means insignificant. The IMF and the World Bank are the most important global financial institutions with memberships that encompass almost the entire world. Exclusion from their membership not only signified a loss of status as a normal member of the international society, but it also deprived the FRY of the opportunity to receive development loans and credits that could have bolstered monetary stability and economic restructuring.

Membership in the GATT was symbolically significant, as the SFRY was the first communist country to join this organization, but it was also crucial for the Yugoslav economy and exports. Expulsion from the GATT prevented the FRY from using its arbitration mechanism, which it had invoked against the EC over the imposition of sanctions in late 1991, thus opening unlimited space for bilateral and multilateral restrictive measures without UN approval. Moreover, due to its expulsion from the GATT, the FRY was not among the founding members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, and the process of entering the WTO would prove to be very long. Interpol includes almost all the countries of the world (even some entities that are not sovereign states), so being excluded from this organization not only carried reputational consequences for the state but also completely cut it off from global police cooperation, directly impacting the state's capacity to maintain security.

The NAM gathers the largest number of countries globally, and its decisions largely reflect the views of many members of the international society. Given this fact, as well as the movement's identity significance, its suspension of the FRY was also a crucial element of stigmatization. The same applies to NATO's decisions. While membership in this organization is relatively narrow, during the period we are studying NATO was establishing its role as a recognized "policeman" in the Euro-Atlantic world. As such, it was the only multilateral forum willing to use military sanctions—whether with or without UN approval. Therefore, while it cannot be said that NATO's actions reflected the views of the entire international society, it is very relevant to consider the unilateral attempts by NATO member states to punish

Serbia for what they portrayed as deviant behavior. The 1999 bombing of the FRY, without UN approval, was the most severe form of sanctions and discrimination.

Finally, it should be mentioned that certain countries imposed sanctions on the FRY/Serbia bilaterally, not only through the stigmatizing forums. The US was at the forefront of these efforts. Given its global influence during this period, these measures had a significant impact on the FRY. The US implemented the initial UN sanctions against the FRY as of 1992 and even tightened them further through presidential directives 12808, 12810, and 12831. For example, Directive 12810 by President George H. W. Bush on June 5, 1992, blocked the assets of the government and enterprises of the FRY/Serbia/Montenegro, thereby tightening the discrimination against the FRY beyond the measures imposed by the UN a week earlier. Such harsher measures compared to the UN are another indicator that the US was the primary driver of the stigmatization and sanctioning of the FRY during this period.

**Table 5 Status-loss and discrimination acts towards Serbia across different international organizations**

Organization	EC/EU	UN	CSCE/OSCE
<b>Status loss and discrimination measures</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Recognition conditionality</li> <li>- Suspension of trade and economic aid and agreements</li> <li>- Trade embargo and economic isolation</li> <li>- Targeted economic and political sanctions</li> <li>- "Smart sanctions"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Membership suspension</li> <li>- Arms embargo</li> <li>- Economic, diplomatic, and cultural blockade of the FRY</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Membership suspension</li> <li>- Logistical support to sanctions</li> </ul>

## Reaction of Serbia on Stigma Imposition

The fact that Serbia initiated stigma management efforts as early as in the early 1990s indicates that it was not indifferent to the stigma imposition process. However, avoiding or mitigating stigma was not initially a high priority for Serbia/the FRY.

– Initial Ignoring (1990–1992)

The initial processes of labeling related to Kosovo or the use of force in the Yugoslav crisis were largely ignored by Serbia, which did little to counter stereotyping. Responses to early mechanisms of isolation in the early 1990s varied, sometimes accepting these mechanisms and sometimes obstructing them. However, when elements of status loss and discrimination began to emerge—signaling the actual beginning of stigma—Serbia initiated its first organized efforts to manage this stigma. Accepting the Vance peace plan and withdrawing the JNA from Croatia (Kostić 2007), initiating a case with the GATT over sanctions imposed by the EU in late 1991 (GATT Council 1992), proclaiming the FRY on April 27, 1992, as a shared state of Serbia and Montenegro “without territorial claims” on its neighbors (Ćosić 1992, 253), deciding to withdraw the JNA from BiH in May 1992, and insisting that Yugoslavia was not participating in the Bosnian war—these were all moves by the Serbian leadership in late 1991 and the first half of 1992 aimed at removing existing and, more importantly, preventing further, harsher stigmatizing measures against Serbia (the FRY). However, these stigma-management measures did not yield significant results, and Serbia entered a phase of intense stigmatization from mid-1992 onwards.

– Stigma-Management “Double-game” (1992–1993)

Corresponding to this situation, the federal level of government came to be led by the “rudderless duo”—the esteemed writer Dobrica Ćosić as a president and the American businessman of Serbian origin Milan Panić as a prime minister (Pavlović 2001). The establishment of a federal government led by a successful American businessman (Panić at the time held only American citizenship), in which the liberal Democratic Party also briefly participated with its representative Ilija Đukić being a foreign minister, can also be seen as an attempt by Serbia to manage its stigma, aiming to send a positive message to Western countries. Not only in its composition, but also in its actions, the federal level of government, formally in charge of foreign affairs, adopted an agenda more focused on removing the effects of state stigmatization than was the case with the Serbian republican leadership. By framing the lifting of sanctions and isolation, as well as the renewal of ties with the world, as existential needs for the FRY, Ćosić (1992), Panić (1992), and Đukić (1992) clearly emphasized the removal of key aspects of stigma as their priority.

Consequently, they were ready for numerous compromises: Ćosić signed a joint declaration with Tuđman in Geneva pledging not to change existing borders by force (Ćosić 1992, 253–254), the Yugoslav army withdrew from Prevlaka (257), international observers were invited to Yugoslav airports (Ćosić 1992, 254), and an intergovernmental commission with Croatia was formed to normalize relations. Panić insisted on a commitment to peace in talks with all external actors (Panić 1992, 249–52), initiated recognition efforts with Slovenia, Macedonia, and Croatia, and the federal government even unilaterally recognized Slovenia.

Besides these actions, Panić attempted to counter the concentration camp accusations leveled solely at Serbs at the London Conference, aiming to make stigmatization general rather than specific. He also worked with Ćosić to secure the FRY's recognition by major global entities (Panić 1992, 250–251) and, together with Đukić tried intensely to prevent the FRY from losing its status within the UN and other global forums and to lift at least the sports, cultural, scientific, and oil sanctions against it (Đukić 1992, 261–263). Nonetheless, these efforts had limited impact: while they managed to delay stricter sanctions in late summer 1992, avoid the abolition of the Yugoslav Mission at the UN, and secure *de facto* (though not *de jure*) recognition of the FRY through presence and speeches at the London Conference by participating heads of state (Panić 1992, 249–250; Đukić 1992, 261), by late 1992 and early 1993 sanctions had been tightened, and Yugoslavia was suspended from participation in the UNGA, ECOSOC, and eventually other organizations. Yugoslavia was even threatened with force by the US if the conflict in Kosovo escalated (Goshko 1992).

The reason for the federal government's failure can be attributed to the fact that real control over decision-making and implementation, especially regarding key measures for stigma management, remained with the republics, primarily with Serbian President Slobodan Milošević as the effectively most powerful actor. Certain changes in the three aspects that Foreign Minister Đukić identified as crucial for reintegration into the international community (Đukić 1992, 264)—contributing to peace in BiH, democratization (holding genuinely free elections), and respecting human and minority rights—were insufficient to convince the “audience of normals” to alter its approach. Nonetheless, it is conceivable that the federal government in this setup operated with Milošević's consent and that this was a deliberate attempt to manage stigma through a different policy at the federal level, without significant changes in those aspects considered most problematic by the international audience, such as military support for the RS.

– More Devoted Stigma Management (1993–1996)

From 1993, following the collapse of efforts to manage stigma through a "double game," Milošević himself changed his approach, attempting to showcase his constructive stance to counter labels portraying Serbia as an aggressor, which were the strongest basis for ongoing stigmatization against Serbia. Primarily, he sought to do this by actively lobbying at Pale for the acceptance of the Vance–Owen peace plan by the RS's leadership. However, as his influence proved ineffective, this measure yielded no concrete results. In parallel, an attempt was made to challenge the labels of "war criminal" and "genocide perpetrator" by filing a counterclaim against BiH at the International Court of Justice, aiming for a sort of counter-stigmatization of BiH, though this had little success in global public opinion.

Under economic pressure, Milošević made one of the key concessions in 1994 that contributed to a slight easing of discriminatory measures against the FRY by lifting cultural, scientific, sports, and transportation sanctions (including the blockade of Belgrade airport and the Port of Bar). This involved imposing a blockade along the Drina River against the RS, aligning with UN-imposed measures on territories controlled by Bosnian Serbs. However, the crucial move came a year later when, after securing the right to make decisions effectively on behalf of the RS, Milošević signed the Dayton Peace Agreement, contributing to the end of the war in BiH. This change led to the suspension of sanctions in late 1995 and their official lifting the following year.

– "Back-Stage" Stigma Management (1996–1998)

However, it cannot be said that, even after 1995 and the lifting of the most severe aspects of stigma, there was a continued intense drive toward destigmatization, as some radical actions in remaining domains, such as human rights (especially in Kosovo), fulfilling international obligations (cooperation with the ICTY), normalizing relations with neighbors, and democratization, did not immediately follow. There were some acts in this regard. In August 1996, mutual recognition and an agreement to normalize and establish diplomatic relations with Croatia were achieved, following a similar agreement with Macedonia. In September 1996, an agreement was signed on the reintegration of Albanians into Serbia's education system between Milošević and Rugova (Gojgić 1996), demonstrating progress in dialogue with Kosovo Albanians. In this period, the first ICTY indictee, Dražen Erdemović, was extradited to the Hague (Martinović 2001). After

three months of protests and external pressure, the findings of the González Commission were officially accepted, confirming the victory of the opposition Coalition Together in most major cities during the local elections in Serbia. This deprived Milošević of an important lever of power. Along with the critical factor of implementing the Dayton Agreement on the ground, these measures led to additional actions that reduced stigma, such as the formal recognition of the FRY by the EU (EUC 1996).

However, by 1997 there was a standstill in negotiations with the Albanians, and tensions escalated with intense conflicts involving the KLA later that year. The Serbian authorities also demonstrated a reluctance to address obstacles to democracy and free elections identified by the González Mission and to establish diplomatic relations with official Sarajevo. Cooperation with the ICTY also reached a standstill, prompting criticism from Madeleine Albright during her visit to Belgrade in 1997 (Nikšić 1997). All of this significantly slowed and effectively halted any real progress in destigmatization. Considering the reluctance to take substantial measures, it cannot be said that genuine destigmatization was pursued in Serbia and the FRY's policies during this period. Rather, the aim was to remove the most severe elements of stigma and relax its pressure without readiness for greater compromises that would address its roots.

#### – Change of Approach (1998–2000)

The beginning of the conflict in Kosovo did not lead to an automatic abandonment of stigma management. On the contrary, as part of agreements with Western actors concerning the Kosovo crisis, Belgrade attempted to achieve some progress in removing certain elements of stigma, primarily through rejoining the OSCE (Perry 1998) and seeking membership in the Council of Europe. The possibility of reintegration into the international organizations served as a “carrot” for Milošević from the audience of normals during this period. However, it became evident that this carrot was not of utmost importance to Milošević, even though he desired it. In the end, he not only willingly sacrificed this possibility but also allowed further stigmatizing actions against Serbia during 1998 and 1999.

Resistance to these new elements of stigmatization was primarily directed through closer ties with Russia and China, hoping their opposition would prevent further stigmatization of Serbia. Although this approach yielded some results, it was certainly not the most successful. From 1999 until the change of power in October 2000, destigmatization was no longer a genuine goal for Serbia. With the exception of further efforts to deepen relations

with Russia, China, and other potential challengers to the West or with other stigmatized states like Iraq and Libya, there were no substantial actions that could realistically lead to the removal of existing mechanisms of discrimination or a return to status through reintegration into international forums and entry into new ones, nor to the elimination of mechanisms of isolation, stereotypes, or labels against Serbia.

## Summary

During the 1990s, Serbia was heavily stigmatized, which unfolded across key international forums, such as the UN, OSCE/CSCE, and EU/EC. The actors that agitated for the imposition of stigma were different over time, but the most influential actors throughout the process were the US, Germany, and UK, with the addition of the European Commission and Turkey. Most important supporting actors were other European countries, Canada, certain Balkan countries (especially Albania, Croatia, and BiH, and to some extent also Hungary in initial phases), as well as countries from the OIC during the war in BiH.

Main labels attached to the FRY, and even more specifically to Serbia were "human rights violator," "aggressor," "perpetrator of war crimes," "genocide perpetrator/accomplice," and "violator of international obligations." Main stereotypes were associated with the Balkans, as a conflict-prone region, leading to the perception of Serbia as an intrinsically aggressive and less civilized actor. Main practices of separation included institutional forms of monitoring and special procedures implemented for the FRY/Serbia by international organizations. Main discriminatory measures encompassed economic, political, and cultural sanctions, direct military actions, imposing of international administration on a part of its territory, and the loss or freezing of status in all relevant international organizations.

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## 5. “Make Serbia World Again”

### Serbian Stigma Management After the Fall of Milošević

**Abstract:** This chapter begins with an analysis of structural factors which influence the choice of destigmatization, with special emphasis on the national habitus. Discussion then moves to the defeat as a one of the main triggers for destigmatization-oriented policies pursued through compromising actions. It continues with a structural analysis of the key stages for Serbia’s stigma management after 2000. Finally, the chapter analyzes the perceptions of Serbian decision-makers regarding the importance of destigmatization as a goal, as well as the relative importance of relations with Croatia and BiH as stages for stigma-management efforts.

**Keywords:** stigma-management stages, former adversaries, national habitus, defeat, identity

During the 1990s, the cries of opposition actors and the public in Serbia over isolation and stigmatization were very loud. The introduction of the UN sanctions in late May 1992 triggered mass student protests against the Milošević regime. During the next wave of mass protests by students and citizens in 1996–1997, one of the most iconic images from this period was a large crowd of people carrying a banner that read “Belgrade is World.” This banner symbolized the protesters’ desire for political, economic, and cultural reintegration into the international society, as Yugoslavia had been before the 1990s. At the same time, it demonstrated their belief that isolation was merely a temporary disruption and that Serbia still belonged to the world, but it just needed to correct its course to be accepted once again.

When the regime changed in late 2000, one of the first tasks of the new authorities was to “make Serbia world again”<sup>1</sup> or to overcome the stigma

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1 Slovenian band Laibach praised a 2025 student protest in Serbia, wishing them to “Make Serbia Great Again.”

of the 1990s. However, the relative importance of this goal varied across different phases between 2001 and 2020. Similarly, the relative significance of particular “stages” for stigma management, including the importance of relations with Croatia and BiH, shifted over time. While the focus of this study is on the perceptions of decision-makers (how they viewed the importance of destigmatization as a goal and relations with former adversaries as a key stage in stigma management), their perspectives do not operate in a vacuum. They are influenced by broader normative and material frameworks, making it essential to address structural factors as well.

This chapter begins with an analysis of significant structural factors which Zarakol (2011) outlines as important for the choice of destigmatization as a goal and the decisions on the use of stigma-management strategies—with the special emphasis on the national habitus. Discussion then moves to defeat as a factor, which Zarakol (2011) identifies as one of the main triggers for destigmatization-oriented policies pursued through compromising actions. The chapter proceeds with a structural analysis of the key stages for Serbia’s stigma management after 2000, building on findings from the previous chapter which examined Serbia’s stigmatization during the 1990s. Finally, the chapter analyzes the perceptions of Serbian decision-makers regarding the importance of destigmatization as a goal, as well as the relative importance of relations with Croatia and BiH as stages for stigma-management efforts.

## **Serbian National Habitus and Stigma**

National habitus shapes members of a community in a particular way, including decision-makers. It represents a key component of the “national security imaginary” (Weldes 1996, 1999), which influences how members of a specific nation or group perceive security issues. However, as emphasized in the framework of this book, individuals are shaped and influenced by habitus to varying degrees. Thus, an analysis of habitus serves as a foundational point in explaining these dynamics, rather than a definitive determinant.

As Zarakol (2011, 104–105) argues, when the national habitus carries lessons of a “golden age” and a perception of a “glorious past,” particularly one that includes the belief that the state once held high status in the international society, stigmatization will be felt more acutely. In such cases, leaders are more likely to prioritize destigmatization as a goal and may demonstrate a greater willingness to make concessions in this regard. Other significant factors highlighted by Zarakol (2011) as influencing the adoption

of destigmatization as a goal, as well as the choice of specific strategies, include the actor's imagination, its material capabilities, and the broader normative context.

While a comprehensive study of Serbian identity and the national habitus would require a much more extensive analysis, it is essential to highlight those elements most relevant to coping with stigma. One of the most significant components in this regard is the role of the Battle of Kosovo, which could be classified as a *mythomoteur* or a constitutive political myth (Smith 2002, 58). This historic battle, where medieval Serbia fought against the Ottoman Empire in 1389, remains a cornerstone of Serbian national identity (Ejdus 2018). The lessons derived from this event are multifaceted, but one of the central narratives for Serbian identity is that Serbia did not merely defend itself but acted as a bulwark for all of Europe and Christianity (Bakić Hyden 2006). This idea of self-sacrifice (protecting religion and freedom for the greater good of others, particularly other Europeans) stands alongside the legacy of the medieval Serbian Empire.<sup>2</sup> During the reign of Emperor Dušan (1346–1355), Serbia reached its greatest territorial expansion, controlling large parts of the Balkans. These elements are central to the Serbian perception of a glorious past both in terms of power and moral righteousness.

Events following the successful Serbian revolution at the beginning of the nineteenth century also significantly contributed to this narrative. Serbia's participation on the victorious side in the First World War, which effectively began with the conflict between Austria-Hungary and Serbia, further solidified the self-perception of Serbia as one of the "core" states, despite its relatively small size. The decisive Serbian victory in 1918, however, came at an enormous cost, with Serbia suffering the highest per capita casualties among all participating nations. This combination of victory and sacrifice became a central element in the Serbian understanding of its national identity and historical significance.

This layer of identity was further strengthened during the Second World War. Yugoslavia, initially defeated and occupied by Nazi Germany and its proxies, became a symbol of resilience through the engagement of its citizens in guerrilla resistance against the occupiers. The eventual outcome of the war, in which Yugoslav partisans alongside the Soviet Army managed to defeat the occupiers in 1944–1945 and reestablish the state, added another

2 This identity narrative is not unique for Serbia. Quite contrary—the perception of being *antemurale Christianitatis* is common for many nations, including those which were opposing Ottomans, such as Croats, Hungarians, Poles, or Romanians.

“glorious” chapter to Serbian history, albeit one marked by significant human losses during the occupation.

Finally, the status enjoyed by socialist Yugoslavia during the Cold War further reinforced the perception of Serbia/Yugoslavia’s importance in the international arena. As one of the key leaders of the NAM, Yugoslavia was able to maintain good relations with both the Western and Eastern Blocs and to parallelly promote itself as one of the leaders of the club consisting of many African and Asian states, many of which were former colonies. This reinforced the idea of Serbia/Yugoslavia as a key player on the global stage, whose agency was respected across the globe.

Given the perception of Serbia as an historically esteemed state in international society, and in accordance with recognition theory, the Serbian national habitus was particularly susceptible to frustration when such a status was removed. As demonstrated in the previous chapter, this loss triggered reactions of Serbian leadership and initiated the first stigma-management activities during the 1990s. However, prior to the defeat, destigmatization was not the primary focus and it remained secondary to other objectives pursued by the leadership for most of that period.

It is important to note that the national habitus contains elements of a belief that Serbia’s “glorious past” was not always adequately recognized by key members of the international society, especially from its core European and Western members, and that Serbia’s sacrifices merited even greater acknowledgment. This lesson mostly refers to stereotypes and hierarchies which old core members of the international society established between them and newcomers, which were unequally recognized. Historically, Serbia like other semi-peripheral states that entered modern Eurocentric international society in the nineteenth century, was stereotyped as being less European or less civilized.

The memory of this late entry into the international society left a significant mark on Serbia’s identity (Ejdus 2014). One of the first leaders of modern Serbia, Prince Miloš Obrenović, claimed in the early nineteenth century that he made sacrifices “to make us also become one of the European peoples” (Lopandić 2010, 38). While formal recognition of Serbian statehood came in 1878, the actual acknowledgment that Serbs were equal to other European states varied, with many influential public figures claiming that the identity of Serbia never fully aligned with the European and was never recognized as such.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, one of the important elements of Serbian

3 This dialectical understanding of Europe in Serbian culture and national habitus was thoroughly addressed in the seminal study *Getting over Europe: The Construction of Europe in Serbian Culture* by Zoran Milutinović (2011).

national habitus also became the perception that it was "East to the West, West to the East" (Đukanović 2019, 46–48).

This twofold lesson could mean that Serbia is both part of East and West, being recognized by both. Serbian stigma led to isolation from both West and East, especially in the 1990s. Therefore, this denial of recognition was particularly painful, considering how widely it spread. On the other hand, understanding of Serbia as being between East and West could also be interpreted as not being completely recognized enough by either of two international "civilizational" poles. Therefore, the vacuum between two sides could also be perceived as the Serbian national habitat. Therefore, Serbian national habitus left room for other interpretations of Serbia's historical role, pointing that it "objectively" deserved an even higher status within the "core," but was, at times, unjustly denied such recognition by both West and East.

An actor's imagination or the self-perception of the stigmatized state regarding its own role, as the second factor outlined by Zarakol, is intrinsically linked to the national habitus. However, other elements also contributed to certain variations in this regard. During Milošević's rule, the dominant discourse portrayed the imposition of stigma as unfair and encouraged Serbia to maintain the main tenets of its policy, drawing from Serbian history examples of "heroic" resistance against the will of certain great powers—ranging from the Ottoman Empire and the Habsburg Empire to Nazi Germany ("*Srbija se saginjati neće*"). This interpretation presented Serbia as justly refusing mistreatment by great powers, referencing historical depictions of the Balkans as peripheral and different. While Serbian habitus predominantly conveys that Serbia was generally respected, it also incorporates elements of unjust treatment by powerful actors, which Milošević's governing elite utilized to explain stigma.

This perspective fueled a narrative of counter-stigmatization, portraying the stigma imposers as deviant and framing Serbia's role as a righteous fight against "the new world order." A crucial aspect of this self-perception was the view of Serbia as an important actor in the contemporary world, reminiscent of Tito's Yugoslavia, and not as a smaller or insignificant country. This narrative particularly gained traction during Milošević's later years, resonating with former communists and nationalists who embraced anti-Western sentiments.

However, this self-perception was not the sole narrative present in the national discourse following the imposition of stigma. Many opposition leaders articulated that stigmatization represented a humiliation of "the great Serbian history," attributing it to Milošević's failed policies. This

discourse, most vocally expressed by opposition leader Vuk Drašković during the 1990s, celebrated the key elements of Serbia's "heroic" national habitus and "national-liberating" strategic culture (Ejdus 2008), while portraying the leadership of the 1990s as an exception. Even those in the opposition critical of certain moments in Serbian/Yugoslav history argued that Milošević's policies marked a discontinuity with its predominantly glorious past. Left liberals and leftists critical of the monarchic era viewed Milošević's policies as a departure from the "glorious" history of Tito's Yugoslavia. In contrast, anti-communists and liberal conservatives considered him part of a broader trend of discontinuity with Serbia's illustrious past, which, in their view, began with the advent of communist rule in 1945.

What unified all these narratives was the acknowledgment of stigma as a burden, not a blessing, and the interpretation of certain aspects (though not necessarily all) of Milošević's policies as responsible for (at least some) deviances. These perspectives also envisioned Serbia's position as closer to that of a small state. However, they differed internally on the extent of Serbia's agency and whether it should adopt a full bandwagoning strategy with the West or pursue a more neutral policy but with fewer deviances.

The parallel existence of these self-perception discourses created a theoretical possibility to interpret stigma as a blessing. However, given that Serbian habitus generally considered Serbia to be a core member of international society, it was evident that such interpretations had a limited shelf life. With the eventual defeat of Milošević's policies, the narrative potential of this interpretation was drastically reduced, pushing Serbian leaders to prioritize destigmatization. However, with the passage of time and Serbia's recovery from defeat, as well as the stigma becoming less acute in the twenty-first century, certain elements of the first discourse have regained their appeal.

The third factor, the actor's current capabilities, refers to the material and social capital it had at its disposal. While during the 1990s Serbia still possessed significant material (particularly military) capabilities, by the beginning of the twenty-first century these capabilities had become limited. In terms of social capital within the international society, by the end of 1990s it was largely restricted to somewhat closer political relations with Russia and China. However, these two countries played a secondary role in international society compared to the dominant Western actors. Political relations with Western states were virtually nonexistent, which became one of the contributing factors to Milošević's defeat. Therefore, the scarcity of both material and social resources pushed Serbia toward prioritizing

destigmatization and adopting compromising strategies. The influence of this defeat on Serbia's approach will be analyzed separately. Nonetheless, with the gradual recovery of Serbia's material and social capacities during the first two decades of the twenty-first century, this factor also began to shift gradually.

Finally, the international normative context during the 1990s and early 2000s was highly stable. This period marked the peak of the international liberal order and the unipolar moment of the US. The international society was very close to what Hedly Bull framed as a *solidarist* concept of society, with the broadening and institutionalization of liberal cosmopolitan values (Buzan 2014, 15–16). This further encouraged Serbia to prioritize destigmatization. The prior experiences of Central and Eastern European states which successfully transitioned by joining the EU in 2004 and 2007 sent a clear message that accepting compromising strategies would enable faster reintegration into the EU. At that time, the EU was still perceived as the core of the regional international society, despite those states having been communist until 1989.

However, criticisms of EU enlargement, fractures within the liberal international order, and the rising power of challengers to Western dominance, particularly during the second decade of the twenty-first century, forewarned the relative influence of this factor. The solidarist type of society continued to exist in vaguer form in the Euro-Atlantic community, but the broader international realm gained traction in the direction of a *pluralist* society (Buzan 2014, 16), focusing on basic norms of order such as sovereignty and stability. This coincided with the decreasing focus on liberal values and growing focus on stability in Serbia's stigma management. Its regime in this period gradually transited from liberal democracy to *stabilocracy* (Bieber 2018), although still aiming to occasionally demonstrate certain liberal traits—especially in its economy.

## Defeat as a Trigger

As explained in the theoretical chapter, Ayşe Zarakol argues that after a defeat states adopt destigmatization as a key goal in their foreign policy. This goal becomes so significant that they are willing to take materially or even physically costly steps. By "defeat," Zarakol refers to the breakdown of state structure (the loss of control over territory through various means—from military occupation to state dissolution) and the collapse of the ideology on which the government or state is based (2011, 33–34). According to these

criteria, the Republic of Serbia in 2000 can undoubtedly be classified as a defeated state.

Serbia lost effective control over the Autonomous Province of Kosovo and Metohija in June 1999. Although UNSC Resolution 1244 and the Kumanovo Agreement guaranteed its sovereignty and territorial integrity, actual control over the province was assumed by the UN and NATO, with the EU and OSCE participating in certain aspects. The Yugoslav army and Serbian police were withdrawn from the entire territory of the province. This was followed with the exodus of more than two hundred thousand Serbs and other non-Albanians from the province in the summer of 1999. Additionally, Serbian state administration and local authorities, including health and education systems, ceased functioning across most of the province, maintaining their activities only in Serb-majority areas (mainly in northern Kosovo and some enclaves south of the Ibar river). Given that this situation resulted from NATO bombing of the FRY, which inflicted significant material and human losses, and that the outcome was the loss of effective control over most of the province, this constituted a defeat and the state structure of the FRY and Serbia was profoundly weakened.

Another element contributing to the weakening of the FRY was the reduced influence of the federal government over Montenegro. Due to political conflicts, the federal government under the new prime minister Momir Bulatović, who was previously a president of Montenegro until January 1998, ceased cooperation with the Montenegrin government and new Montenegrin president Milo Đukanović, which began pursuing an independent foreign policy and refused to cooperate with federal authorities. This was particularly evident following the 2000 federal constitutional reforms, opposed by the ruling coalition in Montenegro gathered around the Democratic Party of Socialists (DPS) of Milo Đukanović. These reforms were enacted with the support of the ruling coalition from Serbia gathered around the Socialist Party of Serbia (SPS) and oppositional parties from Montenegro, most notably the Socialist People's Party (SNP). Although the degree of loss in this case was not as severe as in Kosovo, federal authority over Montenegro was significantly curtailed. While defense remained under federal control, with units of the Army of Yugoslavia still stationed in Montenegro, other areas such as customs and monetary policy had effectively separated from federal jurisdiction. Montenegro adopted the German Mark as its currency in the fall of 1999, and a year later it became the sole legal currency in the republic.

A strong indicator of the federal government's diminishing of effective control over Kosovo, and to some extent Montenegro, were the federal

elections held on September 24, 2000. In many parts of Kosovo, voting was either impossible or limited to a few polling stations. In Montenegro, voting took place in military facilities, private buildings, homes, restaurants, or local facilities in municipalities governed by the SNP and its partners. The Montenegrin government prohibited the use of schools, kindergartens, public administration buildings, and local facilities in municipalities governed by the DPS and its partners (ODIHR 2000, 6–7). Although the FRY did not cease to exist, its state structure was effectively disintegrating.

However, this “objective” element in politics does not operate independently, as explained in the theoretical section; rather, the interpretations of reality by key actors are crucial. Broader narratives and ideological structures that guide actors toward specific interpretations are essential for understanding the perception of defeat. More specifically, ideology plays a key role and if it remains coherent and appealing to the people, defeat can be interpreted as a victory, or at least as something neither final nor permanent.

Milošević’s ideology was a blend of two key components. The first was a reformed socialism, characterized by trust in the welfare state, a positive role for the state in the economy, controlled privatization, and a formally multiparty system. This version of socialism did not renounce its Marxist–Leninist and Titoist roots; instead, it proudly emphasized continuity with them while aiming to adapt these principles to a modern context. The second component was nationalism, with the proclaimed goal of defending the Serb nation beyond Serbia’s borders and redefining Serbia’s quasi-federal constitutional framework (particularly status of its two autonomous provinces) to prevent separatism. This nationalist aspect was encapsulated by two slogans associated with Milošević’s rise to power: “nobody is allowed to beat you” (“*niko ne sme da vas bije*”) which conveyed that no one should oppress Serbs, and “Oh, Serbia, from three parts, you will be whole again” (“*Oj, Srbijo iz tri dela, ponovo ćeš biti cela*”) which referred to the need to change the status of the autonomous provinces (Krstić 2016, 120). An additional bridge between the socialist legacy (continuity with Yugoslav socialism) and national aspirations (“all Serbs in one state”) was Milošević’s aim to preserve Yugoslavia in some form—either as a stronger federation or as a truncated “Serbian Yugoslavia.” Finally, Milošević’s personality cult played an important role in consolidating his power (Antonić 2002).<sup>4</sup>

4 For a more comprehensive analysis of sources that helped Milošević to stay in power, see the study by Eric Gordy (1999). For the factors which indicated his fall already in 1997, see the article by Ognjen Pribičević (1997).

By 2000, important aspects of this ideological and structural connection between Milošević and his supporters had become severely strained. In the early 1990s, during the global erosion of communism, Milošević managed to convince his supporters, and much of the Serbian public on the viability of a reformed version of socialism. However, the context was markedly different. Between 1989 and 1991, economic growth and improvements in living standards were visible, supported by initial, limited, yet relatively successful privatization under Ante Marković's federal government's economic and monetary reforms. In this context, where living standards improved after the shortages and recession of the 1980s, trust in Milošević's reformed socialism was high, even though the positive changes had little to do with Milošević personally.

During this period, visions of achieving "Swedish standards," fast rail infrastructure, and social justice resonated widely. Citizens and businesses even contributed significant funds to Milošević's project, the "loan for the renewal of Serbia" issued in 1989, further illustrating public confidence. Even during the war in BiH and the severe economic crisis within the FRY, Milošević managed to maintain at least general trust in his economic approach. For instance, he provided citizens with the possibility to purchase state-owned apartments at low prices during hyperinflation and avoided formal layoffs in state-owned enterprises despite the crisis (although wages remained low and were often delayed). Moreover, by nullifying privatizations that took place during hyperinflation, he sent a clear message that his ideological focus was on protecting workers' interests, not capital, in line with his proclaimed values.

Milošević's personality cult as a leader was significantly undermined by the end of the century. Increasing details in the independent media about the manipulations by Milošević's family and close friends and his diminishing attempts to mobilize his support base through charisma and speeches weakened his aura as the "protector of Serbs in Kosovo," which facilitated his rise. His image as the "new Tito" also eroded due to the collapse of an economy that still relied heavily on social ownership. His personality cult suffered further due to the stigma attached to him personally. He was not only labeled as the "butcher of Balkans" by many Western media, but he became directly, personally sanctioned when the EU installed a visa ban for him and his family and close aids (as presented in the chapter on sanctioning) and was even formally accused of responsibility for serious war crimes by the ICTY in 1999. It became clear that he no longer was an internationally respected leader, but an isolated and undesirable one.

Milošević had attempted to portray defeats as victories or mere temporary setbacks. In the socioeconomic sphere, his rhetoric included promises of rapid

national recovery and high-speed rail development, alongside an economic boom anticipated from exports to the Russian market. Nationally, he claimed victory over NATO and the preservation of Kosovo, citing that Resolution 1244 affirmed the FRY's and Serbia's sovereignty and territorial integrity over Kosovo. He highlighted that the Kumanovo Agreement restricted international military presence to Kosovo under the UN flag (although effectively conducted by NATO) and did not permit NATO forces unrestricted movement across the rest of the FRY, thus preventing a broader "occupation" of the state.<sup>5</sup> Milošević also suggested that Serbian and Yugoslav security forces would soon return to Kosovo, a provision formally allowed by Resolution 1244 for limited functions, but contingent upon NATO's (the KFOR commander's) approval.<sup>6</sup>

The semblance of preserving Yugoslavia was maintained through FRY constitutional reforms, the introduction of direct elections for the FRY president and federal parliament, and close partnership with Momir Bulatović's SNP at the federal level. Milošević also held his rallies in parts of Montenegro (such as the notable gathering in Berane in late summer 2000) and increased Yugoslav army presence in Montenegro. Military infrastructure in Montenegro was also utilized for civilian political purposes, such as establishing transmitters to broadcast Yugoslav government TV programs, which the Montenegrin republican authorities had denied licensing, or managing logistics of the Yugoslav federal elections which were considered illegitimate by republican authorities (Dimitrijević 2021, 176–177). Despite these efforts, the disintegration of state structures and the growing disparity between proclaimed ideological goals and reality rendered Milošević's narratives increasingly unconvincing.

These factors, coupled with the populace's experience of isolation and the economic and psychological pressures stemming from state stigmatization, led to a decline in support for Milošević. In the September 2000 elections, the opposition coalition Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) and its presidential candidate Vojislav Koštunica secured victory.<sup>7</sup> The opposition countered Milošević's narrative by asserting that Serbia had suffered losses—politically, economically, and otherwise—due to his leadership, but that a change in governance could reverse these setbacks. Their platform

5 Emphasis on the UN mandate as the cornerstone of the deal was present from the very first speech in which Milošević proclaimed "victory" against NATO (Mondo 2021).

6 Milošević and Yugoslav authorities even formed the "Kosmet peace unit" in 2000 to demonstrate the willingness of the army of Yugoslavia to return to the province (Marjanović 2000).

7 Milošević still had more than 1.8 million votes. However, this was only 37 percent of the ballots, making him the runner-up in the election won by Vojislav Koštunica, with nearly two and a half million votes (more than 50 percent).

emphasized preserving Kosovo as formally part of the country, maintaining the union with Montenegro, rebuilding the economy, reintegrating into the international community, and achieving recognition as a normal country. This acknowledgment of defeat, coupled with a commitment to reversal, naturally positioned destigmatization as a primary objective. The DOS's electoral success unequivocally signified the erosion of support for Milošević's policy.

## Serbia's Stigma Management Stages

After the defeat, stigma management had to be pursued simultaneously across multiple stages, reflecting the nature and weight of the stigma imposed on Serbia during the 1990s. The main stages for Serbia's stigma management stem from the origins of its stigmatizing labels, the forums where stigmatization was carried out, and the broader international context in which stigma management takes place. The relative importance of these stages has evolved over the last two decades.

Given that stigmatization occurs in the context of power asymmetry, relations with the primary stigma imposers (the most powerful and influential members of the audience of normals who initiated the stigmatization) represent a critical stage for stigma management. Changing the perceptions of the most powerful actors is essential for achieving destigmatization. Throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the US remained the dominant global actor as it was during the 1990s, despite certain events (such as the 2003 Iraq War and the 2008 global financial crisis) that undermined its reputation and soft power in international society.<sup>8</sup>

In the European context, the EU and some of its member states, particularly Germany, France, and the UK, retained significant influence. However, a series of crises (e.g., the eurozone crisis, the migrant crisis, Brexit) impacted the EU's stability and normative power. Given that the EU was largely perceived as the regional core of international society, progress in the EU accession process emerged as one of the most important stages for Serbia's stigma management, but its importance and nature evolved during the latter half of the 2010s, resulting in a decreasing linearity between destigmatization and the EU-ization (Krstić 2022).

Additionally, relations with actors who did not strictly endorse the stigma also proved beneficial, particularly in light of shifting power dynamics

8 For a thorough study of how international political position determined Serbian foreign policy after 2000, see Dašić 2020.

within international society. During Serbia's stigma management in the first two decades of the twenty-first century, the unipolar dominance of the US gradually weakened, partly due to the rise of China and other emerging actors. Russia also initially experienced a resurgence, achieving notable progress in certain areas, though it remained below the threshold of becoming a global superpower as it was during the Soviet era. Furthermore, Russia's own stigmatization, particularly following the events of 2014, constrained its ability to influence the (de)stigmatization of others within international society.

Nonetheless, Serbia's relations with China and Russia occasionally played a pivotal role in its stigma-management efforts, especially during the periods when these actors could provide significant support for Serbia in international forums. This was especially evident in the context of the Kosovo crisis before the unilateral declaration of independence in 2008.

The first two examples of stigma management focus on influencing members of the international "audience of normals" through direct relations with them. However, it is equally or even more important to shape the opinion of the "audience of normals" through changes of behavior in those aspects that were labeled as deviant. In the context of Serbian stigma management, the most important stages in this regard were relations with former adversaries from the 1990s—Croats and Bosniaks.

Official relations of Belgrade with Zagreb and Sarajevo were therefore closely monitored. Serbia needed to demonstrate its willingness to be a good neighbor in this relation to mitigate some important elements of stigma. Its stance towards the Kosovo issue and policy towards Kosovo Albanians as another former adversary were also carefully monitored and presented as an important stage for Serbian stigma management, as well as (although to a smaller extent) Serbian relations with Albania.

Relations with other neighbors were also significant, despite the fact that there were no open hostilities with these neighbors in the 1990s. Patterns of relations with neighbors, especially those with a substantial part of the ethnic Serb population, those which formerly used to be a part of Yugoslavia, or those whose ethnic group constituted minorities in certain parts of Serbia were important for signaling that Serbia was not aggressive towards its neighbors and that its treatment of national minorities was acknowledged by neighboring states.

Certain aspects of domestic policy also served as important stages for Serbian stigma-management efforts. Important stages in this regard were domestic political transition towards a functional liberal democracy, as well as economic transition towards a free market economy. Changes in

these two areas were important for countering labels of Serbia being a “human rights violator” as well as many stereotypes about Serbia being an unfunctional state, or “the last Bolshevik state in Europe.”

Particularly important was domestic minority protection policy, considering that the initial labeling of Serbia began due to the treatment of minorities, primarily Kosovo Albanians, but also to a certain extent other minorities. Internal efforts in transitional justice also played a vital role, conveying the message that Serbia wanted to be over with problems from the past and all the labels connected with war crimes, claiming that these were the responsibility of individuals rather than the state, and demonstrating Serbia’s willingness to hold perpetrators accountable.

Managing political crises effectively has also become a key aspect of stigma management. The handling of the political security crisis in southern Serbian municipalities with an Albanian majority in 2001, conducted through a political dialogue with local Albanians in coordination with international actors (mostly NATO and the OSCE), was a notable example. Handling of relations in the federation/state union with Montenegro between 2001 and 2006 also presented one of the stages. By peaceful handling of these open issues through political settlements and without resorting to the use of force, Serbia aimed to substantially challenge labels and stereotypes of being an “aggressor” or behaving aggressively in disputes. Serbia’s behavior during the migrant crisis of 2015–2016 was also an important stage, considering that it aimed to build an image of being an exceptionally open and humane through its liberal and hospital treatment of migrants.

Finally, Serbian activities in international organizations and multilateral forums were very important for stigma management. The most important aspect in this regard during the first decade of the twenty-first century was cooperation with the ICTY, which was carefully monitored by the audience of normals, especially the EU and US. By performing its obligations in this regard, Serbia addressed the label of being an “international obligations violator” and addressed prejudices that it was a pariah state that did not want to align with international norms.

Besides that, rejoining other organizations to which Yugoslavia had earlier belonged (such as the UN, OSCE, IMF, etc.) was an important sign of Belgrade regaining its status. Moreover, integration processes to some other important organizations or programs (such as the Council of Europe, Partnership for Peace, and, most importantly, the EU) was also very important for Serbia to demonstrate that it belonged to the core of international society once again.

This study focuses on relations with former adversaries as one of the most important stages for Serbian stigma management, while also partially

addressing other stages. While analyzing relations with Croats and Bosniaks through this theoretical lens, Serbian relations with Kosovo Albanians will not be analyzed in this study. Also, while NATO was a military adversary of Serbia during the 1999 conflict, this dynamic of relations was very different, considering that NATO joined the Kosovo issue in its later stages, effectively intervening to support one side in the already existing conflict. There are two main reasons for this reducing of the scope to relations of Belgrade with Zagreb and Sarajevo as the "purest" cases.

First, Serbia's relations with Croatia and BiH are official diplomatic relations between sovereign, mutually recognized UN-member states. On the other hand, Serbia treats Kosovo as formally part of its territory and refers to its interactions with institutions in Pristina as relations with interim self-governance institutions, in accordance with UNSC resolution 1244. Second, while Serbian policy towards the Kosovo issue was also impacted by seeking destigmatization as a goal, there were other important identity and material variables which influenced Serbian behavior in this regard, especially considering the mentioned importance of Kosovo for Serbian national habitus and identity. This distinguishes the Kosovo issue from other stigma-management stages.

**Table 6 Relevant stages for Serbia's stigma management from 2001 to 2020**

Actor-related stages	Topic-related stages
Relations with former adversaries (Croatia, BiH)	Democratization and economic transition
Relations with key stigma imposers (US, EU, Germany, France, UK)	Treatment of national minorities
Relations with key stigma opponents (Russia, China)	Transitional justice mechanisms
Relations with neighbors	Kosovo policy
Activities in international organizations (cooperation with the ICTY, accession to the EU, reintegration to the UN, OSCE, IMF, etc.)	Handling of political crises (crisis in southern Serbia 2001, relations with Montenegro 2001–2006, migrant crisis 2015, etc.)

### Destigmatization as a Goal: Importance of Relations with Croatia and BiH as a Stage

After addressing the broader social-structural context influencing Serbia's stigma management (from national habitus to defeat as a trigger), as well as after addressing the most relevant stigma-management stages based

on the nature of Serbian stigma (explained in the previous chapter) and the structure of international society, the focus is on how actors perceived destigmatization and how they assessed importance of different stigma management stages.

Although not explicitly named as a goal under this title in any program document, numerous other specific objectives that fall under the concept of destigmatization are explicitly highlighted in documents and official statements. Additionally, in interviews conducted for this research, major foreign policy actors from this period confirmed that destigmatization was one of the goals of foreign policy. Some key decision-makers even emphasized stigma management as “the essence of Serbia’s foreign policy” during their tenure (Interview 5).

To illustrate continuity in this aspect, the articulation of destigmatization as a goal will be traced across different periods marked by government changes in Serbia/the FRY/the SCG.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the relative changes to how decision-makers perceived the importance of this goal in the broader context of Serbian foreign policy will also be addressed. Finally, variances in the perceived importance of relations with former adversaries as a stigma-management stage are also analyzed in accordance with the proposed model.

### *New Governments of the FRY and Serbia: October 2000–February/ March 2003*

The first phase encompasses the period up to February 2003 and the formal transition of the FRY to the SCG. Formal authority for shaping and implementing foreign policy remained at the federal level. Although the president was not the central figure in policymaking, considering the central role of the federal government, the fact that he was elected with a decisive victory over Slobodan Milošević and held constitutional authority to represent the state abroad made Vojislav Koštunica the most influential political figure in this domain.

While this study begins its analysis in 2001, the basic direction of policy in this period can be inferred from the inaugural speech of the newly elected democratic president of the FRY, Vojislav Koštunica, on October 7, 2000. During his oath-taking ceremony at a joint session of both chambers of the federal assembly at the Sava Centar, Koštunica emphasized that one of

9 For a broader analysis of Serbia’s foreign policy goals, determinants, implementation means, and practices in different relations, as well as patterns of continuity and change in this regard, see the textbook that I recently coauthored with my colleagues Dragan Đukanović and Marko Dašić (Đukanović, Krstić, and Dašić 2025).

his key objectives was the reintegration of the FRY into the international community. However, this reintegration, he stressed, was not to occur at any cost: it was to be achieved "upright, with dignity, respecting and defending our national interests and dignity" (Koštunica 2000, 1). This emphasis on dignity conveyed a clear message that the goal was not merely formal reintegration, but rather substantial acceptance of Serbia within the international society—an acceptance that would affirm its equality and allow it to assert its rights and interests as all other states. Thus, the objective was not only to restore Serbia's formal status, but also to eliminate discrimination and negative labeling. The desired outcome was a full-fledged return to the international society, achieved in a manner both "upright and dignified." Koštunica's message further suggested that while reintegration was indeed a priority it would not come at the expense of Serbia's most vital national interests.

At the end of 2000, Zoran Žižić, the new prime minister of the FRY, emphasized that his priority was "the return of the FRY to the international community, European and global currents, while unyieldingly and persistently preserving national and state dignity" (B92 2000). This statement clearly underscores that addressing the major consequences of stigma was the new administration's foremost priority. In January 2001, Zoran Đinđić, the designated prime minister for the new government of the Republic of Serbia, delivered his mandate speech. Although foreign policy then fell under the jurisdiction of the federal state, Đinđić's speech still contained clear elements of destigmatization as a goal. For instance, he stated, "one of the primary priorities of our Government and Parliament as a whole is settling accounts with the past" (Đinđić 2001a). He specified that this involved addressing political assassinations within the country and prosecuting war criminals, who, in his words, should be brought to "domestic justice" (Đinđić 2001a). "They have tarnished the name of the Serbian people. We do not want to bear the responsibility for this," Đinđić declared (Đinđić 2001a).

The analysis of the programmatic statements by Federal Minister of Foreign Affairs Goran Svilanović offers more concrete evidence that destigmatization was a central foreign policy goal.<sup>10</sup> In his 2001 exposition of Yugoslav foreign policy, Svilanović immediately noted in the introductory

10 Presented about a year after the democratic changes, Svilanović's (2001) exposition highlights that normalization of relations and reintegration into the international community represented the first phase of destigmatization. During this period, the "international position and credibility of FRY were significantly strengthened," though it was acknowledged that this goal was still incomplete (310).

paragraph that “changing our country’s international position, that is, exiting international isolation,” was a prerequisite for numerous internal changes (2001, 286). Svilanović emphasized the need to “abandon all the fundamental elements of the previous regime, including those in the realm of foreign policy” (287). The document further outlined the necessity of taking “a series of steps as soon as possible to lead the country out of international isolation and improve its foreign policy position—normalize and restore diplomatic relations with other countries, join numerous international organizations, accede to international treaties, etc.” (287). The exposition stressed the importance of a commitment to “European and Euro-Atlantic integration processes,” while also asserting the need to avoid isolation, as a justification for pursuing military-security integration (295). Although Svilanović acknowledged that completing these processes would take time, he underscored that progress had already begun. The need for a credible and reputable country was articulated in the context of fulfilling international obligations, including cooperation with the ICTY, and for pursuing a European path, which required normalized relations with neighbors. Additionally, membership in the Council of Europe was emphasized as “a form of legitimization” in the context of democracy and the rule of law. In the language of stigma, this represented legitimization of normalcy within the European context (302). These elements highlight the significance of altering the reputation of the FRY, restoring credibility, avoiding further isolation, and, consequently, achieving the destigmatization.

Based on these factors, it can be concluded that destigmatization was a central objective of the FRY’s/Serbia’s foreign policy. Notably, Montenegro had already begun independently pursuing steps in this direction even before the regime change in the FRY. Interviews with high-ranking officials (decision-makers and advisors) from this period confirm that overcoming the negative legacy of the Milošević regime was a key foreign policy goal. However, opinions differed regarding the extent to which this objective should be pursued and the methods for achieving it. What was universally agreed upon was that the first year focused primarily on addressing the most pressing and damaging aspects of stigma: eliminating key discriminatory measures such as economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation imposed by the EU or the US and restoring suspended or revoked statuses through reintegration into international organizations. Simultaneously, some negative labels and stereotypes were dismantled or mitigated.

By the end of 2001, Minister Svilanović summarized the foreign policy achievements of the past year, emphasizing the “significant strengthening” of the FRY’s international position and credibility. He explicitly referenced

the lifting of sanctions and the end of diplomatic isolation, among other accomplishments. However, he noted that a shift would occur only when there was a "change from a policy of conditionality (of the international community toward FRY) to a policy of partnership with Yugoslavia" (Tanjug 2001). This indicated that while substantial progress had been made in addressing the most visible aspects of stigma, significant work remained to achieve full destigmatization and recognition as a "normal" actor.

Following these initial successes, the long-term foreign policy goal became the full normalization of Serbia's international position and the elimination of lingering negative burdens. This process involved addressing remaining forms of discrimination and status loss (most of which had already been resolved) and tackling various remaining forms of separation (most notably, the temporary international protectorate over Kosovo), as well as stereotypes and labels. Membership in the Council of Europe and the Partnership for Peace were identified as immediate indicators of success and crucial status symbols for further destigmatization. EU membership, meanwhile, was explicitly defined as a long-term strategic goal and the ultimate confirmation of Serbia's full reintegration into the international society. Although achieving EU membership was not solely motivated by the need for destigmatization, this goal was undoubtedly one of the key drivers behind the strategic decision. NATO membership was not prioritized, but cooperation with NATO was described as a significant aspect of integration. The term Euro-Atlantic integration subtly suggested a broader alignment with NATO's frameworks. Sivilanović (2001) underscored the importance of cooperation with the ICTY as a mechanism for addressing the burdens of the past.

When it comes to the perception of relative importance of stigma-management stages, initially the most dominant stages were domestic. The priority was implementing internal reforms, specifically political and economic transition, which aimed to demonstrate Serbia's break with the Milošević legacy and eliminating as many stigmatizing labels as possible (Krstić 2020). This approach was particularly important for removing the label of Serbia as a "human rights violator," especially concerning internal undemocratic practices, freedom of speech restrictions, and the erosion of the rule of law. Additionally, economic transition was aimed at signaling Serbia's abandonment of its communist legacy in favor of a free market economy and its intention to evolve into a developed nation. This focus was particularly evident in the speeches of Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić (2001b), encouraging Serbian citizens to promote Serbian reforms abroad and to "be ambassadors of a democratic Serbia." He stressed the importance of resolving

internal issues, stating: “It is very important that we resolve our problems among ourselves, that we do not invite the world to participate and witness the resolution of problems, as every normal nation and all normal parties do” (Đinđić 2001b). Promoting “normalcy” through transition highlights the perceived importance of internal reforms as a stage for destigmatization. The removal of Milošević from power and reforms quickly facilitated Serbia’s reintegration into key international organizations.<sup>11</sup>

In addition, the handling of the crisis in the southern Serbian municipalities of Preševo, Bujanovac, and Medveđa served as an important demonstration of Serbia’s approach to minority policies. Cooperation with the OSCE and NATO in resolving the rebellion led by Albanian paramilitary groups who conducted terrorist attacks on Serbian security forces was of vast significance for Serbia. A plan for the peaceful resolution of the crisis was adopted as early as January 2001 and was implemented throughout 2001–2002 (Janjić 2005, 1–2). This plan included the integration of Albanians into police forces and the establishment of mechanisms for minority protection in line with OSCE standards, alongside measures to dismantle the activities of the so-called UCPBM (Liberation Army of Preševo, Bujanovac, and Medveđa). By successfully implementing this plan, Serbia demonstrated its capacity to ensure minority rights while safeguarding its borders and internal security. Evidence that this crisis management played an important role in stigma management comes from Yugoslav Foreign Minister Goran Svilanović’s statement in 2001. He offered assistance to Macedonia during the Albanian rebellion in the fall of 2001, emphasizing that the FRY had developed valuable “know-how” in handling such crises (Svilanović 2001). Rather than being seen as a model of poor crisis management, Belgrade now presented itself as an example of good practice.

Another critical stage of stigma management was transitional justice. This included efforts to locate and uncover mass graves of Albanian victims within Serbia in 2001. Interviews conducted with two high-ranking officials from this period revealed that decisions on how to manage findings related to these mass graves were made with the international audience in mind (Interview 1 and 6). Serbia demonstrated its initial commitment to

11 Progress was evident in the realm of de-labeling. Western countries praised Serbia for advancements in public administration reform, judiciary reform, and the establishment of the rule of law. International nongovernmental organizations, such as Freedom House, similarly highlighted this progress in their reports (Freedom House 2002, 7–8). Nevertheless, many mechanisms for monitoring progress remained in effect. For further elaboration of the achievement in this regard, see my study on the relation between regime change and destigmatization (Krstić 2020).

investigating the crimes of the Milošević regime. Simultaneously, Serbian authorities arrested Milošević in late March 2001 and extradited him to the ICTY in late June 2001. This was the clearest signal of Serbia's intent to cooperate with international institutions. Namely, cooperation with the ICTY was an important stage for Serbia at the time, particularly in dismantling the label of "violator of international obligations." Given that Milošević's extradition occurred without a clear domestic legal framework and amid pressure that Serbia could lose financial support from the US (Vujačić 2021), the measure primarily aimed to send signals to the audience of normals.

An additional important stage was managing relations within the federal state. This aspect was crucial for Serbia to counter the negative consequences of the "aggressor" label. Serbian leaders, particularly Koštunica and Đinđić, needed to demonstrate a clear break from Milošević's approach in responding to separatist tendencies. Counterintuitively from a realist and statist point of view, Serbian leadership agreed to transform the federal state (FRY) into the loose and effectively confederal SCG in 2002. Interviews with key decision-makers from this period indicate that approach during negotiations with Montenegro was influenced by the perception that this issue was of particular importance to Western actors (Interview 1 and 2). One advisor to a high-level decision-maker from this period noted in an interview (Interview 7) that Serbian leadership was even prepared to agree to a secession referendum in Montenegro sooner rather than later. However, the EU's insistence on the establishment of a confederate state union influenced their decision, as it offered a way to temporarily maintain the country's unity and satisfy Brussels's expectations.

Relations with Kosovo Albanians also represented a significant stage for stigma management. The importance of adopting a compromising approach at this stage was evident through the potentially politically costly decisions taken by the leadership in Belgrade. The overarching goal was to counter the negative labels associated with the Kosovo War. For example, President Koštunica issued an amnesty for almost 1,800 Kosovo Albanian prisoners detained in central Serbia, sending a clear signal of compromise to demonstrate that the new government "distinguishes from Milošević" (Jeremić 2023). Additionally, the FRY and Serbian governments signed a first formal agreement with UNMIK in the fall of 2001 and encouraged Serbs to participate in elections for provisional institutions of self-governance in Kosovo, thereby signaling cooperation (Vlada Srbije 2001). Of course, the issue of Kosovo was inherently significant for Serbia, irrespective of stigma concerns. Zoran Đinđić pushed for the internationalization of the Kosovo issue in late 2002 and early 2003, parallelly calling for the return of around

one thousand members of Serbian security forces to Kosovo in accordance with Resolution 1244 (BBC Serbian 2003). This stage also served a dual function: Belgrade sought to highlight Serbian victims, drawing attention to the crimes and expulsions of non-Albanians from Kosovo after 1999 and the establishment of international administration.

Finally, in the hierarchy of stigma-management stages, relations with former adversaries in the neighborhood—namely Croatia and BiH—were initially not seen as equally important as the aforementioned strategies (Interview 10). However, according to the interviews with decision-makers from this period (Interview 1 and 6), their relative importance gradually increased over time. Relations with BiH were of bigger importance than those with Croatia in this initial period. Establishing more transparent relations with the RS, formalizing diplomatic ties and normalizing political relations with official Sarajevo were crucial for addressing the negative consequences of the “aggressor” and “international obligation violator” labels (Interview 1). Thus, while the perception of the importance of relations with BiH and Croatia for stigma management was initially moderately low, it steadily grew to moderately high, especially in the case of relations with Sarajevo.

*Marović as a President of the SCG, Živković as a Prime Minister of Serbia: February/March 2003–March 2004*

The SCG was established on February 15, 2003. While responsibility for conducting foreign policy formally remained at the level of the state union, the transformation of the two-member federation into a confederation effectively strengthened the role of the republican governments in foreign policy. From 2003 to 2006, the council of ministers was chaired by SCG President Svetozar Marović, combining both the functions of head of state and head of government in one person. However, the SCG joint policies were focused on a narrow set of priorities that two states had agreed on, while Marović did not possess political weight like Koštunica, being elected in parliament and not through direct elections.

During his formal inauguration speech, Marović emphasized the importance of a swift path to EU membership and continued regional and global integration (Grujić 2003). EU membership was explicitly stated as a goal in the constitutional charter of the SCG (Skupština SCG 2003, 1). However, Marović’s speech was not particularly detailed, which is understandable given his limited powers. More important was the mandate speech of Zoran Živković, who assumed the role of Serbian prime minister in March 2003, after the assassination of Đinđić. Živković (2003) underscored the need for “European and global integration,” explicitly linking political stability in the

country and region, as well as the preservation of the SCG state union, to the achievement of this goal. He further tied relations with Montenegro, regional stability, and domestic policy to Serbia's integration into "Europe and the world" as its key foreign policy objective (Živković 2003). All the short-term foreign policy goals he articulated were directed toward integration and membership in specific international forums, such as the Council of Europe, Partnership for Peace, and the initiation of EU accession negotiations. These elements reveal that the drive for integration remained strong, largely driven by the trauma of Serbia's previous isolation. Officials from this period confirmed that destigmatization remained a central foreign policy goal (Interviews 1, 2, 6, 7, 8, 10). This continuity with the previous period was also that Goran Svilanović remained as minister of foreign affairs. Živković emphasized a high degree of alignment between Serbia and the SCG on foreign policy, highlighting that this had not always been the case (Živković 2003). While this alignment appeared strong during the initial period, cracks began to emerge by late 2003. Nonetheless, regarding destigmatization, this period marks a continuation of the efforts initiated prior to February 2003.

During this period, the relative importance of foreign policy stages for stigma management increased. Some internal reforms remained significant, particularly the legal and security system reforms implemented after the assassination of Prime Minister Đinđić. In contrast, relations with Montenegro declined in importance, while the focus on Kosovo remained unchanged. However, it became clear that Serbia had nearly exhausted the potential for achievements based primarily on internal reforms and now needed to concentrate more on its foreign policy to manage stigma. Relations with the main stigma imposers were critically important from the start, but efforts in this regard became more pronounced during this phase. For instance, Serbian Prime Minister Živković's proposal to send Serbian forces to join the US-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) mission in Afghanistan (a costly and unpopular move domestically) demonstrated Serbia's willingness to invest heavily in improving relations with the US (Anastasijević 2003). This effort led to a positive outcome, as the US lifted its remaining economic discriminatory measures against Serbia in late 2003 (Vujačić 2021). Similarly, Serbia's EU path became clearer, as evidenced by the establishment of the position of vice prime minister for European integration. Progress was tangible, culminating in admission of the SCG to the Council of Europe. Serbia maintained a consistent level of engagement with the major international organizations, but cooperation with the ICTY gained additional importance following the new indictments in 2003. During the year, Serbia extradited several individuals, including Veselin

Šljivančanin, accused of crimes against Croats at Ovčara near Vukovar in 1991.

Relations with former adversaries, particularly Croatia, assumed special importance during this period. Both countries recognized the mutual need to demonstrate to the West, especially the EU, that they had changed and were now “good neighbors.” This became evident with the proposal for a “joint declaration on EU accession,” announced in mid-2003 by Serbian Vice Prime Minister Čedomir Jovanović and Croatian Minister for European Integration Nevena Mimica (*Hrvatska riječ* 2003). One key decision-maker from this period noted that the EU’s Thessaloniki Summit in mid-2003, which promised an EU perspective for the entire Western Balkans, influenced the perception that improving relations with neighboring countries could enhance Serbia’s image within Europe and accelerate its EU accession process (Interview 2).

#### *Koštunica–Tadić Cohabitation: March/June 2004–May 2007*

A little over a year after stepping down as president of the FRY, Vojislav Koštunica became the mandate holder tasked with forming a new government. This change was followed with the election of the new SCG foreign minister, Drašković, in April 2004, as well as with the election of the new president of the Republic of Serbia Boris Tadić in June 2004, marking the beginning of the new foreign policy period.

The mandate address of the new prime minister reflected a clear stance that “the European path of Serbia and Montenegro has no alternative” and underscored a commitment to European integration (Koštunica 2004). In this regard, Koštunica continued the objectives set by his predecessors and aligned with the position of the president of the SCG, Svetozar Marović. However, Koštunica mostly refrained from using the terms “Euro-Atlantic” or “global” integration, focusing exclusively on EU membership. He described this process as a formal confirmation that Serbia belonged to European society. A significant portion of his address also centered on managing one aspect of stigma—the international administration in Kosovo. Koštunica prioritized resolving this issue to restore full sovereignty and territorial integrity to the country (Koštunica 2004). In the context of destigmatization, it is also important to note his mentioning of the need for cooperation with the ICTY, though he emphasized that this cooperation should be “two-way.” Thus, while Koštunica’s address did not place a heavy emphasis on a broader destigmatization narrative, it contained elements indicating that specific measures were intended to eliminate the lingering effects of stigma.

In later June 2004, Boris Tadić decisively defeated nationalist Tomislav Nikolić in the second round of elections. This victory gave Tadić additional political leverage to influence foreign policy, particularly given that the government at the time was a minority one led by Koštunica and that the union with Montenegro had effectively become a confederation. From May 2006, following Montenegro's independence, Tadić became the head of a fully sovereign and independent Serbia. However, since his party was not part of the government, his influence was limited. In his inaugural speech, Tadić addressed several stigma-related themes. He stated, "Serbia has had enough misunderstandings with the world," referencing the "horrors of isolation and war" of the 1990s and warning against the threat to the "October 5th victory for freedom," including the risk of renewed isolation (Tadić 2004, 314–315). To overcome these legacies, Tadić expressed a clear intention to guide Serbia toward EU membership, with a foreign policy grounded on three key pillars: Brussels, Washington, and Moscow (317). He also highlighted the importance of the Partnership for Peace (317). Notably, a significant segment of Tadić's speech addressed the need to confront the past. In addition to stressing the importance of cooperating with the ICTY, he acknowledged the region's long history of crimes and insisted that "all peoples of this part of Europe owe each other an apology," while particularly emphasizing the necessity of confronting "the crimes of one's own people" (318). Tadić acknowledged that Serbia had not been a pillar of peace and stability in the past but intended to become one moving forward (317). His approach clearly placed emphasis on overcoming the consequences of stigmatization.

At the end of December 2004, the new minister of foreign affairs, Vuk Drašković, delivered an address to members of the SCG Assembly. In this concise speech, Drašković emphasized the need for a "radical break with Milošević's legacy," primarily through cooperation with the ICTY and reform of the security sector. He stressed that these internal political measures were essential for achieving the foreign policy goal of European and Euro-Atlantic integration (Drašković 2004, 319). Drašković was even more explicit than his predecessors about addressing the negative legacy of the past. He directly used the term "shame" regarding the crimes of the 1990s, stating: "Shame is not erased by denial or defending shame, nor should sin ever be declared a virtue" (320). He described Milošević's legacy as "anti-history" in contrast to the otherwise honorable history of the SCG (320). He further remarked, "In Srebrenica, not only Bosniak civilians and prisoners of war were killed, but the Serbs who suffered genocide in the darkness of World War II were shamed and killed again". He also highlighted the ethnic cleansing of Albanians

before June 10, 1999, juxtaposed with the subsequent ethnic cleansing of Serbs after the same date (319). In essence, Drašković's speech, while centering on EU and NATO integration, explicitly addressed the need for destigmatization. Unlike earlier foreign policy rhetoric, his remarks moved beyond discussions of credibility, isolation, and reputation, focusing instead on the need to remove the "shame" brought upon the state and nation by the policies of the 1990s.

Interviewed officials confirmed the direct connection between EU membership and destigmatization, some of them emphasizing that "this was not the sole motivation for setting this goal as a strategic objective" (Interview 3). Additionally, they acknowledged that the destigmatization of Serbia was indeed one of their foreign policy objectives (Interviews 3, 5, 7). Unlike the previous periods, where efforts were focused on eliminating discriminatory mechanisms or restoring revoked status, this phase linked destigmatization with confronting Serbia's own past. A particular emphasis was placed on the necessity of cooperation with the ICTY to ensure individual accountability and prevent collective guilt. President Tadić and Minister Drašković were at the forefront of this initiative. Other actors, such as Koštunica, viewed cooperation with the ICTY more as a necessity. Nonetheless, a common thread across all actors in this phase—consistent with previous periods—was the tendency to reaffirm Serbia's belonging to the "audience of normals" within the Euro-Atlantic security community, particularly through membership in select forums like the EU and the Partnership for Peace.

From the presented, it becomes evident that relations with Croatia and BiH emerged as the most significant stigma-management stage for Serbia during this period. These relationships served as key examples of Serbia's transformation, positioning the country as fundamentally different from its 1990s image and arguing that Serbia should not be punished in the context of Kosovo's future status. Additionally, Serbia sought to compensate for shortcomings in cooperation with the ICTY—an equally critical stage that experienced ups and downs—by showing its improved relations with former adversaries. This does not suggest that other stages were unimportant. The peaceful dissolution of the state union with Montenegro played a substantial role in this phase, proving that Serbia was not willing to use any aggressive means to keep the union together. Significant attention was directed toward highlighting the deteriorating position of Serbs in Kosovo, particularly in the aftermath of the pogrom in March 2004. Finally, alongside deepening relations with Western states as the primary imposers of stigma and advancing on the EU integration path, the importance of

strengthening ties with Moscow also grew during this period. Relations with Russia were increasingly perceived as an important aspect of Serbia's broader stigma-management strategy.

### *The Second Government of Vojislav Koštunica: May 2007–July 2008*

In mid-2006, Montenegro voted in favor of independence through a referendum, leading to the dissolution of the state union. Serbia subsequently initiated the process of drafting a new constitution, followed by parliamentary elections in early 2007. However, the formation of the new government was delayed until May 2007. During this transitional period, from June 2006 to May 2007, Vuk Drašković continued to serve as the minister of foreign affairs of the now-independent Republic of Serbia. From the autumn of 2006, foreign policy was managed by the Serbian government, alongside the president of the independent Republic of Serbia. In May 2007, a new coalition government was formed, once again led by Vojislav Koštunica. This time, however, most ministries were controlled by Tadić's Democratic Party (DS) in coalition with Koštunica's Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), G17+, and New Serbia (NS).

Koštunica's mandate address as prime minister echoed his 2004 speech in terms of stigma-related elements. The central issue was unequivocally Kosovo, with a focus on the need to preserve Serbia's sovereignty and territorial integrity (Koštunica 2007). Nonetheless, EU membership was reaffirmed as a stated goal. Koštunica explicitly highlighted Serbia's chairmanship of the Council of Europe as an opportunity to "affirm Serbia in the international community." He also stressed that participation in integration processes such as the Partnership for Peace "should strengthen Serbia's international and overall position" while clarifying that all efforts must align with "state and national interests" (Koštunica 2007). This rhetoric demonstrated a dual goal of improving Serbia's international reputation while prioritizing its national interests. Following his reelection in February 2008, President Boris Tadić did not deliver a mandate speech. Nevertheless, it was evident that Tadić, as president and leader of the party controlling the most ministries, along with his former advisor Vuk Jeremić serving as foreign minister, exerted influence over Serbia's foreign policy which was far beyond his formal constitutional powers. Tadić took his oath before the national assembly on February 15, 2008, delivering a brief address (NSRS 2008). However, this government was short-lived due to disagreements over Serbia's approach to EU integration following Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, triggering new elections in March 2008 where foreign policy—particularly the issue of the EU path—dominated the campaign.

Although he did not deliver a formal foreign policy address to parliament, then foreign minister Vuk Jeremić articulated his strategic goals during the first conference of ambassadors of the Republic of Serbia in December 2007. Jeremić declared “accelerated accession to the European Union” as Serbia’s central strategic goal, framing the “great idea of Europe” as synonymous with democracy, individual freedoms, the rule of law, human and minority rights, and regional integration. He emphasized that EU accession also represented a rejection of war as a means of foreign policy in Europe (Jeremić 2007, 323–324). By linking internal reforms and regional cooperation with external goals, Jeremić highlighted reconciliation, compromise with Kosovo Albanians, and confrontation with the past as essential components of Serbia’s path toward the EU. Cooperation with the ICTY was underscored, not only as an international obligation but as a “moral duty towards our neighbors and the world, but above all towards ourselves” (Jeremić 2007, 324). Jeremić further connected integration processes with identity building, arguing that they provided Serbia with a “sense of purpose in the twenty-first century” (324). This moralistic discourse of self-reflection, combined with a rejection of “outdated concepts of isolated national defense” (324), clearly positioned EU membership as a cornerstone of Serbia’s destigmatization efforts.

Interviewed officials from this period confirmed that destigmatization remained an important foreign policy goal (Interviews 3, 4, 5). The primary components of this goal continued to include EU membership, cooperation with the ICTY, and regional relations. However, it became evident that improving overall reputation had become secondary to Serbia’s most pressing objective in this period—preventing the secession of Kosovo. To a certain extent, resisting Kosovo’s independence was itself part of Serbia’s stigma-management strategy. The wide recognition of Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence among the Western states could be perceived as a continuation of discrimination against Serbia based on negative labels from the past. Defending Serbia’s position on Kosovo took precedence over other goals. This was most clearly demonstrated when Serbia decided to withdraw its ambassadors from states recognizing Kosovo’s independence, including Croatia, the US, Germany, and France, despite potential damage for future bilateral relations with these countries. Nonetheless, even Serbia’s reaction to Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of independence was, to some extent, influenced by its ongoing destigmatization efforts. A key example was Serbia’s announcement that it would refrain from military solutions and rely exclusively on peaceful means to protect its interests. While this position may seem logical, it is noteworthy that most states confronted with

separatist threats do not categorically deny military deterrence. Serbia's decision to emphasize its commitment to peaceful solutions highlights the importance of maintaining a normal and peaceful image, even in the face of secession.

A notable divergence also emerged within the government regarding the EU path. DS figures, particularly Tadić and Jeremić, framed their arguments using moral reasoning, while Prime Minister Koštunica relied more heavily on interest-based arguments. These differences contributed to the eventual collapse of the government over disagreements concerning Serbia's EU integrations. Elections in March 2008 were dominated by foreign policy issues, particularly the question of Serbia's EU path. Signing of the Stabilization and Association Agreement with the EU in April 2008 by Deputy Prime Minister Božidar Đelić (DS), despite the lack of support from Prime Minister Koštunica, signaled that the pro-EU camp was willing to make even politically risky and potentially expensive gestures to demonstrate that Serbia aspired to join the EU. To conclude, while regional relations remained important for stigma management during this period, their relative importance decreased compared to the Kosovo policy and, for the DS, to the focus on EU integration.

#### *Coalition Government led by the Democratic Party: July 2008–May/July 2012*

After securing a significant number of mandates in the May 2008 parliamentary elections, the coalition "For a European Serbia" (DS, G17+, and other smaller parties) formed a postelection partnership with the coalition gathered around former Milošević's Socialist Party. Their rule effectively ended following Tomislav Nikolić's victory in the second round of the presidential elections in May 2012, which led to the formation of a new parliamentary majority. In analyzing the foreign policy priorities from 2008 to 2012, Igor Novaković identified various goals under the so-called doctrine of four pillars of foreign policy, noting the absence of a clearly defined hierarchy among these sometimes-conflicting objectives (Novaković 2013). While destigmatization was not explicitly stated as a separate goal, it is evident that many specific priorities during this period indirectly served the broader purpose of removing stigma.

The first major goal contributing to destigmatization was EU membership. Prime Minister Mirko Cvetković's 2008 mandate address echoed Koštunica's speech from the previous year but placed greater emphasis on accelerating Serbia's EU accession, with the preservation of Kosovo's status as a secondary focus. Importantly, Cvetković justified EU membership not merely as a

matter of national interest but also as a mean to “become a full member of the European family of nations from which [Serbia] had long been excluded due to unfortunate historical circumstances” (Cvetković 2008). By directly addressing Serbia’s exclusion and negative historical legacy, Cvetković emphasized EU integration as a pathway to formal reintegration into the audience of normals. His 2011 address during the government reconstruction maintained similar topics (Cvetković 2011). Also, the first national security strategy of the Republic of Serbia from 2009 explicitly stated that “democratic processes and the European foreign policy orientation of the Republic of Serbia strengthen its international position,” while Serbia’s involvement in NATO’s Partnership for Peace program was described as “confirming commitment” to regional and global peace (NSRS 2009). Thus, Serbia’s strategic goals—EU accession and participation in Partnership for Peace—were directly linked to enhancing its international reputation and position.

The second key goal in the function of stigma management during this period was the diversification of strategic partnerships worldwide. In a 2009, President Tadić elaborated the “doctrine of four pillars of foreign policy.” This doctrine expanded on the earlier concept of prioritizing relations with Brussels, Washington, and Moscow, outlined initially by Drašković (2004, 319), by adding Beijing as the fourth pillar (RTS 2009a). Foreign Minister Jeremić reaffirmed this doctrine in his three addresses before the parliamentary foreign policy committee (Novaković 2013, 33–35). He also advocated for stronger ties with the NAM, drawing criticism from some within his own party (RTS 2011). Both Jeremić and Tadić repeatedly underscored the importance of active bilateral and multilateral engagement, particularly through establishing strategic partnerships with a diverse array of countries (Đukanović and Živojinović 2011). While much of this activity focused on countering Kosovo’s recognition and entry into international organizations, it also served the broader purpose of improving Serbia’s international image. Interviews with key actors from this period confirm that the “four pillars” strategy and Serbia’s active diplomatic engagement were, in part, aimed at achieving destigmatization (Interviews 3, 4, 5). Based on the above, it is evident that destigmatization remained a critical foreign policy goal during this period, returning to the top of Serbia’s priorities. One prominent actor from this period noted in an interview that destigmatization was viewed as “the essence of foreign policy action” even though it was not explicitly articulated as such in major speeches (Interview 5).

A significant stage in stigma management during this time was cooperation with the ICTY. Although similar justifications were used as in previous periods, the moral argument became less prominent due to acquittals

for crimes against Serbs, which President Tadić openly criticized (RTS 2009b). A notable shift in operationalizing this goal was the diversification of partnerships beyond the West, with Russia emerging as a key partner in the mid-2000s and China taking a central role starting in 2009. The signing of a strategic partnership with China in 2009 marked a significant step, demonstrating Serbia's strong ties with rising global powers in the East. Nevertheless, EU membership remained an essential component of Serbia's stigma-management strategy, as it represented reintegration into the regional "audience of normals." One of the most significant signaling acts occurred in 2009, when Serbia unilaterally began implementing the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), even though the EU had blocked its implementation on their end. This unprecedented move, which carried potential economic risks for Serbia due to its unilateral nature, demonstrated Serbia's unwavering commitment to EU membership and its European identity, even at the cost of short-term sacrifices, which is an act that conventional IR theories might dismiss as irrational.

In addition to European integration, ICTY cooperation, and active bilateral and multilateral engagement, relations with Croatia and BiH emerged as particularly significant stages for stigma management in this period. Their importance grew as Serbia advanced on its EU integration path. President Tadić's statement that the Western Balkans should become "an area of reconciliation and eternal peace which wants to become integrated into the EU" underscores the perceived connection between regional reconciliation and Serbia's broader international image. This strategic approach, aimed at removing remaining elements of stigma, was emphasized by two decision-makers from this period during interviews (Interview 4 and 5).

#### *Nikolić as President, Dačić as Prime Minister: May/July 2012–May 2014*

One of the pivotal moments for destigmatization as a foreign policy goal, as well as for Serbia's overall foreign policy orientation, occurred in 2012 when the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), led by former Serbian Radical Party members, and the SPS formerly led by Milošević, made a coalition government. Considering that many leaders of both parties held important functions during the 1990s, this initially raised skepticism in the foreign public about their priorities. However, it quickly became evident that the new administration would adhere to foreign policy continuity, particularly in maintaining Serbia's orientation toward the EU, rather than initiating a shift. This approach extended to destigmatization as a goal.

At the outset of his 2012 policy address, Prime Minister Ivica Dačić described the preceding decade as a "historical crisis for the Serbian people"

underscoring the need to overcome inherited problems, including Serbia's "unenviable foreign policy position in the modern world" (Dačić 2012). Dačić's pragmatic approach emphasized compromise in resolving the Kosovo issue and advancing EU membership. He characterized the path to the EU as a pursuit of "overall civilizational progress for our country," thereby framing membership as confirmation of Serbia's place within the audience of normals in a regional and international context (Dačić 2012). His second policy speech, delivered during the government's reconstruction in August 2013, reinforced this connection more explicitly. He proclaimed: "Finally, in addition to the date, we received something else—we were recognized as reliable partners. We had allies and we earned respect for sincerity, effort, and finally—for results" (Dačić 2013). This statement highlighted the importance of obtaining a date for EU accession negotiations as recognition of Serbia as a reliable and normal member of the international society. He further emphasized that, prior to the formation of his cabinet, Serbia had "not a single ally in the West." Dačić reiterated that Serbia had endured a "historical crisis in which our national and state interests were called into question, faced with the dissolution of our former common state, wars, the violent secession of part of our territory, the double standards of the international community, economic impoverishment, and the loss of any perspective" (Dačić 2013). From this speech, it is evident that Dačić's foreign policy orientation aimed to annul the consequences of this crisis, demonstrating a clear focus on destigmatization.

The diversification of foreign policy partnerships which had been a key foreign policy goal linked to destigmatization in the previous period also continued during this phase. Tomislav Nikolić, as the first president of independent and sovereign Serbia, delivered a formal and elaborate inauguration speech outlining his priorities. On this occasion, Nikolić emphasized building global friendships, stating that "Serbia has no right to have enemies" (B92 2012). Although not explicitly stated, this radical stance on avoiding hostile relations clearly reflects the legacy of the 1990s, when Serbia had very few allies and faced isolation. Nikolić, who had held a prominent position in the government during the late 1990s, underscored the continuation of Serbia's European path while prioritizing cooperation with both the West and the East. This strategy of diversifying partnerships followed the orientation of his predecessor, Boris Tadić.<sup>12</sup>

12 It is notable that, unlike in previous phases, there was no longer any explicit link between cooperation with the ICTY and destigmatization. This omission was logical, as cooperation with the ICTY had effectively concluded under the preceding government.

The perception of relations with Croatia and BiH as significant stages in stigma management was reflected in speeches by key foreign policy actors. Prime Minister Ivica Dačić publicly emphasized that strengthening Serbia's image and interests necessitated Serbia's role as a "promoter of regional cooperation," with particular emphasis on fostering close ties with Croatia and BiH (RTS 2013). However, it was evident that these relations were secondary to Serbia's policy on the Kosovo issue, which became the primary arena for compromise and stigma management after 2012. The most significant compromise in this regard was the signing of the First Agreement on the Principles of Normalization in April 2013 (commonly known as the Brussels Agreement). Through this agreement, Serbia committed to integrating its municipal, interior, and judicial systems in northern Kosovo (where it had maintained practical control) into a unified institutional framework under Pristina's governance. In return, the agreement promised the establishment of the Community/Association of Serb-Majority Municipalities, a commitment that remains unfulfilled even a decade later.

*Vučić as Prime Minister, Nikolić as President: May 2014–May 2017*

The period from 2014 marked the beginning of the political dominance of the SNS. However, some form of power sharing persisted among key political actors. Until the 2016 elections, the opposition DS controlled the provincial government in Vojvodina, as well as several municipal councils across Serbia. Additionally, until 2017 Tomislav Nikolić served as president of Serbia, often adopting a different approach to several issues compared to Aleksandar Vučić, then prime minister and leader of the SNS. This situation continued until Vučić's election as president in the spring of 2017.

During this period, the term "stigma" was explicitly introduced into the public discourse by political decision-makers. President Nikolić was the first to use it, accusing Croatia of attempting to stigmatize Serbia through charges and verdicts against individuals like Dragan Vasiljković (RTV 2016). Later, in reflecting on the 2015 events surrounding the proposed UNSC resolution on Srebrenica put forward by the UK and vetoed by Russia, Vučić described this as an attempt to place a stigma on Serbian people (Al Jazeera Balkans 2019). These examples illustrate that the perception of stigma remained significant, while Serbian policies continued to serve stigma-management purposes.

Further destigmatization was highlighted in key speeches as one of Serbia's foreign policy goals, although the same speeches emphasized achievements in reducing stigma during the preceding period. This suggests that the perceived level of stigma began to decline. In his inaugural address

as prime minister in 2014, Vučić identified “the restoration of international trust in Serbia and the regaining of its credibility” as one of the “five victories of the previous cabinet.” He directly linked Serbia’s restored international reputation to its fulfillment of commitments, particularly regarding the Kosovo issue and the signing of the Brussels Agreement, a key Western demand (Vučić 2014). In Vučić’s second address as prime minister in 2016, following the formation of a new government, the entire first chapter was titled “Proud and Confident Before the World.” This underscored a foreign policy positioning goal aimed at alleviating lingering stigma-related shame or pressure while restoring pride and confidence to Serbia (Vučić 2016). Within this section, Vučić emphasized EU membership as a strategic orientation, not only for pragmatic and economic benefits but also for identity and status validation on the global stage. He declared: “Membership in the European Union as one of the strategic orientations of the government speaks to our desire to see Serbia in the club of democratic and most developed countries of the world” (Vučić 2016).

The perceived importance of relations with Croatia and BiH as stages for Serbia’s stigma management fluctuated during this period. The significance of good relations with Croatia, often portrayed in earlier years as a showcase of Serbia’s “good-neighborly policy,” was significantly reduced, although not completely absent. It remained only partially relevant, considering that Croatia had direct influence on Serbian EU path as the member of the Union since 2013. Conversely, then-Prime Minister Vučić further underscored the importance of relations with Bosniaks and Muslims, stating in 2015 that “relations with Muslims and Bosniaks are of the greatest importance” for Serbia (Al Jazeera Balkans 2015). This statement highlighted the renewed relevance of this stage in Serbian stigma-management efforts.

Still, the relevance of this stage was lower in this period than the relevance of Kosovo policy stage, where Serbia again made substantial concessions with additional normalization agreements. Another more important stage was the EU accession process in which Serbia made progress in opening new chapters. Finally, Serbia performed actively on various domestic stages—from fiscal reform to the protection of LGBT+ rights through enabling and normalizing pride parades and appointment of the first declared LGBT+ minister Ana Brnabić. Another very important foreign stage in this period were close bilateral relations with Germany. Berlin was willing to send several positive messages regarding Serbia in this “honeymoon” period of bilateral relations between the two states, while Serbia completely followed and publicly defended German stances on many important issues—from the migrant crisis to the financial crisis (Interview

8). The migrant crisis was of particular importance for the government of Vučić, who used opportunities to manage its image very intensively during the crisis (Krstić 2022, 167).

*Vučić as President, Brnabić as Prime Minister: May 2017–December 2020*

The final period of this analysis began with Aleksandar Vučić's election as president in 2017 and extended until late 2020. Ana Brnabić became prime minister of Serbia and remained head of the government until 2024. However, it was evident that Vučić would continue to make key foreign policy decisions, despite foreign policy not being the official domain of the president under the normative framework. This phase marked continuity with the previous one, but certain important modifications emerged, particularly regarding the perception of stigma and the prioritization of destigmatization as a foreign policy goal.

The persistence of stigma as a factor influencing decision-makers is confirmed by its continued explicit acknowledgment. In 2019, President Vučić mentioned stigma on two notable occasions. At the start of the year, he thanked Russia for "saving Serbia from the stigma of genocide" (Al Jazeera Balkans 2019). Later that summer, he referenced the satisfaction among Serbian citizens following the summons of Ramush Haradinaj to the special court for KLA crimes, stating, "our people have borne the stigma of being the sole culprits for everything that happened in the former Yugoslavia" (RTS 2019). These instances clearly demonstrate the direct recognition of stigma during this phase.

Elements related to stigma were also present in Prime Minister-designate Ana Brnabić's 2017 policy address, titled "Connecting Serbia with Europe and the World" (Brnabić 2017, 24–28). The emphasis on Serbia's continued EU path was justified not only in terms of pragmatic interests, but also as a morally correct choice that signaled Serbia's belonging to the audience of normals and exemplary nations. Brnabić stated, "The European Union was created as a peace project, and today it represents a model of democracy and proof that a brighter future is possible for all nations striving to improve the lives of their citizens and foster good neighborliness. Serbia has been and remains part of the European family of nations, whose foundation is common values and civilizational achievements" (24). However, as seen in the previous period, the tendency to highlight achievements in this regard persisted, reflecting a perception among leaders that stigma had significantly decreased, though not entirely disappeared. During his grand inauguration in June 2017, Vučić outlined a series of priorities across various policy areas. His speech featured explicit elements of destigmatization, predominantly

focused on progress and achievements. Vučić emphasized a break from “mythomania” as a sign of Serbia’s progress:

We have acknowledged that we are not a chosen people, that we are neither the greatest nor the smartest, that we do not live under some heavenly mandate but here, in our Serbia, and that our lives here will be what we make of them, through our own work. We stopped waiting and started seeking. We stopped making excuses and started taking responsibility. We stopped hiding and began facing every challenge. We stopped looking for scapegoats and excuses and started finding faults within ourselves. We stopped hoping that someone would give us something and started believing that we can create. We stopped believing in death and war and started believing in life and hard work. (Vučić 2017)

This set of messages reflected Vučić’s view of Serbia’s transformation under his government. He presented a vision of Serbia moving away from behaviors rooted in shame or stigma—such as scapegoating, hiding, and making excuses—toward characteristics of a confident and “normal” state, including self-reflection, courage, and confidence. Vučić further emphasized Serbia’s readiness for compromise and its commitment to building relations with neighboring countries:

We have had enough funerals in the Balkans; it is time for new beginnings. I will preserve Serbia’s integrity but will always accept dialogue with Kosovo Albanians because this protects our Serbs and maintains peace. It is better for me to feel humiliated at times, but it is far more important that Serbia does not suffer humiliation and that people in our country have peace and tranquility. We have given enough to death; it is time to give life to life. We have all but destroyed everything together in the Western Balkans, and now it is time to build. We have all been victims of our own fears; now it is time to be heroes of the future in which we believe. (Vučić 2017)

The willingness to personally “feel humiliated” to prevent Serbia from experiencing humiliation and to preserve peace illustrates Vučić’s readiness to compromise on contentious issues to overcome the problematic past. This narrative combines compromise with confidence and strength, characteristic of Vučić’s approach. On one hand, it conveys that stigma has been partly overcome and that Serbia is now proud, strong, and confident—essentially normal. On the other hand, it acknowledges the

remaining negative legacies while affirming a commitment to addressing them. This phase maintained a consistent recognition of Serbia's negative past and the need for its complete destigmatization. Interviews with foreign policy advisors from this period confirmed that while destigmatization remained a goal it held less importance compared to previous phases (Interview 9 and 11).

In November 2020, Ana Brnabić's policy program acknowledged that certain elements of stigma (mostly negative labels and stereotypes) persisted and needed to be addressed, referring to Serbia's "often negative image in the world" (Brnabić 2020). The designated tools for this task included technological development and public diplomacy through initiatives such as "creative embassies" as part of the "Serbia Creates" campaign. This approach marked the increasing significance of public diplomacy as a stage for stigma management. She also stressed that Serbia should avoid "any isolation" and make connections with as many actors as possible (16–17). This "fear of being left out" is another proof that consequences of stigma continued to influence Serbia's policy (Krstić 2022, 172).

Conversely, the importance of relations with Croatia and BiH for stigma management declined during this period. This represented a notable shift from the previous phase, as these relations were rarely mentioned in political discourse regarding Serbia's international image. However, the importance of relations with Zagreb declined completely, while the importance of relations with Sarajevo did not completely vanish because many international actors still monitored Serbia's policy towards BiH. The primary focus remained on dialogue with Pristina, while relations with Germany were gradually overshadowed by growing proximity to the US during the Trump administration. This shift culminated in the Belgrade–Pristina agreement, signed in Trump's cabinet in September 2020 (CDDRI 2020). Simultaneously, growing ties with global powers, particularly Russia and China, became significant for stigma management.

In terms of regional relations, the focus was switched on the growing quality of relations with North Macedonia and Albania (with which increase started already from 2015), as well as Montenegro, until 2019 (Interview 9). The most important form of multilateral cooperation was the Open Balkan initiative, initiated from Belgrade, with an aim to integrate North Macedonia, Albania, and Serbia into the common market. This form of economic regional integration, followed by the substantial increase in the political relations between Tirana, Skopje, and Belgrade, became the most important "south" pillar of Serbian regional policy, which was under the spotlight of the West, especially the US (Interview 11). On the other hand,

the most important “north” pillar were cordial relations with Hungary, which were qualified by both sides as “the best in history.”

Domestically, internal economic development (as well as the presentation of this development at World Expo exhibitions or through the Serbia Creates platform) was a vital stage for stigma management, alongside advancements in LGBT+ rights. This progress was most visibly demonstrated through the appointment of Ana Brnabić, Serbia’s first openly lesbian prime minister, in 2017. The promotion of economic development would remain the landmark of Serbian stigma-management efforts even after 2020, with the special emphasis on the organization of the coming specialized Expo 2027, presented by Serbian politicians as a chance to show the best Serbian face to the world. However, this is not in the scope of the research of this book but should be analyzed in further studies.

### Relative Success of Destigmatization

The destigmatization dilemma model is focused on the perceptions of decision-makers. In that sense, the actual frequency of labels and stereotypes, as well as the intensity of separation, status loss, and discrimination measures are of less importance. However, considering that decision-makers do not operate in a vacuum, it is analytically illustrative to briefly present the relative weight of stigma during the first two decades of the twenty-first century.

The harshest elements of Serbian stigma faded after the first couple of years. The change of regime led to the instant retrieving of membership status in many international organizations—most importantly the UN and OSCE (Krstić 2020). Further domestic reforms, coupled with progress in other stages (from relations with former adversaries, over handling of open issues such as South Serbia, Kosovo, and Montenegro, to cooperation with the ICTY) contributed to the removal of the remaining sanctions, beginning with those on arms trade installed by the UN. Visits of numerous important statesmen also signaled that Belgrade was no longer isolated (Krstić 2022, 166). Restoration of the economic relations which the SFRY had with the most important global actors was finalized with the reaccession of Serbia to the American Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) in 2005 (Vujačić 2021). Accession of Serbia to the Council of Europe in 2003 and to the Partnership for Peace in 2006 further signaled that it was recognized as a normal, democratic European country.

However, the process was not linear. After a period of relative decrease of stigma, new direct stigma imposition to Serbia occurred in 2008. In February,

Serbia was punished through the decision by many states to recognize the unilateral declaration of independence of Kosovo in 2008, referring to the events from the 1990s and Serbian negative labels concerning the Kosovo crisis 1998–1999 as a legitimacy basis for this action. This measure parallelly introduced the new sanctioning measure towards Serbia, signaled that Serbian sovereignty was not recognized in all parts of its territory, and reinforcing negative labels from the 1990s, those derived from the Kosovo crisis. As a result, this represented a particularly negative event for Serbia's stigma-management efforts.

Since 2008 until the mid-2010s, further progress in destigmatization was directly linked with progress in the EU accession process. Both the regional audience of normals and Western Balkan states viewed EU membership as the ultimate proof of "Europeanization," "de-Balkanization," and destigmatization of all states in this region (Krstić 2022). The main benchmarks signaling Serbia's progress in this process included the signing of the SAA in 2008 and its entry into force in 2013, the formal granting of the candidate country status in 2012, the opening of membership negotiations in 2014, and the closing of the first chapters in 2016. This progress was most directly linked with Serbia's stigma-management measures conducted in relations with Zagreb and Sarajevo, but also with its stance on Kosovo and progress in dialogue with Pristina, cooperation with the ICTY until 2011, and management of the migrant crisis after 2015.

Still, from the late 2000s and early 2010s, with the growing multipolarity of the world and consequential diversification of the global audience of normals, Serbia aimed to present its close relations with the leading global actors as one additional proof of its recognition, reputation, and destigmatization. The four-pillared foreign policy, focused on parallel close relations with the EU, Russia, China, and the US, was followed with the revival of cooperation with the NAM and the more intensive engagement of Serbia in international organizations. The best indicators that Serbian engagement was widely recognized in the context that was broader from the political West were election of its candidate for the president of the UNGA in 2013 and election of Serbia for the chairmanship of the OSCE in 2015.

Near the end of the 2010s, due to the general sclerosis in the EU enlargement (the last accession was of Croatia in 2013)—which was fostered by financial crisis, Brexit, enlargement fatigue in public opinion, decay of democracy in certain member-states, etc.—destigmatization became less connected with EU-ization (Krstić 2022, 173–177). Still, even in this period, despite the setbacks in Serbia's rule of law and quality of democracy, as well as in the foreign policy alignment with the EU (Nedeljković and Krstić

2018), some important benchmarks for destigmatization were achieved. These included the formal reduction of the air-security zone between the KFOR and Serbian army in 2015, Western media labeling that “Serbs are now good guys” during the migrant crisis 2015/2016, Serbia’s candidate for UN secretary general finishing second in the preliminary voting in 2016, and Belgrade receiving official support by the West in the “custom wars” with Zagreb in 2015 and with Pristina in 2018–2020. Additionally, many foreign leaders visited and praised Belgrade between 2016 and 2020 (Krstić 2022, 170–171). In parallel, as previously demonstrated, Serbian decision-makers reduced the focus on stigma, claiming instead that the reputation of Serbia had been revived (Dnevnik 2017) and that “Serbia is now respected in the world” (FoNet 2019).

However, despite an important decrease in stigma sharpness, the negative burden of the past remained visible twenty years after the change of regime. The lack of progress in EU integrations indicated that there was still a limit in Serbian desires to become part of the most exclusive club on the continent. Separation of Serbia through certain monitoring missions of international organizations (e.g., the OSCE Missions) still operates, while Serbia has not managed to get the full recognition of the desired public through integration into the EU, simultaneously remaining outside of the WTO (Krstić 2022, 171–172). Certain broader forums, such as the European Parliament or the UNGA, keep labels connected with human rights violations or war crimes from the 1990s at least partially active. Moreover, the transition is still not finished in some important aspects (Jović 2022). Finally, despite relative fading, stereotypes about Serbia and Serbs are still present in the social discourse in the West.

Besides that, some stigma-imposition measures were reattempted during this period. One of the most direct examples of a stigma imposition attempt was Serbia’s inclusion on the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) blacklist as a country with inadequate regulations on money laundering and terrorism financing (Krstić 2022, 171). Examples of more diffuse stigmatization were more frequent. The most important examples were labeling of Serbia for shortcomings in human rights and democracy by international NGOs (INGOs). The most important example is classification of Serbia as a country with a “hybrid-regime” or as a “partially free” country by Freedom House from the late 2010s, followed by negative reports about the freedom of speech from Reporters Without Borders (Krstić 2022, 168). Additionally, assembly bodies of many regional international organizations—most importantly the European Parliament and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe—negatively labeled Serbia in their resolutions.

Actors involved in the process have differing assessments regarding the reasons for the partial and incomplete destigmatization. Some claim that the lack of substantial, fast, and fundamental policy changes on topic-related stages—including transitional justice—could not be compensated with diplomatic efforts on actor-related stages (Interview 10). Others believe that the missed opportunity for faster EU integration in the 2000s and early 2010s is most responsible for the partial outcome (Interview 11). Also, the unresolved issue of Kosovo is considered as the biggest problem for complete destigmatization by certain actors (Interview 8). Finally, the lack of strategic public diplomacy is also addressed as one of the contributing factors (Interview 9).

While many criticize the "audience of normals" for failing to provide Serbia the opportunity for faster destigmatization (Interview 4, 5, 7), some say that the internal disputes in Serbia/the FRY are to blame for the missed opportunity of faster destigmatization, which was possible only in the early stages of Serbian stigma management (Interview 2, 6, 10). While all those interviewed acknowledge the importance of relations with Zagreb and Sarajevo as a relevant stage—none identify it as a stage where Serbia could have achieved substantially more without parallel progress at other outlined stages.

## Summary

Destigmatization became an important goal for all post-Milošević governments, particularly following defeats of Milošević's policies in the 1990s. At that time, all structural factors (national habitus, self-imagination, actor capabilities, and international normative context) converged to position destigmatization as one of Serbia's primary policy objectives. Stigma management remained a significant aspect of Serbian foreign policy throughout the first two decades of the twenty-first century. Even in 2020, Serbian decision-makers continued to address Serbia's "negative image in the world" as a challenge, indicating that certain elements of stigma were still perceived as drivers of Serbian foreign policy.

Actions undertaken during this period confirm that this perception translated into practical political initiatives. Numerous gestures aimed to appeal to the international audience of normals and persuade them to destigmatize Serbia. However, these actions often deviated from the conventional statist, sovereigntist, and material/military, security-focused logic of international relations. Examples include the acceptance of the transformation of the

joint state from a federation to a confederation (state union) in 2002, the public declaration in 2007 that Serbia would refrain from the use of force in the event of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, and the effective removal of its judiciary, interior, and municipal administration from North Kosovo between 2013 and 2016. Gestures lacking an immediate economic cost-benefit rationale, such as Serbia's unilateral implementation of the SAA in 2009, were similarly motivated.

However, the relative influence of destigmatization as a policy goal fluctuated over time. First, during the period leading up to and immediately following Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, destigmatization became secondary to the protection of territorial integrity. Serbia's nonviolent response to Kosovo's independence declaration reflected a desire to avoid further stigmatization and potential military conflict in which NATO would use force against Serbia once again. Nevertheless, subsequent actions, such as the temporary withdrawal of ambassadors from countries that recognized Kosovo show that stigma management briefly took a backseat to more sovereigntist interests.

Second, from the mid-2010s onward, a gradual reduction in the perception of stigma among Serbian decision-makers became evident, particularly after 2017. This corresponded with changes in structural factors. The international normative order became more heterogeneous in the 2010s, fracturing the previously unified audience of normals that characterized the unipolar moment of the 1990s/2000s. At the same time, Serbia acquired greater material and political resources, reducing the pressure of residual stigma and diminishing the perception of defeat from 1999–2000. Political actors also began to emphasize an alternative self-perception, presenting Serbia as less problematic during the 1990s that it had previously been portrayed.

Serbia's success in addressing certain aspects of stigma further empowered this alternative self-image. By removing all sanctions, regaining status in nearly all major international organizations (except for the WTO and the EU accession process), and eliminating most separation measures (aside from certain monitoring mechanisms, such as the OSCE Mission in Serbia), Serbia bolstered its international standing. Nevertheless, full destigmatization was not achieved. Negative labels and stereotypes persisted, while the ongoing dialogue with Pristina remained the most substantial unresolved consequence of stigma. Thus, while stigma management continued to be important, its prominence diminished compared to earlier phases.

Regarding the relative importance of specific stages, Serbia's relations with Croatia fluctuated over the course of this analysis. Initially, relations with Zagreb were not perceived as a critical stage for stigma management.

However, their importance grew during the early years of the twenty-first century and peaked in the mid-2000s. After Croatia's recognition of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence, the perceived importance of this stage declined, only to rise again in the early 2010s. Since the mid-2010s, the importance of these relations was gradually reduced, while near the end of the decade relations with Croatia ceased to be viewed as particularly significant for Serbia's stigma-management efforts.

By comparison, relations with BiH were considered more important for a longer period. However, this perception also fluctuated. Although these relations were somewhat sidelined in 2007–2008, they remained relatively significant for stigma management until the late 2010s, regardless of changes in the government. Since 2017, however, their perceived importance has gradually diminished. This shift corresponds with the broader perception that Serbian stigma was easing and that destigmatization efforts were yielding results. Findings of this analysis will be used in the next chapter to illustrate the destigmatization dilemma model.

**Table 7 Relative significance of relations with Croatia and BiH as the stages of stigma management**

Year Stage	2001– 2003	2003– 2004	2004– 2007	2007– 2008	2008– 2012	2012– 2014	2014– 2017	2017– 2020
<b>Relations with Croatia</b>	Low to Moderate	Moderate to High	High	High to Moderate	Moderate to High	High to Moderate	Moderate to Low	Low
<b>Relations with BiH</b>	Low to Moderate	Moderate to High	High	High to Moderate	High	High	High to Moderate	Moderate to Low

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## 6. “You Labeled Me, I’ll Label You”

### Serbian Stigma Management in Foreign Policy towards Croatia (2001–2020)

**Abstract:** This chapter examines how Serbian officials perceived relations with Croatia and how they assessed the level of threat coming from Zagreb. It also classifies different stigma-management actions pursued by Serbia towards Croatia between 2001 and 2020 and analyzes the most important results of their application and the impact they had on the desired destigmatization of Serbia. Combining the findings of the analysis of the relative importance of this stage with the analysis conducted of the perception of threat coming in relations with Croatia, this chapter tests whether the pursued strategies align with the destigmatization dilemma model. The chapter seeks to understand why Serbia’s response in some cases was compromising or apologetic, while in others it was negational and accusing.

**Keywords:** strategy, compromise, negation, threat perception, war crimes, refugees

At the 2007 Montreal Masters tournament, the official speaker mistakenly announced the winner, Novak Đoković, as a Croatian player. Đoković corrected the error, stating that he was from Serbia, but added that there was no significant difference between the two nations. His response was well-received in both countries. However, when Serbia’s greatest athlete and most successful tennis player publicly cheered for the Croatian national football team during the 2018 World Cup, his gesture was met with insults from a member of parliament from the ruling SNS, who stated that only a “psychopath” could cheer for Croatia.

Novak Đoković, widely regarded as one of Serbia’s leading patriots, has consistently emphasized the closeness of the two nations. This perspective, rooted in their shared Slavic origin, linguistic similarities (up until the

early 1990s, the language in both republics was considered the same and called “Serbo-Croatian”), shared cultural space termed the “Yugo-Sphere” by Tim Judah (2009), and the legacy of living in the same state since 1918, resonates with many Serbs. On the other hand, a focus on differences (such as religion) and negative aspects of shared historical experiences (especially the suffering of Serbs in the so-called Independent State of Croatia during World War II) has fueled a counternarrative, particularly appealing to nationalists, which argues that Serbs should never support Croatia.

This anecdote highlights the variations in how Serbian identity is perceived in relation to Croatia. Similar examples exist in Croatia, ranging from President Zoran Milanović’s statement that “Croats and Serbs are the two most similar nations” to the same politician’s description of Serbia as “a handful of misery” in a taped conversation. Anthropologist Ivan Čolović (2018) has referred to such patterns of animosity between two highly similar nations as an example of the “narcissism of small differences” on a group level. The tragic events from 1991 to 1995 further entrenched the negative aspects of this perception on both sides, dominating public discourse immediately after the war. This forms a broader identity context within which Serbian and Croatian decision-makers operated in the immediate postwar period.

Practical aspects of Serbian-Croatian relations after the war were twofold. On one hand, the relationship presented an important stage for stigma management, as previously discussed, monitored by the audience of normals. On the other hand, these relations held intrinsic importance for Serbia due to other factors such as the status of the Serb minority—numbering near 580,000 people in Croatia before the war in 1991 (RZS 1991),<sup>1</sup> the return of Serb refugees, the potential for renewed cooperation between the two complementary economies, and more. These factors undoubtedly influenced Serbian policy toward Croatia after the war.

Although relations with Croatia achieved a degree of normalization following the establishment of diplomatic ties in 1996 and the signing and implementation of several significant technical agreements, the relationship by the late twentieth century was still far from normal. Croatia’s decision to allow NATO to use its airspace during the 1999 bombing of the FRY, as well as its genocide lawsuit against the FRY that same year, further deteriorated the perception of relations. Open issues (e.g., return of Serb refugees to Croatia, responsibility for war crimes on both sides, the issue of national minorities,

1 Additionally, more than one hundred thousand people in Croatia nationally decarded themselves as Yugoslavs (RZS 1991).

lawsuits before the ICJ, or border delineation on Prevlaka and the Danube) were considered critical and of great interest to Serbia, requiring stigma management to not fundamentally compromise them. It was under these circumstances that the Democratic Opposition of Serbia (DOS) coalition came to power and began implementing a new foreign policy approach toward Croatia.

This chapter examines how Serbian/Yugoslav officials perceived relations with Croatia and how they assessed the level of threat coming from Zagreb, in accordance with the outlined theoretical and methodological framework. The chapter is divided into seven subchapters, each presenting a period with a different dominant perception of threat and character of bilateral relations (*enemy/rival/partner/friend*). It also classifies different stigma-management actions pursued by Serbia towards Croatia during these seven periods and analyzes the most important results of their application and the impact they had on the desired destigmatization of Serbia. Combining the findings from the previous chapter (the relative importance of this stage) with the analysis conducted in this chapter (perception of threat), this chapter tests whether the pursued strategies align with the destigmatization dilemma model. In doing so, it seeks to explain why Serbia's response in some cases was directly apologetic, while in others it adhered to the logic of Metallica's lyrics: "You labeled me—I'll label you," conveying the message that past events remain "unforgiven."

### **From Rivalry to Rapprochement (2001–2003)**

The initial perception of officials in Belgrade in 2001 was that Croatia was no longer an enemy but a rival that could become a partner. The perception of threat for the interests of Serbia/the FRY coming from Croatia decreased from high to moderate. On the other hand, as demonstrated in the previous section, Belgrade officials perceived that the stage of relations with Croatia was of low importance for Serbian stigma management. However, its importance was constantly increasing during this period, reaching a moderate level in 2003.

Statements by Serbian/Yugoslav officials lacked any remarks labeling Croatia as an enemy. However, there were also no expressions of friendship. In 2001, it was still premature to perceive relations as partnership oriented, although there was a visible tendency in the discourse to achieve this goal. The notion of "normalization and good-neighborliness" as an objective became an integral part of officials' rhetoric. This objective was emphasized

in the speech by Foreign Minister Goran Svilanović (Svilanović 2001, 295) and echoed in statements by other officials. For instance, a joint statement by President Koštunica and President Mesić in June 2001 conveyed a desire for the normalization of relations (Helsinški odbor 2002). Other actors, such as Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Žarko Korać and Federal Foreign Minister Goran Svilanović, reiterated this desire (Beta 2001a, 2001b).

Initially, the perception of relations was characterized as rivalry. This is evidenced by the narrative of “Croatia hinders progress” present in the rhetoric of Serbian officials. For instance, Deputy Prime Minister Momčilo Perišić accused Croatian officials of “suffering from a syndrome of non-cooperation,” arguing that this stemmed from Croatia no longer being the “regional leader” as Serbia had emerged as a “regional champion in problem-solving” (Tanjug 2001b). This sentiment was supported from another deputy prime minister, Žarko Korać, one of the more conciliatory members of the Serbian government. He remarked that “it seems the hindrance to normalizing relations comes from the Croatian side,” contrasting this with Serbia’s compromising restraint to make the return of displaced Serbs to Croatia a prerequisite for discussions (Tanjug 2001a). This was a response to Croatian Foreign Minister Tonino Picula’s demand for Serbia to issue an apology for the 1990s as a condition for normalization. Additionally, Koštunica emphasized that the FRY had “unilaterally taken certain steps,” which were “not reciprocated by Croatia” (Tanjug 2002).

In these statements, Serbia’s perceived magnitude in relation to Croatia was often emphasized, whether through its reform successes and regional prominence (Perišić), its restraint in imposing conditions (Korać), or its initial conciliatory steps (Koštunica). This cautious and skeptical approach to Croatia was confirmed by interviewed officials from this period (Interviews 1, 2). The skepticism that Croatia might pose a threat to Serbia in certain areas was not limited to top officials but also extended to diplomacy and the security sector. One interviewee noted that efforts to make concessions to Croatia, such as revealing information about missing persons, were often obstructed by the “deep state” and belief that such unilateral gestures would be mistakes unless reciprocated by Croatia (Interview 1). This highlights the broader context of viewing Croatia as unreliable and insufficiently constructive.

Over time, signs of progress in the FRY/Serbian officials’ perception of relations with Croatia became evident. The “Croatia hinders progress” narrative gradually faded, while the discourse of “normalization and good-neighborliness” gained prominence. This shift marked a transition from viewing relations as competitive to framing them as cooperative. For instance,

satisfaction with progress was expressed during Goran Svilanović's visit to Zagreb in December 2001 (Beta 2001a, 2001c). Similarly, a joint statement by Koštunica and Mesić during a meeting in Brdo kod Kranja in mid-2002 highlighted satisfaction with the progress achieved (Beta 2002c). Koštunica noted that future disputes would be resolved through agreements and emphasized that "we shouldn't weigh who gains more," but that both sides should recognize that everyone benefits from cooperation (Beta 2002c). This signaled a shift from rivalry to partnership.

Notable progress was also reflected in statements made during Croatian Foreign Minister Tonino Picula's visit to Belgrade in spring 2002 by officials such as Goran Svilanović, Vojislav Koštunica, and Yugoslav Prime Minister Dragiša Pešić (Beta 2002d, 2002e, 2002f). Additionally, the agreements signed between the FRY and Croatia during this period explicitly stated cooperation as a priority. For example, the Agreement on Cooperation in the Field of Culture and Education, as well as other similar agreements signed in this period, marked a departure from earlier agreements signed between 1996 and 2001, which lacked such explicit terminology (MSP 2020, 1–3).

Despite these advances, it is important to note that the discourse of "normalization and good neighborliness" remained aspirational. Complete normalization was presented as an objective in the joint statement by Koštunica and Mesić (Beta 2002c). Svilanović and Picula praised establishment of only "foundations" on which good neighborly relations could be built (Beta 2002k). At no point did Serbian or Yugoslav decision-makers describe the state of relations with Croatia as having fully reached the level of good-neighborliness or partnership. While progress was evident, the relationship had not yet transitioned to a partnership phase by 2002 or the first half of 2003.

### *Stigma Management Strategies and Outcomes*

In accordance with the destigmatization dilemma model, the reliance on denying strategies would be expected due to the considerably higher level of threat and lower importance of this stage. The stigma-management strategies employed by official Belgrade during this period did include mostly denying strategies (rejection of stigma and a mild form of counter-stigmatization), followed with lighter forms of compromising strategies (compensation and camouflage). However, when the perception of a threat from Croatia began to decline and the perception of the importance of this stage began to incline in late 2001/early 2002, the change in the intensity of the use of strategies also occurred. Namely, the intensity of compromising strategies gradually increased, while the denying strategies were used less frequently.

These gradual changes clearly illustrate the correlation between the outlined factors and strategies pursued, as envisioned in the developed model.

*Camouflage and compensation* were primarily reflected in concessions that Serbia made to Croatia, which entailed material or political costs for Serbia but aimed to send a positive signal to both Croatia and international society. These efforts aimed to portray Serbia as a “good neighbor.” One such move was Serbia’s definite acceptance of the stance that the FRY was not the sole successor of the SFRY, which the Milošević regime resisted fully acknowledging during the 1990s. Consequently, Serbia also agreed to share the SFRY’s property abroad with other former Yugoslav republics—including diplomatic missions which had until then been used exclusively by the FRY since the dissolution of the SFRY. The conclusion of the succession agreement in the summer of 2001 marked the finalization of this process (Dimitrijević 2013, 27–28) with Serbia abandoning its control over material property to send a positive political message. Another similar act was the decision made at the end of 2001 to return cultural assets from the Vukovar area, which had been kept in a museum in Novi Sad since 1991, to Croatia (Tanjug 2001c). This restitution gesture of goodwill conveyed a positive message despite involving the transfer of valuable property that Serbia had no right to claim.

Serbia also agreed to establish frameworks, such as working groups, to address key bilateral issues, including the missing persons and border disputes. While Serbia preferred the status quo on the border issue, where the interim administrative boundary along the Danube had been established for practical reasons under the Erdut Agreement, it agreed to enter formal negotiations for a final resolution and to form the interstate commission on the Danube border in 2002 (Bickl 2023, 110). Regarding the issue of missing persons, Serbia made small initial steps by revealing the fate of some individuals. However, a key actor from this period mentioned in an interview that further progress was hindered by the security community, which perceived such unilateral concessions as risky and insisted on reciprocal data from Croatia (Interview 1). This reflects how the perception of threat influenced the choice of stigma-management strategies, as acknowledged in interviews (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5).

Another significant unilateral gesture was the suspension of visa requirements for Croatian citizens traveling to the FRY in 2002. Initially implemented unilaterally (with Croatia reciprocating slightly later), this decision was attributed to the independent initiatives of two key actors from that period. One actor stated that their primary motive was to facilitate the travel of Serbs from Croatia to the FRY (Interview 2), while the other explained that the goal was to send a positive message to Croatia and

the international audience, encouraging reciprocal actions (Interview 1). Undoubtedly, this act served a purpose in terms of stigma management.

The successful conclusion of border negotiations over the Prevlaka peninsula (south borderline between the FRY/Montenegro and Croatia) and the acceptance of a compromise on this issue also constituted an important element of the strategy. The FRY's willingness to compromise was significant from a destigmatization perspective given the public scrutiny of this issue, especially after the UNSC had previously labeled the FRY problematic in this area during the late 1990s. A high-ranking foreign policy actor from this period confirmed in an interview that this resolution was used to portray Serbia as cooperative and constructive in its relations with neighbors while safeguarding core interests (Interview 1). Yugoslav concessions on this issue helped Croatia fulfil its goal of ending the UN Mission of Observers in Prevlaka, one of the mechanisms of international oversight imposed on this demilitarized part of Croatian territory in 1996. The mission was terminated in late 2002 with the support of official Belgrade (UNMOP 2002).

Finally, Minister Goran Svilanović's expression of regret for "all war victims" on both sides during his visit to Croatia in late 2001, along with his acknowledgment of Vukovar as a symbol of Croatian suffering, can also be classified under this strategy (Beta 2001d). This gesture carried certain risks of being interpreted as an apology and admission of responsibility, which the FRY sought to avoid due to potential domestic political repercussions and concerns about exploitation by Croatia. This risk was underscored by the backlash against Svilanović's statement, which some interpreted as an apology, prompting him to issue a formal denial that his gesture had apologizing intentions (Tanjug 2001e). Nevertheless, this act of goodwill symbolically contributed to improving bilateral relations and Serbia's destigmatization. The denial that the statement constituted an apology or acknowledgment of responsibility is the reason why this action is not classified as a direct act of stigma acceptance.

*Stigma rejection* was evident primarily in the categorical refusal of the FRY to apologize for past events or to accept Croatian demands related to "coming to terms with the past." One of the most prominent demands was the removal of Momčilo Perišić due to his conviction in Croatia for alleged war crimes committed in Zadar in 1991. In 2001, Croatia conditioned further progress in cooperation and normalization on his removal from office, but Serbia rejected these demands.<sup>2</sup> In doing so, Serbia demonstrated unwillingness to

2 Momčilo Perišić was removed from his vice-presidential position in government in 2002. This resonated very well with the Croatian counterparts. However, the removal of Perišić from

make concessions that could be perceived as an admission of responsibility for the events of the 1990s. This stance was particularly significant given the “war criminal” label applied to certain individuals in the new government. The official position maintained that the wars were a matter of the past and a problem that the new democratic Serbia was leaving behind.

Apologies were equally rejected. Minister Svilanović stated that he would not visit Vukovar on the day commemorating Croatian suffering during the war, emphasizing that the question of “who should apologize to whom is complicated” adding that the past decade could not be viewed in isolation. He limited himself to the mentioned expression of “deep regret” for all victims of all nationalities (Tanjug 2001e). Similarly, in 2002 Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić explicitly refused to apologize, stressing that individuals responsible for war crimes against all, including Serbs, must be held responsible (Beta 2002b, 2002g). He emphasized that the government bore no responsibility for the actions of Milošević. This stance represented one of the most significant messages from Serbia during this period, as it sought to reject stigma without implicating the state itself, framing accountability strictly in individual terms.

While responsibility for war crimes was to be individualized, the label of the FRY as an “aggressor” was denied. Serbia consistently refused any interpretation that characterized the conflict in Croatia as anything other than internal, rejecting responsibility for any acts of aggression related to the conflict. Decision-makers confirmed in interviews that concern over potential misuse of conciliatory gestures by Croatia led to the avoidance of radical steps such as apologies—explicitly demanded by the Croatian side (Interviews 1, 2, 6). Instead, Serbia denied that any past deviations were attributable to the present-day state.

*Counter-stigmatization* was primarily employed against Croatia during the early part of this phase and was mainly expressed through references to Croatian crimes or other perceived deviations. These responses were often reactive to accusations from Zagreb. For example, when Žarko Korać responded to Croatian demands for Perišić’s removal by noting that Serbia could condition talks on progress in the return of Serbian refugees to Croatia, he implicitly highlighted Croatia’s shortcomings in fulfilling its obligations (Tanjug 2001b). Likewise, Svilanović rejected the possibility of an apology by asserting that addressing historical injustices would require looking further back than the last decade, implicitly referencing the genocide against Serbs

his office could not be qualified as a compromising stigma-management act, considering that he was dismissed after being caught in an illegal exchange of vital security information with a CIA agent in Belgrade in March 2002. Still, this outcome also had positive implication on relations with Zagreb.

in the Independent State of Croatia (NDH) during World War II. In doing so, he countered Croatia's framing of the FRY as solely responsible for crimes of the 1990s (Tanjug 2001e). Nevertheless, such labeling remained indirect.

Serbian officials also implicitly reminded international and domestic audiences of negative labels associated with Croatia, often to balance positive gestures. For example, when Svilanović expressed understanding of what Vukovar symbolized for Croats, he also emphasized that Jasenovac held a similar significance for Serbs. This juxtaposition alluded to mass crimes against Serbs in the NDH, effectively countering the symbolic weight of Vukovar in Croatian discourse (Beta 2001d). Balancing such gestures was logical, as expressions of regret for Vukovar victims represented the furthest steps Serbia had gone toward acknowledging at least some elements of stigma. This balancing act aimed to ensure that such gestures would not be misinterpreted as the FRY accepting exclusive responsibility.

As the perception of threat diminished, the use of such labeling strategies also decreased. Open issues, such as Serbian housing rights in Croatia, began to be discussed with a calmer tone, without explicit accusations or harsh rhetoric, reflecting a hope for practical resolutions to lingering disputes. The only exception was the radical labeling of Croatia with the call for further sanctioning of this state by Serbian Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić in January 2003. Đinđić stated that Croatia should pay "maybe even 150 billion euros" of reparations "for the expulsion of 200,000 Serbs" from Croatia (Tanjug 2003a). However, this was the single reaction to the previous claims that the FRY should pay reparations to Croatia made by Croatian President Mesić. This discourse was not further pursued, signaling that there was no serious long-term intent to demand reparations.

The results of Serbia's and the FRY's actions during this phase were limited but not irrelevant. After the initial compromise moves in 2001, relations that had been stagnant were unblocked. The Croatian leadership softened its position and abandoned its tendency to accuse the entire state of war crimes. Croatian President Stjepan Mesić led the way with the stance that individuals, not entire nations, were responsible for crimes and that accountability should be individualized. He also stated that no one should insist on an apology from anyone (Tanjug 2001d; Beta 2001e). Mesić articulated this position to encourage Serbia to accept cooperation with the ICTY. However, Serbia did not make significant efforts during this period to fulfill its obligations to the ICTY in its relations with Croatia, particularly regarding the handover of the "Vukovar Three." This lack of cooperation hindered even greater progress in relations, despite official Belgrade's expressed intention to cooperate with the ICTY.

Nonetheless, the outcomes of this period included numerous signed agreements. Among these were the establishment of a free trade regime between the two countries in 2002, the creation of institutional mechanisms for resolving open issues, agreements on the Prevlaka regime and succession, and the intensification of bilateral political visits. These achievements were of great importance for Serbia's destigmatization efforts, as they sent a significant message that Serbia was now a constructive and desirable partner to its neighbors and had changed in comparison to Milošević's era. This was especially stated by Croatian Foreign Minister Picula, who stated in 2002 that his visit to Belgrade was "a clear evidence of positive changes in FRY" (Beta 2002g), and openly supported "the entrance of FRY to European Integration," including the start of the EU accession and membership to the Council of Europe (Beta 2002h).

The importance of this message, conveyed through cooperation with Croatia to the international society, was acknowledged by interviewees from this period (Interview 1, 2, 6). They unequivocally stated that this was one of their primary motivations for such actions, alongside the benefits that good relations with Croatia brought to Serbia and its people. Open Croatian support was especially important for Serbia's entry to those organizations in which Croatia was already a member, such as the Council of Europe. Membership in such bodies was seen by Belgrade officials as an important sign of being (re)integrated to the audience of normals and thus crucial for the process of destigmatization.

The destigmatization results achieved by Serbia during this period were considerable since a significant degree of reintegration into the international society was accomplished. This reintegration was undoubtedly supported by progress in playing the role of a good neighbor in regional relations with Croatia. However, the fact that Serbia had not yet joined the Council of Europe or signed the Partnership for Peace with NATO in this period (both important goals in terms of integration to international organizations) indicates that changes at other stigma-management stages were of a vast importance for success in this context, and that improvements in relations with Croatia alone were insufficient.

### **Development of a Partnership (2003–2007)**

As previously elaborated, relations with Croatia were perceived by Serbian decision-makers during this period as a highly important stage for stigma management. At the same time, the perception of threat significantly

decreased, being assessed as moderate to low. As this subsection will present, officials from Serbia from mid-2003 began perceiving Croatia as much less threatening, characterizing the bilateral relations as predominantly partnership oriented.

The full affirmation of the "partnership and good-neighborliness" discourse (an enhanced version of "normalization and good-neighborliness") indicated that relations were viewed as substantially improved. At the start of 2003, Minister Svilanović still referred to "progress in normalization" (Beta 2003a). However, by mid-2003 key figures already described the relations as good and stable. President of the SCG Svetozar Marović used the term "upward trajectory" to describe relations in a joint statement with the president of Croatia and the chairman of the presidency of BiH (Beta 2003c). Serbia's minister of justice, Vladan Batić, generally somewhat skeptical about relations with Croatia, spoke optimistically about the goodwill to overcome problems and heralded better days in relations following his visit to Zagreb in June 2003 (Beta 2003d). Deputy Prime Minister Čedomir Jovanović characterized relations between Belgrade and Zagreb as good, adding that there were "no contentious issues, no unsolvable problems, no taboo topics" (Beta 2003e). Prime Minister Zoran Živković emphasized relation with Zagreb as future oriented, focused on common goals (Tanjug 2003b).

The acknowledgment of good relations between the SCG and Croatia became evident during Croatian President Stjepan Mesić's first official visit to Belgrade in September 2003. President Marović even described the atmosphere on the eve of Mesić's arrival as "friendly" (Beta 2003g), while Minister Svilanović highlighted that Mesić's visit was a "great pleasure" for Belgrade (Beta 2003h). While the term "friendly" marked a notable shift, it did not imply full-friendly relations typical of a security community with a complete absence of threat. Nevertheless, the public use of "friendly" to describe relations with Croatia for the first time indicated positive progress. Practical reflection of this more positive perception of relations was the decision by Belgrade to remove military personnel from the border between the two states, delegating border security to the police and signaling normalized relations (Hrvatska riječ 2003). Relations were now perceived as partnership oriented rather than rivalrous, while security threats coming from Zagreb were perceived as much lower than a couple of years ago.

Several factors contributed to this shift in perception in early 2003. Interviews with Serbian officials revealed that the EU–Western Balkans summit in Thessaloniki, where it was stated that the entire region would eventually join the EU, positively influenced the belief in a shared future.

This reduced perceptions of competition and threats in relations with neighbors, fostering the belief in a common European security community (Interview 1, 2). Croatia's positive approach, including its application for EU membership and conciliatory signals sent to Belgrade (suspending the visa regime and addressing issues of the Serbian community in Croatia) contributed to this shift. Additionally, the establishment of the SCG brought a change in key foreign policy officials at the state community level, with Montenegrin DPS official Svetozar Marović becoming president. His party had closer ties with Zagreb and viewed relations less as a threat compared to Montenegrin opposition politicians (mostly from the SNP) who had previously participated in the federal government of the FRY until February 2003.

The "partnership and good-neighborliness" discourse continued into 2004. The new foreign minister, Vuk Drašković, described relations between the two countries as "positive" and progressing (Tanjug 2004a). Defense Minister of the SCG Prvoslav Davinić noted an "extraordinarily good beginning for bilateral cooperation" with Croatia in defense and security (Beta 2004a). Such expressions of satisfaction in security cooperation—a domain traditionally marked by mutual suspicion—indicated a reduced perception of threat from Croatia. Especially positive tones about progress in cooperation came from newly elected Serbian Prime Minister Koštunica during his meeting with Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader in November 2004, marking the first visit of a Croatian prime minister to Belgrade after the war (Beta 2004c). Marović echoed this by emphasizing the same strategic orientation and shared future during talks with Sanader, further indicating that Croatia was perceived strategically and long-term as a partner and part of the same security community (Tanjug 2004b). He further emphasized that all issues between the two countries were being "resolved very correctly," underscoring a lack of perception that any serious problem could escalate and pose a threat to the SCG (Beta 2004d).

The fact that positive discourse on cooperation was not interrupted as significant, since the beginning of 2004 marked the first major challenge for Serbian-Croatian relations since 2001. First, the conservative Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ), founded by Franjo Tuđman, returned to power. The left-liberal coalition of former Prime Minister Ivica Račan was defeated in the elections. Subsequently, in Serbia a coalition led by conservative politician Vojislav Koštunica replaced Zoran Živković of the DS. Koštunica's minority government received support from the SPS, marking the return of Milošević's party's influence. In the spring of 2004, Vuk Drašković, perceived by many in Croatia as a "Chetnik" due to his positive stance on the role of the Yugoslav Army in the Fatherland during World War II, replaced left-liberal

Goran Svilanović as foreign minister. The endurance of positive discourse indicates that the perception of threat from Croatia was not solely linked to personal and ideological factors.

A similar intensity in the use of this good neighborliness and partnership discourse was maintained throughout 2005. A key confirmation of Serbian officials' positive perception came during Koštunica's visit to Zagreb in the fall of 2005. This was the first visit by a Serbian prime minister to Croatia since the dissolution of Yugoslavia. Koštunica assessed that there was "significant progress" in the relations between the two states and confirmed that relations had been continuously progressing, with minor fluctuations, since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1996 (Tanjug 2005a). He highlighted that the "well-begun cooperation" was becoming more concrete, and that all emerging problems would be resolved with his Croatian colleague Sanader "in the spirit of understanding that has marked all our previous discussions" (Tanjug 2005a). The fact that a conservative politician made such positive remarks, with an emphasis on trust in resolving problems within the "spirit of understanding," suggested a substantial reduction in the perception of threat coming from Croatia.

Important remarks about the additional reduction in tensions were expressed in the first half of 2006. First, the newly appointed SCG ambassador in Zagreb, Radivoj Cvetičanin, remarked that "Serbia is not a threat" to Croatia, emphasizing that the armies of the two states "cooperate very well" (Tanjug 2006). Emphasis on cooperation and the absence of threat was indicative of decreasing security dilemmas in the relations between the two states and confirmed that relations had shifted into a more cooperative partnership framework. Second, President Tadić expressed trust that "Mesić will defend the rights of Serbs in Croatia" just as he would defend the rights of Croats in Serbia (B92 2006a). This was a signal that a perception of threat coming from the government for Serbs in Croatia was also decreasing, considering the belief that the head of state would protect them when endangered.

Another major test was the dissolution of the state union with Montenegro in May/June 2006, considering that Podgorica was often considered a driving force in the process of rapprochement between the SCG and Croatia. However, officials of independent Serbia demonstrated a clear continuity in this regard. At the joint opening of a new border crossing on the corridor ten highway with Croatian Prime Minister Sanader, Koštunica emphasized that the two states were now "connected by faith that where disputes exist, patience and mutual trust must take precedence in resolving them," showing that he did not view unresolved issues with Croatia as a

threat (Vlada Srbije 2006a). Another government member with a strong national orientation, Velimir Ilić, also stated that there were “good relations” with Croatia (Vlada Srbije 2006b). Newly appointed Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Ivana Dulić-Marković noted “slight” progress even in an area traditionally considered critical—the status of the Serb minority in Croatia (Vlada Srbije 2006c). The positive perception was still active in early 2007, when Serbian ambassador Cvetičanin stated that “very dynamic” cooperation had “significantly improved” relations between Serbia and Croatia, adding that “cooperation is now inevitable” (Beta 2007f).

It is evident that the period from 2003 to early 2007 led to considerable progress in relations between the two states, significantly reducing Serbian officials’ perception of Croatia as a threat. Cooperation between Serbia and Croatia was firmly within the realm of partnership perception from the perspective of Serbian officials.<sup>3</sup> The key reason for this perception shift in Belgrade was the highly constructive behavior of Croatian statesmen during this period, especially Sanader, with whom it was possible to resolve many open issues, as certain decision-makers from this period pointed out in interviews (Interviews 3 and 7). Additionally, Mesić and Sanader emphasized their desire to advance relations with Serbia (and the SCG) within the context of the shared goal of EU membership. These factors encouraged both Croatia and Serbia to act constructively and neighborly and to view their relationship as a platform for demonstrating their normality within the international society. Through its relationship with Serbia, Croatia also sought to manage its own stigma from the 1990s (Krstić 2025).

However, there was also awareness that much work remained to transition from partnership to genuinely friendly relations and that there were some areas where full partnership had not yet taken root. Significant unresolved issues also persisted. The discourse of “Croatia hinders progress,” which implied actual accusation of Croatia intentionally obstructing improvement of relations, disappeared among officials from Belgrade. However, there was still open acknowledgment of existing problems and unresolved issues, as well as dissatisfaction with certain aspects of Croatia’s actions, such as the slower return of Serb refugees to Croatia or official Zagreb’s celebration of

3 The large number of agreements signed during this period, whose texts can be classified within the discourse of cooperation and good neighborliness, demonstrate continuity in progress relative to the 2001–2003 period. Between 2004 and 2006, five international bilateral agreements were adopted, and their titles contained highly positive terms, such as “mutual assistance” (in customs matters), “cooperation” (between Vojvodina and Istria), or mutual “protection of rights” of Serbian and Montenegrin national minorities in Croatia and Croatian minorities in the SCG (MSP 2020, 3).

Croatian Operation Storm from August 1995 during which more than two hundred thousand Serbs fled the Krajina region with hundreds of remaining being killed. This indicated that there was still much room for improvement and that sparks of distrust had not completely disappeared, even though they had significantly diminished.

### *Stigma Management Strategies and Outcomes*

During this period, Serbia predominantly relied on compromising strategies, including stigma acceptance and camouflage and compensation. The use of denying strategies was far less intense, focusing mainly on stigma rejection, which aligns with the general logic of the destigmatization dilemma model in the context of lower threat and higher importance of the stage. The intensity of strategy use showed fewer fluctuations with compromising strategies generally intensifying, while denying strategies became less frequent and were tied to short-lived oscillations in relations. However, a more forceful application of stigma rejection, which bordered counter-stigmatization, became evident later in this period, particularly in 2005–2006. This shift corresponded to gradual changes in the perception of Serbia's relations with Croatia, wherein certain Croatian actions, such as the mass celebration of the tenth anniversary of Operation Storm, were interpreted as provocations and threats to Serbs and Serbia (Interview 6). This dynamic change further aligns with the logic of the model, illustrating the correlation between these phenomena.

*Stigma acceptance* in foreign policy toward Croatia was first employed in 2003. During Croatian President Stjepan Mesić's visit to Belgrade, SCG President Marović and he exchanged mutual apologies.<sup>4</sup> "I wish to apologize for all the wrongs any citizen of Montenegro and Serbia has done, caused or committed against anyone in Croatia," Marović stated. He added that he apologized "because I do not think nations are guilty, nor should they apologize; rather, we should work together, as we are doing these days, to ensure that anyone guilty stands trial, and one of our greatest obligations in this regard is cooperation with The Hague." The president apologized, but limited an apology in a way that it was not given as an admission of responsibility by the state or nation. Mesić initially emphasized that he accepted the apology and then added that he also apologized to everyone to whom "Croatian citizens caused pain or harm, anytime and anywhere,"

4 For a detailed study of apologizing between Serbia and Croatia, including context and consequences, see my previous study (Krstić 2021). For the way it was balanced with accusations, refer to my latest paper (Krstić 2025).

reiterating that collectivities (states or nations) were not responsible, but rather individuals who must be held accountable (B92 2003).

From 2004 to 2006, the stigma acceptance strategy reappeared in indirect forms, such as through Foreign Minister Vuk Drašković. His stance on the need to distance oneself from Milošević's crimes became evident in his address, where he referred to the crime of "turning a blind eye" by not punishing criminals as a "sin against ourselves" (Beta 2006). Although these statements were not directly aimed at Croatia, they clearly referred to war crimes committed against Croats, such as the crime at Ovčara. Drašković demanded accountability while emphasizing that such acts were exceptions in the "glorious Serbian history." This approach acknowledged part of the "war criminal" label, but sought to individualize responsibility by attributing it to specific individuals and the then regime, framing it as an anomaly in Serbian history—one characterized by victimhood and righteousness, rather than perpetration. Another important act in this regard was the unequivocal condemnation by Serbian President Tadić, SCG Foreign Minister Drašković, and Ambassador to Croatia Simurdić of the establishment of the government and assembly of the RSK in exile in Belgrade (Tanjug 2005b). By condemning actions that revived past issues, such as the political status of Kninska Krajina, the SCG decisively distanced itself from any revisionist aspirations in this area. This strategy was a novelty compared to the previous phase and corresponded with the prevailing positive tone in bilateral relations, as well as the decline in perceived threats from Croatia.

The *camouflage and compensation* approach was used intensely during this period. One example was the initiative for a joint action with Croatia to improve the image of the entire region. Čedomir Jovanović spoke about the need for regional impression management toward the international society during a meeting with Račan in mid-2003. Marović and Tadić later emphasized the importance of this topic (Beta 2003f). In 2004, Vojislav Koštunica expanded these efforts by proposing to the new Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader a joint bid to host the 2010 basketball world championship, together with other countries in the region. He described the initiative as a "political victory for the entire region" which would send a message of peace, stability, and reconciliation (Tanjug 2004c). This initiative illustrated Belgrade's intention to achieve destigmatization through symbolic rapprochement with Croatia, using sports to promote cooperation.

Further institutionalization of cooperation during this period also conveyed significant messages to the international audience of normals. This included the establishment of the joint commission for economic cooperation and frequent high-level meetings which were strongly advocated

by Belgrade. These meetings symbolized Serbia's rapprochement with its former enemy, illustrating full normalization and exemplary relations at the highest level. Serbian politicians like Koštunica and Velimir Ilić emphasized the symbolic importance of joint projects with Croatia, such as the mentioned opening of the renewed Batrovci–Bajakovo border crossing and the railway bridge on the Danube (Vlada Srbije 2006a). These projects symbolized the overcoming of past conflicts and a shared focus on the future. The joint celebration of the 150th anniversary of Nikola Tesla's birth in 2006, attended by the presidents of Serbia and Croatia, also symbolically demonstrated a commitment to shared positive elements from the past. This celebration aimed to foster "new Teslas" and emphasized progress toward the future (B92 2006b).

This approach included making concessions to signal appropriate behavior to the international audience of normals. For instance, Serbia refrained from raising bilateral issues in the context of Croatia's accession to the EU and NATO, unequivocally supporting Croatia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations. Croatia was itself a partially stigmatized state, under scrutiny by the audience of normals, especially the EU and the US. Serbia could have highlighted the issues, such as the rights of Serbs in Croatia to external actors, but instead it chose to unequivocally support Croatia, emphasizing that all issues would be resolved directly through dialogue with Croatia. This conveyed a message of trust which was certainly beneficial to Zagreb and demonstrated Serbia's "maturity" and its ability to peacefully address disputes with former adversaries.<sup>5</sup> The decision to grant reciprocal rights to Croats in the SCG comparable to the rights guaranteed to Serbs in Croatia was another act in this regard. This move was noteworthy given the larger Serb population in Croatia (and their historically different status as a once-constitutive nation in Croatia) in comparison to a smaller minority of Croats in Serbia. Belgrade aimed to send a positive signal to the international society and erase the label of Serbia as a human rights violator. Serbia also sought to enhance the visibility of the Croatian minority in Vojvodina, particularly on the occasion of meetings with Croatian officials. The appointment of Ivana Dulić-Marković, a person of Croatian ethnicity, as deputy prime minister of Serbia in 2006 further reinforced this message, even if that was not its primary intention.

*Stigma rejection* was most directly applied in relation to the "aggressor" label, which Croatia used in its internal narrative to characterize Serbia about

5 Certain interviewees later viewed this decision even as a "missed opportunity" for Serbia (Interview 5).

the conflicts of the 1990s. Foreign Minister Vuk Drašković emphasized his view that the conflict in Croatia during the 1990s was a civil war. While this stance sparked controversy in Croatia early in his tenure, he maintained this position and reiterated it explicitly in an interview with the Croatian magazine *Globus* (Beta 2004b). Serbia refused to issue apologies that would imply aggression, particularly for war crimes attributed to the state rather than individuals. Prime Minister Koštunica rejected the need for apologies, deeming such gestures unnecessary (D.M.S. 2007).

Some of Serbia's actions during this period bordered on *counter-stigmatization*, though they did not fully meet the criteria for direct application. For example, in response to incidents such as attacks on Serbian students in Zagreb at the end of 2004, assaults on local Serbs in Zadar in 2005, or issues at certain sports events official Belgrade called for action from Croatia's authorities but refrained from lodging strong protests or accusing them directly. Serbian officials occasionally expressed dissatisfaction with specific issues, such as President Tadić publicly criticizing the slow pace of Serb returns to Croatia. However, these criticisms were framed as calls for greater effort rather than accusations of obstruction by Croatia. Similar sentiments were expressed by politicians like Vuk Drašković and Sanda Rašković-Ivić, who called for improvements in Serb rights in Croatia without resorting to sharp accusations. One instance that could marginally be classified under this strategy was President Tadić's request for Croatia to condemn Operation Storm. This request, following the release of footage showing crimes against Serbs by Croatian and Bosniak forces in western Bosnia during Operation Maestral (a continuation of Operation Storm), represented an implicit accusation of Croatia for past crimes. This footage emerged shortly after the release of footage showing the Serbian Scorpions executing Bosniaks in Srebrenica. Through this request, Serbia sought to relativize the narrative of sole Serbian responsibility for crimes in the 1990s and to socialize the responsibility for atrocities. However, this case was less direct compared to accusations made after 2013, when Serbia more explicitly criticized Croatia for commemorating crimes.

Several actions taken by Serbia yielded highly positive results for its destigmatization. These efforts were further bolstered by Croatia's responses, which conveyed relatively positive signals to the international audience regarding Serbia's approach and its own stigma. Croatian President Stjepan Mesić consistently emphasized individual responsibility over collective guilt, aligning closely with Serbia and Montenegro's position that accountability for past wrongdoings should be individualized, avoiding the attribution of blame to entire states or nations. Similarly,

Croatian Prime Minister Ivo Sanader adopted an exceptionally positive tone regarding relations with Serbia. However, it should be noted that such messaging was equally significant for Croatia as part of its own destigmatization efforts.

The most important concrete positive destigmatization outcomes for Serbia, associated (at least to a certain extent) with good relations with Croatia, were progress in EU accession (a positive feasibility study for SAP negotiations), public compliments for Serbian "good-neighborly" policy from the most important international actors, and the political support for major investments in Serbia (such as the acquisition of the state-owned Mobtel mobile network by Norwegian Telenor for more than 1.5 billion euros). Many Western actors, including the EU, publicly supported the preservation of the state union with Montenegro, which Serbian leadership had declared as one of its goals. This support served as an additional signal that Serbia's stigma was no longer as "sticky" in political matters as it used to be, considering that Belgrade was now behaving differently.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the general discourse about Serbia in international media became much softer and more balanced during this period.

However, on the Kosovo issue it remained clear the Serbia was still feeling the consequence of its stigma, especially in 2006 and early 2007 when many Western states started advocating in favor of the independence of the province. It became evident that Serbia still had a long road ahead and that much more work remained to fully remove the stigma—both on the stage of relations with Croatia, and on other relevant stigma-management stages.

### **Return to Rivalry (2007–2010)**

In 2007, Serbian decision-makers continued to perceive relations with Croatia as highly significant for managing its stigma. However, as outlined in the previous chapter, the shift in focus to Kosovo in 2008 led to a temporary decline in the importance of this stage and the goal of destigmatization overall. By 2009, with the relative easing of the acute crisis in Kosovo, the importance of this stage began to increase again. Conversely, as will be described in this subchapter, the perception of threat from Croatia increased from 2007. While there were fluctuations, with notable spikes in 2008 and late 2009/early 2010, the overall perception of threat ranged between moderate and high, leaning towards the negative end of the spectrum.

6 For the issue of "stickiness" of certain foreign and security policies, see Rečević Krstić 2025.

Signs of a shift in Serbian decision-makers' stance toward Croatia, moving in a more negative direction, began to surface as early as 2007. The initial deterioration in relations became evident following the ICJ verdict on Bosnia's lawsuit against Serbia for genocide in February 2007. The Serbian ministry of foreign affairs characterized reactions from Zagreb as a "negative campaign" (Beta 2007a). Croatian President Stjepan Mesić expressed dissatisfaction with the verdict, which he believed "amnestied" Serbia from responsibility. He nonetheless emphasized that the ruling "does not rule out the responsibility of the Yugoslav army" which he stated had been "controlled by Slobodan Milošević" (Beta 2007c). In response, Serbian President Boris Tadić appealed to BiH and Croatia to understand that "reconciliation is impossible when you blame one nation," signaling his perception that recent actions were undermining the quality of relations (Beta 2007c). Another indication of strained relations was the absence of bilateral high-level meetings between Belgrade and Zagreb in 2007, breaking a trend of regular meetings from 2003 to 2006. The only direct encounters occurred on the margins of multilateral forums and international organizations. Nevertheless, some elements of the "cooperation and good neighborliness" discourse persisted. For instance, defense ministry assistants Dušan Spasojević and Igor Pokaz emphasized the existence of "good cooperation" in defense matters (Beta 2007b).

A more significant shift occurred regarding Croatia's stance on the future status of Kosovo. The Croatian government initially supported the Ahtisaari Plan which Serbia opposed, while it later switched to backing a compromise solution during the second half of 2007. However, President Mesić began advocating for Kosovo's independence already in 2007. By early 2008, Croatia announced plans to recognize Kosovo's independence (Beta 2008a). Mesić expressed hope that recognition would not worsen relations with Serbia (Beta 2008d) and supported Kosovo's self-determination, suggesting Serbia could be compensated with expedited EU accession (Beta 2008e). Croatian leaders Sanader and Mesić, along with the Croatian ambassador in Belgrade, emphasized that this decision was not directed against Serbia. The Croatian ambassador highlighted Western pressure to recognize Kosovo, suggesting that Croatia's decision was a necessity rather than an anti-Serbian action (Tanjug 2008d). To avoid escalating tensions, Croatian officials responded cautiously to incidents in front of the Croatian embassy in Belgrade in February 2008. However, Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić made it clear that any country recognizing Kosovo's independence would harm Serbia's interests (Vlada Srbije 2008a). President Tadić countered Croatia's rationale by pointing out that Croatia had not yet fulfilled all conditions for EU membership and should not recognize Kosovo prematurely (Beta 2008c).

When Croatia recognized Kosovo, Serbia responded by recalling its ambassador and declaring that relations with Croatia were strained (Vlada Srbije 2008h). The "Croatia hinders progress" discourse was fully reactivated, at times implying that "Croatia works against Serbia's interests." Compounding the issue was Croatia's active support for Kosovo. A high-ranking Serbian official from this period noted in an interview that Croatia's recognition of Kosovo's independence was not entirely unexpected and, therefore, did not immediately lead to a radical shift in Belgrade's perception of Zagreb's intentions. He acknowledged some understanding for Zagreb's perceived compulsion to act under external pressure, as emphasized by Croatian officials themselves (Interview 4). However, tensions escalated when Croatia went further, quickly establishing close relations with Pristina and taking a leadership role in this regard. By autumn 2008, Serbian Foreign Minister Jeremić highlighted this as a significant problem, stating that "Croatia is the loudest supporter of Kosovo's independence" (Tanjug 2008e).

Serbian officials indirectly outlined demands that would satisfy Serbia as a form of compensation for Croatia's decision. Among other issues, Minister Jeremić highlighted obstacles such as the refusal to allow the opening of a Serbian consulate in Knin and the lack of explicit condemnation of Operation Storm by Croatian officials. He emphasized that progress in these areas could significantly improve bilateral relations (Tanjug 2008a). However, the primary message, consistently underscored by key Serbian officials such as Minister Jeremić and Prime Minister Cvetković throughout 2008 and 2009, was that Croatia's genocide lawsuit against Serbia remained a major stumbling block. They conveyed that Serbia's withdrawal could serve as a new starting point for relations. However, Croatia refused to allow the opening of a consulate in Knin, declined to withdraw its lawsuit, and responded to President Tadić's criticism of the lack of apology for Operation Storm by reinforcing its narrative of the operation as a liberation campaign. This narrative also placed sole responsibility for the wars of the 1990s to "Greater Serbian policy of Milošević" (Beta 2008f).

By early 2009, the intensity of this negative discourse began to subside. For example, during Prime Minister Sanader's visit to Belgrade in 2009, Serbian Prime Minister Cvetković raised issues such as Kosovo's recognition and the genocide lawsuit. However, the rhetoric lacked harsh language and instead emphasized the need to resolve these problems while reiterating calls for the withdrawal of lawsuits at the ICJ (Vlada Srbije 2009d). Concurrently, the "cooperation and good neighborliness" discourse, which had been absent during 2008, began to reemerge, albeit in a softer form, focusing on sectoral cooperation. This shift was accompanied by the signing of agreements

emphasizing “cooperation” in their titles. These agreements covered areas, such as education, transport, policing, collaboration in the EU integration process, and, most notably, improved economic cooperation and joint ventures in third markets (MSP 2020, 3–4). Serbian officials highlighted in mid-2009 that “good neighborliness is in our interest” (Tanjug 2009a) and stressed that protecting the Serbian minority in Croatia is best achieved “through good neighborliness” (Beta 2009a).

However, parallel public messaging indicated that Serbia still viewed Croatia as unwilling to resolve remaining open issues. The softened version of the “Croatia hinders progress” discourse demonstrated that Belgrade still perceived Zagreb as insufficiently constructive and as a threat to certain Serbian interests (Tanjug 2009b). Toward the end of 2009, negative discourse intensified, while the use of the “cooperation and good neighborliness” discourse significantly decreased. This shift toward a more negative perception was influenced by two key factors. The first was Croatia’s refusal to respond positively to Serbia’s repeated requests to withdraw the genocide lawsuit. The second and more significant was Croatia’s unexpected participation in the ICJ discussions regarding the advisory opinion on Kosovo’s declaration of independence. During its oral statement (delivered without a written submission), Croatia claimed that Kosovo had a right to secede. This act was described by Serbia’s foreign minister as a “major political blow,” as Serbia viewed success in this case as its vital interest.

The early days of January 2010 marked the peak of tensions and the most direct perception of Croatian actions as aggressive among Serbian officials since 2001. Serbian leaders assessed Croatian President Stjepan Mesić’s statement that he would send the army to Brčko in the event of a referendum on the independence of the RS as aggressive and warmongering. President Tadić announced plans to inform the UNSC, characterizing the statement as a threat to peace (Tanjug 2010b). This assessment marked the culmination of untrust. Between 2007 and early 2010, cooperation primarily fell within the realm of rival relations. This period saw fluctuations, with moments leaning toward partnership (the second half of 2007 and 2009) and moments nearing hostile relations (late 2008 and late 2009/early 2010).

### *Stigma Management Strategies and Outcomes*

Between 2007 and 2010, Serbia implemented all variants of compromising and denying strategies. This approach aligns with the logic of the destigmatization dilemma model, considering the high perception of both stage’s importance and threat level. However, there were some variations during this period. For example, as the stage’s importance declined in 2008,

coupled with the rising perception of threat, Serbia temporarily shifted primarily to denying strategies, with only sporadic use of the camouflage and compensation strategy from the compromising repertoire. During periods of heightened threat, such as late 2009/early 2010, the most direct use of counter-stigmatization through efforts to negatively label Croatia became particularly evident. However, because this stage was very important, this was balanced with parallel intensive compromising. Key actors from this period confirmed in interviews that the perceived threat influenced their strategy choices. They avoided taking responsibility when it posed risks for Serbia but did so when they deemed it beneficial (Interviews 1, 2, 3, 4, 5).

The most visible example of *stigma acceptance* was President Tadić's direct apology to Croatia. "To all the citizens of Croatia and all members of the Croatian people whom members of my nation have made unhappy, I apologize and take responsibility for it," Tadić stated in 2007 during an interview for the program *Nedeljom u 2* on Croatian Radio-Television (B92 2007). Through this statement, Tadić delivered an unequivocal apology, even taking responsibility, making a step further in accepting (a part of) responsibility compared to Marović's earlier apology. Many Serbian officials referred to this apology in their communications with different foreign actors during this period. For instance, Foreign Minister Jeremić invoked the apology to BiH made previously by Tadić, as well as his visit to Srebrenica, while attending the special meeting of the NAM in Manila in early 2010 (RTS 2010), while Serbian ambassador to the US Petrović also referred to this and other apologies made by representatives of Serbia in his op-ed for *The New York Times* a couple of weeks later (Tanjug 2010a). This indicates that the apologies were also intended to signal to third-party actors that Serbia was adopting a compromising stance.

The strategy of *camouflage and compensation* was also employed. This was primarily demonstrated through symbolic gestures aimed at conveying to the international society that Serbia remained positively oriented toward its neighbors and willing to compromise. One such symbolic gesture was Serbia's proposal (accepted by Croatia and jointly implemented) to restore the birthplace of Milutin Milanković in the Slavonian town of Dalj. The project envisioned turning the site into a center for joint scientific collaboration (Blic 2007). Later in this period, Serbia conveyed similar messages at multilateral gatherings to highlight its normalcy and readiness for compromise. For instance, at the Adriatic-Ionian Initiative meeting in Zagreb in May 2008, Minister Vuk Jeremić emphasized Serbia's desire for good relations with Croatia, stating that "Serbia and Croatia must lead the region towards EU membership" (Vlada Srbije 2009a). Additionally, Serbia proposed hosting

an NAM conference in Belgrade in collaboration with Croatia and other former Yugoslav states, further underlining its commitment to regional cooperation (Beta 2009b). Finally, an offer to not to file a counter-lawsuit against Croatia if Croatia withdraw its genocide lawsuit against Serbia was framed as a gesture of commitment to constructive dispute resolution.

*Stigma rejection* was also evident during this phase, primarily through Serbia's denial of the "genocide" label. In early 2007, Serbia strongly objected to attempts from Croatian circles to reaffirm the genocide label against Serbia. Following the ICJ's ruling, which found that Serbia was not responsible for committing genocide in Srebrenica but only for failing to prevent it and punish the perpetrators (an interpretation Serbia viewed as exonerating), some Croatian circles intensified public denunciations of the verdict. These efforts aimed to relativize Serbia's acquittal for genocide and its role in the wars in BiH and Croatia. Although these reactions did not constitute official foreign policy positions, Serbia formally protested against certain Croatian political figures and media outlets (including the public broadcaster HRT) for their interpretations of the verdict (Beta 2007a). This episode marked Serbia's strongest reaction in denying stigma in its relations with Croatia since 2001. The dynamic surrounding Croatia's genocide lawsuit against Serbia also intensified during this period. Serbia's legal representative, Tibor Varadi, formally stated before the ICJ that genocide had not occurred in Croatia and that Serbia bore no responsibility for such a crime. This position was reiterated in Serbia's response to the lawsuit in early 2010 (Tanjug 2008b).

Additionally, Serbia refuted claims that "Greater Serbian policy" and Milošević's regime were solely responsible for the wars of the 1990s. Serbian officials highlighted the Croatian side's responsibility and premeditated crimes committed in the conflict, which Serbia persistently characterized as a civil war, rejecting the "aggressor" label, while publicly demanding an apology from Croatia (Beta 2008b). Moreover, a series of carefully crafted statements emphasized that Serbia's current policies were not a continuation of Milošević's nationalist agenda. For instance, when Serbia announced its counter-lawsuit, officials stressed that this decision was forced upon them and was not "a continuation of nationalist policy" (Tanjug 2008c). This reinforced the narrative that all stigmatizing characteristics from the 1990s could be attributed solely to Milošević's regime, not to present-day Serbia. Prime Minister Cvetković underscored this point, asserting that Serbia would only take stronger measures against its neighbors when legitimately defending its vital interests (Vlada Srbije 2008c).

*Counter-stigmatization* was deployed intensively during this period, in contrast to its almost complete absence between 2003 and 2006. The

first notable instance occurred in spring 2007, when Serbia's ministry of foreign affairs strongly responded to Croatian attempts to relativize the ICJ's ruling on Srebrenica (Beta 2007d). Serbia publicly referenced the genocide committed against Serbs during the NDH in World War II, an act that could be interpreted as counter-labeling Croatia for past atrocities. This historical reference was even included in a formal diplomatic note delivered to the Croatian side. A key element of this approach was the filing of a counter-lawsuit against Croatia for genocide. Serbia announced this intention in late 2008. During 2009, Serbia expressed willingness to forgo this legal action if Croatia withdrew its lawsuit (Vlada Srbije 2009c). Ultimately, Serbia submitted the counter-lawsuit on the last day of 2009 after compromise efforts failed (Vlada Srbije 2009b). This counter-lawsuit not only aimed to label Croatia as genocidal due to Operation Storm in 1995, but also sought to present a historical continuum of genocidal intentions, extending back to atrocities against Serbs during the NDH era (Vlada Srbije 2008d). While the lawsuit was largely seen as a political tool to exert pressure on Zagreb and highlight Serbian grievances, the theoretical possibility of its success underscored Serbia's desire for Croatia to face formal accountability for its actions.

Besides the mentioned genocide-related labeling attempts, President Tadić and Minister Jeremić openly emphasized the label of "ethnic cleansing" to describe Croatia's actions against Serbs in the 1990s. Jeremić also mentioned Serb refugees in his letter to the OSCE (Vlada Srbije 2008b). Additionally, Serbia raised the possibility of addressing the status of Serbs in Croatia within the framework of Croatia's EU accession process. As early as 2007, Serbian Refugee Commissioner Đorđe Dabetić praised the European Commission for treating Serb refugee issues as human rights matters, rather than merely humanitarian concerns, while simultaneously criticizing Croatia's shortcomings in this area (Beta 2007e). In 2008, Deputy Prime Minister Božidar Đelić identified Croatia's EU accession as an opportunity to address Serb-related issues (Vlada Srbije 2008e). Efforts to pressure Croatia into apologizing and acknowledging its responsibility became a consistent element of Serbia's strategy during this period. The intensified use of this strategy aimed to reinforce Croatia's stigma while preventing the complete transfer of stigmatization onto Serbia. If Serbia were perceived as the sole state bearing a markedly negative legacy due to its conduct during the wars in Croatia and Bosnia, its own international reputation would deteriorate further. This approach sought to maintain a balance in the narrative, ensuring that the actions of both sides remained subject to scrutiny. Finally, President Tadić labeled the Croatian president's decision

to pardon convicted war criminal Siniša Rimac as “anti-civilizational and anti-European” (Beta 2010b).

The outcomes of Serbia’s stigma management in its relations with Croatia during this period were mixed. Efforts within the camouflage and compensation strategy yielded certain results, particularly through numerous cooperation agreements with Croatia. These agreements conveyed a positive message to the international society, showcasing Serbia as future oriented and non-aggressive despite unresolved issues. Serbia made progress toward EU accession in 2008 and 2009, with Croatia’s open support despite ongoing tensions. This support sent a favorable signal to the EU, the regional audience of normals. Croatia’s motivations included addressing its own challenges, such as its 2009 territorial dispute with Slovenia, and demonstrating a cooperative spirit to encourage other states to join the EU. Croatia also responded positively to some Serbian initiatives, such as the organization of the NAM conference, which bolstered Serbia’s international image (Beta 2009b). Notably, Croatian Prime Minister Sanader praised Serbia’s judiciary in March 2009, citing the conviction for crimes against Croats in Ovčara as “proof of the capabilities of Serbia’s judiciary” (Tanjug 2009c). This statement sent an important message, portraying Serbia as committed to transitional justice and supported by stable and independent institutions.

On the other hand, Croatia’s recognition of Kosovo’s independence undermined these efforts. This decision was a particularly negative outcome for Serbia. Croatia’s active advocacy for Kosovo’s independence reinforced the notion that this punishment of Serbia was both regionally accepted and seen as legitimate. Additionally, Croatia shifted from its earlier emphasis on individualizing responsibility for the 1990s conflicts, instead openly labeling Serbia as the aggressor and holding it accountable for the wars. Croatia also refused to withdraw its genocide lawsuit against Serbia despite Serbia’s efforts to secure this symbolic concession. While these actions sent unfavorable messages for Serbia’s destigmatization, they did not substantially impede its overall progress. Serbia continued to advance toward the EU and made concessions in other areas. Nevertheless, the relationship with Croatia missed the opportunity to achieve breakthroughs that could have accelerated the destigmatization process.

### **“European” Partnership and Pledging Friendship (2010–2012)**

Between 2010 and 2012, the perception of threat from Croatia was at its lowest in the twenty-first century, as demonstrated by the findings of discourse

analysis and interviews with relevant officials from this period. This is further elaborated in the previous chapter of the book. On the other hand, relations with Croatia were perceived as highly important for Serbia's stigma management during this period, as previously elaborated.

During the first part of 2010, Serbian officials began to significantly shift their perspective on relations with Croatia. Following a peak in tensions, the discourse of "cooperation and good neighborliness" regained prominence. In March 2010, after an informal meeting between Serbian President Boris Tadić and the newly elected Croatian President Ivo Josipović, two presidents announced that their mutual goal was the establishment of "the European partnership" between two states (Tanjug 2010i).<sup>7</sup> Shortly thereafter, Minister of Foreign Affairs Vuk Jeremić, speaking at a joint meeting with the foreign ministers of Croatia and Hungary, highlighted the "very good" regional cooperation. In a symbolic gesture of solidarity, they crossed their hands, sending the message: "All for one, one for all" (Vlada Srbije 2010a). In May 2010, Jeremić reiterated that reconciliation with Croatia was a priority, affirming that "relations are moving in a positive direction" with visible improvements (Vlada Srbije 2010d). During Croatian Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor's visit to Belgrade, Serbian Prime Minister Mirko Cvetković underscored the "spirit of looking towards the future and a spirit of cooperation," asserting that open issues would be resolved constructively (Vlada Srbije 2010f). Cooperation on European integration was described in this conversation as a "pledge of friendship"—a significant shift in tone, as this was the first time in years that "friendship" was publicly invoked. Serbian officials' confidence that every dispute could be resolved constructively reflected a declining perception of threats from Zagreb.

These developments indicate that Serbian leaders' perceptions of relations with Croatia had largely returned to a partnership-oriented framework. In both 2010 and 2011, the discourse of "cooperation and good neighborliness" gained further strength. For example, at the beginning of 2011, Justice Minister Snežana Malović described cooperation with Croatia as "at an enviable level," and Prime Minister Cvetković noted in April 2011 that "relations are on the rise" (Vlada Srbije 2011a, 2011b). The presence of the term "cooperation" in the titles of multiple bilateral agreements signed during this period underscored the growing partnership (MSP 2020, 4). At the same time, the discourse of "Croatia hinders progress" significantly diminished. While Serbia occasionally criticized Croatia for insufficient efforts regarding

7 The contribution of Tadić and Josipović to progress was emphasized in previous studies (Jović 2010, 29–32)

Serbian refugees, such remarks were milder. The only notable exception remained the “traditional” exchange of accusations during the anniversary of Operation Storm. Even then, the tone was far more restrained. For instance, in 2011, after criticizing Croatia for celebrating Generals Ante Gotovina and Mladen Markač (convicted in 2011 in the first instance of participating in a joint criminal enterprise to expel Serbs from the Krajina region), Minister for the Diaspora Srđan Srećković highlighted the improvement in relations with Croatia, integrating the “good neighborliness and cooperation” discourse (Vlada Srbije 2011c).

One significant factor driving this improvement was the shift in narrative from Zagreb. Prime Minister Kosor, who replaced Ivo Sanader in 2009, demonstrated a willingness to resolve disputes, particularly those hindering Croatia’s EU integration. While her primary focus was on resolving the border dispute with Slovenia, she also altered the tone of relations with Serbia. She distanced herself from President Stjepan Mesić’s earlier statement about deploying troops to Brčko (Tanjug 2010f). More importantly, President Josipović actively promoted positive relations with Serbia. His messages ranged from emphasizing the strategic importance of relations with Serbia to suggesting the potential withdrawal of Croatia’s genocide lawsuit against Serbia. He also commemorated Serbs killed in 1992 in Sijekovac in BiH by Croatian forces. Josipović’s gestures extended to issuing a formal apology to Serbs killed in Paulin Dvor near Osijek (Krstić 2021, 153–154). This was the first apology directed explicitly at Serbs by Croatian officials since Mesić’s general apology in 2000. The 2011 initial verdict by the ICTY against Generals Gotovina and Markač for crimes committed during Operation Storm also alleviated Serbia’s concerns. By labeling Croatia’s wartime leadership as responsible for participation in a “joint criminal enterprise” aimed at forcibly displacing Serbs from the Kninska Krajina, the verdict contributed to reducing Serbia’s sense of threat from Croatia.

On the eve of its EU accession, Croatia made several symbolic gestures toward Serbia as part of its own stigma management. These included donating a translation of EU legislation to Serbia worth seven million euros (Vlada Srbije 2010f) and President Josipović’s praise for Serbia’s treatment of Croatian national minority and cooperation with the ICTY (Beta 2011). Croatia also expressed readiness to deepen cooperation across various domains, and progress was evident in the treatment of the Serb minority in Croatia. Interviews with key Serbian decision-makers from this period confirmed that Josipović’s approach was instrumental in shifting Serbia’s perception of Croatia from that of a threat to a partner (Interviews 3, 4, 5).

### *Stigma Management Strategies and Outcomes*

The almost exclusive reliance on compromising strategies, particularly the intensive use of stigma acceptance, aligns with the assumptions of the destigmatization dilemma model. Denying strategies were employed infrequently, mostly during the periods of heightened tensions such as anniversaries of war-related events. This shift clearly indicates that the factors outlined (perceived importance of the stage and threat) and the choice of stigma-management strategies are correlated, as posited by the model developed in this book.

*Stigma acceptance* was most prominently reflected in the actions of President Boris Tadić. A particularly significant example was his apology for the crimes committed at Ovčara, delivered during a joint visit to Vukovar with Croatian President Ivo Josipović at the end of 2010 (Beta 2010a). This marked Tadić's second apology to Croatia, and the third apology from Belgrade overall, following then-President of the SCG Svetozar Marović's apology in 2003. These symbolic acts were widely utilized by Serbia in its communication with the international audience. For instance, in early 2011, Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić cited President Tadić's approach as evidence of Serbia's tolerance during his address to the UN Commission on Human Rights in Geneva (Tanjug 2011a). Key actors from this period emphasized that the intent behind these gestures was to signal that Serbia had undergone significant change (Interview 3, 4, 5).

The strategy of *camouflage and compensation* was also intensively applied during this period. Serbia initiated a series of actions toward Croatia, many of which were intended to demonstrate to the international society the depth of their improving relations. Key agreements, such as the landmark agreement on defense cooperation and the extradition of citizens accused of war crimes, were signed, symbolizing significant progress in bilateral relations (Vlada Srbije 2010d, 2010e). Belgrade also proposed allowing travel between Serbia and Croatia using only an ID card (Vlada Srbije 2010b). Additional efforts included the return of cultural treasures to Croatia, intensified cooperation in locating missing persons, and enhancement of the status of the Croatian minority in Serbia (Vlada Srbije 2010c, 2010g). President Tadić supported the return of property to Croatian companies in Serbia, contingent on reciprocal action for Serbian property in Croatia (Tanjug 2011b). The cancellation of the arrest warrant for Tihomir Purda, initially accused of war crimes, further signaled Serbia's intent to depoliticize war crime trials in its relations with Croatia, with the expectation that similar practices would cease on the Croatian side (Tanjug 2011c).

A particularly significant concession that Serbia made during this period involved refraining from raising the issue of the Serbian minority's position in Croatia during Croatia's EU accession process. Although earlier announcements suggested that Serbia would emphasize this issue, the decision to abstain was a deliberate one. According to a high-ranking official, this choice aimed to send a positive message to both Croatia and the EU, demonstrating Serbia's unwillingness to blackmail its neighbors or obstruct European integration (Interview 4). This represents a clear instance of a state prioritizing broader reputational goals over immediate political interests in pursuit of destigmatization.

*Stigma rejection* was applied primarily in response to accusations from Croatia, although such instances were relatively rare during this period. For example, in August 2011, when Croatian Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor attributed all the conflicts in Yugoslavia to Slobodan Milošević's policies, Serbia rejected this framing, refusing to accept sole responsibility for the past. In its response, Serbia emphasized the suffering caused by Operation Storm and underscored the importance of Croatia acknowledging its own historical actions (Tanjug 2011d). Although these responses bore some resemblance to counter-stigmatization, their relatively mild tone and reactive character, occurring primarily during the turbulent days of August, place them under the stigma rejection strategy.

While the outcomes of Serbia's efforts during this period were limited, they were nonetheless meaningful. President Tadić's gesture during his visit to Ovčara earned widespread praise from international officials, as well as applause of the Vukovar citizens (Beta 2010c). Additionally, as previously mentioned, Croatia commended Serbia for improving the position of its Croatian minority and signaled its readiness to unlock institutional mechanisms to address unresolved issues, such as the border dispute along the Danube. These responses from Croatia conveyed positive destigmatization signals about Serbia to the international society. Furthermore, Croatian President Josipović's apology for specific crimes committed against Serbs sent a significant message, challenging the narrative that Serbs were the sole perpetrators of war crimes during the 1990s.

As a result of these efforts, the international society undertook several notable destigmatizing moves toward Serbia. These included granting Serbia opportunities to assume leadership roles in major international forums, such as the OSCE and the UN, as well as Serbia being granted formal EU candidate status in early 2012. Given the EU's emphasis on good neighborly relations as a prerequisite for accession, Serbia's progress in its relationship with Croatia played a crucial role in achieving these milestones. Specific actions, such as

President Tadić's apology, received exceptionally positive reactions from the international society (Krstić 2021, 164–165). Serbia's relations with Croatia during this period compensated for shortcomings in its efforts to meet EU expectations regarding its relationship with Pristina. However, several key objectives remained unfulfilled during this period. Notably, Croatia did not withdraw its genocide lawsuit against Serbia, despite some indications of willingness for such a move. Furthermore, Croatia upheld its narrative regarding Operation Storm, continuing to frame Serbia as the aggressor during the 1990s. Had these two objectives been realized, this phase could have been the most significant milestone in Serbia's destigmatization process. Their absence, however, highlights missed opportunities and underscores the need for continued efforts in subsequent phases.

### **Rump Partnership and Mild Rivalry (2012–2015)**

Between 2012 and 2015, Serbian officials perceived the threat coming from Croatia as a moderate one, fluctuating between periods of lower intensity and moments of heightened tensions. At the same time, the perceived importance of the stage remained constantly high, as previously discussed. In the second half of 2012, relations between Serbia and Croatia experienced a noticeable downturn. Serbian officials began to view relations with Croatia as less of a partnership than before, reverting to a predominant perception of rivalry. The discourse of "Croatia hinders progress" was reactivated, while the narrative of "cooperation and good neighborliness" stagnated. Serbian Prime Minister Ivica Dačić, previously a strong proponent of fostering good neighborly relations with Croatia from 2010 to 2012, remarked in September 2012 that he felt Croatia was "turning its back on the region" (Vlada Srbije 2012a).

Several factors contributed to this shift. First, Zagreb demonstrated skepticism toward Serbia's new president, Tomislav Nikolić. While President Josipović sent his congratulations, he symbolically signaled Croatia's unease with Nikolić's past by not attending his inauguration. Second, Croatia did not respond positively to initiatives critical to Serbia. It declined to mutually withdraw genocide lawsuits, despite earlier indications that it might, and rejected the initiative to allow border crossings with ID cards, even though Croatia had established similar arrangements with Montenegro and BiH. Finally, as Croatia approached EU membership, skepticism emerged in Serbia over whether Croatia might follow Slovenia's example by blocking Serbia's EU accession until unresolved issues, such as the Danube border dispute, were settled.

A significant event in November 2012 further exacerbated tensions. The ICTY Appeals Chamber acquitted Croatian Generals Gotovina and Markač by a three-versus-two vote, overturning their earlier unanimous conviction by the trial chamber for participating in a joint criminal enterprise to expel Serbs from the Krajina region during Operation Storm in 1995. This verdict was met with triumph in Croatia. Croatia sought to use the verdict as a capstone for its own complete destigmatization, legitimizing claims that the Homeland War was just and negating conduction of systematic war crimes or ethnic cleansing. This intensified Serbia's stigma, as the ICTY verdicts seemed to reinforce labels applied to Serbia. Since the war-induced stigma had previously been shared, the reduction of Croatia's stigma increased Serbia's visibility as the stigmatized party, eliminating Serbia's argument that "all sides committed crimes." This was perceived as a direct threat to Serbia. Belgrade's immediate reactions emphasized the verdict's devastating nature, claimed justice for Serbian victims had not been served, and reiterated Tuđman's statements about Operation Storm's intent to make Serbs "practically disappear," while reducing further cooperation with the ICTY to a technical level (Beta 2012b).

Despite this negative shift, tensions did not escalate further. Belgrade's reactions, though critical, were expressed in moderate terms. Croatia emphasized it would not block Serbia's EU accession and adopted a declaration in its parliament to affirm this. Croatian Foreign Minister Vesna Pusić provided unambiguous support for Serbia's EU progress, stating that "Serbia must receive a date for the start of negotiations," emphasizing "unconditional" support (Vlada Srbije 2012b, 2013a, 2013g). Croatian Prime Minister Zoran Milanović echoed these sentiments during a visit to Serbia in early 2013, which was positively received by his Serbian counterpart Dačić (Vlada Srbije 2013d). This signaled that Croatia would not exploit its EU membership to obstruct Serbia's accession, alleviating some perceived threats. The discourse of "cooperation and good neighborliness" regained prominence, albeit in a slightly subdued form. Terms like "normalization" and "progress" replaced earlier terms such as "partnership" or "pledge of friendship." Serbian officials praised the normalization of relations, with gratitude expressed to Minister Pusić for her visit to Belgrade ahead of Croatia's EU accession in June 2013 (MSP 2013d). President Josipović's toast at Croatia's accession celebration, dedicated to the integration of the entire region to the EU, was also positively received (MSP 2013a).

Throughout 2013, criticisms directed at Croatia were mild and indirect. In response to incidents such as the destruction of signs in Serbian Cyrillic script in Vukovar, Serbian officials refrained from directly blaming the

Croatian state. Instead, they attributed these actions which endangered the Serb minority to extremists. Foreign Minister Ivan Mrkić stated that there was "no criticism" of the Croatian government regarding minority rights, indicating that Zagreb was not perceived as actively endangering the Serb minority (NSPM 2013). Even during the traditionally tense August period, Serbian Deputy Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić criticized the failure to prosecute those responsible for crimes committed during Operation Storm but directed his remarks at the international actors rather than Croatia (Vlada Srbije 2013c). He also noted that issues with Croatia were being addressed and that the position of Serbs in Croatia would improve, signaling a degree of growing trust in cooperation with Zagreb.

President Tomislav Nikolić further emphasized improved relations during President Ivo Josipović's visit to Belgrade in the autumn of 2013, stating that Serbia and Croatia had entered a new and better phase of their relationship (MSP 2013b). These sentiments were supported by frequent high-level meetings. Josipović's 2012 statement that the rapprochement process was "unstoppable" and progressing well seemed to hold true. Despite a brief decline in relations, momentum was building toward a return to a genuine partnership, possibly even friendly relations (Tanjug 2012). Overall, the perception of relations during this period balanced between rivalry and partnership, showing an upward trend from early 2013 to early 2014.

However, this optimism waned in early 2014 due to Croatia's definitive rejection of Serbia's proposal for mutual withdrawal of genocide lawsuits. Croatia justified its decision by citing Serbia's alleged failure to adequately address the issue of missing persons or fulfill other conditions deemed necessary for withdrawing the lawsuit. Croatia's justice minister expressed confidence in the success of Croatia's lawsuit, framing it as an opportunity to "shed light on a part of Croatian history that the Hague Tribunal had not clarified" (Beta 2014a). This indicated that Croatia intended to use the proceedings to reinforce its narrative of the 1990s conflict, portraying Serbia as the "aggressor" and the "perpetrator of war crimes" under the umbrella of the formal aim of proving genocide. Such an approach risked amplifying Serbia's stigma while reducing Croatia's, threatening Serbia's goal to destigmatize. Former Prime Minister Jadranka Kosor's warning that the issue of missing persons was the "zero issue" without which progress in relations would stall seemed validated (RSE 2011). Serbia's leaders feared that Croatia might use this situation to justify its blocking Serbia's EU accession process.

Despite this, Serbian officials did not immediately escalate their rhetoric. Instead, they expressed hope that "history would be left behind," a sentiment

echoed by Aleksandar Vučić, the dominant political figure in Serbia at the start of 2014 (Vlada Srbije 2014a). This restrained response can be partly attributed to Croatia's efforts to reassure Serbia, particularly through the actions of Foreign Minister Vesna Pusić and Ambassador to Serbia Markotić, who emphasized strong support for Serbia's European integration (Vlada Srbije 2014d, 2014b). Pusić's speech at the opening of Serbia's EU accession talks was interpreted by Vučić as "strong support" (Beta 2014b). Furthermore, during her visit to Belgrade in February 2014, Pusić sought to downplay the potential impact of the ICJ proceedings on bilateral relations, describing the court process as "part of resolving past issues, not part of current politics" (Vlada Srbije 2014a).

In 2014, the discourse of "good neighborliness and cooperation" persisted, albeit less intensively than in the previous year. Interior Minister Nebojša Stefanović highlighted the "very good" cooperation with Croatia in policing (Vlada Srbije 2014e), while Defense Minister Bratislav Gašić and his Croatian counterpart Ante Kotromanović noted an "upward trajectory" in defense cooperation (Vlada Srbije 2014f). However, the "Croatia hinders progress" discourse reemerged, albeit in a softer form, focusing on Croatia's refusal to withdraw its genocide lawsuit and its perceived insistence on unresolved historical issues (MSP 2014a).

Toward the end of 2014, tensions increased following the release of Vojislav Šešelj from detention at the ICTY, prompting Prime Minister Vučić to accuse unnamed neighbors of refusing to acknowledge Serbia's progress in Europe (Vlada Srbije 2014c). This signaled a shift toward a more negative perception of relations, with Croatia seen as hindering progress by clinging to historical grievances. Nevertheless, the deterioration in relations did not reach significant levels, leaving room for a return to partnership. Early in 2015, Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić acknowledged recent problems, but called for their resolution, avoiding further escalation of negative rhetoric and indicating that Serbia's perception of Croatia as a threat remained relatively low at the start of the year (Vlada Srbije 2015d).

### *Stigma Management Strategies and Outcomes*

During this period, Serbia employed a range of strategies, with a notable reliance on the camouflage and compensation strategy, particularly in 2013 and 2014. Denying strategies, such as rejecting stigma and occasional counter-stigmatization, were utilized at the end of 2012, at the beginning of 2013, and again from March 2014. In an exceptional instance, Serbia also employed the strategy of stigma acceptance, specifically in the context of the ICJ proceedings. This marked the second phase in the twenty-first century in

which all four stigma-management strategies were applied simultaneously. Considering the officials' perception of the threat as moderate, but with certain phases reaching even high levels, while the importance of this stage was constantly perceived as high, this outcome of parallel pursuance of all strategies is in line with the destigmatization dilemma model.

*Stigma acceptance* was present in Serbia's legal defense before the ICJ and was used in a limited but deliberate manner. Serbia's main representative at the court, Saša Obradović, announced that Serbia did not deny serious crimes against Croats, specifically those validated by the ICTY (Beta 2014a). In his opening statement, he remarked: "There is no doubt that many Croats suffered in that conflict, and this is an opportunity for all of us to remember their tragedy" (Tanjug 2014b). Furthermore, he expressed "on behalf of the Government and people of the Republic of Serbia" regret for all war victims and crimes committed in Croatia (Tanjug 2014b). However, these expressions of regret served as an introduction to Serbia's counterarguments, which aimed to challenge the context and negate the existence of genocidal intent. Obradović emphasized that, while Serbia regretted the suffering of Croats, Serbs were the primary victims of war in Croatia, including those subjected to genocide during Operation Storm. The approach combined acknowledgment of crimes with efforts to relativize and socialize stigma, ultimately aiming to negate heavier labels such as "genocide perpetrator" or "aggressor."

The *camouflage and compensation* approach was pursued through different forms. The first aspect was a proposal for easier movement of the population. For instance, then-Prime Minister Ivica Dačić publicly called for allowing border crossings between Serbia and Croatia with an ID card, signaling Serbia's desire for deeper bilateral relations. Similarly, President Tomislav Nikolić emphasized his informal discussions with Croatian leaders during international events, conveying to the international society that Serbia maintained high-level dialogue with Croatia despite the change in government (Beta 2012d).

The second aspect of this strategy was the substantial increase in bilateral meetings. Serbia and Croatia agreed on a practice of regular semiannual meetings at the level of foreign ministers (Vlada Srbije 2013b). Intensive ministerial-level meetings across various sectors continued throughout 2014. Meetings were utilized by Serbia to reinforce its message that "the past should be left to historians" and that the country was committed to partner relations. The significance of Serbian-Croatian relations was underscored during President Josipović's ceremonial visit to Belgrade in the autumn of 2013 (MSP 2013c). Earlier that year, Deputy Prime Minister

Vučić publicly thanked Josipović for advocating partnership with Serbia during his visit to Zagreb (Vlada Srbije 2013e). This heightened political engagement allowed Serbia to project the image of closeness, goodwill, and gratitude to international audiences. This approach became critical leading up to and during the ICJ proceedings, as Serbia sought to convey that its counter-lawsuit against Croatia was not an act of aggression, but a necessary legal measure. At the start of the ICJ proceedings, Serbia's representative highlighted examples of historical cooperation and closeness between Serbs and Croats, rejecting the notion of "centuries-old hatred." He clarified, "Serbia's opponent in this case is neither the Croatian people nor the Croatian state, but extreme Croatian nationalism" (Tanjug 2014b). Thus, Serbia sought to ensure that this legal process would not undermine its role as a "good neighbor."

A step further in this regard involved advocating for institutionalized address of open issues through the establishment of ministerial-level commissions (Vlada Srbije 2013d). By advocating for the creation of these commissions, Serbia conveyed its commitment to resolving disputes peacefully and in good faith, thereby fostering trust and promoting a regional security community. This initiative was complemented by persistent calls for the mutual withdrawal of genocide lawsuits—a move Serbia emphasized until the onset of the ICJ proceedings. Such a withdrawal would have carried a significant symbolic message of destigmatization. Another aspect of institutionalized cooperation included Serbia's initiative for joint police patrols along the Serbia–Croatia border. This effort not only improved coordination and built trust between the two nations' police forces but also sent a positive message of cooperation between former adversaries to international observers (Vlada Srbije 2013f). Additionally, the signing of a joint declaration on missing persons in Mostar in the summer of 2014, involving Serbia and other regional countries, signaled Serbia's commitment to leveraging its institutional capacities to address the issue of missing persons (Al Jazeera Balkans 2014). At the start of 2014, Aleksandar Vučić announced that he would ensure provision of Croatian-language textbooks for the Croatian minority in Serbia, highlighting the issue as a priority (Vlada Srbije 2014a).

Finally, another aspect was Serbia's readiness to make concessions to Croatia (and the EU), including the revision of provisions in the SAA regarding duty-free import quotas for EU tobacco products into Serbia. By agreeing to these quotas, strongly supported by Brussels, Serbia allowed Croatian producers to avoid economic losses resulting from Croatia's departure from the Central European Free Trade Agreement (CEFTA) upon joining the

EU. This decision effectively abandoned a protective measure for Serbia's tobacco market to assist Croatia, thereby demonstrating Serbia's willingness to make material sacrifices to expedite its EU accession process and further its destigmatization efforts. Serbia also extended other symbolic gestures to Croatia, such as donating nearly forty thousand aerial photographs taken by the JNA, which were invaluable for Croatia in property legalization processes (Vlada Srbije 2014a).

*Stigma rejection* became more pronounced during the ICJ proceedings on Croatia's genocide lawsuit in the spring of 2014. Serbia's legal team sought to counter both the "genocide perpetrator" and "aggressor" labels. They argued that responsibility for events preceding April 1992, when the FRY was established, lay with the leadership of the former SFRY and the JNA, referencing statements from prominent German experts to bolster this claim (Tanjug 2014a). Serbia contended that any responsibility for actions before this date could not be attributed to the FRY or Serbia, but rather to the non-existing SFRY. Serbian delegation also argued that the actions of the Krajina Serbs could not be classified as aggression, as they were a reaction to Croatian separatism and perceived threats against Serbs. The delegation also recalled the atrocities committed against Serbs in Croatia during World War II, emphasizing that these historical events contextualized the actions of the Krajina Serbs (Tanjug 2014b).

There were also other examples during this period in which Serbia aimed to portray itself as respected and appreciated, aiming to disassociate itself from a negative past and reject any lingering stigma or perceived need for further atonement. For example, in the autumn of 2014 Croatia attempted to negatively label Serbia over the behavior of Vojislav Šešelj, and lack of a strong official response to his anti-Croatian rhetoric and humiliating acts, such as burning of the Croatian flag. Prime Minister Vučić dismissed Croatia's and certain European parliamentarians' efforts to condemn Serbia through the European Parliament, asserting that Serbia had "deservedly earned a better place in Europe than it had a few decades ago," signaling as well that Serbia rejected new labeling attempts (Vlada Srbije 2014c). Foreign Minister Dačić denied any connection between Serbia and Šešelj's behavior, emphasizing that it had no influence over his release, that he did not represent the authorities, and that there was no reason for Serbia to apologize (RTRS 2014).

*Counter-stigmatization* efforts were undertaken on several levels. The first level focused on internationally labeling Tudjman's Croatia as responsible for the exodus of Serbs, thereby attempting to counterbalance Croatia's destigmatization, which was bolstered by the ICTY Appeals Chamber's

acquittal of Gotovina and Markač. A prominent example of this approach was the UNGA debate on the work of the ICTY, specifically addressing this verdict, organized by President of the General Assembly and former Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremić. The debate, scheduled for April 10, 2013, coinciding with the anniversary of the establishment of the NDH during World War II, was clearly intended to highlight the suffering of Serbs in Croatia. Jeremić underscored the “undeniable fact” that 250,000 Serbs were expelled from Croatia during Operation Storm in 1995 (RSE 2013). During the debate, Serbian President Nikolić delivered remarks about Operation Storm and referenced the Jasenovac concentration camp and the suffering of Serbs, Jews, and Roma under the NDH. Several invited foreign speakers, including the former UNPROFOR commander in Sarajevo, criticized the ICTY’s selective justice and the lack of accountability for crimes against Serbs. Jeremić emphasized the necessity of shared responsibility. These efforts aimed to alleviate Serbia’s stigma and highlighted that Serbia and Serbs were not the sole perpetrators of war crimes (RSE 2013).

The second level involved public protest statements from nearly all Serbian officials following the ICTY verdict, denouncing it as a severe blow to justice and reconciliation in the region. A follow up of this approach included the cancellation of meetings with Croatian delegations in protest of celebrations marking the release of the generals. Serbian Deputy Prime Minister for European Integration Suzana Grubješić canceled a planned visit to Zagreb (Beta 2012a). However, despite the sharp rhetoric, Serbian officials primarily directed their criticisms at the ICTY rather than Croatia. While the accusations indirectly touched on Croatia’s actions during the 1990s, Serbia did not call for punitive measures against Zagreb. Instead, it focused on questioning the tribunal’s impartiality and urging accountability for individual crimes. Croatia was encouraged to confront its past, but no demands for its isolation or punishment were made.

The third level was Serbia’s counter-lawsuit against Croatia for genocide with the ICJ. Before the court, Serbia presented evidence alleging Croatian genocide against Serbs in Krajina in 1995, emphasizing the historical context of World War II (Tanjug 2014b). Serbia attempted to draw a connection between the NDH’s genocidal actions and Tuđman’s policies, Operation Storm, and ongoing challenges faced by Serbs in Croatia such as the destruction of Cyrillic signs and obstacles to refugee return. To support its case, Serbia called upon experts on the Holocaust, including Canadian professor William Schabas, who testified for the Serbian team (Tanjug 2014a). The formal objective was to label Croatia as genocidal, seek reparations for war victims, challenge the state celebration of Operation Storm, and

establish monitoring mechanisms to ensure conditions for Serb returnees in Croatia (FoNet 2014). However, the actual main goal was to remind the international audience of the mass suffering of Serbs under the NDH and to reinforce claims that Croatia's actions in the 1990s warranted the label of "war criminal." Serbia also aimed to portray Croatia as the initial aggressor in the conflict, citing its violent secession from the SFRY and its actions against Serbs in Croatia.<sup>8</sup>

The results achieved by the application of compromising strategies in this period were moderate. Croatia sent a series of positive signals to the "audience of normals" about its improved relations with Serbia. The most significant gesture was the visit by Minister Pusić to Belgrade just days before Croatia's entry into the EU, as well as President Josipović's toast at a reception dedicated to the integration of the entire region into the EU (MSP 2013a). Croatia consistently stated that Serbia deserved to continue its European path as quickly as possible and that it had Croatia's strong support, sending the best possible signal that Serbia was a normal state, accepted even by its former adversaries. Additionally, a series of symbolically important arrangements initiated by Zagreb, such as the possibility of Serbian police patrolling Istria, a popular destination for Serbian tourists, alongside Croatian police (Vlada Srbije 2013f), conveyed a message about the acceptance of closeness with Serbia. Even the calls for withdrawing the lawsuits received a positive response from parts of the Croatian public (Dnevnik 2013).

The honoring of the Serbian ambassador to Croatia by President Josipović for contribution to the development of bilateral relations was also a symbolically positive message from official Zagreb (Predsjednik Republike Hrvatske 2013). Furthermore, the acceptance of the narrative by Croatian politicians that the past should be left behind, despite the lawsuit before the ICJ, sent a reassuring message to those international actors who might interpret the mere initiation as a sign of deteriorating relations between the two states. The signing of seven new cooperation agreements between the two countries also sent a positive message to the international audience (MSP 2020). The fact that Croatia decided not to withdraw its lawsuit against Serbia, however, was the biggest setback to Serbia's desired outcome in applying these strategies.

8 Serbian officials interpreted the ICJ ruling from 2015 in a manner that suggested Croatia bore responsibility for the exodus of Serbs (Vlada Srbije 2015j). This interpretation intended to frame the ruling as evidence that Croatia had engaged in ethnic cleansing, reinforcing Serbia's counternarrative and partially shifting the stigma.

The application of denying strategies during this period also yielded mixed results. The fact that Serbia could place the topic of justice for Serb victims on the agenda of the UNGA was a symbolic confirmation that partial destigmatization had already been achieved. The forum that had been at the forefront of labeling Serbia in the 1990s was now a platform where Serbia could create an agenda (thanks to the position of the UNGA presidency held by Vuk Jeremić), actively defend itself, and attempt to label others. However, these efforts received only partial reception of international actors. Most countries attended the debate, and Serbia enjoyed the support of Russia, China, and several non-aligned countries. However, the US, as the still dominant destigmatization actor, refused to participate in the discussion, along with Canada and Jordan. EU countries participated but sent lower-level delegations than usual, symbolically signaling their support for the ICTY (RSE 2013). This suggests that attempts to label the ICTY and Croatia were only partially successful, yet the message that Serbia would not accept the stigma of being solely responsible for war crimes was clearly heard along the East River.

The results of the dispute before the ICJ were also mixed and partial. Both Croatia's lawsuit and Serbia's counter-lawsuit were rejected (ICJ 2015). This outcome definitively allowed Serbia to shed the label of "genocide perpetrator" in Croatia in the most thorough way possible. On the other hand, Serbia failed in labeling Croatia as responsible for genocide against the Serbs. Nevertheless, Serbia expressed satisfaction with this outcome and attempted to interpret the ruling as a confirmation of certain labels applied to Croatia for certain crimes.

Additionally, Serbia was not entirely successful in distancing itself from Šešelj's actions, thereby preventing international forums, at Croatia's initiative, from examining its behavior regarding this matter. Croatian members of the European Parliament managed to secure the adoption of the resolution, "Serbia: the case of accused war criminal Šešelj" (European Parliament 2014). Although this resolution did not directly label official Belgrade, it called on Serbia to respond decisively to the rise of irredentism and Greater Serbian ideas promoted by Šešelj, thereby indirectly encouraging the reaffirmation of these labels in the context of Serbia. Despite Serbia's assertion that it had no connection to Šešelj and its refusal to take responsibility for his actions, Belgrade was unable to prevent the adoption of the resolution and only expressed gratitude to those MEPs who opposed it, such as Tanja Fajon (Vlada Srbije 2014c). This outcome demonstrated that Zagreb possessed a stigma power over Belgrade within the European Parliament as a (de)stigmatization forum and would not hesitate to use it.

## Escalation of Rivalry (2015–2018)

Starting from second part of 2015, officials' perception of threat coming from Croatia substantially increased, while the relative importance of this stage decreased, although it was still perceived as relevant—primarily because of the EU accession process, in which Croatia had big influence as a member state. Serbia's officials began perceiving an increase in threats emanating from Zagreb as early as 2014. The initial negative shift arose from Croatia's refusal to withdraw genocide lawsuits, followed by the rise of tensions accompanying the return of Vojislav Šešelj from ICTY custody. However, official statements did not employ the "Croatia obstructs progress" discourse. This changed in August and September 2015.

During the 2015 anniversary of Operation Storm, the Serbian refugee commissioner highlighted Croatia's behavior as a threat to the Serb community in Croatia (Vlada Srbije 2015c). President Nikolić stated that with the "parade (held on the day of Operation Storm), Croatia was sending a message to displaced Serbs not to return" (MSP 2015c). Croatia's actions during the September 2015 migrant crisis, including the decision to close the border in response to Serbia's allowing of unrestricted passes for migrants towards Croatia on their way to the EU, were labeled by Foreign Minister Dačić as "Croatia's aggression" and an "economic war." (Vlada Srbije 2015h; Tanjug 2015). Prime Minister Vučić also described Croatia's actions as "aggressive" (Vlada Srbije 2015b). This was the second time in the twenty-first century that the discourse of an "aggressive Croatia" was employed in bilateral assessments, apart from reactions to Mesić's 2010 threat, signifying a fundamental shift in the perception of threat.

By early 2016, this perception of Croatia's economic aggression had evolved into fears of a potential military threat. Foreign Minister Dačić claimed that Croatia's "uncontrolled" acquisition of ballistic missiles was disrupting the regional balance of power (Vlada Srbije 2016i). He also accused Croatian Defense Minister Kotromanović of "saber-rattling" (Vlada Srbije 2016e). This marked the first use of security dilemma discourse by Serbian officials since 2001. Such statements underscored a decline in perceptions of the quality of relations, with the "Croatia obstructs progress" discourse morphing into "aggressive Croatia." Serbia now viewed the relations with Croatia as rivalrous, with pronounced threats. As 2016 progressed, Croatia's behavior was further characterized as "interference in Serbia's internal affairs" (Vlada Srbije 2016a) and by mid-year as "anti-Serbian hysteria" (Vlada Srbije 2016e). In late summer, Prime Minister Vučić alleged "organized attacks in various international forums and institutions led by Croatia against Serbia,"

reinforcing the perception of Croatia's actions as aggressive attempts at (re) stigmatizing Serbia (Vlada Srbije 2016i). Croatia's actions were again labeled "aggressive" or "bullying" when it blocked chapter twenty-six in Serbia's EU accession negotiations at the end of 2016 (Tanjug 2016). This was followed by renewed expressions of confusion over Croatia's rearmament, with Serbian officials asserting that Serbia's military actions were purely defensive (Vlada Srbije 2016g). In a broader statement, Prime Minister Vučić warned that Serbia "will not allow anyone to endanger it militarily or economically," acknowledging perceived threats in these domains (Vlada Srbije 2016b).

While tensions subsided in early 2017, Croatia's increase of sanitary import taxes on Serbian fruits and vegetables in the summer reignited accusations of economic aggression (Vlada Srbije 2017f). By the second half of 2017, Serbian officials noted an "anti-Serbian atmosphere" and accused Zagreb of failing to address it (Vlada Srbije 2017b). Sectors where cooperation had previously been productive, such as war crimes processing, were described as "at the lowest possible level," according to Serbian Justice Minister Nela Kuburović (Vlada Srbije 2017g). Although statements regarding threats from Croatia diminished in intensity by 2018, both Vučić and Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović agreed that relations were "not friendly," underscoring mistrust, while expressing hope for progress (Beta 2018b).

Multiple factors contributed to negative development. Serbian officials often attributed Croatian behavior to domestic political needs, describing it as a "dirty theater" staged by Croatian politicians (MSP 2016b). Specific actions—such as coercive economic measures during the 2015 migrant crisis, perceived revisionist tendencies regarding World War II, and the blocking of EU integration despite earlier assurances—undoubtedly exacerbated tensions. However, the escalation cannot be ascribed to changes in Croatia's government, as tensions began under Milanović's administration and continued under the HDZ-led government. Additionally, Serbia's own rearmament was cited as evidence of possible internal political motives in Serbia to securitize Croatia's behavior, raising questions about whether perceived threats from Zagreb were genuinely felt. Despite suspicions that some threat narratives were exaggerated for domestic purposes, Serbian officials increasingly characterized relations with Croatia as rivalrous and, in certain instances, directly threatening. This marked a significant shift toward a more negative perception of bilateral relations.

### *Stigma Management Strategies and Outcomes*

The strategies employed during this period were predominantly denial strategies, including stigma rejection and counter-stigmatization. Both

were used far more extensively than in the previous phase. However, the compromise strategy of camouflage and compensation was also applied relatively intensively. This approach aimed to mitigate the potential negative effects of denial strategies on Serbia's international image and to maintain the perception that it was committed to the role of a "good neighbor," despite such efforts being hindered by Croatia's actions. The strategy of stigma acceptance was not utilized. Given the predominance of denial strategies, their application will be elaborated on first. The outcome in which Serbia relied mostly on denial strategies, but still also pursued compromising acts through camouflage and compensation acts, is in accordance with the destigmatization dilemma model.

*Stigma rejection* was grounded in Serbia's refusal to accept any historical responsibility regarding its relations with Croatia. The key messages conveyed were that Serbia would no longer "bow down" to Croatia's demands or offer apologies, and that it was now respected globally, with its normality and even exemplarity being widely recognized. Serbia proudly highlighted the EU's pressure on Croatia to open the closed border and remove economic measures against Serbia from September 2015. It further noted that EU countries characterized Serbia's behavior—both toward Croatia and generally during the migrant crisis—as commendable and non-aggressive (Vlada Srbije 2015b; MSP 2015b; Beta 2015). This outcome was intended to send a clear message to the international society that even actors previously critical towards Serbia, like Germany, now viewed Serbia as an equal and normal, and—in the context of the migrant crisis—even more exemplary than most European nations.

When Croatia either blocked or threatened to block certain aspects of Serbia's EU negotiations, Serbian officials responded sharply. Foreign Minister Dačić suggested that if Serbia could be obstructed by Croatia on its EU path, it might reconsider whether it truly desired EU membership, implying that Serbia, in some respects, was "better" than certain EU member states (Beta 2016). When negotiations resumed, this was framed as a victory, showcasing the success of Serbia's normality and the international unwillingness to tolerate Croatia's obstructive tactics. Vučić publicly thanked US Vice President Joseph Biden for urging Croatia to change its stance (Vlada Srbije 2016b). He previously underscored Serbia's rejection of Croatia's blocking attempts by departing from Brussels before the opening of two new chapters in Serbia's EU negotiations, as chapter twenty-six had been stalled (Tanjug 2016).

Serbia also publicly dismissed Croatian allegations regarding the supposedly poor status of the Croatian minority within Serbia, emphasizing significant improvements in their position (Vlada Srbije 2016b). It argued

that resurrecting the old stigma of “human rights violator” in this context was completely baseless. Serbia also rejected Croatia’s criticism of its use of universal jurisdiction for prosecuting war crimes, pointing out that Croatia had raised no objections when this jurisdiction was applied to prosecute Serbs. Another form of stigma rejection was Serbia’s refusing to accept diplomatic protest notes from Croatia delivered to the Serbian ambassador in Zagreb (Vlada Srbije 2017a). This unusual move conveyed Serbia’s outright rejection of the alleged stigmatizing labels without even acknowledging their content.

*Counter-stigmatization* directly followed the previously described acts of stigma rejection. Serbia often responded to Croatia’s accusations by counter-labeling or even calling for special measures against Croatia due to its behavior. Moreover, this approach was taken on Serbia’s initiative, even when no accusations had been made from the Croatian side. In September 2015, Serbian officials publicly labeled Croatia as insufficiently “European,” “democratic,” and “civilized” due to its actions toward Serbia and its treatment of migrants. Serbia reacted similarly to Croatian taxes in 2017, indicating that if Croatia did not reduce them, Serbia would request that the European Commission intervene and “punish” Croatia (Vlada Srbije 2017f). Another response was Serbia’s agreement to coordinate countermeasures against Croatia with other CEFTA countries, which risked contributing to a limited regional stigmatization of Croatia for its economic practices (Vlada Srbije 2017e).

Starting in 2016, Serbia began accusing Croatia of glorifying fascism and applying punitive acts against Croatia, justifying them as necessary to highlight Croatia’s “deviant” behavior. Through numerous statements and official protest notes, Serbia accused Croatia of rehabilitating Ustasha and fascist ideologies. Examples included the formal legal rehabilitation of Alojzije Stepinac (Vlada Srbije 2016h), the partial rehabilitation of the greeting “For the Homeland Ready!” through a special state commission’s report (Vlada Srbije 2018), the installation of a plaque bearing this slogan at Jasenovac, the erection of a monument to Miro Barešić—a member of the Ustasha diaspora that in 1971 assassinated Yugoslav ambassador in Sweden Vladimir Rolović (Vlada Srbije 2017c)—and the actions of Croatia’s Minister of Culture Zlatko Hasanbegović. Croatia was labeled as a “country that committed genocide against Serbs during World War II” (Vlada Srbije 2016d). Significant activity was Serbia’s organization of an exhibition about the Jasenovac concentration camp at the UN building in New York (Tanjug 2018). Serbia intensified contacts with Holocaust victim associations, such as the Simon Wiesenthal Center, whose director Efraim Zuroff accused Croatia of rehabilitating Ustashaist ideology that committed genocide against Jews, Roma, and Serbs.

Additionally, Croatia was characterized as anti-Serbian, anti-civilization, and backward due to the annulment of the conviction of Branimir Glavaš for crimes against Serbs in 1991, the lack of convictions for crimes committed during Operation Storm, and the celebration and glorification of Operation Storm. From 2015 onward, the memorialization of victims of Operation Storm in Serbia was elevated to state level (Vlada Srbije 2015i). Messages about the suffering of Serbs and Croatia's responsibility for the exodus of Serbs in 1995, as well as the prevention of their return in the following years, were conveyed at mass gatherings attended by associations of displaced persons, representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and leadership from the RS and the Republic of Serbia. Serbia even placed banners on the website of the ministry of foreign affairs directing visitors to content discussing the suffering of Serbs during Operation Storm and to annual reports from the Serbian National Council on violations of Serb rights in Croatia. This highlighted Serbia's intent to communicate to an international audience that Croatia remained a threat to Serbs.

Serbia frequently not only labeled Croatia but also called upon the EU and the international society to react and compel Croatia to confront its past. This approach demonstrated that these messages were primarily directed at the international audience of normals and that Serbia sought not only acknowledgment of these labels, but also concrete action or punitive measures against Croatia, including the imposition of higher and stricter stigmatization. By urging the EU to take tangible steps against Croatia and by independently implementing reciprocal countermeasures against Croatia in 2015, Serbia escalated its stigmatization attempts beyond mere labeling, aiming to provoke more significant consequences for Croatia in terms of stigmatization.

*Camouflage and compensation* were extensively employed during this period. It generally accompanied denying strategies, with the clear intent of balancing them and conveying to the international audience that Serbia was not against Croatia, but that it was simply forced to react as it did under the circumstances. In early 2015, Prime Minister Vučić's attendance at the inauguration of the newly elected president of Croatia, Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović, could be interpreted as a symbolically significant gesture of goodwill (Vlada Srbije 2015f). Similar messages were conveyed by persistent statements from Serbian officials expressing a desire for good neighborly relations and a forward-looking approach. Particularly symbolic was Prime Minister Vučić's statement addressed to Serbs in Croatia, urging them to "respect and love both Serbia and Croatia," emphasizing that Serbs in Croatia should remain loyal to the state they live in (Vlada Srbije 2015g).

This sentiment was followed by the concrete decision to return a significant number of cultural artifacts to Croatia (Vlada Srbije 2015e).

Following the elevation of the memorialization of Serbian suffering during Operation Storm, Prime Minister Vučić initiated the establishment of a single day of remembrance for all victims of the Yugoslav wars, sending a conciliatory message to both regional and international audiences (RSE 2015). Additionally, Serbia's decision to delay imposing countermeasures on Croatia in September 2015, while waiting in hopes that Croatia would withdraw its measures, was highlighted by Serbian leadership as an example of exceptional restraint (Vlada Srbije 2015h). Serbia used this opportunity to position itself as better than its neighbor, which was already a member of the EU—a regional audience of normals. Even after introducing countermeasures against Croatia, Serbian officials emphasized that these measures would be lifted as soon as Croatia lifted its own, underscoring their reactive nature (Vlada Srbije 2015a).

After the end of the “mini customs war” in September 2015, Serbia proposed joint patrols, and the Protocol on Cooperation in the Migration Crisis and in Preventing Illegal Migration was signed. Throughout 2016, Serbia maintained its declared desire to improve relations with Croatia, delivering a symbolic message through the meeting between Prime Minister Vučić and President Grabar-Kitarović at the bridge near Bački Breg, accompanied by the signing of a joint declaration to address outstanding issues (Vlada Srbije 2016f). This event occurred just before Croatia blocked the opening of the new chapters in Serbia's EU accession negotiations, suggesting Serbia's readiness to move forward despite tensions.

In August 2016, Prime Minister Vučić announced unilateral restraint in responding to the statements from Croatia about Serbia, signaling that Serbia was taking the first step toward *détente* in relations with its western neighbor (Vlada Srbije 2016c). Another positive signal was sent following the first meeting between Vučić and Croatian Prime Minister Plenković at the margins of a gathering in Davos at the beginning of 2017, during which both leaders pledged peace and cooperation (Vlada Srbije 2017d). Since the prior unilateral moratorium on responses to Croatia proved only partially successful, Vučić, ahead of his 2018 visit to Zagreb, proposed a six-month moratorium on statements about the past between the two countries, emphasizing Serbia's preference to “calm the ghosts of the past” rather than awaken them (Beta 2018a). Finally, in 2018, Serbian officials stressed the need to depoliticize the issue of missing persons. This approach can be interpreted as part of a broader strategy to reduce tensions on sensitive issues with Croatia while simultaneously removing one of Croatia's key

arguments for labeling Serbia as a state unwilling to confront its legacy from the wars of the 1990s.

The results of this combination of denial and compromise were not negligible. The fact that Germany and the EU sent a message in 2015 that Serbia acted properly in its initial restraint toward Croatia at the start of the "mini customs war" and exerted certain pressure on Croatia to remove measures against Serbia was one of the strongest symbolic indicators that Serbia had indeed destigmatized itself to a significant extent compared to the 1990s. This indicated that no EU member state could easily legitimize the application of special measures, such as trade blockades against Serbia, by invoking traditional stereotypes about Serbia's allegedly malevolent and even aggressive behavior toward its neighbors. Of course, this outcome was also influenced by Serbia's overall behavior in the migration crisis, which was previously mentioned. The fact that Croatia eventually relented on its tax increases in 2017 also sent a similar message that discriminatory measures against Serbia were no longer easy to legitimize in front of the international society. Additionally, the EU and US messages to Croatia to not block Serbia's EU path over bilateral issues were an example that discrimination against Serbia based on the label of "human rights violator" was now much more challenging.

The labels Croatia directed at Serbia were not reaffirmed in key stigmatization forums. Certain compensation and camouflage acts successfully maintained the perception of Serbia as an actor committed to good neighborly relations, meaning that the issue of relations with Croatia did not position itself as an obstruction in this regard. Serbia's attempts to label Croatia had certain limited outcomes in highlighting Croatia's rehabilitation of the Ustasha movement, particularly among members of the international society sensitive to Holocaust-related issues. The very fact that the Jasenovac exhibition was held at the UN building at East River, New York (UN 2018) and that numerous Holocaust-related associations joined in labeling Croatia (BBC 2016) demonstrates that Serbia's actions indeed had some impact.

On the other hand, the success was far from complete. Primarily, Croatia was still able to occasionally slow down Serbia's European path by delaying the opening of negotiation chapters, demonstrating its higher position in this power hierarchy. Additionally, EU enlargement strategy specified that EU membership could only be achieved by countries with clearly defined borders (European Commission 2018). This meant that Serbia would not be able to join the EU before defining its borderline along the Danube with Croatia. This decision by the EU strengthened Croatia's leverage in the future and clearly complicated Serbia's position. Finally, despite Serbia's

considerable efforts to label Croatia, none of the labels Serbia attempted to attach to Croatia were accepted in any stigmatizing forum, and the application of higher degrees of stigmatization against Croatia was never seriously considered in such forums. Of course, the question arises as to whether Serbia, by applying such a strategy, truly intended to achieve the stigmatization of Croatia, or if it aimed to relax its own stigma through the strategy of “the best defense is a good offense,” achieving moderate effects in the realm of counter-labeling. Certain possible domestic political motives that might correspond to this goal should also be considered. In any case, it is evident that the effects were quite limited.

### **Deepening Rivalry (2018–2020)**

Near the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the perception of Croatia as a threat was further solidified. Notably, the public expression of negative attitudes toward Croatia became an important internal political issue for gaining domestic support. This corresponded to the general decline of democracy in Serbia which especially gained momentum in this period. According to the Freedom House “Freedom in the World” index, Serbia in 2019 declined from the category of “free” to “partially free” countries, while the “Nations in Transit” index classified Serbia to the category of “transitional or hybrid regimes” (Freedom House 2024). One of the most important causes of this decline was control over most of the media by the ruling party. However, Serbian officials internally regarded Croatia as a potentially threatening actor concerning what they perceived to be the interests of their government (Interview 9). Conversely, the importance of this stage for Serbia’s stigma-management activities declined to its lowest level since the early 2000s.

The first part of 2018 marked the last attempt to normalize relations between the two sides. The visit of President Vučić to Croatia in February, along with the announcement of a “moratorium” on historical disputes, suggested the possibility of de-escalating tensions, which had remained high almost continuously for three years. However, from August 2018, during the anniversary of Operation Storm, tensions once again escalated. This time, the escalation was unprecedented, and the “good neighborliness” discourse was entirely absent in evaluations of the current state of cooperation. This signaled that rivalry had become entrenched and that a return to a more partnership-oriented relationship was not foreseeable.

At the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, the discourse framing Croatia’s actions as “anti-Serbian behavior” was consistently pursued

in the speeches of Serbian public officials. However, this discourse differed substantially from that of the previous period. Explicit references to concrete threats stemming from Croatia's behavior diminished, while generalized references to Croatia as an adversary without specifying reasons became dominant. Minister Dačić referred to an "anti-Serbian hysteria" (Beta 2019), while President Vučić claimed that "someone in Croatia" expected Serbia to be marginalized following Croatia's entry into NATO and the EU (Hina 2019a). Serbian officials emphasized the perception that Croatia sought to "keep Serbia down" in all relevant hierarchies, from the economy to the military. Parallel to this, the "Croatia hinders progress" discourse remained vivid and often took direct forms. President Vučić claimed that reconciliation was hindered by Croatian attempts to "humiliate Serbia" (Hina 2020). The focus on the "arms race" also persisted, with Serbian leaders frequently discussing Croatia's military power from a regional rivalry perspective.

However, a significant shift occurred from mid-2018 onward in how Serbian leaders positioned Serbia within this informal hierarchy. Serbian officials increasingly emphasized Serbia's strength and growing economic and military power. In this context, although Croatia's "bad intentions" toward Serbia were still highlighted, the widely used narrative of Serbian strength indicated the absence of any public articulation of a real threat posed by Croatia's behavior. This raises questions about whether Serbian leaders genuinely perceived any substantial threat from Croatia in the given period. This shift coincided with a slowdown in Serbia's EU integration process. While Croatia's stance could have posed a threat to Serbia's progress in the EU path, as it had in previous years, this was no longer a prominent focus. Furthermore, there were no immediate crises, such as the September 2015 bilateral dispute during the height of the migrant crisis, where Croatia's actions were perceived as particularly harmful to Serbia's economic interests.

### *Stigma Management Strategies and Outcomes*

During this period, Serbia used mostly denying strategies, while rarely resorting to mild forms of camouflage and compensation. The almost complete reliance on denying strategies, particularly the intensive use of counter-stigmatization alongside only occasional mild forms of compromising acts, aligns with the destigmatization dilemma model.

The most significant characteristic of this phase was the relative scarcity of compromising strategies by Serbia toward Croatia. Only a few symbolically positive measures were taken, such as Serbia's donation of one million euros in humanitarian aid to Croatia following the large earthquake in

December 2020 (FoNet 2020). Although this act could be viewed as broader impression management, presenting Serbia as compassionate toward the tragedies of its former adversaries, it fell far short of the symbolic acts undertaken in earlier periods, especially prior to 2015. The closest example of a gesture of goodwill was Serbia's renovation of the birthplace of Ban Josip Jelačić, one of Croatia's most prominent national leaders from the nineteenth century. The historic house was reopened in Petrovaradin, Novi Sad, in October 2020, attended by Serbian President Vučić and Croatian Foreign Minister Gordan Grlić Radman (Tanjug 2020a).

Further evidence of the decreasing prevalence of compromising gestures for stigma-management purposes is found in Serbia's public condemnation of Boris Milošević's decision, the political representative of Serbs in Croatia, and the vice president of the Croatian government attending the state-organized commemoration of the anniversary of Operation Storm in Knin in August 2020. Minister Dačić described Milošević's participation as "serving Croatian interests" rather than those of Serbs (Tanjug 2020b). Additionally, some of Serbia's own compromising gestures during this period received far less attention and were less widely disseminated than earlier efforts. For instance, Veran Matić, the president's envoy for relations with Croatia, symbolically knelt in Vukovar in autumn 2020 as a commemorative gesture honoring war crimes victims (Beta 2020). While Matić acknowledged receiving the president's support for this personal act, Serbian state officials did not emphasize this event as Serbia's remorse for the past. This stands in stark contrast to the widely publicized apologies issued by Tadić, which were consistently referenced in Serbia's communications with foreign actors.

On the other hand, the use of denying strategies shifted primarily to *counter-stigmatization*. When confronted with accusations by Croatia, Serbian officials promptly responded with counter-accusations, highlighting Serb suffering during the 1990s or referencing Croatia's NDH crimes during World War II and alleged revisionism. For example, when Croatian officials protested a memorial plaque in Novi Sad dedicated to the JNA commander from the Battle of Vukovar, Serbian President Vučić responded by pointing out that Croatia names streets after Mile Budak, a leader of the Ustasha during World War II (Tanjug 2019). Similarly, when Plenković claimed that reconciliation was impossible unless Serbia "acknowledges its aggression against Croatia during the 1990s," Foreign Minister Dačić countered, asserting that reconciliation could not occur until Croatia stops "presenting Jasenovac as a place of good fun and theater plays" and fully confronts its World War II history (FoNet 2019). This was followed with broader analogies between Serbs and Jews on the one side, and Croats and Germans on the other side. When

Zagreb protested against Dačić's speech at the UN exhibition on Jasenovac, claiming that the Serbian foreign minister was "abusing and manipulating with the Jasenovac victims for daily political purposes," President Vučić stated that "it's like somebody signing a protest note to Jews for marking Holocaust (Remembrance) Day, and that note arriving from Germany" (Beta 2018c). Comparing contemporary Croatia with the NDH and Nazi Germany was continued in the coming years.<sup>9</sup>

However, it is important to note that there remains considerable debate about whether labeling and blaming were part of a genuine stigma-management strategy. Stigma management typically aims to influence external audiences, altering their perceptions of the stigmatized actor. There is little evidence suggesting that Serbia made a concerted effort to convince the audience of normals that Croatia should be blamed and punished, while Serbia exonerated. By the end of the second decade of the twenty-first century, it appears that the primary audience for these labeling statements was Serbia's domestic public rather than external actors. Consequently, it could be argued that even denying stigma-management activities during this stage were gradually decreasing, much like the compromising gestures.

There were no direct positive destigmatization effects of the mentioned actions for Serbia. Conversely, certain negative effects arose from Croatia's efforts to (re)stigmatize Serbia. One prominent example was the denial by the office of Croatian President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarović that a bilateral meeting with Serbian Foreign Minister Dačić had taken place on the sidelines of the UNGA session in New York in autumn 2019, despite claims by the Serbian Foreign Ministry (Hina 2019b). This sharp rejection of the notion that "a brief meeting in the corridor" constituted a bilateral discussion highlights the desire of Croatian political elites to marginalize Serbian leadership. Similar dynamics were evident in reactions from numerous Croatian politicians to suggestions that Vučić might visit Zagreb for the European People's Party (EPP) meeting in 2019. Additionally, in multilateral forums Croatian representatives consistently supported resolutions criticizing Serbia, either for historical events or its current policies.

However, the real impact of these Croatian efforts should not be overstated. Due to the stagnation of Serbia's EU accession process, Croatia did not significantly influence this aspect during the period, although it was evident that

9 One of the most radical examples was President Vučić's comment on Croatian reaction to Montenegro's parliamentary declaration condemning genocide in Jasenovac, when he said that "they [Croats] fell into their own trap and showed that they make no difference compared to NDH (Nazi-puppet government) and any other Croatian state that ever existed" (Hina 2024).

it could pose challenges in the future if Serbia made substantial progress on its EU path. Moreover, Croatia's labeling efforts primarily targeted Serbian leadership, rather than portraying Serbia as a weak or deviant state. Over time, Croatia began to fully assume the role of a member of the audience of normals, distancing itself from its previous status as a stigmatized peer of Serbia. This shift included refraining from significant compromising gestures, which might have served Croatia's own impression management before the core members of the international society. Nonetheless, Croatia did not hold sufficient power within the international system to further stigmatize Serbia. Consequently, bilateral relations became less relevant from a stigma-management perspective.

### **Summary: Rising and Fading Destigmatization Dilemma in Relations with Croatia**

Foreign policy towards Croatia was one of the stages through which Serbia aimed to manage its stigma and improve its reputation among the international and continental audience of normals. Many negative labels attached to Serbia during the 1990s (war criminal, human rights violator, aggressor, and violator of international obligations) were at least partially connected to the Croatian War (1991–1995) and Belgrade's role in it. To remove these negative labels, as well as other sharper aspects of stigma (stereotypes, separation, status loss, and discriminatory measures) based on these labels, it was important for Serbia to send the right messages to the audience of normals through its relations with Croatia. Members of this audience, especially the EU, the US, and Western European countries, closely monitored Serbian-Croatian relations to assess the behavior of both actors in the postwar context.

From 2001, Serbian decision-makers faced a destigmatization dilemma in their relations with Croatia. They feared that making too many compromises might be exploited by Croatian actors and jeopardize Serbia's security interests, while making no compromises could negatively impact destigmatization, one of Serbia's main goals. As a result, Serbia pursued some of the compromising and some of the denying strategies simultaneously for most of the time, attempting to balance its two goals: preserving security and achieving destigmatization. This shows that both goals remained very relevant throughout the period of analysis, even though they varied in importance. Still, it seems that the dilemma is reactively fading at the end of the analyzed period, and that this relation is not as important for Serbian destigmatization anymore.

However, the relative emphasis on different strategies varied during these two decades. In certain periods (2001–2003, 2015–2020) the dominantly applied strategies were of a denying character (stigma rejection and counter-stigmatization), with the simultaneous use of only camouflage and compensation from the scope of compromising strategies. In other periods (2003–2007, 2010–2012), there was a clear dominance in the use intensity of compromising strategies (stigma acceptance and camouflage and compensation), with the marginal simultaneous use of only stigma rejection from the corpus of denying strategies. Finally, during two periods (2007–2010, 2012–2015), all types of compromising and denying strategies were used parallelly, with somewhat similar intensity.

The analysis confirmed that variations in the relative intensity and the dominance of a certain type of strategy depended on two factors. The first was the perceived importance of this stage for achieving destigmatization. In periods when this perception was higher, Serbian leaders were strongly incentivized to pursue compromises in their relations with Croatia to send positive messages to the audience of normals and vice versa. The second factor influencing Serbian policy was the perceived threat coming from Croatia. In periods when this perception was higher, Serbia resorted more to denying strategies and vice versa. The interplay of these two factors led to different outcomes, consistent with the outlined destigmatization dilemma model. When importance of a stage was low, while the threat perception was high, Serbia dominantly pursued denying strategies. Conversely, when the importance of a stage was higher, and the threat perception relatively low, Serbia relied dominantly on compromising strategies. Finally, when both factors were high, Serbia pursued all strategies parallelly (table 8).

**Table 8 Serbia’s destigmatization dilemma in relations with Croatia (2001–2020)** ↵

Period	2001–2003	2003–2007	2007–2010	2010–2012	2012–2015	2015–2018	2018–2020
<b>Importance of stage</b>	Low	High	High	High	High	Low	Low
<b>Threat perception</b>	High	Low	High	Low	High	High	High
<b>Dominant strategies</b>	Denying strategies	Compromising strategies	Parallel appliance of all strategies	Compromising strategies	Parallel appliance of all strategies	Denying strategies	Denying strategies

The process unfolded more as a continuum marked by gradual shifts rather than distinct, clear-cut phases as presented here for analytical purposes. This is reflected in the internal dynamics of each phase. For example, Serbia's compromising gestures became significantly more pronounced in late 2002 and early 2003 compared to the more rigid stance observed in early 2001, at the outset of the first period. Nonetheless, to simplify the model, each phase is categorized according to its prevailing pattern, using a binary scale ranging from high threat (rivals and enemies) to low threat (partners and friends), while addressing the observed variations in more detail in the subchapter.

Moreover, while some phases belong to the same binary category, their relative position in that category varies, leading to different frequency of the use of a dominant strategy. For example, although relations with Croatia had been perceived as rivalrous since 2015, the further increase in the perception of threat and the decreased importance of relations with Croatia as a stigma-management stage led to much less frequent use of compromising acts in 2020 compared to, for example, 2016–2017. Similarly, although the threat perception was low between 2003 and 2007, it was comparatively much lower between 2010 and 2012, leading to even more intensive use of compromising strategies. These relative fluctuations between and inside different periods, elaborated in this chapter, are also visually presented (figure 4).

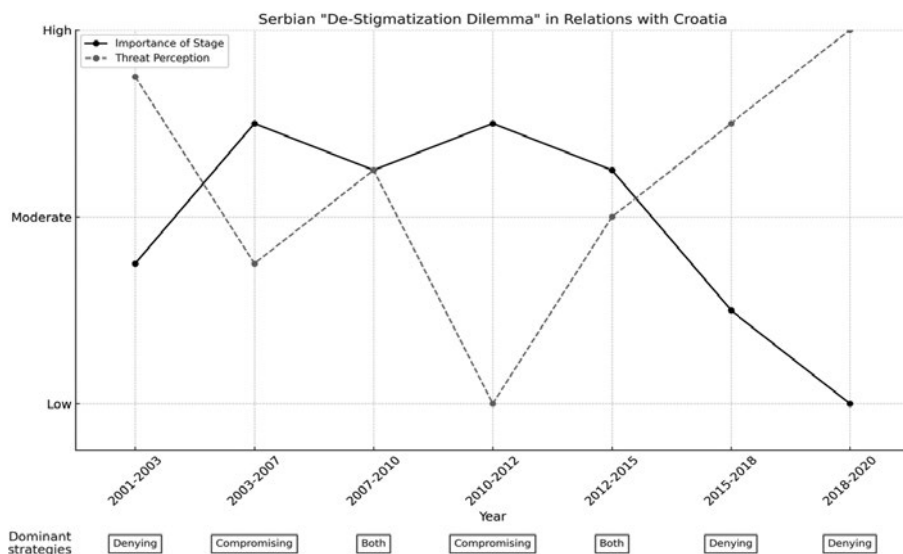


Figure 4: Serbia's destigmatization dilemma in relations with Croatia (2001–2020) ◀

While this chapter addressed some important factors influencing changes in threat perception and the role of staging over the decades, a comprehensive exploration of these causes was beyond its primary scope. The main goal was to trace how changes in the two factors influenced the shifts in stigma-management strategies Serbia applied in relations with Croatia from 2001 to 2020. Based on the process tracing findings, it is possible to conclude that the premises of the destigmatization dilemma model are confirmed in this case (figure 4).

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## 7. “Do Not Use the G-Word”

### Serbian Stigma Management in Foreign Policy towards BiH (2001–2020)

**Abstract:** This chapter analyzes the perception of threat and the nature of Serbian decision-makers’ relations with BiH, with a particular focus on the Bosniak population, using the outlined theoretical and methodological framework. It distinguishes between different periods based on the dominant perception of relations (enemy/rival/partner/friend), categorizes Serbia’s actions in this context into the different ideal types of stigma-management strategies, and elaborates the outcomes of their application. Finally, by combining insights from analysis of the relative importance of this stage, with the analysis of the perception of threats, this chapter evaluates whether the strategies employed align with the destigmatization dilemma model, summarizing all variations at its conclusion. The chapter spotlights the importance of avoiding the genocide label for Serbian decision-makers.

**Keywords:** strategy, compromise, negation, threat perception, genocide, war crimes

“Damn any country that doesn’t have Bosnia”<sup>1</sup>—this saying was a very popular print on T-shirts, mugs, and other items in Belgrade during the early 1990s. The appeal of this phrase lay in its ability to resonate with two distinct groups of citizens: Yugo-nostalgic individuals who lamented the dissolution of the “old Yugoslavia” and viewed the “rump Yugoslavia,” consisting only of Montenegro and Serbia, as an inferior successor, and Serbian nationalists, who considered BiH a part of the historical Serbian space and believed that the new FRY was not “Serbian enough” if it did not include BiH, or at least part of it (Republika Srpska).

1 *Jebeš zemlju koja Bosne nema* in the Serbian language.

This example is highly indicative of the broader perceptions of BiH that have existed in modern Serbian history. One perspective regarded BiH as historically Serbian territory that should be unified with Serbia. Many Serbian leaders, starting with Prince Mihailo Obrenović, invested significant efforts to achieve this unification during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>2</sup> The occupation of BiH by Austria-Hungary in line with the 1878 Congress of Berlin decision already raised worries about the possibility of such an outcome. The following annexation of BiH by the Habsburg Empire in 1908 triggered an outpouring of anger among Serbs, including Crown Prince Đorđe Karađorđević, and led to open calls for war with Austria-Hungary to “liberate Serbian brothers” in BiH (Lopandić 2010). In late 1918, numerous municipalities in BiH proclaimed unification with Serbia. After the creation of Yugoslavia, many Serbs considered most of BiH to be part of the Serbian historical territory within the new state.<sup>3</sup> A more nationalist interpretation held that all citizens of BiH were ethnically Serbian but had converted to either Islam or Catholicism from Orthodoxy.

The other perspective saw this territory as distinct from Serbia, yet still closely linked. The religious diversity of BiH and its unique historical development encouraged a more “Yugoslav” approach among certain political groups who viewed it as a territorial unit like Serbia, but not entirely the same. While acknowledging the Serbian/Orthodox identity of BiH, this view also recognized the equal importance of the Muslim/Bosniak and Croat/Catholic identities in the region’s composition.<sup>4</sup> In socialist Yugoslavia, the recognition of BiH as a separate people’s republic within the federation in the 1940s marked a shift in the dominant elite attitudes toward the territory. However, Muslims (Bosniaks) were not recognized as a constituent nation until 1971. The relative success of the “brotherhood and unity” project during socialist Yugoslavia and the absence of disputes between Serbia and BiH until the early 1990s supported the belief that Serbia and BiH naturally belonged to the same community.

2 Later, Serbian King Petar Karađorđević, then as a regular citizen, participated in the uprising against Ottomans in Bosnia during the Great Eastern Crisis 1875–1878.

3 After the Second World War and the creation of the separate Peoples Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina inside Yugoslavia, this perception ceased to be dominant among Serb ruling Communist politicians; even some communists considered BiH to be, at least partially, dominantly tied to Serbia. For example, Serbian-Jew Communist Moša Pijade, who advocated for BiH being a province inside Serbia and against the formal recognition of a Muslim (Bosniak) nation in Yugoslavia (Antić and Marković 2016).

4 This distinction was acknowledged already in the first Serbian national strategy called “Načertanije” from 1844, in which Ilija Garašanin envisioned that Serbia should invest energy to coopt “Bosniaks” Muslims and Catholics for its cause.

Despite the differing perspectives on BiH (whether viewed as exclusively Serbian or as a territory equally belonging to Bosnian Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks), both visions shared a common belief that BiH was naturally tied to Serbia. Consequently, any event threatening this unity was far more unsettling to the Serbian national mindset than the breakdown of unity with Croatia. In the early 1990s, Milošević's policies fluctuated between these two positions: from supporting a "historical agreement" with Bosniaks to preserve BiH within Yugoslavia, to making secret agreements with Tudman for the ethnic partition of BiH, aiming to place most of the territory under Serbian control.

However, alongside this dominant sense of closeness, nationalist circles cultivated negative perceptions of interethnic relations in BiH. These narratives depicted Bosnian Muslims and Croats as threats to Serbs, often referencing the genocide committed against Serbs, Jews, and Roma by the Ustasha regime during World War II. They also highlighted periods of Ottoman and Habsburg rule in BiH as eras when Muslims or Catholics were favored by foreign powers, while Orthodox Serbs were marginalized and treated as second-class citizens. The main narrative among Bosnian Serbs about the 1992–1995 conflict builds on these premises, framing it as a defensive war, referred to as the Defensive-Patriotic War (*Odbrambeno-otadžbinski rat*) which aimed to prevent a recurrence of the historical suffering of Serbs in Bosnia. This coexistence of a sense of closeness with BiH and the perception of historical victimization has formed the central identity-narrative axis for Serbian-BiH relations since the 1990s.

The war in BiH during the 1990s was the primary catalyst for the stigmatization of the FRY as an "aggressor." The suffering of Bosniaks became a basis for labeling the FRY as responsible for war crimes and even genocide. Serbia's reluctance or failure to extradite Bosnian Serb military and political leaders to the ICTY further entrenched its image as a violator of international obligations. Additionally, the treatment of the Bosniak minority in Serbia became a reference point in assessing Serbia's human rights record. Considering these factors, Serbia's actions toward BiH and particularly toward the Bosniaks in BiH, their politicians at the state and entity levels, and the Bosniak minority in Serbia represented a critical stage where Serbia had to demonstrate its role as a "good neighbor" and a "normal" actor within the international society to achieve destigmatization.

At the same time, there were unresolved issues regarded by Serbian elites as vital to national security. The survival of the RS has been considered a national interest for Serbia since the 1990s, with any threats to its existence perceived as a direct security threat. The broader position of Serbs in BiH

also held significant importance for Serbia. Furthermore, concerns about potential encouragement of Bosniak separatism in Sandžak by Bosniak politicians from BiH were seen as a security risk. The Bosnian genocide lawsuit filed against the FRY in 1993 was another longstanding issue, viewed as a major threat since the 1990s. Sarajevo's refusal to withdraw the lawsuit prevented the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two countries during the second half of the 1990s, as Belgrade conditioned normalization on this withdrawal. The genocide label carried particular weight and Serbia actively sought to avoid the use of the term, making it a focal point of its diplomatic efforts.

It is evident that both elements of the destigmatization dilemma model were prominently present in this relationship. This chapter analyzes the perception of threats and the nature of Serbian decision-makers' relations with BiH, with a particular focus on the Bosniak population, using the outlined theoretical and methodological framework. It distinguishes between five different periods based on the dominant perception of relations (enemy/rival/partner/friend). It also categorizes Serbia's actions in this context into the different ideal types of stigma-management strategies and elaborates on the outcomes of their application. Finally, by combining insights from the previous chapter (on the relative importance of this stage) with the current analysis (on the perception of threats), this chapter evaluates whether the strategies employed align with the destigmatization dilemma model, summarizing all variations at its conclusion.

### **Initial Rivalry and Fast Rapprochement (2001–2003)**

During the initial years after the regime change in Belgrade, as this subchapter shows, relations with BiH were perceived as increasingly important for Serbia's stigma-management efforts. However, these relations were less critical than internal reforms and cooperation with the ICTY. The perception of threat was clearly decreasing, but the Bosnian lawsuit against the FRY for genocide prevented this perception from dropping to a low level. Instead, the threat was still perceived as moderately high.

In early 2001, diplomatic relations were established between the FRY and BiH. Progress in relations followed, leading Serbian foreign policy decision-makers to increasingly view relations with Sarajevo as potentially partnership oriented. By 2001, the discourse of "normalization and cooperation" emerged in their statements. The FRY's first ambassador to BiH, Stanimir Vukićević, stated that relations between the two countries

were "developing" and expressed expectations for the "continuation of normalization" (Beta 2001c). Foreign Minister Goran Svilanović listed the improvement of relations with all neighbors, including "the Bosnians," as an achievement (Beta 2001d). The discourse of cooperation was also evident in agreements signed in 2001, including the establishment of the Council for Interstate Cooperation between the FRY and BiH. Its first session was held in Sarajevo at the end of 2001, marking the third visit to Sarajevo of FRY President Vojislav Koštunica within a year (Tanjug 2001c). At a meeting of the council's standing committee in 2002, FRY officials, alongside colleagues from BiH, noted that "a lot has been done" to advance bilateral relations (Tanjug 2002f). In 2002, President Koštunica used highly positive terms to describe the nature of relations, calling the meeting of the three presidents "comprehensive, friendly, and open" in a joint statement with BiH's three-member presidency and Croatia's president (Tanjug 2002c). By 2003, this discourse of "normalization" evolved into one of "partnership and cooperation." Assistant Minister of Foreign Affairs Vladimir Đerić remarked that "we have very good relations with Bosnia" (Tanjug 2003b). Speaker of the SCG Assembly Dragoljub Mićunović went further, describing relations with BiH as "friendly and on the rise" (Beta 2003f). The use of the term "friendly" to describe mutual relations for the first time underscores the progress achieved.

However, relations with BiH had not yet reached a fully partnership-oriented status by the second half of 2003, let alone a genuinely friendly one. Serbia maintained truly friendly relations with BiH entity RS, with which it upheld special parallel ties and close cooperation. Statements about the closeness with the RS were often so explicit that Bosniak politicians in Sarajevo interpreted them as undermining BiH's sovereignty. For instance, President Koštunica referred to the RS as a "temporarily separated part of the family," a statement suggesting exceptional closeness with one entity in BiH but also potentially conveying an irredentist message about the need to "reunite the family," meaning Serbia and the RS, thereby undermining BiH (Beta 2002d). The distinction in how Belgrade perceived its relations with different parts of BiH is further illustrated by Svilanović's statement in May 2003, emphasizing the need to develop economic cooperation between "all of BiH" and "all of SCG" (Beta 2003b).

A particularly indicative sign that relations were still not perceived as a partnership was the parallel discourse of "Bosniaks hindering progress," used in the context of Bosniak politicians at the state level refusing to withdraw the lawsuit against the FRY/SCG before the ICJ. Although Ambassador Vukićević emphasized in 2001 that the lawsuit did not "constitute an obstacle

to cooperation," he clearly expressed Belgrade's view that it should be withdrawn to enhance cooperation (Tanjug 2001b). Serbia's legal representative before the ICJ, Tibor Varadi, stated in early 2003 that the lawsuit "burdens relations" (Tanjug 2003a). Varadi also described the lawsuit as a "continuation of the war" and warned that it could have "far-reaching negative consequences" if successful (Beta 2003c). Advisor to FRY President Predrag Simić even compared the lawsuit to the severe repercussions Germany faced after World War II (Beta 2003i). Minister of Defense Boris Tadić openly declared that "regional security cannot be built on mutual lawsuits" (Tanjug 2003g). Thus, the BiH lawsuit was perceived through a "security perspective" as a threat to the Serbian economy which could be substantially hit with hypothetical reparations, as well as a threat for its international reputation.

Skepticism about the survival of the RS was also present in statements by Serbian officials. In a congratulatory message to RS President Šarović on the Day of Republika Srpska in 2002, Koštunica expressed his hope that Serbs in BiH would preserve the "Dayton BiH and RS within it," implying that the Dayton order, and the RS itself, might be at risk. However, the main threat to the RS was not perceived as coming only from Bosniaks or Croats, but also from the Office of the High Representative (OHR) with its extensive Bonn Powers.<sup>5</sup> Dissatisfaction with the OHR's "mentoring and tutoring" approach to managing relations between BiH and the FRY was voiced by President Koštunica in the spring of 2002 (Tanjug 2002a). Guarantees that planned tax reforms "would not endanger the spirit and letter of the Dayton Agreement," and thus the RS, were requested from High Representative Paddy Ashdown by Goran Svilanović and Božidar Đelić in February 2003 (Tanjug 2003i). Svilanović also stated that any unilateral renaming of the RS was unacceptable and emphasized that it was impermissible to label the RS a "genocidal creation" (Beta 2002e). Thus, the discourse of an "endangered Republika Srpska" existed during this period, but was mild, framed more as a potential concern than a clear indication of an imminent threat.

### *Stigma Management Strategies and Outcomes*

In line with the premises of the destigmatization dilemma model, decision-makers in Belgrade relied heavily on various compromising gestures towards

5 The Bonn Powers present an extensive authority devoted to the OHR (including the right to remove officials in BiH that did not respect the bidding legal norms and to unilaterally adopt new bidding norms) at the December 1997 meeting of the Peace Implementation Council (PIC). The PIC was formed in 1995 in accordance with the Dayton Peace Agreement, and it consisted of the main international actors observing the implementation of the agreement, including the US, UK, EU, and Russia.

Sarajevo, though without direct stigma acceptance. These gestures were balanced with occasional acts of denial, as previously discussed. Although two types of denying strategies (stigma rejection and counter-stigmatization) were employed alongside only one type of compromise strategy, it was obvious that the overall approach was gradually leaning towards compromise. This was largely due to the extensive application of the camouflage and compensation strategy. Considering that the importance was rising, and the threat perception was decreasing, this gradual intensifying of a compromising approach was in accordance with the model. Interviews revealed that threat perception influenced decisions on whether to apologize or accept partial responsibility (Interview 1, 2, 3). They also indicated that counter-stigmatization acts were considered as a "trade-off to reduce the risk of placing all blame for wrongdoing on Serbia" (Interview 1).

The *camouflage and compensation* approach during this period relied on several key elements. The first was the decision to withdraw the counter-lawsuit against BiH for genocide in April 2001 (Hrnjaz 2015, 259). Although it was evident that winning this counter-lawsuit, initially filed by the FRY in 1997, was nearly impossible, its existence served to apply pressure on Sarajevo to withdraw its own lawsuit against the FRY. It also played a balancing role by presenting arguments about crimes committed during the BiH war, allowing allegations about crimes against Serbs in BiH to enter public records and discourse. Despite these potential benefits, FRY officials chose to relinquish this tool. The decision also had procedural and legal grounds, as the FRY argued that it was a new state that had not been a UN member during the 1990s and, therefore, could not be sued. However, given that the court's jurisdiction had already been established in 1996, it was widely recognized that altering this decision was unlikely, as later acknowledged by members of Belgrade's legal team. Thus, the withdrawal carried significant political symbolism, signaling a break with Milošević's confrontational policies toward neighboring countries. This act was framed as a "gesture of goodwill" (as Ambassador Vukićević described it) and a "unilateral concession" from Belgrade, implicitly appealing to Sarajevo to reciprocate by withdrawing its 1993 lawsuit against the FRY (Beta 2001a).

The second crucial element of this strategy was Belgrade's commitment to strictly adhering to the Dayton Agreement and refraining from interfering in BiH's internal affairs. This included halting the funding of security structures in the RS, a measure implemented in the early years following the regime change in Belgrade (Interview 1). Messages that accompanied this approach emphasized Belgrade's respect for BiH's sovereignty and adherence to the Dayton Agreement, with statements such as "we do not

want to be anyone's elder brother" (Beta 2002e). Serbia underscored its respect for BiH's sovereignty and territorial integrity in international forums, such as the OSCE and the UN (Beta 2002c). These declarations were further reinforced by the ratification of the Dayton Agreement in the FRY parliament in late 2002, seven years after its signing. This ratification eliminated any formal-legal ambiguity regarding the new government's stance on Dayton. Additionally, this development was accompanied by a new agreement on special parallel ties between the FRY and the RS. According to a senior official interviewed from this period, this agreement was always negotiated with consultations and approval from Western stakeholders, demonstrating Belgrade's transparency and signaling a "shift from Milošević's approach toward Serbs in the region" (Interview 1).

The third element, closely linked to the previous one, involved encouraging RS political elites to compromise on specific political issues inside BiH. A notable example of this was the explicit support from Koštunica, Đinđić, and Svilanović for implementing the BiH constitutional court's ruling that required the RS to amend its constitution to extend the status of constituent peoples to Bosniaks and Croats in addition to Serbs (Tanjug 2002d, 2002e; Beta 2002e). Goran Svilanović explicitly stated the necessity of breaking away from Milošević's ideology, which held that "Serbs cannot live with others" (Beta 2002f). This behavior aimed to demonstrate that Belgrade had transformed into a "more than good neighbor," shifting from a disintegrative force to one encouraging compromise among Serbs in neighboring countries.

The fourth element consisted of efforts to institutionalize close relations with Sarajevo, aimed at demonstrating that Belgrade was indeed a "good neighbor." Decision-makers from this period confirmed that these relations were closely monitored by international actors, which motivated the pursuit of closer ties with Sarajevo. However, this was not the sole motivation; economic needs and the necessity for political solidarity with a country where Serbs were a constituent people, also played a role (Interviews 1 and 2). Numerous agreements were signed, including the free trade agreement and the dual citizenship agreement (MSP 2016a, 1–2; Beta 2002b). Especially important was the establishment of the mentioned council for cooperation of the two states, which sent a highly positive message globally about FRY-BiH relations. Furthermore, during the first year of his mandate, Koštunica visited Sarajevo three times. These visits and meetings were consistently accompanied by strong messages from Belgrade emphasizing its desire for close relations with of the entire BiH, including the RS as an integral part (though the RS often received particular emphasis). Active policy efforts were also directed toward Sarajevo as the capital of the Federation of Bosnia

and Herzegovina (FBiH) entity. Minister Svilanović repeatedly expressed a desire for closer cooperation. However, formal disparities in the treatment of physical and legal entities from FBiH in the FRY, compared to those from the RS, were only eliminated in 2003.

The fifth involved efforts to jointly cooperate with BiH in multilateral formats, showcasing close collaboration with third parties. Koštunica and his foreign policy advisor Predrag Simić emphasized that Belgrade was the initiator and main advocate for establishing regular high-level summits between the FRY, BiH, and Croatia. This initiative was presented as a strong example of Belgrade's commitment to preserving BiH's territorial integrity (Tanjug 2002a, 2002h; Beta 2002d). Additionally, in the spring of 2003, Svilanović and Marović initiated a joint regional position for the Western Balkans ahead of the Thessaloniki Summit with the EU. This initiative demonstrated regional unity in the orientation toward European integration and highlighted the ability of former adversaries to cooperate closely in the context of a shared European future (Tanjug 2003j).

Finally, the last element included material concessions by Serbia to demonstrate goodwill toward Sarajevo. In addition to agreements on the succession of assets, a notable example was the decision of the FRY to unilaterally abolish almost all customs duties on BiH imports in 2002, while BiH reciprocated only in 2004 (Beta 2002b). These concessions indicated that Belgrade's actions were driven not solely by relative gains and losses in bilateral relations, but also by the impression these efforts would make on the international society regarding Serbia's role as a "good neighbor." In parallel with these efforts, Belgrade engaged positively with the Bosniak national minority in Serbia, presenting this as an example of rapprochement with Bosniaks to Sarajevo. This was particularly evident in the visit by Minister Rasim Ljajić to Sarajevo (Tanjug 2002c).

*Stigma rejection* was evident through two main elements. The first was the refusal (or, at most, conditional acceptance) of any responsibility or apology for past events by Serbian politicians. Koštunica reacted strongly to High Representative Paddy Ashdown's expectation that an apology would be the desired outcome of his visit to Sarajevo and refused to make such a gesture, despite the Bosniak public's expectations (Tanjug 2002a). Đinđić took a similar stance, emphasizing that others would also need to apologize to Serbia in such a case and stating that he had no reason to apologize for the crimes of Milošević's regime (Beta 2002g). The only official with a somewhat softer approach was Svilanović, who stated that it was not yet time for apologies but added that they would inevitably become part of the agenda as relations progressed and time passed (Tanjug 2001a). In making

this statement, Svilanović essentially confirmed that relationships needed to be perceived as a partnership by a higher level of mutual trust and lower threat perception before apologies could be considered.

The second element was the public denouncement of the BiH lawsuit against the FRY and the refusal to accept its allegations. Serbia's legal representative, Tibor Varadi, asserted that the lawsuit contributed neither to justice nor reconciliation. He argued that, hypothetically, if the lawsuit succeeded, residents of Serbia's north autonomous province of Vojvodina—many of whom belonged to national minorities—would have to pay reparations to Radovan Karadžić, a war leader of Bosnian Serbs who is a BiH citizen (Tanjug 2003a). This was an attempt to discredit the notion that the entire state was responsible and that all BiH citizens were victims of Serbia. Even after the ICTY convicted Bosnian Serb general Radislav Krstić for genocide in Srebrenica, Varadi maintained that this preliminary judgment did not incriminate Belgrade and argued that there were significant chances the ICJ would conclude not only that official Belgrade was not responsible for genocide, but that genocide itself may not have occurred at all (Beta 2003c). Without directly addressing whether genocide occurred, Minister Goran Svilanović similarly dismissed any association of this label with the FRY or Serbia, rejecting the characterization of the RS as a “genocidal creation,” as promoted by certain political circles in BiH (Beta 2002e). This demonstrated that official Belgrade sought to remove the stigma from Serb responsibility, or—failing that—to argue that Belgrade did not control Banja Luka.

Finally, *counter-stigmatization* acts were applied, albeit marginally. Specific examples included attempts, following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, to associate the army of BiH with al-Qaeda and the Mujahideen. The participation of the Mujahideen on the Bosniak side during the BiH war was subtly highlighted during meetings with Western officials. The hope was that the global focus on Islamic terrorism would generate empathy toward Serbs, alter perspectives on the 1990s, and shift regional policies. FRY Parliament Speaker Dragoljub Mićunović explicitly mentioned this potential shift, noting that even Milošević's defense in The Hague emphasized connections between the Mujahideen, the Army of BiH, and the KLA of Albanian separatists (Tanjug 2002d).

Another example involved accusing the Bosniaks of committing crimes against Serbs during the BiH war, portraying these as equally severe as those committed against Bosniaks. In the summer of 2003, Serbian Justice Minister Vladan Batić twice threatened to present evidence of crimes against Serbs in BiH if Bosniaks refused to withdraw the genocide lawsuit. This lawsuit

was considered illegitimate by Serbs in BiH, as it lacked the support of Serb representatives in the country. In his first statement, Batić asserted that war crimes trials would be held in Belgrade, including one for the crime against JNA members on Dobrovoljačka Street in Sarajevo, accusing BiH of avoiding prosecution for this act (Tanjug 2003h). In his second statement, Batić was more direct, declaring that Serbia would disclose numerous documents proving "genocide against Serbs in BiH." This was an attempt to label BiH as genocidal toward Serbs, thereby relativizing Bosniaks' accusations against Serbia (Beta 2003a). However, these were more isolated instances rather than systemic efforts.

The results of Serbia's compromise efforts during this period were both numerous and tangible. In some cases, these actions served as prerequisites for further destigmatization steps. For instance, halting the financing of the security sector in the RS was a condition set by the US in 2001 and 2002 for continued financial aid, as well as progress in normalizing relations and reintegrating into the international society. Additionally, Serbia's actions received favorable feedback from international actors. High Representative Paddy Ashdown not only personally verified Belgrade's commitment to preserving the Dayton Agreement and inviolable borders but also praised the improvement of minority rights in the FRY, calling the results "impressive" and significant even for BiH (Beta 2002a). Public praise extended to trilateral meetings among Serbia, BiH, and Croatia to declarations signed during these meetings, and to Belgrade's encouragement of the RS to accept compromises, such as amending the constitution.

The second form of progress involved statements from BiH officials commending improved relations. As early as 2001, BiH's first ambassador to Belgrade, Željko Komšić, announced that the time for good neighborly relations had arrived, specifically praising Minister Svilanović's efforts to normalize relations (Beta 2001b). In early 2002, BiH Foreign Minister Zlatko Lagumdžija stated at the standing committee meeting of the council for cooperation that "far more had been done" to foster cooperation between the two countries since the end of 2000 than in previous years. He highlighted the free trade agreement as a "major breakthrough" (Tanjug 2002f). Such statements from ethnic Croats and Bosniaks were significant, accompanied by typical superlatives from Serbian politicians about cooperation. The frequent meetings of the council for cooperation and many agreements signed also represented a positive response from BiH to Belgrade's efforts. Sarajevo further demonstrated goodwill by approving the opening of an FRY consulate in Banja Luka and agreeing on dual citizenship, which primarily benefited Serbs in BiH (Tanjug 2002f).

Belgrade succeeded in conveying a message of a changed, cooperative approach toward its neighbors. The significant progress in restoring status and eliminating key elements of discrimination attested to the acceptance of this message by key actors within the “audience of normals.”<sup>6</sup> However, success during this period was not absolute. As mentioned earlier, the international society demanded additional efforts in certain cases, such as calls to halt funding for the RS, signaling a lack of complete confidence in the new course of the Belgrade government. Ongoing pressure on the RS and Serbian politicians in BiH to implement reforms toward state centralization also demonstrated that further compromises were expected of Serbs beyond their previously assumed obligations. The fact that key international actors did not openly support Serbia’s demands for BiH to withdraw its genocide lawsuit against Belgrade, such as the demand publicly made by Defense Minister Boris Tadić in 2003, confirms that the international audience of normals had not been fully convinced by Belgrade’s new role.

Reactions from Sarajevo often failed to validate Belgrade’s efforts to present itself as a stabilizing actor and a proponent of good neighborly relations. For example, Bosniak presidency member Beriz Belkić stated in late April 2002 that relations with the FRY “were not good,” calling on Belgrade to refrain from interfering in BiH’s internal affairs. He also urged Belgrade to stop discriminating against BiH citizens from the FBiH entity when entering the FRY and to ensure equal treatment for them as for those from the RS (Tanjug 2002g). The demand for equal treatment of BiH citizens from both entities was echoed even by former RS Prime Minister Mladen Ivanić upon assuming the role of BiH foreign minister. However, he simultaneously praised Belgrade and endorsed cooperation between Serbia and the RS as beneficial for of the entire BiH (Beta 2003e).

Nevertheless, the parallel ties between Belgrade and Banja Luka were often interpreted by Bosniak and Croatian politicians in Sarajevo as bypassing the state level and undermining BiH’s sovereignty. Particularly angering to Bosniak politicians were Koštunica’s reference to the RS as a “temporarily separated part of the family” and Đinđić’s statements implying that the fate of Kosovo, which he defined as a “protectorate along with BiH,” might affect the territorial integrity of BiH and Macedonia (Tanjug 2002b). These

6 As elaborated in the chapter on Serbian stigma management, Serbia was in this period reintegrated to the most important international financial organizations (IMF, World Bank, etc.), accepted to the membership of the Council of Europe, and diminished of almost all the remaining sanctioning measures. This indicated that messages which Serbia sent resonated quite well to the most important actors in the international society.

remarks implicitly suggested possible Serbian separatism in BiH as a form of retaliation for potential recognition of Kosovo's self-determination, which would violate Serbia's territorial integrity.

The refusal of BiH to withdraw its genocide lawsuit against the FRY represented the most significant blow to Serbia's destigmatization efforts in relation to Sarajevo. Bosniak officials not only declined to withdraw the lawsuit but argued that it could benefit bilateral relations, as Belkić claimed. Meanwhile, Serbian politicians in BiH consistently challenged the lawsuit's legitimacy, calling for its withdrawal and noting that it had been filed by the "Muslim presidency" of BiH in 1993 without the consent of Bosnian Serbs. The strongest defense of the lawsuit came from Sulejman Tihić, who strongly opposed Serbian Justice Minister Vladan Batić's counter-lawsuit threats. Tihić asserted that crimes committed by the Army of BiH were sporadic and unplanned, whereas Serbian crimes were systematic. He argued that it was necessary for Serbs to "face the truth and move on" (Beta 2003h). These statements failed to send positive signals to the international audience about the state of Belgrade-Sarajevo relations.

The messages from Sarajevo, in which Bosniak officials consistently emphasized Serbia's responsibility, demonstrated that Serbia's efforts to present itself as a cooperative and peace-seeking neighbor had not achieved full success. For many Bosniak politicians, the memory of the war and the atrocities committed against their people remained central to their narrative in relations with Serbia—a narrative they were unwilling to compromise on or set aside in the interest of normalizing relations.

### **Establishing of Partnership (2003–2005)**

The perception of threat significantly decreased after 2003, as this subchapter demonstrates. Determining the exact moment when decision-makers in Belgrade began perceiving relations with BiH as partnership based is challenging. While some cordial statements suggest that this transition may have occurred as early as the beginning of 2003, the strong reactions from Belgrade officials to Bosnia's lawsuit against Serbia in mid-2003 indicate that relations likely did not fully enter the partnership category until the latter half of 2003. At the same time, challenges in cooperation with the ICTY, particularly regarding the arrest of the Bosnian Serb military leader accused of war crimes Ratko Mladić, further elevated the significance of this stage, as evaluated in the previous chapter. It became a critical opportunity for Serbia to demonstrate its willingness to confront its past despite ongoing obstacles in ICTY cooperation.

The EU-Western Balkans Summit in Thessaloniki in mid-2003 likely marked a turning point in regional relations. According to multiple decision-makers from this period, the EU's clear promise that the entire region would become part of the EU, and thus part of the European security community, helped reduce perceptions of unresolved issues as threats and fostered warming relations across the region (Interviews 1 and 2). The signing of the dual citizenship agreement in May reassured Belgrade that Sarajevo was not attempting to obstruct legitimate ties between Serbia and Serbs in BiH, further reducing perceived threats to Serbian interests (MSP 2016a, 2). Additionally, the agreement on refugee return signed between Serbia and BiH in October 2003 alleviated concerns about Sarajevo posing a threat to Serb refugees from the FBiH (MSP 2016a, 2). This aspect of perceived threat diminished further following the signing of the Sarajevo Declaration on refugee return in January 2005. Certain leadership changes in February and March 2003 also contributed to this shift. Svetozar Marović, who approached relations with Sarajevo with significantly less suspicion than his predecessor Vojislav Koštunica, became the head of the SCG. Zoran Živković, who succeeded Zoran Đinđić as prime minister after the latter's assassination, also harbored less suspicion toward Sarajevo. Although Živković left office after a year, succeeded by Koštunica, this change did not negatively impact the overall perception of relations. Further positive developments came with the election of Boris Tadić, a Sarajevo native, as president of Serbia in summer 2004. Tadić's conciliatory stance on regional relations marked a significant shift.

This positive trajectory was reflected in the increasingly frequent use of the "good neighborly relations and partnership" rhetoric. During his visit to Sarajevo in November 2003, SCG President Marović stated that a new and better phase in regional relations had begun (Tanjug 2003f). Ambassador to Sarajevo Vukićević remarked that relations were "constantly improving" (Tanjug 2003c). While receiving the credentials of the new BiH ambassador, Marović emphasized that the SCG and BiH had achieved "dynamic cooperation" over the previous three years (Beta 2003j). In February 2004, during a meeting with BiH Council of Ministers President Adnan Terzić, Marović noted "clear progress" in relations (Beta 2004a). Serbia's Deputy Prime Minister Miroljub Labus expressed a positive outlook on BiH, emphasizing a desire for good neighborly relations (Tanjug 2004i). When SCG Foreign Minister Vuk Drašković visited Sarajevo in April 2004, he expressed confidence that all issues between the two countries would be resolved through agreements, signaling growing trust in bilateral relations (Tanjug 2004b). In May 2004, participants at the council for cooperation meeting noted "continuous progress in relations" (Beta 2004b). Marović stated that

he was "increasingly optimistic" (Tanjug 2004a). However, by late 2004 and early 2005, this rhetoric began to decline in intensity. At the meeting of the council in February 2005, Marović described relations with BiH simply as "good" (Beta 2005g). Similarly, during a visit by a delegation from the FBiH in March 2005, Deputy Prime Minister Labus mentioned positive relations, though optimism had noticeably waned (Vlada Srbije 2005b).

Meanwhile, discourse emphasizing threats and obstacles to cooperation diminished significantly from the second half of 2003, appearing only sparingly in early 2004. Initial reaction to BiH's delay in lifting tariffs on SCG products in early 2004 was negative but quickly resolved through bilateral discussions (Beta 2004d). Defense Minister Prvoslav Davinić raised concerns about the threat of Islamic terrorism from BiH but refrained from blaming Sarajevo (Tanjug 2004l). Also, concerns over the position of Serbs in the FBiH highlighted the ongoing apprehensions but in a mild form (Tanjug 2004n). However, from late 2004 Belgrade decision-makers began expressing concerns about the survival of the RS, perceiving this as a threat to the security of Serbia.<sup>7</sup> Koštunica voiced concerns over what he described as "very liberal and creative interpretations of Dayton" (Vlada Srbije 2004). Ambassador Vukićević echoed this sentiment, stating that OHR measures against the RS leadership had created a crisis (Tanjug 2004m). In early 2005, Koštunica reiterated the importance of preserving the entities, calling them the "foundation of Dayton in BiH." In a meeting with Koštunica, High Representative Paddy Ashdown clarified that military and police reforms would not proceed without the consent of all constituent peoples and assured that the RS would not be abolished (Vlada Srbije 2005a). This temporarily eased concerns, keeping relations within the partnership zone. Finally, while avoiding terms like "threat," both Foreign Minister Drašković and President Tadić emphasized that BiH's ongoing lawsuit against Serbia tarnished Belgrade's perception of relations. These developments illustrate that, despite decreasing perceptions of threats, relations remained vulnerable to slipping back into a more adversarial stance.

### *Stigma Management Strategies and Outcomes*

With the low perception of threat, Belgrade officials intensively employed stigma acceptance strategies, including direct apologies, complemented by

7 Concerns were driven largely by the OHR pressure on RS officials to implement military and police reforms and cooperate with the ICTY. The dismissal of nearly sixty RS officials, including the Speaker of the Assembly Dragan Kalinić, under the OHR's Bonn Powers, fueled fears that the RS's powers could be further diminished.

extensive use of camouflage and compensation strategies. At the same time, the persistence of a minimal level of perceived threat necessitated some balancing of these compromising strategies with elements of the thinner denying strategy, such as stigma rejection. This approach aligns with the expected logic of the destigmatization dilemma model.

*Stigma acceptance* was first demonstrated in November 2003, when the president of the SCG, Svetozar Marović, apologized to the citizens of BiH “for all the harm” inflicted on them “by any citizen of Serbia and Montenegro” (Beta 2003d). Although general in nature, this apology was significant, particularly given the absence of a reciprocal apology from the other side, unlike the mutual apologies exchanged between Marović and Croatian President Stjepan Mesić in the fall of 2003 in Belgrade. The one-sidedness of this apology highlighted its cathartic nature. Marović’s gesture received some criticism in Serbia and the RS, though no Serbian officials distanced from it. Marović stated that he believed the apology was also in the interest of the RS (Tanjug 2003d). He explicitly framed this act as an effort to alleviate the burden of the wartime legacy, saying, “the government must kneel so that its people may stand” (Tanjug 2004j).

This strategy was applied even more explicitly in November 2004, when President Boris Tadić apologized “to everyone against whom crimes were committed by members of the Serbian people” (Beta 2004c). Unlike Marović’s apology (limited to the citizens of the SCG), Tadić assumed responsibility on behalf of the Serbian people, not just Serbia or the SCG. This marked a broader acknowledgment, as Tadić accepted responsibility for actions committed by members of the VRS or Serb paramilitary formations during the war. This apology signified a departure from the prior practice of Belgrade accepting responsibility solely for the actions of its own citizens or institutions. Instead, Belgrade extended its acknowledgment to encompass the actions of the Serbian people beyond Serbia. Tadić emphasized, however, that it was “impossible to accuse an entire nation” for crimes, clarifying that “not the entire Serbian people committed crimes,” but rather specific individuals (Beta 2004c).

*Camouflage and compensation* was intensively applied during this period. One of the earliest examples was Marović’s condolences for the death of BiH war president Alija Izetbegović in the fall of 2003 (Tanjug 2003e). Although primarily a protocol gesture, it conveyed a message of compromise from Belgrade and demonstrated a readiness to overcome a “history wars.” This was significant, considering that the public in the SCG viewed Izetbegović as one of those responsible for the war and certain crimes committed by the Army of BiH. However, the more consequential aspect of this strategy was

Serbia's consistent signaling to Banja Luka to make concessions in internal BiH negotiations. This eventually led to the RS agreeing to the formation of unified armed forces in BiH. Serbia's support for concessions sent a clear message that Belgrade had adopted a new approach to BiH. Additionally, Serbia continued its practice of issuing declarations guaranteeing BiH's sovereignty and territorial integrity while calling for improved bilateral relations. Prime Minister Koštunica emphasized that by upholding the Dayton Agreement Serbia demonstrated its "commitment to respecting international agreements" (Vlada Srbije 2004). This was intended to help remove the stigma of Serbia being labeled a "violator of international agreements." Furthermore, Serbia's Deputy Prime Minister Miroslav Labus promised to eliminate all differences in how Serbia treated the RS and the FBiH (Tanjug 2004i).

The most far-reaching proposals for rapprochement came from Foreign Minister Vuk Drašković. In 2004, he advocated for the long-term "removal of borders," proposing the elimination of police and military presence along the border so that citizens would "only feel them on maps" (Tanjug 2004b). Drašković also openly supported integration processes in the military and police domains between the SCG and BiH (Tanjug 2004g). Furthermore, Belgrade proposed and implemented a range of agreements during this period (MSP 2016a, 2–3). The emphasis on closer ties was further demonstrated by symbolic gestures. Sarajevo was the first foreign destination visited by Serbia's new Foreign Minister Drašković and Deputy Prime Minister Labus. It was also the first regional destination visited by President Boris Tadić, underscoring Belgrade's intent to foster the closest possible relations with BiH. Belgrade even suggested, through statements by the SCG legal representative Tibor Varadi, that it might consider offering material compensations or concessions in an out-of-court settlement for war victims in BiH if the genocide lawsuit were withdrawn (Tanjug 2004f).

*Stigma rejection* during this period was applied in several ways. Efforts were made to contest or withdraw the BiH lawsuit against the SCG, which was part of a broader attempt to reject the possibility of Serbia being labeled a "genocide perpetrator". Both Drašković and Tadić criticized the lawsuit as contrary to the European spirit of reconciliation and cooperation (Beta 2004e; Tanjug 2004k). Drašković argued that the lawsuit unfairly targeted "hundreds of thousands of people in Serbia who fought against war and crimes," rejecting the notion of transferring responsibility from the regime to the citizens (Tanjug 2004c). Radoslav Stojanović, the new SCG's representative before the ICJ, expressed confidence in Belgrade's acquittal, arguing that states cannot possess "genocidal intent" necessary for the

conviction (Beta 2005a). Another approach, championed by Drašković, involved distinguishing between the responsibility of Milošević and that of Serbia. He insisted that only Milošević and his regime should be held accountable, emphasizing that the “moral dimension of the State Union’s defense” lay in the idea that crimes were the actions of individuals, not the state. Drašković asserted, “Slobodan Milošević is not Serbia, and those who committed crimes are not Serbia” (Tanjug 2004e). This aligned with Tadić’s statement that crimes were committed by individuals. Similar practice was a public refusal to accept that Serbia bore sole responsibility for war crimes. After issuing his apology, Tadić argued that others should also apologize to Serbs for crimes committed against them. Similarly, Koštunica condemned all crimes, regardless of whether they were committed by or against Serbs, in a joint declaration with RS leaders. Notably, no direct acts of counter-stigmatization were conducted during this period.

The application of compromising strategies during this period yielded tangible results. In spring 2004, BiH Foreign Minister Mladen Ivanić stated that BiH and the SCG were “two neighboring and friendly countries” (Tanjug 2004h). Similarly, BiH ambassador to Belgrade, Tomislav Leko, remarked in summer 2004 that relations were “very good” and experiencing a “meteoric rise” (Tanjug 2004d). Even Bosniak officials such as Adnan Terzić expressed “increasing optimism” about relations with Belgrade and acknowledged progress in cooperation (Beta 2004a; Tanjug 2004a). These positive signals were conveyed to the audience of normals alongside continued efforts through the interstate cooperation council, a dynamic schedule of mutual visits, and the signing of significant bilateral agreements. Together, these actions served as valuable assets for Serbia in its efforts to present itself as a good neighbor. The audience received this message quite well, enabling the SCG to achieve notable destigmatization milestones, including receiving a feasibility study on EU membership, starting SAA negotiations with the EU, and acceptance to the GSP by the US. However, progress during 2004 was hindered by the lack of cooperation with the ICTY which remained a critical issue. Momentum in this regard would regain traction in 2005.

### **Mild Rivalry (2005–2010)**

During the period which this subsection analyzes, the perception of importance of relations with BiH as a stage for stigma management remained relatively high, except for a temporary reduction during the previously elaborated intense focus on handling Kosovo’s unilateral declaration of

independence, particularly in 2008. At the same time, the perception of threat emanating from Sarajevo increased among Serbian politicians, with a partial reduction of this perception in 2006 and 2008 due to BiH's decision not to recognize Kosovo.

Several events in the spring of 2005 contributed to this change, elevating the perceived threat from low to moderate and shifting the quality of relations from partnership to rivalry. The discourse of "cooperation and good neighborliness" diminished in this period, and Belgrade's focus shifted toward relations with Banja Luka.<sup>8</sup> One key event was the March 2005 announcement by BiH legal representative before ICJ Sakib Softić that Sarajevo would not withdraw its lawsuit for genocide against the SCG (Beta 2005b). The persistence of this lawsuit was perceived as a growing threat, particularly considering the ICTY verdicts from 2004 that held certain VRS officers responsible for genocide in Srebrenica (ICTY 2024). These verdicts heightened concerns that Serbia might be found responsible for committing or aiding genocide by the ICJ, potentially undermining its destigmatization efforts. Officials from this period realized that the SCG's initiatives to encourage withdrawal of the lawsuit "were not seriously considered in Sarajevo" (Interview 3) or "were ignored" (Interview 5). Another event that resurfaced tensions occurred in March 2005, when BiH suspended the implementation of the free trade agreement with the SCG. Serbian Prime Minister Koštunica openly criticized this decision, initiated by Bosniak representatives, as highly detrimental to Serbia's interests and the principles of free trade (FoNet 2005). This act was seen as a significant threat to Serbia.

Later in the year, tensions escalated when BiH Prime Minister Adnan Terzić and High Representative Paddy Ashdown accused Serbia of being responsible for the RS's refusal to agree to police reforms (Beta 2005e). This renewed suspicions in Belgrade that Bosniak political intentions were aimed at disempowering the RS. Statements from Belgrade emphasizing the survival of the RS intensified, coinciding with external pressures such as the US Congress resolution on Srebrenica, which was interpreted as an attempt to dissolve the RS (Beta 2005d). Terzić further called on the EU to postpone its decision to begin SAA negotiations with the SCG, citing "political ties between Belgrade and Banja Luka" as a reason (RSE 2005). This was perceived in Belgrade as an additional threat. Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Drašković emphasized that such accusations could not be viewed favorably by Belgrade, reflecting the growing tensions (Beta 2005e). During 2006, the

8 While meetings with RS officials intensified, the council for intergovernmental cooperation with BiH became inactive, and the dynamic of signing agreements declined.

discourse of cooperation and positive relations experienced a brief revival. This was reflected in a joint statement by the new Serbian ambassador to BiH, Spasović, and the new Bosniak member of the BiH presidency, Haris Silajdžić, emphasizing the historical, economic, cultural, and traditional compatibilities between the two states (Beta 2006c). However, Serbian officials no longer described cooperation as “good,” and terms like “growth,” “progress,” or “friendship” disappeared from their discourse.

Two events in early 2007 further reinforced negative rhetoric in Belgrade’s statements about relations with Sarajevo. The first major development that contributed to this shift was the February 2007 ICJ judgment, which concluded that genocide had been committed in Srebrenica in July 1995, but that Serbia could not be held responsible for its execution. This ruling significantly reduced the perception among Serbian leaders that Serbia might be permanently labeled as a genocide perpetrator. However, the court found Serbia guilty of failing to punish the perpetrators, though without imposing sanctions. This left lingering concerns in Belgrade about how the verdict might be interpreted. Foreign Minister Vuk Drašković openly criticized a perceived campaign to “misinterpret this verdict” and emphasized in the spring of 2007 that such actions did not contribute to good neighborly relations (Beta 2007a). The second issue was the acquittal by ICTY Naser Orić, a regional commander of the Army of BiH, for crimes against Serbs in eastern Bosnia. This decision risked reinforcing the impression that only Serbs had committed war crimes. President Tadić expressed concern over this perception, stating that placing responsibility solely on one nation was neither fair nor just.

Simultaneously, the perception of a security threat from extremist Wahhabi Islamic groups resurfaced. In April 2007, members of the Serbian security forces clashed with a group of Wahhabis on Mount Ninaja, where a training center for terrorist activities had been established. Several Wahhabis were arrested (Karanović 2007). Serbian officials, including Minister Rasim Ljajić (Bosniak from Serbia), stated that Wahhabi groups in Sandžak were connected to counterparts in Bosnia (Bg2 2010). It was speculated that the tolerance of Wahhabism by Sarajevo’s mufti, Mustafa Cerić, facilitated its spread throughout the region, including Serbia (Turudić 2010).<sup>9</sup> Also, Foreign Minister Sven Alkalaj informed Serbia that the dual citizenship agreement

9 The rise of Wahhabism also coincided with a split within Serbia’s Islamic community into two factions, leading to antagonism among Bosniaks and creating the potential for increased radicalism. Followers aligned with Sarajevo and Cerić, led by Mufti Muamer Zukorlić, were seen as a source of potential instability.

with BiH was no longer valid (Beta 2007b). This notification was perceived as a dual threat. First, it undermined an agreement that benefited the Serb population in Bosnia, creating the impression that Sarajevo sought to harm the interests of Serbs in BiH. Second, the claim that the agreement was invalid because the SCG no longer existed effectively denied Serbia's continuity as the SCG's legal successor. This posed a risk for Serbia, as its continuity with the SCG/FRY underpinned its right over Kosovo under UNSC Resolution 1244.<sup>10</sup>

The rising perception of threat contributed to a stagnation in relations. This stagnation was recognized not only by Serbia, but also by BiH politicians. For example, head of the BiH Council of Ministers Nikola Špirić acknowledged in 2008 a two-year period of stagnation in relations between the two countries (Vlada Srbije 2008a). This shared perception demonstrated that neither side viewed relations as a genuine partnership. However, a brief revival in relations occurred in 2008, when it became evident that BiH would not recognize Kosovo's independence. While this outcome was expected, given the necessity of Serb representatives' support within BiH institutions, it was notable that no significant calls for recognition came from leading Bosniak or Croat politicians. Certain officials, such as a BiH presidency member from the Croat community, Željko Komšić, even stressed the importance of understanding Kosovo's significance for Serbia (Beta 2008a). Still, BiH occasionally sent negative signals, such as the absence of its representative during the UNGA vote to request an advisory opinion from the ICJ on Kosovo's declaration of independence, demonstrating that disputes still existed.

Despite progress in economic cooperation and collaboration in defense and internal affairs during 2008 and 2009, terms like "good neighborliness," "good relations," and "partnership" did not return to regular use. One reason for this was the issue of the RS. From 2005 onward, the focus on the RS's status through a security lens intensified in Belgrade, partly as a spillover from the Kosovo crisis. Between 2005 and 2007, Serbian politicians, notably

10 This move had little effect on the dominant international stance recognizing Serbia as the direct successor of the SCG, a position agreed upon by Montenegro and acknowledged by key international bodies like the UN. However, the fact that certain politicians in Bosnia openly questioned this continuity—especially in the context of negotiations on Kosovo's status in 2006 and 2007—was perceived as unfavorable and even threatening by Serbia. Such challenges were viewed as potentially laying the groundwork for further questioning of Serbia's territorial integrity and sovereignty over Kosovo. This brief crisis was resolved in Serbia's favor through the swift response of Serbian officials in Bosnia who asserted that the agreement remained in effect.

Foreign Minister Drašković and later Minister for Kosovo and Metohija Slobodan Samardžić, drew parallels between Kosovo's self-determination and potential similar scenarios in BiH and Macedonia. This was intended to highlight the potential domino effect of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence and encourage the international society to seek a compromise that would preserve Serbia's territorial integrity (Beta 2005c, 2005d, 2006e; Beta 2007c; Tanjug 2007a). Securitizing the RS's position became a tool for managing the threat of Kosovo's secession.

Even after Serbia ceased drawing these parallels at the end of 2007, it continued to prioritize the survival of the RS as a vital interest. Prime Minister Koštunica identified the RS's survival as a national goal of equal importance to preserving Kosovo, prompting Željko Komšić to threaten Koštunica with a "slap on the wrist," which sparked a sharp reaction from Belgrade (Deutsche Welle 2007). Shortly after, Vuk Jeremić reiterated that Serbia had a "vital interest" in preserving the Dayton structure in BiH, including the RS (Beta 2007d). Deputy Prime Minister Ivica Dačić emphasized that pressures on the RS were perceived as a threat to Belgrade, stating in the fall of 2008 that Serbia considered the RS's survival a "vital interest." Dačić reiterated this stance during a meeting with US Vice President Joseph Biden in Belgrade in 2009, describing threats to the RS as a key concern for Serbia (Tanjug 2008; Tanjug 2009b).

Near the end of this period, during the second half of 2009, the perception of threats to the RS escalated. High Representative Valentin Inzko threatened to use the Bonn Powers to take severe measures against Milorad Dodik and the RS government before and after the Butmir negotiations on BiH constitutional reforms. In mid-2009, Inzko annulled certain RS acts, prompting negative reactions from Belgrade (Tanjug 2009f). Serbian President Tadić, who had previously avoided securitizing rhetoric on the RS, criticized Inzko's actions as illegitimate. Both Tadić and Minister Jeremić emphasized the legitimacy of the RS's leadership, asserting that Serbia would not "twist Banja Luka's arm" (Beta 2009c; Tanjug 2009h).

### *Stigma Management Strategies and Outcomes*

During this phase all the strategies were applied. Considering the relative balance between the perception of threat and the importance of relations with BiH for stigma management, Serbia's decision to apply all strategies in parallel aligns with the framework of the destigmatization dilemma model. Dynamics of stigma acceptance and counter-stigmatization during this period also align with the predictions of the model. When the importance of relations with BiH as a stigma-management stage was relatively reduced,

along with a simultaneous decrease in the perception of threat (late 2007 and during 2008), acts of stigma acceptance and counter-stigmatization became rare. Conversely, when the importance of this stage began to grow again in 2009, stigma acceptance was used more intensively. Counter-stigmatization reemerged as a corrective mechanism, though less intensively, since the level of perceived threat had started to decline. The connection between the dynamics of these more direct forms of compromise and denial demonstrates that they were often used as tools for balancing, enabling Serbia to navigate the challenges of the destigmatization dilemma effectively.

The most prominent act of (partial) *stigma acceptance* was President Boris Tadić's attendance at the commemoration for the victims of Srebrenica in July 2005. Although he did not explicitly apologize, his presence, alongside RS President Dragan Čavić, conveyed a powerful symbolic message (B92 2005a). Tadić stated that his visit to Srebrenica was intended to "pay respects to the victims," advocating for confronting this crime and commending the RS commission, which disclosed facts about Srebrenica and determined the number of victims (Beta 2005f). Additionally, the sharp condemnation of the 1995 Trnovo killings of young Bosniaks from Srebrenica by a Serb paramilitary unit, captured in a widely circulated video, came from Tadić and the government. Prime Minister Koštunica described the footage as depicting a "brutal, callous and shameful crime," and the perpetrators were swiftly apprehended (B92 2005b).<sup>11</sup> In later years, Tadić frequently referred to his apology in Sarajevo in late 2004 and in his 2005 visit to Srebrenica, particularly in front of international audiences. For instance, during a 2009 lecture at Columbia University in New York, Tadić reiterated that he had apologized to Bosniaks and others (RTRS 2009). This indicates that the apology targeted not only the public and political elites in BiH, but also the external audience of normals. At the same event, Tadić expressed disappointment that no one from the Bosniak side had apologized to Serbs.

Another borderline case was a joint statement issued by Prime Minister Koštunica alongside RS President Dragan Čavić and Prime Minister Pero Bukejlović, which condemned crimes committed by and against Serbs, with particular emphasis on the "mass crime in Srebrenica" (Deutsche Welle 2005). However, this statement lacked an explicit apology and sought to balance the crimes against Serbs with those committed by Serbs, meaning it cannot be fully categorized as direct stigma acceptance. Other acts of partial stigma acceptance followed in subsequent years. In 2006, Serbia's

11 It is important to note that acknowledgments were limited to specific incidents, such as the crime in Trnovo, without addressing the broader context of the crimes in Srebrenica.

ICJ representative, Radoslav Stojanović, publicly acknowledged that “SCG accepts that Muslims suffered the most during the war” (Beta 2006a). While this did not involve an apology on behalf of Serbia or Serbs, the mere recognition of disproportionate suffering—contrary to domestic attitudes—was an act of partial recognition.

Near the end of this period, the National Assembly of Serbia adopted a declaration condemning the crime in Srebrenica (NSRS 2010). This declaration included two significant elements of stigma acceptance: a public condemnation of the crime itself and an apology to the families of Bosniak victims for Serbia’s failure to prevent the crime. In doing so, Serbia effectively assumed responsibility for the failure to prevent the crime and punish the perpetrators. However, the declaration avoided using the term “genocide,” instead referring to the “manner determined by the ruling of the International Court of Justice.” This compromise allowed Serbia to demonstrate respect for international obligations and law while avoiding direct acknowledgment of genocide, which no Serbian leader had formally accepted as a term for the Srebrenica crime. The primary motive for adopting the declaration was to remove the label of Serbia as a “violator of international obligations” and signal compliance with the ICJ ruling and “a commitment to apprehending Ratko Mladić” (Interview 4). The audience for the declaration was international institutions such as the ICJ and, to some extent, the ICTY. This act represents one of the clearest examples of stigma-related apologies. Additionally, the declaration aimed to send a positive message to Bosniaks and the international society about Serbia’s current perspective on the past. This intent was evident in Ivica Dačić’s statement that the text of the declaration was coordinated by President Tadić with Bosniak presidency member Haris Silajdžić and Turkish President Erdoğan (Beta 2016b).

The *camouflage and compensation* approach during this period was initially less intensive. One notable attempt to apply this strategy can be seen in the initiative of the SCG’s (later Serbia’s) legal representative before the ICJ, Radoslav Stojanović, who proposed that the SCG, BiH and Croatia establish a joint fund to financially and materially compensate all war victims in exchange for dropping lawsuits (Beta 2006d). Belgrade sought to demonstrate its willingness to make material concessions as a means of addressing the consequences of the 1990s wars, while simultaneously ensuring that such efforts were collective rather than unilateral. Early actions under this strategy were mostly limited to principled statements by Serbian officials reaffirming their respect for BiH’s territorial integrity. These officials emphasized that close ties with the RS were compatible with,

rather than contradictory to their desire for strong relations with Sarajevo. However, the credibility of these assurances was weakened by hints that the RS's right to self-determination might not be illegitimate if Albanians in Kosovo were granted the same right. Serbia's muted reaction to statements from Banja Luka, particularly those by Milorad Dodik advocating a potential referendum on RS independence in response to pressure from Bosniaks and the international society, diluted its stated commitment to BiH sovereignty.

The application of this strategy intensified significantly toward the end of 2007. A pivotal example was Serbia's decision to abandon the parallel it had previously drawn between Kosovo's self-determination and the potential self-determination of Serbs in Bosnia. By doing so, Serbia effectively signaled to the international society that, although it could have leveraged the potential destabilization of Bosnia to counter Kosovo's independence, it chose not to pursue this course. This move was a deliberate attempt to shed the "violator of international obligations" label and to strengthen Serbia's position in requesting reconsideration of discriminatory decisions by international actors who had recognized Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence. From a *realpolitik* perspective, continuing to escalate tensions in Bosnia might have served to highlight the risks of a domino effect following Kosovo's recognition. However, Serbia instead opted for a broader strategy aimed at demonstrating its respect for international law and constructive engagement with its neighbors, leveraging these principles to advocate for its stance on Kosovo. Serbia urged international actors to revisit their decisions on Kosovo, framing them as discriminatory.

After abandoning the Kosovo-Bosnia analogy, Serbia intensified its unequivocal position that Bosnia was indivisible and that its territorial integrity must be preserved, while also emphasizing the importance of maintaining the RS as an integral part of BiH. This shift was accompanied by a "handshake" campaign toward Bosnia. Notable examples include offers from Minister of Economy Mladen Dinkić to establish a framework for economic cooperation with the FBiH similar to that with the RS (Tanjug 2009a), and Defense Minister Dragan Šutanovac's focus on developing defense cooperation (Tanjug 2009d). A significant gesture toward FBiH was Serbia's expressed interest in signing an Agreement on Special Parallel Relations with this entity like the one with the RS (Tanjug 2009c). Belgrade aimed to signal its desire for partnership with all of BiH (Beta 2009a). Another compensatory gesture during this period was President Boris Tadić's proposal to build a "Bosnia" school in Sandžak with joint funding from the FBiH, in response to negative reactions over the financing and inauguration of the "Serbia" elementary school in Pale (Beta 2009c). Additionally, during the 2009 gas

crisis Serbia made a significant economic concession by sharing its limited gas reserves with BiH (B92 2009). This act demonstrated Serbia's solidarity to support its neighbor, even at the expense of its own energy security.

*Stigma rejection* initially focused on efforts to discredit Bosnia's genocide lawsuit and refute the associated label. In late 2005, SCG President Svetozar Marović, during a visit to Banja Luka, stated that the lawsuit was not in the spirit of European integration and cooperation and that its withdrawal would be beneficial (Tanjug 2005). Legal representative Radoslav Stojanović emphasized that it was impossible to prove that Serbs as a people or the SCG as a state had genocidal intent, even if individuals were found responsible. This marked a tactical shift from outright denial of genocide to denying state or collective responsibility (Beta 2006d). On the eve of the trial in early 2006, Stojanović reiterated the call for withdrawing the lawsuit, arguing that a ruling that left one side dissatisfied would become an "obstacle to reconciliation" (Beta 2006d).

The proceedings in BiH's lawsuit began in February 2006. The SCG presented ten witnesses in its defense, including a former UNPROFOR commander in BiH. Alongside court arguments, SCG representatives also used media channels to address the broader public. Stojanović presented multiple arguments to the court, ranging from the claim that the FRY was not a UN member in 1993 and therefore could not be sued (challenging jurisdiction) to disputing allegations of genocidal intent, the existence of a plan to destroy any ethnic group in BiH, and the number of victims cited by the Bosniaks (Beta 2006a). Belgrade's alleged control over the RS during the war was also denied, with representatives asserting that Belgrade had attempted to stop the conflict by accepting peace plans (Beta 2006a). The label of "aggressor" was also denied, even though this issue was not formally addressed in the proceedings. Stojanović argued that military aid sent by Belgrade to the RS was necessary, claiming that the Bosniak side had also been armed by Turkey and Iran, thereby attempting to legitimize Serbia's role in the war (Beta 2006a). The logic of the lawsuit itself was questioned, with arguments suggesting that a verdict against Belgrade would theoretically position the RS as a victim and Kosovo as an alleged perpetrator. It was also suggested that such a ruling would bolster nationalist forces in Serbia (Beta 2006a). After the ICJ ruling in 2007, Belgrade focused on framing the verdict as "exonerating," emphasizing that Serbia was not found responsible for genocide. Efforts were made to downplay the ruling's other findings, including Serbia's failure to prevent genocide and to punish the perpetrators, as well as the confirmation of the Srebrenica genocide classification. These activities gradually decreased during the second half of 2008 and throughout 2009.

*Counter-stigmatization* was only occasionally attempted during this period. For instance, Radoslav Stojanović raised the question of who would compensate the Serbs expelled from Mostar (who once made approximately 20 percent of the city's population) before the international court. This was an attempt to label Bosnia as a state that should take responsibility for war crimes committed in its name (Tanjug 2007b). However, this statement was made in the context of defending against the genocide lawsuit, and no subsequent efforts, such as filing a counterclaim like those against Croatia, were undertaken to demand compensation from BiH. This suggests that the issue was used rhetorically to counter demands for Belgrade to compensate Bosniak victims.

In the summer of 2006, the Serbian government launched what appeared to be an organized campaign highlighting crimes committed by predominantly Bosniak and Croatian forces against Serbs and rebel Bosniaks loyal to Fikret Abdić, the leader of the so-called Autonomous Province of Western Bosnia, during the late summer and early autumn of 1995. Initially, footage of these crimes was broadcast in regional media and submitted by Serbian government to the ICTY office in Belgrade. The government called on BiH and Croatia to respond to these crimes as Serbia had in the Trnovo case the previous year (Beta 2006b). Following a meeting with Vojislav Koštunica, RS President Dragan Čavić and Prime Minister Milorad Dodik jointly filed a criminal complaint against Atif Dudaković, the commander of the 5th Corps of the Bosnian Army, with the Bosnian prosecutor's office (FoNet 2006). The Bosniak political elite rallied to protect Dudaković. This allowed Serbian officials to label the Bosnian state and Bosniak leaders as unwilling to confront their past or punish war crimes, accusing them of covering up these crimes instead. By calling on the international society to pressure Bosnia to confront its past, Serbia conveyed the notion that Bosnia required external oversight or "tutelage." Therefore, this campaign can be categorized as an act of counter-stigmatization.

Additionally, there were minor instances that could be marginally classified as counter-stigmatization. Following the rulings of 2006 and 2008, Serbia sought to label Naser Orić, a commander of the Army of BiH, as responsible for war crimes against Serbs (Deutsche Welle 2006; Vlada Srbije 2008b). This effort implicitly extended responsibility to the broader Bosnian war leadership. In foreign media interviews and university lectures, President Boris Tadić referred to his 2009 apologies while emphasizing that Bosniaks and others had not apologized to Serbs. This implied equal responsibility for the events of the 1990s and aimed to distribute the stigma among all parties involved in the conflict.

Finally, even the declaration on Srebrenica—the most direct act of stigma acceptance during this period—also contained subtle elements of counter-stigmatization. The declaration called on parliaments in other countries in the region to condemn crimes and apologize to Serbs. This was intended to convey that Serbs were not only perpetrators, but also victims. This highlights how counter-stigmatization acts were often used as a balancing element to ensure stigma acceptance did not “go too far.”<sup>12</sup>

Dragoljub Mićunović, an influential member of the then-ruling DS, confirmed in 2009 that gestures emphasizing unambiguous confirmation of Bosnia’s sovereignty were also part of an “impression management” effort for the international society. He noted the need for Serbia to “gradually gain the reputation of a stabilizing factor in the Balkans” (Tanjug 2009e). The connection between such actions and the goal of destigmatization was particularly evident. Decision-makers from this period confirmed that conciliatory gestures, including apologies, were made with expectations of reciprocity from BiH. However, they expressed disappointment that these gestures did not elicit particularly positive reactions from the Bosniak side (Interview 4 and 5). One high-ranking official claimed that “there was no one within the Bosniak community, aside from Sulejman Tihić to some extent, who would initiate a similar process of confronting the past” (Interview 5). This disappointment influenced the decision to intensify the use of denying strategies (including counter-stigmatization) to mitigate the threat arising from open apologies.

The outcomes of applying denying strategies during this period were, therefore, partial. Above all, Serbia was exonerated from responsibility for committing or planning genocide in the ICJ verdict. This was undoubtedly important for Serbia’s destigmatization efforts. Attempts to draw the international attention to Bosniak and Croatian crimes against Serbs in the Bosnian Krajina in 1995 also yielded partial success, particularly after the broadcast of footage showing the 5th Corps commander, Atif Dudaković, ordering certain crimes. Initially, the Bosniak side denied any responsibility on the part of Dudaković and the Bosnian army, and the prosecutor’s office refrained from indicting him until 2018, twelve years after Dodik and Čavić’s complaint. Certain successes were also achieved with compromising strategies. A statement from BiH ambassador to Serbia, Tomislav Leko, describing relations as friendly and improving, was symbolically significant, particularly since it came from an ethnic Croat and during a period when

12 For broader theoretical explanation of balancing apologies with accusation, see my latest study (Krstić 2025).

relations had begun to stagnate. It signaled that BiH still believed in the potential for positive future relations with Belgrade (Tanjug 2006). The abandonment of the RS-Kosovo parallels was especially praised by the international society, including by the new High Representative Miroslav Lajčák who expressed confidence that Serbia was sincerely committed to BiH integrity. While Sarajevo's refusal to recognize Kosovo was a positive signal, it was evident that this decision resulted from the fact that Serbs had a veto right on such decision. Bosniaks and Croats in Bosnia would likely have recognized Kosovo if they could.

Nevertheless, the results of actions during this period were not substantial. There were no public condemnations of crimes against Serbs from Bosniak politicians, despite repeated calls from Serbian leaders. Serbian disappointment over the lack of appreciation or reciprocal gestures for apologetic acts (such as Tadić's visit to the Potočari memorial in 2005, Koštunica's condemnation of the Srebrenica crimes following the release of the Trnovo execution footage in 2006, or Tadić's reiterated apology to BiH citizens in 2009 and 2010) illustrates the limited success of Serbia's stigma management. On the contrary, Bosniak politicians, particularly Haris Silajdžić, escalated their rhetoric against Serbia, accusing it of harboring war criminals. In April 2008, Silajdžić publicly protested the EU's decision to "reward" Serbia by signing the SAA (Beta 2008b). In 2009, he criticized Boris Tadić's attendance at the opening of the "Serbia" elementary school in Pale, calling it an attack on Bosnia's sovereignty (Beta 2009b). Silajdžić and Komšić also refused to join the Bosnian delegation, led by the Serb member and BiH Presidency Chairman Nebojša Radmanović, during a visit to Belgrade in 2009. These unfavorable messages undermined Serbia's efforts to portray itself as a good neighbor to the audience of normals. Additionally, despite Serbia's decision to abandon the RS-Kosovo parallel, Serbian leaders faced continued pressure to push the RS toward compromises in Bosnia's systemic reform. Meanwhile, Sarajevo sent negative signals regarding Serbia's stance on Kosovo, such as its decision not to support Serbia's request for an advisory opinion from the ICJ in the UNGA.

Probably the most significant negative outcome for Serbia during this period was its failure to contest the characterization of the Srebrenica massacre as genocide. While the ICJ verdict did not label Serbia as a "genocide perpetrator/accomplice," it qualified the Srebrenica crime as genocide and found Serbia responsible for failing to prevent and punish the perpetrators. This ruling entrenched the label of Serbia as a "violator of international obligations" and placed significant pressure on Serbia to respond formally to the verdict. Furthermore, as the first ICJ ruling to qualify an event as

genocide, it posed long-term challenges to Serbia's goal of distributing responsibility for all crimes in the former Yugoslavia evenly and avoiding a hierarchy of blame. Ultimately, when the Serbian Parliament formally reacted by condemning the Srebrenica crime "in the manner defined by the ICJ ruling" in early 2010, the international response was largely positive. While some criticized the omission of the word "genocide," the declaration was perceived favorably, including in Sarajevo. This act was perhaps the most positively received outcome for Serbia during this period. It showcased an apologetic stance while carefully avoiding language that could be politically threatening to Serbia. Finally, Montenegrin Prime Minister Đukanović witnessed that Serbia's clear support to the unity of BiH was received "very positive in USA," after meeting with Vice President Biden (Tanjug 2010b).

### **Stable Partnership and Its Strengthening (2010–2016)**

The perception of threat substantially reduced from 2010, marking the period presented in this subchapter as the closest to friendship in all the analyzed periods. Parallely, as previously elaborated, perception of the importance of relations with BiH as a stigma management stage remained very high. Determining the precise moment when one period ends and another begins is challenging, as perceptions form a nuanced continuum without clear-cut transitions. While the complete shift in perception occurred from late April 2010, several factors influenced the reduction of the perceived threat beginning in late 2009 and continuing into early 2010.

Firstly, after the failed Butmir negotiations on BiH constitutional reforms in the fall of 2009, the high representative refrained from using his powers to sanction the RS, signaling a reluctance to repeat measures against the Serb-majority entity. This reassured Belgrade of a diminished risk to the status and existence of the RS. Additionally, the departure of Stjepan Mesić from the Croatian presidency, following his January 2010 threats of military force against the RS if it held a referendum, and the subsequent calming influence of Josipović as his successor, alongside Prime Minister Kosor, indicated a reduction in perceived threats from Zagreb to the security of the RS. This stabilization contributed to the perception of the RS's position as more secure. Moreover, the arrest of a large group of Wahhabis in their logistical center in Gornja Maoča, BiH, at the start of 2010 sent a positive message about the mitigation of regional security threats. Minister Ljajić's statement confirming that Wahhabism from BiH no longer posed a danger to Sandžak and Serbia reinforced this. The threat of alternative interpretations

of the 2007 ICJ ruling also dissipated. Additionally, the likelihood of BiH recognizing Kosovo had effectively vanished by 2010, as potential decisions that could challenge Serbia's continuity with the SCG or impact Kosovo-related international votes were no longer on the agenda.

By early 2010, Serbian officials increasingly employed a discourse of "good-neighborliness and cooperation." A significant step in this direction was marked by the signing of the Agreement on Cooperation in Education, Culture, and Sports. The Serbian ambassador in Sarajevo highlighted this agreement's importance for enhancing collaboration, signaling a shift in perception of Sarajevo's openness to cooperation (Beta 2010b). In March 2010, following the arrest of a member of the BiH war presidency, Ejup Ganić, in London on a Serbian war crimes warrant, officials from Belgrade stated they would have no objection to Ganić's extradition to Sarajevo for trial. This was another indicator of a shifting perception of BiH institutions' impartiality in prosecuting war crimes (FoNet 2010). However, the transition toward partnership relations was not completed. Serbian officials' statements still suggested perceived threats from Sarajevo. At the Day of Republika Srpska celebration in Banja Luka on January 9, 2010, President Tadić criticized the OHR's use of the Bonn Powers for producing "counter-effects" (Tanjug 2010a). In February, the Serbian ministry of diaspora claimed that Serbs in the FBiH were disenfranchised (Beta 2010a). In March, Belgrade warned against centralization of BiH without Serb consent (Vlada Srbije 2010). While these statements were milder in tone, they indicated that the perception of threat had not entirely dissipated.

A symbolic turning point toward partnership relations was the Declaration of Istanbul, adopted following a tripartite summit between Erdoğan, Tadić, and Silajdžić in late April 2010. The declaration highlighted the goodwill of both Sarajevo and Belgrade to improve relations and included joint praise for the international community's role, including the OHR. This represented a significant shift from prior criticism of the OHR just months earlier. Furthermore, Tadić's visit to Mostar shortly before the summit symbolically demonstrated this changing perception. During the visit, a cooperation agreement in tourism was signed, further emphasizing the evolving relationship (Tanjug 2010f). Two key reasons contributed to the shift in the perception of the quality of relations during the spring of 2010. First, the Serbian leadership was satisfied with the overwhelmingly positive reaction from Sarajevo to the adoption of the resolution on Srebrenica. This response marked a significant change compared to previous apologies and commemorative acts, which failed to produce the desired impact. Considering the earlier grievances expressed by Serbian leaders about the

lack of acknowledgment for their conciliatory gestures—some of whom claimed this had “fueled skepticism about Sarajevo’s intentions” (Interview 5)—this was a notable turning point. Second, Turkey’s mediation efforts, trusted by both Belgrade and Sarajevo at the time, played a significant role in reducing the perception of threat starting in the spring of 2010.

From mid-2010 to mid-2012, there was a marked improvement in the perception of relations. During a visit to Sarajevo, Serbian Prime Minister Cvetković stated there were “no crucial open issues” (Tanjug 2010c). Deputy Prime Minister Dačić praised BiH presidency member Bakir Izetbegović’s apology to all innocent victims of the army of BiH, noting that it had positively influenced the prospects for cooperation (Tanjug 2010d). Acknowledgment of Sulejman Tihić, president of the leading Bosniak political party SDA, that “Dobrovoljačka was undoubtedly a crime”<sup>13</sup> contributed to a more constructive perception of relations (RTS 2010a). Izetbegović’s assurance that he would “not support political adventurism in Sandžak” reduced the perception of a threat (Tanjug 2011c). President Tadić praised Serbia’s good relations with BiH politicians (Beta 2011). During his visit to Sarajevo, he characterized meetings with Bosnian officials as “friendly,” emphasizing “good-neighborly cooperation” (Tanjug 2011e). Serbian ambassador Stojadinović reinforced this positive dynamic during his first meeting with Izetbegović (Tanjug 2011d). After signing a consular cooperation agreement, Serbian Foreign Minister Jeremić declared in March 2012 that this marked the beginning of a new phase in bilateral relations (Tanjug 2012).<sup>14</sup> He also stated at the South-East European Cooperation Process meeting in June that relations in the Western Balkans were “better than ever” (Beta 2012b).

During this period, the “Sarajevo hinders progress” discourse saw a decline, but with certain occasional tensions. Bosnian presidency member Željko Komšić’s statement recognizing “Serbia without Kosovo” drew strong protests from President Tadić (Tanjug 2010g). Bosnia’s hesitation in supporting Serbia’s draft UNGA resolution on continuing dialogue with Pristina in 2010 also sent negative signals about the stance of non-Serb officials in Bosnia regarding Serbia’s territorial integrity (RTS 2010b). Serbia further expressed dissatisfaction with Bosnia’s decision not to vote for Vuk Jeremić as president of the UNGA, with Tadić remarking that such behavior

13 The Dobrovoljačka Street in Sarajevo incident happened on May 3, 1992, when members of Bosnian army and Bosniak paramilitary units attacked and killed dozens of JNA soldiers who were peacefully leaving Sarajevo.

14 In 2011 and 2012, several agreements and joint statements emphasized cooperation (MSP 2016a, 5–7).

would "not leave a good impression on Serbia" when considering support for Bosnian candidates in future international forums (Beta 2012e). Additionally, throughout 2011 Serbia reiterated its stance that imposed solutions in Bosnia were unsustainable. In November 2011, Deputy Prime Minister Božidar Đelić highlighted three open regional issues: Kosovo, Bosnia's structure, and Macedonia's name dispute, signaling Bosnia's structural challenges as a regional concern (Tanjug 2011a). Overall, the perceived level of threat during this period was considerably low, though not entirely absent.

In mid-2012, a change of government in Serbia led to increased skepticism in Sarajevo and Zagreb regarding the intentions of the new authorities in Belgrade. This skepticism stemmed from the fact that many members of the new government had served during the Milošević regime and had been formally committed to Serbia's nationalist and expansionist policies until 2008, when moderates left the Serbian Radical Party. However, the new authorities in Belgrade did not significantly alter their perception of relations with Sarajevo. Following a meeting with Valentin Inzko, Prime Minister Dačić emphasized in the second half of 2012 that, for Serbia, "there are no closer people" than the citizens of BiH, Croatia, and Montenegro (Beta 2012a). During a visit to Sarajevo, the new minister of foreign affairs, Mrkić, described relations with BiH as "good and stable" and, in December, emphasized that BiH had an "honest friend" in Serbia (MSP 2012). In January 2013, Dačić also visited Sarajevo, noting progress in relations and expressing a desire for further development of good neighborly ties (Tanjug 2013).

Superlatives about the relations were prominent in the declaration adopted at the trilateral summit of Turkey, BiH, and Serbia in May 2013 (Vlada Srbije 2013). During a visit to Sarajevo in September 2013, Dačić highlighted the frequency of mutual visits as a positive indicator of both sides' intentions to enhance relations further (Beta 2013). Closer relations were also reflected in a series of high-level meetings at the ministerial level in areas. In mid-2014, after catastrophic floods hit the region, the newly appointed Minister of Foreign Affairs (and former Prime Minister) Dačić praised the solidarity and unity displayed during the crisis by BiH, Croatia, and Serbia (MSP 2014a). During the first half of 2015, Dačić, during meetings with officials from BiH, stated that relations were "at a very high level" and that BiH was "one of Serbia's most important partners" (MSP 2015). This explicitly demonstrated that relations were perceived as a partnership. In the second half of 2015, this positive discourse became somewhat less frequent. However, it did not disappear. The persistence of this discourse was best exemplified by the highly positive commentary on relations during the first joint session of the Serbian government and the council of ministers of BiH at the end of 2015

(Politika 2015). Considering the stability of partnership discourse, containing even elements of friendship, the phase from mid-2010 to mid-2015 represented the closest period in bilateral relations as perceived by Belgrade officials.

From 2012 onward, very few matters were initially highlighted as threatening in relations between BiH and Serbia by Serbian officials. The consistent call to preserve the RS served as an indicator that any attempt to abolish the RS against the will of the Serbs in BiH would be interpreted as a direct action against Serbia's interests. However, beyond these general assertions, there were minimal statements indicating negative aspects of Sarajevo's behavior. From the second half of 2015, this perception began to slowly shift. The primary catalyst for this change was the attack on Prime Minister Vučić in Potočari during the commemoration of the Srebrenica victims. The lack of a stronger reaction from Sarajevo, as well as lapses that allowed the incident to occur, raised skepticism among Serbian officials. This led to beliefs that the incident was even intentional (Tanjug 2015c). The perception that the prime minister's life was directly threatened in Serbia was significantly fueled by regime-controlled media, which labeled the incident as an "assassination attempt" (Tanjug 2015c). While internal political motivations for exaggerating this incident may exist, it is evident that this attack, coupled with lukewarm reactions, heightened skepticism about potential threats from Sarajevo.

Another factor contributing to the perceived increase in threat was the UK-proposed UNSC resolution condemning genocide in Srebrenica in July 2015. Although Sarajevo was not the formal proposer, Bosniak politicians actively supported the initiative. Serbian decision-makers later labeled the resolution, which was vetoed by Russia, as an "attempt to enforce stigma" on Serbia. While reactions at the time were not excessively sharp, raising questions about whether the perception of threat from this act was later exaggerated for domestic political purposes, it was still seen as a negative act against Serbia in 2015. Notably, Minister Dačić cited this resolution as an exception to generally good relations (RTRS 2016). One of the prominent foreign policy actors in this period confirmed in an interview that this was "a negative milestone" in relations with London, affecting also relations with Sarajevo (Interview 10). The crisis surrounding the extradition of former army of BiH officer Naser Orić further deepened skepticism of Sarajevo's behavior. Orić was arrested in Austria on war crimes charges filed in Belgrade, but Sarajevo suddenly requested his extradition, ostensibly to try him for the same crimes. Serbian officials suspected that the intent was to enable Orić to evade justice rather than to hold him accountable (Tanjug 2015b). This situation was perceived as a threat to justice for Serbian victims

and as undermining Serbia's efforts to demonstrate that crimes had been committed on all sides.

Despite these challenges, relations remained within the partnership field until the first part of 2016. Late 2015 saw the mentioned joint session of the two governments—a gesture indicative of partnership. During his visit to Banja Luka in early 2016, Prime Minister Vučić emphasized the interconnectedness of Serbs, Croats, and Bosniaks, both in Serbia and BiH, stating, "We Serbs, Croats and also Bosniaks, both in Serbia and in Bosnia and Herzegovina, are bound by destiny." Similarly, in spring 2016, Minister Đaćić reiterated that BiH was "one of Serbia's biggest partners" (RTRS 2016). Thus, while the perception of threat had increased, the change was not radical, and the relationship had not yet descended into a rivalrous phase.

### *Stigma Management Strategies and Outcomes*

During this period, Serbia relied mostly on compromising strategies, including the most direct forms of apologizing. On the other hand, denying strategies were reduced to avoidance of the term "genocide" while referring to the Srebrenica crime. This indicates that, although low, some threat was still perceived as existing. This particular selection of strategy aligns with the destigmatization dilemma model, considering that the perception of threat substantially reduced during this period, while the perception of the importance of relations with BiH as a stigma-management stage remained very high.

*Stigma acceptance* acts were applied throughout this phase, with the most significant actions occurring in 2010, 2013, and 2015. On the fifteenth anniversary of the crime in Srebrenica, President Tadić and Foreign Minister Jeremić attended the commemoration in Potočari in July 2010, where he reiterated his regret over the Bosniak tragedy and emphasized determination to ensure that responsible individuals, including Bosnian Serb war leader Ratko Mladić (who was still at large), were brought to justice (RSE 2010). Considering the temporal proximity of the Serbian Parliament's declaration on Srebrenica from March 2010, this visit should be viewed cumulatively with these preceding acts. In a 2013, in an interview with Bosnian state television, Tadić's successor as president, Tomislav Nikolić, stated that he "kneels" in the name of Serbia and the Serbian people and begs Bosniaks to forgive the crime in Srebrenica (RTS 2013). This was undoubtedly the most direct form of apology, as it included a rhetorical reference to "kneeling."<sup>15</sup>

15 This powerful act of contrition was famously conducted by Willy Brandt during his visit to Warsaw in 1970.

Finally, on the twentieth anniversary of the crime in 2015, Prime Minister Aleksandar Vučić visited Srebrenica to convey a message of apology and acceptance of responsibility. Considering Vučić's inflammatory statements from the 1990s, including his speech in 1995 threatening NATO that "if you kill one Serb, we will kill a hundred Muslims," this gesture carried additional symbolic weight. However, the visit was marred by a physical attack on the Serbian prime minister, complicating the intended gesture of reconciliation.

However, acceptance was precisely calibrated not to include any mentioning of the word "genocide." Former president of Serbia Boris Tadić stated on the TV show *Utisak nedelje* in 2022 that if he had recognized that what happened in Srebrenica was genocide, Serbia could have been forced to pay hundreds of billions of reparations to BiH (Dnevni avaz 2022). He claimed that the reluctance of the Bosniak politicians to give up on attempts for revision of the genocide lawsuit in front of the ICJ was threatening for Serbia in the sense that public recognition of this crime as genocide by Serbian actors might lead to the change of verdict and material punishment of Serbia. Although it is hard to claim that this scenario would occur, this statement is an important indicator that Serbian leadership still perceived some threat and that, therefore, it was not willing to use the term "genocide" in order to prevent negative effects for its economic security. This additionally confirms that Serbian leaders faced a destigmatization dilemma.

Acts of *camouflage and compensation* were used very intensively. One significant aspect was Serbia's consistent emphasis on the importance of BiH's survival and its opposition to any referendum on secession in the RS. Serbia reiterated these positions throughout the period, particularly during BiH's political crises, such as in early 2010 (Beta 2010c). A notable example occurred in 2015 when Serbia mediated and influenced the RS to postpone a referendum on the jurisdiction of the BiH court, thereby contributing to deescalating tensions (Ranković 2015). These messages sent a strong signal to the international audience that Serbia had transitioned into a stabilizing force in the region. At the same time, Serbia balanced these efforts with its continued support for the RS, emphasizing that any changes must be acceptable to the Serbs. Serbia also refrained from intervening in internal BiH issues, such as the RS-proposed plebiscite on OHR-imposed measures (Beta 2010c; Tanjug 2010a). This strengthened the RS's position while signaling Serbia's compliance with regional stability efforts. According to WikiLeaks reports, President Tadić often defended Milorad Dodik and RS policies before foreign officials, occasionally frustrating them (US Embassy Belgrade 2007). However, Serbia also occasionally took steps such as adopting the declaration on Srebrenica or fostering trilateral relations with Ankara and Sarajevo,

which RS leadership publicly criticized. These moves demonstrated that Serbia was also pursuing broader rapprochement with BiH.

Another significant application of the camouflage and compensation strategy was the institutionalization of trilateral cooperation between Serbia, Turkey, and BiH. Initiated in 2010, this framework included annual summits and foreign ministers' meetings in New York during the session of the UNGA. The 2010 Declaration of Istanbul emphasized reconciliation between Serbs and Bosniaks and sent an important message of Serbia's openness to historical reconciliation, especially toward the Muslim majority states (Tanjug 2010e). Serbia also pursued closer bilateral institutional cooperation with BiH. This was characterized by a "Scandinavization" narrative, contrasting positively with the "Balkanization" stereotype. Jeremić and Lagumdžija promoted a "Nordic model" of foreign affairs cooperation in 2012 (Tanjug 2012). After the change of the government, the new speaker of Serbia's National Assembly Nebojša Stefanović also expressed support for the "Nordic model" of cooperation among regional parliaments (Beta 2012c). Serbia began providing consular protection to BiH citizens in countries where BiH lacked consulates, such as during the 2014 FIFA World Cup in Brazil (MSP 2014b). Regular foreign ministry consultations and support for parliamentary collaboration strengthened this narrative. The joint session of Serbia's Government and BiH's Council of Ministers in 2015 symbolized this enhanced cooperation (Politika 2015).

Besides that, several concrete gestures could be qualified as an example of this strategy. Serbia sought to extend its relations with the FBiH entity, proposing a special parallel relations agreement like that with the RS entity, as permitted by the Dayton Agreement (Beta 2012c). Acts of goodwill, such as Serbia's five million euro donation to Srebrenica in 2015 during a period of austerity (Čongradin 2015), further underscored this approach. This act was especially important, considering that it was perceived as a compensation to the war-crimes victims. Other symbolic gestures included Serbia's willingness to withdraw the warrant for Ejup Ganić, contingent on BiH prosecuting him for the Dobrovoljačka Street crime. Very relevant in this regard was also the visit of the entire BiH presidency to Belgrade in the summer of 2015, shortly after the attack on Vučić in Srebrenica (Tanjug 2015a). By warmly welcoming the presidency members, walking through Belgrade in a friendly atmosphere (including chatting with citizens in Belgrade city center), and emphasizing that Belgrade remained committed to reconciliation between Serbs and Bosniaks, Serbia sought to send the message that it was better than its neighbors and was ready to extend a hand even when attacked.

*Stigma rejection* acts were applied only occasionally during this period and primarily consisted of refusals to use the term “genocide” concerning Srebrenica. Despite the ICJ ruling stating that Serbia was not guilty of genocide, Serbian officials continued to avoid labeling the events in Srebrenica as such. The only partial exception was the national assembly’s declaration, which referenced the ICJ ruling, but notably avoided directly using the word “genocide” (NSRS 2010). In most cases, state officials sidestepped the issue by not directly disputing the genocide qualification and choosing instead to avoid commenting on it. Tomislav Nikolić, for instance, acknowledged that the events in Srebrenica were “a large crime” and apologized for them, but stopped short of calling it genocide (RTS 2013). He also relativized the term by suggesting that “all that happened on the territory of the former Yugoslavia had characteristics of genocide,” further diluting the specific characterization of Srebrenica. The rejection of the genocide qualification became more explicit during the UK’s 2015 attempt to pass a resolution in the UNSC condemning the genocide in Srebrenica. Serbia strongly opposed this initiative, which was ultimately vetoed by Russia. Another form of stigma rejection involved Serbian officials emphasizing that Serbia and Serbs also deserved apologies and that criminals from all sides of the conflict should be held accountable. This narrative sought to shift the focus from Serbia’s responsibility alone and attempted to socialize the stigma by distributing it across other actors in the region. Such statements often accompanied Serbian officials’ or institutions’ gestures of apology during this period.

The reliance mostly on compromising strategies during this period yielded significant results. The international audience of normals reacted very positively, especially to the application of the stigma acceptance strategy. The general improvement in relations with BiH and the region, along with the implementation of numerous symbolically important steps towards BiH listed within the camouflage and compensation strategy, were also positively received. By mid-2010, Valentin Inzko, the high representative in BiH, noted progress in regional relations, and many high-ranking officials would follow his lead in the next two years (Tanjug 2011b).

The reactions from BiH during this period were quite positive, although some were dissatisfied that the parliamentary resolution did not explicitly mention the term “genocide.”<sup>16</sup> Its effectiveness was somewhat reduced by

16 Eric Gordy outlined several factors influencing the resistance of Serbia and the RS to accept genocide qualification for the mass crime in Srebrenica, including polls (political cost for leaders), conservatism of institutions dealing with the past, and a potential crisis of legitimacy, particularly important for the RS (RSE 2018).

the fact that the declaration was supported by only a narrow majority in parliament. The accusations claiming that Serbia's close ties with the RS undermined BiH sovereignty ceased in this period, marking another indicator that Sarajevo had accepted Belgrade's statements on its commitment to a unified BiH as credible. A series of positive statements about the relations between the two countries from Sarajevo officials from 2010 to 2012 were of great importance as a signal to the international society that BiH recognized Serbia's role as a "good neighbor." Especially important messages came from certain gestures on the Bosnian side, such as Bakir Izetbegović's apology to the innocent victims of the Army of BiH (Tanjug 2010d), and Sulejman Tihić's statement that Dobrovoljačka Street was undoubtedly a crime (RTS 2010a). These gestures acknowledged that not only Serbs committed crimes, but others as well.

In 2012, there was a slight setback. Izetbegović reacted strongly to what he called the "denial of genocide" in Srebrenica by the new President Tomislav Nikolić (Beta 2012b). BiH officials reacted negatively to the use of the term "two states" to describe relations with the RS entity (which he later explained as a slip), and the ministry of foreign affairs of BiH issued a protest note when Speaker of the Assembly Nebojša Stefanović made the same gaffe (Beta 2012d). However, these tensions quickly subsided, and by September Inzko reaffirmed his confidence that the new government in Serbia sincerely desired the stability and integrity of BiH (Beta 2012a). After Tomislav Nikolić's apology for Srebrenica, a wave of positive reactions from BiH resumed. By May 2013, during a visit to Rijeka, Izetbegović stated that Serbia's leadership deserved full support and expressed confidence in its good intentions (Nezavisne novine 2013). In addition to statements, the fact that BiH allowed Serbia to open a consular office in Drvar (a town in the FBiH entity with Serb majority) and agreed to institutionalize cooperation in numerous fields sent positive feedback to the international society regarding Serbia's actions during this period (MSP 2014c). The most important signal was certainly the agreement to hold a joint session of the Serbian government and the BiH council of ministers at the end of 2015. Also, the decision by the three-member presidency to visit Belgrade in the summer of 2015 and participate in numerous activities in a friendly tone helped Belgrade demonstrate its "openness" and "extended hand" shortly after the incident at the Srebrenica commemoration.

Finally, the successful institutionalization of trilateral cooperation between Ankara, Belgrade, and Sarajevo (as well as Belgrade, Zagreb, and Sarajevo) sent an extremely important message, especially to Muslim-majority countries. The West praised Belgrade's role in convincing Banja

Luka to abandon the referendum on the jurisdiction of the BiH court, as well as Vučić's visit to Srebrenica in 2015. This move was perceived as confirmation that Belgrade was a crucial stabilizing factor, complementing Serbia's handling of the migrant crisis that year and the new set of agreements with Pristina in Brussels in August 2015. All in all, the results throughout this period were quite positive, not only because of actions on this front, but largely due to them.

### **From Rump Partnership to Latent Rivalry (2016–2020)**

During this period, the relative importance of this stage for Serbian stigma management was in a state of decline, with the spotlight being put to other stages. However, its importance did not completely diminish—remaining more important than relations with Croatia. Specifically, relations with BiH continued to hold some importance for managing impressions not only with the EU (whose relevance temporarily diminished due to stagnation in EU integration since 2018), but also with Turkey and countries in the Middle East and North Africa region. These nations became increasingly important to Serbia, especially in its efforts to develop cooperation with the UAE and Egypt. This subchapter shows how threat perceived from Sarajevo increased during this period, particularly in late 2016 and early 2017, as well as in 2020. In the interim, there was a temporary reduction in tensions, though relations did not return to the level of true partnership.

The discourse of Serbian officials increasingly emphasized threats coming from Sarajevo in various aspects from mid-2016. President Nikolić openly stated that certain politicians in BiH and the region were “deliberately raising tensions” (Tanjug 2016). The removal of restrictions on Naser Orić during his war crimes trial and Bakir Izetbegović's statements during his visit to Novi Pazar in July 2016 were described by Ivica Dačić as attempts to “destabilize the region and provoke conflicts with the Serbian people” by Bosniaks (Beta 2016c). Izetbegović's comparison of the relationship between Banja Luka and Belgrade with that of Sarajevo and Novi Pazar was interpreted by Belgrade as a provocative analogy and interference in Serbia's internal affairs. The perception of threat further increased in September, when former Bosnian army commander Sefer Halilović stated that “war is possible” due to the announced referendum on the Day of Republika Srpska. Dačić characterized this as a warmongering statement and a “threat to peace and stability” (Beta 2016c). Both he and Vučić clearly stated that Belgrade would not allow the destruction of the RS (Beta 2016d).

This was the first time since Mesić's statement at the beginning of 2010 that military means were mentioned in the BiH context. While the perception of threat increased, certain statements may have been overly securitized for domestic purpose considering that Halilović held no official position in BiH at the time. The announcement of a request for revision of the ICJ ruling on BiH's genocide lawsuit in early 2017 further deepened the perception of threat. Vučić emphasized that it "hinders reconciliation in the region," and Dačić even called it an "act of hostility" (Beta 2017a, 2017c). However, the ICJ denied the request on procedural grounds in late March 2017, reducing the perception of threat stemming from this issue.

Despite these tensions, the discourse of "cooperation and good neighborliness" experienced a brief renaissance in 2017, when public references to threats diminished. Particularly significant were Dačić's statements that relations with BiH were good (MSP 2017b) and that relations with BiH (and Turkey) were "excellent" by the end of 2017 (MSP 2017c). During the opening of the new BiH embassy in Belgrade in the summer of 2017, Minister Dačić stated that "the bilateral relations between our two countries and the traditional friendship and closeness of our citizens represent an example of good neighborliness in the Western Balkans region, which is also one of the priorities of our foreign policy" (MSP 2017a). However, this very positive discourse was somewhat moderated in 2018 and 2019. Instead of "very good" or "excellent," Serbia's new President (and former Prime Minister) Aleksandar Vučić assessed relations with Bosniaks as "good" at the beginning of 2018 (Beta 2018a). Similarly, Foreign Minister Dačić gave a more neutral characterization of "good" relations during a 2019 meeting with the new Bosnian ambassador in Belgrade (Vlada Srbije 2019).

By 2020, negative discourse once again dominated. Serbian leaders directly labeled certain acts by Sarajevo as "threats." President Vučić called on BiH politicians in late 2020 to "cease threatening to diminish Republika Srpska" (RSE 2020). However, considering that no specific threats were clearly identified, the sincerity of this statement remains unclear. Previously, labeling Minister Dačić as a "member of the criminal Milošević regime" by the Bosniak member of the presidency also provoked a furious reaction from Belgrade. Thus, after the brief warming of relations in 2017, stagnation in 2018 and 2019, and the deterioration in 2020, which reached the highest publicly articulated level of threat since the mid-2000s, it is difficult to claim that relations ever returned to a true partnership during this period. A fitting description of the relations between BiH and Serbia during this time was given by then-Bosnian House of Representatives Speaker Radmanović

in November 2020 during his meeting with Ivica Dačić, when he assessed bilateral relations as “complex” (RTV 2020).

### *Stigma Management Strategies and Outcomes*

Stigma-management strategies applied particularly intensively in this phase were primarily denying. Serbia used the stigma rejection quite extensively, alongside counter-stigmatization. In this phase, there was no explicit use of stigma acceptance, but camouflage and compensation continued to be applied intensively. Considering that the perception of threat was increasing, while the importance of this stage was in a moderate decline, Serbia's reliance on a denying strategy is unsurprising and in accordance with the destigmatization dilemma model. During the periods when a potential renewal of BiH's genocide case against Serbia appeared imminent, there was a marked reluctance to apply compromising acts, with a pronounced preference for counter-stigmatization, which indicates how the perception of threat directly influenced the choice of strategies employed.

The act which could be classified as *camouflage and compensation* continued during this phase. The first and most direct use of this strategy was the continued funding for the municipality of Srebrenica, first announced at the end of 2015. The use of this action for stigma-management purposes became even more pronounced during the second half of 2015 compared to the previous year. In September 2016, Prime Minister Vučić participated in the Clinton Global Initiative in the US, on a panel with then-Mayor of Srebrenica Ćamil Duraković, moderated by the former US President Bill Clinton (Srbija uživo 2016). Alongside conciliatory messages and references to past gestures of stigma recognition (though without an explicit new apology, only an acknowledgment of “understanding the pain”), Vučić particularly highlighted Serbia's assistance to Srebrenica. Additionally, Vučić emphasized that Serbia continued to extend a hand to BiH, despite the attack on him, and highlighted Serbia's compromising gestures following the incident in late 2015. Such rhetorical emphasis on the desire for reconciliation and closer relations with the Bosniaks was another aspect of this strategy. For instance, during a meeting with Erdoğan and Izetbegović, Vučić emphasized Serbia's commitment to a “lasting peace” with the Bosniaks (Beta 2018a). However, in mid-2018, President Vučić angrily stated that while Serbia respected BiH's integrity, including the RS status within BiH, it did not “need to declare this every day” (Beta 2018b). This statement either reflected frustration over previous gestures being cautiously received or signaled a reserved approach appealing to more nationalist domestic audiences in Serbia and the RS. Consequently, this message's frequency decreased during 2018

and 2019, but resurfaced in 2020, with clear statements supporting BiH's territorial integrity.<sup>17</sup>

Additional aspects of this strategy involved institutional cooperation, such as Serbia providing consular protection to BiH citizens during the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro (MSP 2016d). Other examples include joint projects, such as the Belgrade–Sarajevo highway, signaling rapprochement between the two states. While these initiatives were driven by economic and practical logic, their destigmatizing effect on the foreign audience was undoubtedly significant. Lastly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, Serbia employed this strategy in its public health aid efforts. Initially, Serbia supported the RS with medicine donations. By late 2020, Serbia began considering donating vaccines to BiH and allowing BiH citizens to receive vaccinations in Serbia. Though this measure was implemented in early 2021, after the period analyzed here, it significantly influenced public opinion in BiH, as it targeted both BiH entities.

*Stigma rejection* was applied intensively during this period. In response to accusations that Serbia was "rehabilitating Milošević," Ivica Dačić rejected these claims, asserting that Serbia "does not glorify the 1990s" (Beta 2016a). However, Dačić made a shift from the previous approach, describing it as "based on the idea that Serbia committed war crimes and that the Serbian leadership, led by Milošević, was part of a joint criminal enterprise" (Beta 2016a). While this statement was largely inaccurate, since no Serbian leader between 2001 and 2012 explicitly claimed that "Serbia committed war crimes," it signaled a notable change in approach. Dačić directly addressed responsibility for crimes in BiH, stating: "It was the Hague Tribunal itself that concluded the opposite, that Milošević was acquitted of suspicions of ethnic cleansing and war crimes in BiH, that he was not part of a joint criminal enterprise, and that, on the contrary, he condemned ethnic cleansing" (Beta 2016a). This statement referred to an interpretation in Belgrade that a part of the 2016 verdict against Radovan Karadžić concluded there was insufficient evidence to prove Milošević and other Serbian officials participated in a joint

17 Nevertheless, Serbia did not prevent the RS from holding a referendum on Day of Republika Srpska in 2016, which rejected the BiH constitutional court's ruling that the holiday was unconstitutional. Furthermore, Belgrade participated in the Day of RS celebrations in subsequent years, deciding to send positive messages to Bosnian Serbs, at the expense of negative messaging to Sarajevo. Tolerating murals of Ratko Mladić, the convicted Bosnian Serb war commander, in Belgrade also conveyed a negative signal. However, President Vučić's avoidance of attending these celebrations after the BiH constitutional court's ruling in 2019 indicates that Serbia still considered its international image and sought to balance its actions. Political analyst Cvijetin Milivojević noted in 2023 that Vučić avoided attending the event "on the suggestion of Washington" (Tomić 2023).

criminal enterprise in BiH. Dačić did not deny that ethnic cleansing occurred but rejected both the responsibility of contemporary Serbia and that of Milošević's regime. This marked a broader rejection of the "perpetrator of war crimes" label regarding Serbia. Additionally, Serbian officials dismissed the possibility of revising the 2007 genocide verdict, discrediting it as a "private lawsuit" of Izetbegović. In 2020, when BiH presidency member Šefik Džaferović accused Dačić of being part of Milošević's regime responsible for war crimes, Dačić responded that he "never entered BiH during the war nor participated in any war crimes" (MSP 2020).

*Counter-stigmatization* was applied quite intensively during this period, but only at the level of labeling. The first example was the accusation by Dačić in the summer of 2016, blaming the political leadership of BiH for responsibility for the attack on Vučić in Srebrenica (MSP 2016c). This marked a shift from the immediate aftermath of the 2015 incident, during which the state of BiH was urged to identify those responsible and acknowledge the failures, without being directly accused of intending for such an incident, characterized by Serbian officials as an "assassination attempt," to occur. At this point, however, direct accusations were made against Bosniak politicians and officials in BiH, primarily Bakir Izetbegović.

Another form of labeling emerged in Dačić's response to Turkish Foreign Minister Çavuşoğlu's statement that "while Bosnia weeps, Turkey cannot sleep peacefully." In his response, Dačić issued a series of accusations for past crimes against Serbs, ranging from the Skull Tower ("Ćele kula") to the Janissaries (Beta 2016b). Although these remarks primarily concerned Turkish historical actions and were directed at Ankara, Dačić deliberately linked Bosniaks, as those loyal to Turkey, with shared responsibility. This historical association of Turkish rule with today's Bosniaks is not new, with its darkest manifestation being the justification of the Srebrenica massacres as "revenge against the Turks in these areas" by Ratko Mladić in July 1995. Dačić also responded to Izetbegović's announcement of a potential revision of the genocide lawsuit, arguing that Serbia could have filed numerous lawsuits against neighboring countries for "genocide, mass war crimes and persecutions as far back as the First World War," but refrained in the spirit of good neighborliness (Beta 2017a). While this was not explicitly directed at BiH, given that it did not exist as a state during World War I, the statement implicitly suggested crimes against Serbs in BiH, emphasizing Dačić's intent.

Protests over the lifting of restrictions on Naser Orić also highlighted crimes against Serbs, as had occurred a decade earlier when Orić was acquitted by the ICTY. Serbia again reminded the international audience that many Islamic state fighters had fought on the Bosnian side in the

1990s, a key element of Serbia's earlier (largely unsuccessful) attempts to stigmatize Bosniaks in the early twenty-first century (MSP 2016b). Additionally, in 2016 Serbia portrayed Bosniak politicians as aggressive towards the RS, particularly in the context of the aforementioned threat from Sefer Halilović regarding a potential war. Serbia used this to present the stance of the Bosniak political elite as inherently hostile. However, it is worth noting that Serbia did not demand measures of isolation, status deprivation, or discrimination against the Bosniaks or BiH based on these labels. Consequently, while the frequency of counter-stigmatization efforts increased, their intensity and severity remained relatively low, especially in comparison with those directed at Croatia during the same period.

Finally, the most direct act of counter-stigmatization in this period occurred in September 2020. Minister Dačić responded to accusations by BiH presidency member Džaferović that he had been part of the "criminal Milošević regime" by alleging that Džaferović himself participated in war crimes against Serbs. Dačić specifically referenced Džaferović's position as the head of security services in Zenica during the war, alleging that this period saw members of the "El Mujahideen" unit and the army of BiH engaging in acts such as "cutting off heads of Serbs" in the region of Ozren. He further labeled the crime in Vozuća as "the first operation before ISIS in which Serbs were ritually beheaded and everything was recorded with cameras" (MSP 2020). Dačić broadened these accusations to include former BiH president Alija Izetbegović, claiming that his followers participated in such acts, allegedly driven by the idea of creating an Islamic state—a goal he argued they still pursued. This marked one of the first instances in years of direct labeling of Bosniak leadership during the war as Islamic extremists.

Two major positive outcomes emerged during this period. First, certain acts, such as COVID-19 diplomacy and especially vaccine donations, had a significant positive impact on Bosnian public opinion, which was also recognized by the broader international audience. For instance, the Sarajevo Canton invited Serbian citizens to visit Sarajevo and offered two thousand subsidized vouchers as a gesture of gratitude for Serbia's donation of twenty thousand vaccine doses to the Canton in early 2021 (RSE 2021). The vaccine donation was accompanied by President Vučić's visit to Sarajevo and a meeting with BiH presidency members, during which positive messages about Serbia's contributions were conveyed (N1 2021). Second, the continuation of close trilateral cooperation between Ankara, Belgrade, and Sarajevo further enhanced Serbia's image among countries with Muslim-majority populations. Joint appearances by Serbia and BiH in international contexts, including visits to countries like Saudi Arabia with significant Islamic influence,

exemplified this effort (Beta 2017b). Serbia also continued to deepen relations with the UAE and maintained strong ties with Turkey, demonstrating that its cooperation with BiH was an integral part of its broader stigma management aimed at Muslim-majority members of the international society. Certain collaborative projects received notable praise in Western countries as well.

However, beyond the COVID-19 vaccine donations, praise from Bosniak elites diminished significantly compared to the previous period, while criticism intensified, primarily due to Serbia's close ties with Banja Luka, which was perceived as bypassing Sarajevo. Irritation arose from Serbia's continued participation in the Day of RS celebrations on January 9, which Bosniak politicians regarded as a violation of the BiH Constitution in light of court decisions from 2016 and 2019. Although Vučić's absence from these ceremonies helped mitigate some of the discontent, the participation of other Serbian officials, including prime ministers, foreign ministers, and parliamentary speakers still provoked criticism. Izetbegović's attempt to submit a request for revision of the ICJ ruling symbolized a significant setback for Serbia's efforts to present the Srebrenica issue as resolved in its relations with Sarajevo. It also posed a potential threat of intensified stigma if the ICJ had accepted the request and reopened the case. However, the request was denied because the ICJ determined that BiH's legal representative lacked authorization to submit it, as there was no formal approval from the BiH presidency. This outcome was facilitated by Serbian politicians in BiH, who effectively prevented the revision. Serbia continued to interpret the 2007 ruling as an exoneration.

Finally, Serbia's attempts to stigmatize BiH failed to yield tangible results, though it remains unclear whether they were genuinely intended to achieve concrete outcomes. For example, Naser Orić was ultimately acquitted in court in Sarajevo, while allegations linking Džaferović to war crimes and Islamic extremism did not affect his standing in the international society or the region. Overall, this phase produced mixed results, raising doubts about whether Serbia's counter-stigmatization efforts targeted certain actors in BiH (such as Džaferović) or were driven by other motives, such as gaining domestic political support.

### **Summary: Permanent Destigmatization Dilemma in Relations with BiH**

Foreign policy towards BiH is one of the most important stages for Serbia's stigma management. Many negative labels attached to Serbia during the

1990s (war criminal, human rights violator, aggressor, violator of international obligations) were connected to the events from the Bosnian War (1992–1995). A label of genocide perpetrator/accomplice was specifically attached only to the events related to Bosnia and Herzegovina—more specifically the town of Srebrenica. This required active engagement on Serbia in relations with official Sarajevo (especially with the Bosniak political elites) to convince the international “audience of normals” to remove negative labels and other aspects of stigma (stereotypes, separation, status loss, and discriminatory measures). Members of this audience, especially the EU, the US and Western European countries, as well as Muslim-majority countries around the world, closely monitored Serbian relations with BiH (especially with Bosniaks).

From 2001, Serbian decision-makers faced a destigmatization dilemma in their relations with BiH. They feared that making too many compromises might be exploited by Bosniak actors and jeopardize Serbia’s security interests, mostly through giving additional fuel for Bosniak lawsuits against Serbia, or for the pressure on the Serbs in BiH to accept the constitutional re-designing of the country (including the reducing of authority of the RS) as a form of compensation for past wrongdoings. Serbian officials were particularly sensible not to help solidifying of label associated with genocide, due to the fear that it might lead to reparation demands and that this acknowledgment might be used as an argument to mobilize a coalition against Serbs and Serbia in existing or future open issues. On the other hand, as demonstrated, making compromises at this stage was essential for destigmatization, one of Serbia’s main goals.

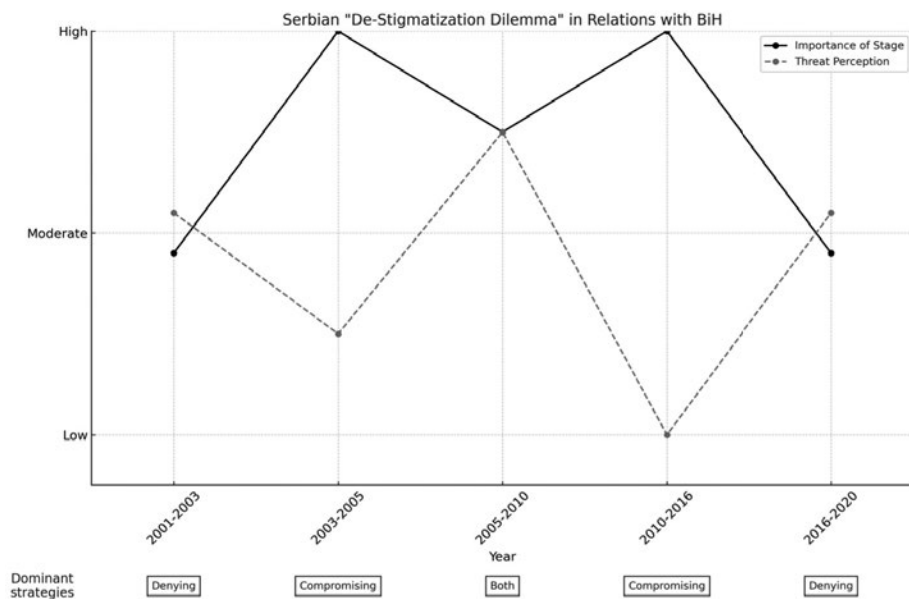
As a result, Serbia pursued some compromising and some denying strategies simultaneously for most of the time, attempting to balance its two goals: preserving security and achieving destigmatization. Generally, focus was more intensively on the application of compromising strategies, including apologetic forms of stigma acceptance. However, the exception was refusing to accept any responsibility associated with the genocide labels, where Serbia applied denying strategies of stigma rejection and even counter-stigmatization. One of the most important goals in Serbian stigma management was not to allow “the g-word” to be used in the context of acts of Serbs or Serbia.

Similarly, as in the case of relations with Croatia, the relative intensity of the use of different strategies depended on two factors. The first was the perceived importance of this stage for achieving destigmatization. In periods when this perception was higher, Serbian leaders were strongly incentivized to pursue compromises to send positive messages to the audience of normals, and vice versa. The second factor influencing Serbian policy was

the perceived threat coming from Sarajevo. In periods when this perception was higher, Serbia resorted more to denying strategies, and vice versa. The interplay of these two factors led to different outcomes, consistent with the destigmatization dilemma model. In accordance with the assumptions of the model, Serbia pursued all types of strategies parallelly when both factors were high (2003–2005, 2010–2016), while pursuing mostly denying strategies when only the threat was high, or mostly compromising when only importance was high.

**Table 9 Serbia’s destigmatization dilemma in relations with BiH (2001–2020)** ↵

Year	2001–2003	2003–2005	2005–2010	2010–2016	2016–2020
<b>Importance of stage</b>	Low	High	High	High	Low
<b>Threat perception</b>	High	Low	High	Low	High
<b>Dominant strategies</b>	Denying strategies	Compromising strategies	Parallel appliance of all strategies	Compromising strategies	Denying strategies



**Figure 5: Serbia’s destigmatization dilemma in relations with BiH (2001–2020)** ↵

It is important to emphasize one more time that the presented periodization is developed for analytical purposes. Similarly, like in the case with Croatia, changes were not clear-cut, but more of a gradual character, so it was not an easy task to determine when the one ends, and the other one starts. However, for the purpose of the simplicity of the model, periods were eventually classified as belonging to the more dominant category in the binary division between high (enemy, rival) and low threat (partner, friend). What is clear from the findings of the process tracing conducted in this chapter is that the choice of stigma management strategies was consistent with the model outlined in this book (table 9, figure 5).

As with the case of Croatia, this analysis does not account for all the variables that shaped Serbia's policy toward BiH. Rather, its focus was on tracing how shifts in threat perception and the perceived significance of staging influenced the evolution of Serbia's stigma management strategies in this bilateral relationship.

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## 8. Conclusion

**Abstract:** The concluding chapter summarizes the book findings, outlining the contributions that it makes to the literature on stigma as well as to the broader International Relations literature. It also suggests potential future avenues for research, and offers a snapshot to the developments in Serbian relations with Croatia and Bosnia and in Serbian stigma management on other stages five years after the end of the analysis period used in this book.

**Keywords:** International Relations, Serbia, stigma management, stigma, Western Balkans

At the turn of the twenty-first century's first quarter, Serbia's relations with Croatia and BiH have significantly improved compared to their state twenty-five years ago. Both neighboring countries have become important economic and trade partners for Serbia, marked by close people-to-people ties and advanced cooperation in several key areas. Nevertheless, political turbulence, often fueled by references to past events, remains a persistent feature of bilateral discourse. These "ghosts of the past" also serve as a convenient tool for political elites, often seeking to divert attention from domestic challenges. This persistence highlights the continued relevance of stigma-related narratives in Serbia's public discourse. While such topics provide fertile ground for populist manipulation, they also underscore that stigma remains a politically salient factor in regional relations.

This book aimed to explain how Serbia used its relations with Croatia and BiH as a stage for stigma management between 2001 and 2020. It also offered analysis of stigmatization of Serbia during 1990s and the broader streams of its stigma management on other stages, aiming to give to the theoretical literature a new and comprehensive framework for analysis of this process. The destigmatization dilemma model developed in this book aimed to theoretically explain factors which influenced the choice of strategies in Serbian relations with former adversaries. This model contributes to the theoretical literature on stigmatization and stigma management in IR

by outlining a concrete social mechanism which helps us to understand the process of how and why states choose stigma-management strategies (which is still unpacked in scholarship) and why they often, in parallel, pursue strategies based on different logic.

The first chapter offered a critical review of the existing theoretical literature on stigma in IR, locating the existing gaps and open issues, while the second chapter theoretically and methodologically situated and outlined the basic premises of the destigmatization dilemma model. Considering that analysis of stigma imposition is of vast importance for the analysis of stigma management, the next chapter analyzed stigmatization of Serbia during the 1990s. The fourth chapter explained how important stigma management was for Serbia's decision-makers after 2001, with a particular reference on how important a stage of relations with Croatia and BiH was for the achievement of destigmatization, as well as which factors influenced setting of destigmatization as a goal. Finally, the last two chapters apply the destigmatization dilemma model to explain Serbian stigma management in relations with Croatia and BiH.

Findings of this book confirmed that Serbia's decision-makers were facing a destigmatization dilemma vis-à-vis Croatia and BiH. While they were motivated to pursue compromising acts in relations with these actors to confirm that Serbia is now a good neighbor, which would substantially help its destigmatization, they were also afraid that too much compromising might be misused by Sarajevo and Zagreb in open issues and therefore be threatening for Serbia, which motivated them to neglect responsibility. They were solving this dilemma with trade-offs in the sense of parallel use of different (sometimes even contradictory) strategies. The intensity and frequency of the use of strategy was driven by the relative impact of the two factors: perception of threat and perception of importance of relations with an actor for stigma management. The matrix of choice developed in this book was confirmed in the cases of Serbian policy towards Croatia and BiH.

Modeling of the interplay between the tendency to be secure and the tendency to be recognized in influencing foreign policy decision-making presents one of the broader theoretical contributions of this book. Although this model is focused on a narrower case, integration of the intersubjective security theories with recognition theories presents a theoretical foundation for other similar models which could be developed in the future. This is the most important macro-theoretical contribution to IR which this book offers. While the premises of symbolical interactionist research of stigma and the Copenhagen school of security studies in many aspects share a common ground, they have rarely communicated in the existing scholarship.

Therefore, theoretical foundations of this model could serve for research of other phenomena in IR in the future. Also, the literature review of the book aimed to situate the study of stigma in IR in a broader context and to demonstrate its compatibility with other main IR grand theories.

Finally, the focus of this book was on the desire to overcome stigma/become fully recognized as equal and how it correlates with fear/perception of threat in the international society of states. However, the intersection of these two drivers of behavior is undisputably important for the research of stigma in human societies as well. This book therefore aims to inspire further discussions in sociology, social psychology, and other disciplines that analyze stigmatization and stigma management in the broader context, as well as to provide food for thought about the nature of relation between human societies and international society.

Future studies should seek to apply the model to other comparable cases, particularly those of countries whose regional relations are shaped by their interactions with one or more former adversaries. Croatia might be one of them, considering that some studies have already addressed how different factors influenced its stigma management in relation with Serbia (Krstić 2021, 2025). Behavior of Albanian political elites in Tirana and Pristina could also be an important regional example, and to a certain extent also Bosniaks in Sarajevo. Beyond the Western Balkans, regions such as the South Caucasus, the Middle East, or even East Asia (with cases like Japan and South Korea) present comparable examples of countries whose regional ties are shaped by relations with former adversaries and could be usefully examined through the destigmatization dilemma model.

Besides that, future studies should test the broader relevance of this model for the research of stigma management in different contexts. While this study was limited to relations with former adversaries in the region, the theoretical underpinnings of the social-constructivist destigmatization dilemma model (which combines symbolic interactionism—particularly stigma and dramaturgy—with compatible recognition and securitization theories) allow it to be tested on other stages as well. Moreover, future studies could fruitfully explore the interplay between different stages, both regional and international, to better understand how states navigate stigma management across overlapping and sometimes conflicting arenas. This line of inquiry is particularly compelling, as the configuration of stigma imposers and opponents, as well as the audiences of normals, may shift depending on the stage.

In terms of studies of Serbian foreign policy and the Balkan relations, future studies should focus more on how internal political debates and the

quality of democratic dialogue shaped the perception of stigma and the perception of threat among decision-makers, as well as their public articulations of these issues. The importance of these factors was acknowledged in this study but was not thoroughly addressed. Also, it is important to address how other aspects (stages) of Serbian politics and policy were affected by destigmatization as one of the important national goals in the twenty-first century. While the perspectives for the full destigmatization perspective were not the topic of this book, they should undoubtedly be further analyzed, and the time frame of the research should be broadened to include Serbian foreign policy after 2020.

While the empirical analysis in the book stops at the end of 2020, the situation over the following five years remained similar. Serbia has further solidified its status of a normal and reliable partner through important strategic partnership/dialogue documents with both China and the US. This symbolic parallel recognition from the most powerful Western and Eastern actor is a significant status asset. Additionally, praise from actors such as the IMF helped Serbia to reduce stereotypes of being a typical less-developed Balkan state. Government-emphasized specialized Expo exhibitions which featured Belgrade helped Serbia to improve its reputation worldwide. However, progress remained very limited. Serbian EU negotiations are in a stalemate, considering that since 2021 there were no openings of new clusters/chapters in accession negotiations, while negative labels on the decay of democracy in Serbia further increased and became more direct with the ODIHR report on the December 2024 elections.<sup>1</sup>

Parallel with this, Serbia was, however, indirectly labeled as “pro-Putin” due to the lack of alignment with the EU sanctions against Russia in resolutions of these organizations, especially since 2022. This resonated well with the existing stereotypes of Serbs being “aggressive Russian proxies” in the Balkans, which was particularly emphasized by Serbian opponents in the regional context since the Russian aggression on Ukraine. Still, there were no follow-up effects of this labeling which would result in more concrete sanctioning of Serbia—probably connected with the fact that a lot of ammunition and arms produced in Serbia eventually ended in the arsenal of the Ukrainian army. Even when anti-Russian sanctions were about to hit Serbia, like the US sanctions against Russia-owned energy companies in these countries from January 2025, Washington officials insisted that this was a measure against Russia, not against Serbia, thereby negating the

1 For the measuring of degree to which Serbia's national interests are implemented, see Krstić and Jović 2024.

connection between sanctioning measures and the mentioned (attempted) labeling.

In the meantime, the evolving domestic crisis reaffirmed that the “specter of stigma” and recognition-seeking discourse remained crucial for political mobilization in Serbia. Following the collapse of the canopy at the newly renovated railway station in Novi Sad, which killed sixteen people on November 1, 2024, mass protests erupted across the country. Led primarily by students, these protests—the largest in Serbia’s recent history—were a response to corruption and government-backed violence against peaceful protesters. Protesters employed a range of slogans, including “Belgrade is World AGAIN” (Šejić 2025), a deliberate reference to the anti-government student protests of 1996–1997. Back then, the same slogan was used to signal the rejection of Serbia’s international marginalization and isolation during the 1990s. Meanwhile, in his New Year’s interview, President Aleksandar Vučić, while defending his record and attacking the protesters, identified “raising Serbia’s reputation in the world” as the foremost achievement of his twelve-year political legacy (Milić 2024). The fact that both sides invoked Serbia’s international reputation amid this domestic crisis underscores the enduring resonance of stigma among the Serbian society, as well as the importance they attach to the country’s destigmatization.

A quarter century after the regime change, the prospects for Serbia’s full destigmatization remain uncertain. While regional and global developments, particularly in the European context, have reshaped the broader landscape, experts continue to disagree on Serbia’s chances for overcoming stigma. Pessimists argue that the stigma is deeply entrenched and deliberately maintained by the West to keep Serbia on the margins of international society. Some contend that Serbia may need another twenty-five years (totaling fifty years since the initial post-Milošević transition) to overcome persistent stereotypes and negative labels, emphasizing that a brief window for rapid destigmatization was missed in the early 2000s (Interview 10). Conventional optimists, by contrast, suggest that the changing international order and Europe’s turn toward pragmatic realism could accelerate geopolitical EU enlargement and offer Serbia a renewed opportunity to complete the destigmatization process through accession. Meanwhile, unconventional optimists argue that a new window of opportunity may emerge from below, as Serbia’s new student democratic movement and its resistance to institutional erosion by the ruling party could position the country as a positive example in an era of democratic backsliding across Europe. As a vigilant and hopeful observer, I remain attentive to whether Serbia will seize this moment not only to reclaim its place in international

society, but to redefine it on its own terms, with a renewed commitment to learning from past mistakes and striving to be a better, more responsible actor on the regional and global stage.

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# Index

The index does not include the key terms from the book's title (stigma, fear, foreign policy, Serbia, destigmatization dilemma, the Western Balkans) given that they appear throughout almost the entire manuscript. It also does not include the terms "Croatia" and "Bosnia and Herzegovina," since, due to the extremely high frequency of references to these two states (which are also clearly designated as two case studies in the table of contents), listing every page on which they appear would offer little navigational value. The index does not list the names of major theorists, who are mentioned primarily in the literature review and the chapter on the theoretical model—it includes only the names of individuals referenced in the empirical analysis.

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