

The never-ending Yugoslav conflict: ethnicity and historical memory in the Serbia–Kosovo negotiations

O Jamais Encerrado Conflito Iugoslavo: Etnicidade e Memória Histórica nas Negociações Sérvia–Kosovo

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Abstract

This article analyzes the factors that explain the failure of attempts to normalize relations between Kosovo and Serbia, with emphasis on the recent agreements mediated by the European Union. It starts from the following research question: how do ethnic-identity elements influence the causal mechanisms present in the normalization negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia? To answer it, the qualitative method of Process Tracing is adopted, with the objective of identifying how perceptions, discourses and symbolic interpretations shape the behavior of the actors and interfere in the results. The empirical analysis identifies four main causal mechanisms, related to semantic divergence on the terms of the agreement, the symbolic memory of the territory, the absence of mutual trust and the limitations of international mediation. The findings demonstrate that the standoff between Kosovo and Serbia stems not exclusively from legal or strategic factors, but from deep-seated disputes over identity, history and mutual recognition. The study concludes that, in conflicts with high symbolic and ethnic load, international mediation fails when it disregards the cultural codes in dispute. The methodological approach adopted contributes to evidence subjective causalities and can be applied to other cases of diplomatic impasses marked by identity conflicts.

Keywords: ethnicity; Process Tracing; Kosovo; Serbia; international negotiation.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa os fatores que explicam o fracasso das tentativas de normalização das relações entre Kosovo e Sérvia, com ênfase nos recentes acordos mediados pela União Europeia. Parte-se da seguinte pergunta de pesquisa: como elementos étnico-identitários influenciam os mecanismos causais presentes nas negociações de normalização entre Kosovo e Sérvia? Para respondê-la, adota-se o método qualitativo de Process Tracing, com o objetivo de identificar como percepções, discursos e interpretações simbólicas moldam o comportamento dos atores e interferem nos resultados. A análise empírica identifica quatro mecanismos causais principais, relacionados à divergência semântica sobre os termos do acordo, à memória simbólica do território, à ausência de confiança mútua e às limitações da mediação internacional. Os achados demonstram que o impasse entre Kosovo e Sérvia não decorre exclusivamente de fatores jurídicos ou estratégicos, mas de disputas profundas sobre identidade, história e reconhecimento mútuo. O estudo conclui que, em conflitos com alta carga simbólica e étnica, a mediação internacional falha quando desconsidera os códigos culturais em disputa. A abordagem metodológica adotada contribui para evidenciar causalidades subjetivas e pode ser aplicada a outros casos de impasses diplomáticos marcados por conflitos identitários.

Palavras-chave: etnicidade; Process Tracing; Kosovo; Sérvia; negociação internacional.

1 INTRODUÇÃO

In the field of Political Science, especially with regard to International Politics and International Relations, there are not infrequent occasions when, for numerous reasons, the desired or predicted results fail to be achieved. Despite the efforts of both academics, intellectuals, and international analysts – with their research and theoretical, technical, and methodological approaches – and statesmen, diplomats, and policymakers – with their roles in leading and shaping the direction of countries – the uncertain nature of the issues they deal with makes failures, at times, inevitable.

Halliday (2007) brings to light a number of examples where policy objectives have failed at the international level. From the revolution in Iraq in the early 1980s, from the sandinistas in securing a guerrilla victory in El Salvador in the same period or even from the United States of America (USA) in dealing with the economic depression in the early twentieth century, all have had their projects limited in some way. Still Halliday (2007), when analyzing the period of the end of the Cold War, in the 1980s and 1990s, highlights, however, what can perhaps be understood as one of the most prominent failures in the recent history of the international system, that is, the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe. In this context, the end of socialist nations, such as the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, involved, in immediate terms, two major challenges to peace in territories previously influenced by leftist ideology: the explosion of nationalism and the rise of ethnic conflicts. These clashes are attributed to the sudden independence movements of the new republics that, now influenced by the West through capitalist reforms and economic liberalizations, began to emerge and act in the international system (Halliday, 2007; Van der Pijl, 2006).

However, in the specific case of Yugoslavia, conflicts involving ethnic groups assumed intense and lasting proportions, especially during the so-called Yugoslav wars, which lasted from 1991 to 2001. Based on Thomas and Mikulan (2006), these conflicts resulted from historical resentments accumulated by diverse ethnicities towards the political dominance exercised by Serbs within the Federation. Throughout this decade of hostilities, marked by accusations of ethnic cleansing, war crimes, forced rectifications of borders and involvement of foreign powers, the former Yugoslavia progressively fragmented. Initially, the independent States of Slovenia, Croatia, North Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina appeared, as well as the

creation of the federation called Serbia and Montenegro. In 2006, Montenegro would also gain its independence, symbolically marking the definitive collapse of the Yugoslav project and effectively the loss of Serbian hegemony over the other peoples of the region (Nogueira, 2015; Thomas; Mikulan, 2006).

Despite the violence involved in these processes, the new States managed to achieve mutual recognition and establish relatively stable diplomatic relations. One notable exception, however, was the case of Kosovo. According to the 1974 Yugoslav Constitution, only the six republics – Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia – had a constitutional right to self-determination and secession. In turn, Kosovo was only a political-administrative unit within Serbia, inhabited mostly by ethnic Albanians, but without the *status* of a nation and therefore without a formal right to separation (Nogueira, 2015). Even so, after a decade of instability, marked by ethnic tensions and intervention by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in the 1990s, Kosovo unilaterally declared its independence in 2008. Although this movement has been recognized by the USA and most members of the European Union (EU), Serbia refuses to recognize it to this day. It is precisely the persistence of this impasse and the failure of the most recent attempts at negotiation – especially the recent agreements mediated by the EU – that constitute the focus of this study (Stanicek, 2023; Thomas; Mikulan, 2006).

Since 2008, several attempts at negotiation have been undertaken with international mediation. The latter culminated in the Brussels agreements (February 2023) and its Ohrid Annex (March 2023), which sought to establish a path towards normalizing relations between the two sides. However, even with the active action of the EU and the involvement of local leaders, the results were limited, revealing deep resistances and persistent obstacles (Stanicek, 2023). Therefore, this article sets out to investigate why normalization between Kosovo and Serbia remains so difficult, even in scenarios of strong external pressure and incentives.

Defining the research design, the central hypothesis is that the recurrent failure of these negotiations cannot be explained solely by geopolitical or economic interests, but rather by causal mechanisms rooted in identity disputes, conflicting historical memories, and asymmetric perceptions about legitimacy and sovereignty. In this sense, the dependent variable is defined as the failure of normalization between Serbia and Kosovo in 2023, while the independent

variables correspond to the ethnic-identity factors that shape memory narratives, political discourses and interpretations of sovereignty. To explore this dynamic, the qualitative method of Process Tracing is applied, as formulated by Bennett (2010), which allows to trace the causal links between decisions, discourses and political actions within a specific case. This method proves to be adequate for the investigation, since the causal factors operate in an indirect or symbolic way – as in ethnic-identity conflicts – in which the actors interpret reality from historical, cultural and subjective frameworks.

The research question that guides this study is: how do ethnic-identity elements influence the causal mechanisms present in the normalization negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia? To answer it, the work is organized into six sections. In addition to this introduction, the theoretical framework is presented based on authors such as Kimmel (2006) and Bennett (1998), who discuss culture, identity and causality. Then, the methodological strategy adopted is outlined, followed by empirical analysis, with historical contextualization until the arrival of the events of 2023. Finally, the causal mechanisms are discussed, relating them to the guiding theory, and the final considerations are presented.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ETHNICITY AND INTERNATIONAL NEGOTIATION

At first glance, for the purposes of this work, ethnicity is understood as a form of collective identification based on real or perceived markers of common ancestry, such as language, religion, culture and shared historical memory. Unlike formal nationality, ethnicity operates in the symbolic, subjective and affective field, shaping the perception that groups build about themselves and others (Calu, 2020; Poutignat; Streiff-Fenart, 1998). In conflict contexts, such as Kosovo and Serbia, ethnicity goes beyond the cultural sphere and becomes an active political mechanism, influencing decisions, strategies and resistance (Calu, 2020). As Bieber and Daskalovski (2005) and Calu (2020) point out, ethnic disputes are not only about territory, but regarding recognition and legitimization of collective identity in the political space. This identity dimension therefore becomes central to understanding impasses in international negotiations, especially when actors in conflict share incompatible narratives about belonging and sovereignty.

That said, it is believed that the literature on International Relations traditionally emphasizes the rationality of state actors. However, authors such as Kimmel (2006) and Bennett (1998) draw attention to the influence of cultural and identity factors (such as ethnicity), in particular on the behavior of negotiators, whether they are statesmen, diplomats or policymakers. Thus, it is necessary to understand the perspective of Kimmel (2006) about the processes of international negotiation and the role of negotiators as promoters of what the author defines as "microculture". This concept corresponds to the relationships and new perceptions of the scenario built from the interaction between two actors with different trajectories and cultures – conclusions that the sides would never reach alone without the negotiation itself. Thus, the author points out that, once this effort is mitigated, without the exercise of practices of good faith and trust, agreements break down and negotiations do not go forward, following up or starting the conflict.

In addition, Kimmel (2006) reflects on the role of multiculturalism (set of cultures interacting with each other) in negotiating both "subjective culture" (that formed internally by a subject from living with his close circle of individuals), and "common culture" and "cultural identity", which are the preference for respect and honor to those values acquired from living in a given society. Thus, the author directs to negotiators the responsibility of being able to read these characteristics in meetings, in order not to commit misinterpretations of gestures and positions (conceptualized as misperceptions and misunderstandings), especially when dealing with countries at different levels of information (Kimmel, 2006).

In turn, Bennett (1998), deals with the issue of intercultural communication. Pointing out the way in which the human species generally deals with differences, seeking to distance itself and avoid what diverges from what is known, the author criticizes generalization and stereotypes, also emphasizing the importance of being fundamental to consider differences in language, behavior patterns, values and principles in communication between people or groups from different cultures. Another important point of his contribution is the differentiation made between "Culture", or objective culture, which implies participation in one of the cultural institutions, encompassing the information that can be acquired through courses on a given society; from "culture", or subjective culture, which therefore refers to the psychological

characteristics that define a grouping, being established as: “the learned and shared patterns of beliefs, behaviors, and values of groups of interacting people” (Bennett, 1998, p. 3).

For that reason, the contributions of both authors allow us to understand that negotiations between actors from different cultural backgrounds – as in the case of Serbia and Kosovo – do not occur only around material interests, but are crossed by subjective structures of identities and values. This symbolic dimension of negotiation is especially critical in contexts of ethnic conflict, in which otherness is not only perceived as difference, but as an existential threat. With Serbia and Kosovo, these factors manifest themselves in a particularly sensitive way, given the history of interethnic violence, the symbolic legacy of Kosovar territory for Serbian national memory and the Kosovar effort to assert its own political identity.

In this context, Calu (2020) alludes that national identities do not operate only as a panorama, but as active elements in the behavior of actors – structuring their reading of the other, their tolerance for compromise and their perception of threat. Thus, the concepts of “microculture” (Kimmel, 2006) and “subjective culture” (Bennett, 1998) help to clarify how divergent interpretations emerge precisely when there is no shared symbolic field. It is in this perspective that the negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia reveal not only political disagreements, but deep ruptures of mutual recognition, which justifies the choice for a method such as Process Tracing, capable of detecting the subjective and identity mechanisms that affect causality in the negotiation course.

3 METHODOLOGICAL PROCEDURES

3.1 PROCESS TRACING AND THE RECONSTRUCTION OF CAUSAL MECHANISMS

Based on Bennett (2010), Process Tracing is a qualitative method that seeks to identify and test causal mechanisms between variables within a single case. Instead of just observing whether one variable causes another, Process Tracing reconstructs the sequence of events, perceptions, and decisions that link cause to effect. It functions as an explanatory narrative, but anchored in empirical evidence and causal logic. Therefore, it is a form of intensive inference, based on detailed empirical evidence, which aims to understand how a result occurred, reconstructing the temporal sequence and the intervening mechanisms. The method is useful

when the causal relationship is not direct or observable, but mediated by perceptions, beliefs, normative constraints, and other factors.

On the other hand, King, Keohane, and Verba (1994, p. 86) point out that: "Identifying causal mechanisms is a popular way of doing empirical analyses. It has been called, in slightly different forms, 'process tracing', 'historical analysis', and 'detailed case studies'." Thus, still based on the authors, even in qualitative research, it is necessary to seek transparency and inferential coherence in the collection and interpretation of evidence. In this sense, Process Tracing allows treating causality with sophistication, especially in cases where normative and identity factors – although subjective – operate as traceable and empirically accessible causal mechanisms, such as the Serbia-Kosovo case (King; Keohane; Verba, 1994).

Although Process Tracing is directly linked to qualitative studies and intensive case analysis, as proposed by Bennett (2010), its epistemological foundation dialogues with the broader principles of scientific inference, as defended by King, Keohane and Verba (1994). The authors insist that good research, whatever its approach, must start from well-formulated causal questions, present logical coherence between hypotheses and evidence, and seek transparency at each stage of the investigative process. Bennett (2010), when applying this logic to the qualitative field, proposes a structure that precisely allows the analytical reconstruction of causal chains through the identification of mechanisms that, although not always directly observable, become empirically traceable when accurately contextualized. Such an articulation between rigorous inference and interpretative sensitivity is especially pertinent in research that, like this one, deals with normative, identity and historical factors. Therefore, the methodological choice adopted here – Process Tracing – is justified not only by its adherence to the type of question that guides the study, but also by its explanatory potential in the face of phenomena in which the meaning attributed by the actors to events and decisions occupies a central place.

3.2 UNIT OF ANALYSIS, SOURCES, AND IDENTIFIED MECHANISMS

This work adopts a unique, intensive and qualitative case study, using Process Tracing to reconstruct the causal mechanisms that connect the 2023 agreements to their non-implementation. The choice of the case of Kosovo and Serbia is due to its empirical relevance,

the availability of documents and the fact that the context involves divergent interpretations on sovereignty, legitimacy and, therefore, identity and ethnicity. In this design, the dependent variable corresponds to the failure of normalization in 2023, while the independent variables refer to ethnic-identity factors manifested in memory narratives, political discourses and interpretations of sovereignty. The causal mechanisms analyzed (M1–M4) function as intervening variables, which connect the identity elements to the observed political decisions and results.

That said, the unit of analysis focuses on the Serbian-Kosovan negotiation process, in particular on recent developments involving EU mediation. For this purpose, empirical evidence was collected in official documents of the European Union, such as those of the European External Action Service (EEAS), speeches of political leaders (Josep Borrell, Albin Kurti and Aleksandar Vučić), reports of the European Parliament (like Stanicek, 2023), as well as academic analyzes, such as Van der Pijl (2006), Bieber and Daskalovski (2005) and Calu (2020), among other pertinent sources.

It is on this basis that the empirical analysis adopted to understand the contemporary standoff between Kosovo and Serbia is structured in the following section. In addition, this notion is also relevant in section five, with the causal mechanisms preliminarily identified regarding: (i) the semantic and symbolic divergence on the term “normalization”; (ii) the perception of identity threat by Serbia; (iii) the absence of accumulated trust and the legacy of memory of ethnic conflicts; and (iv) the limitations of international mediation in interpreting in negotiations the concrete meanings assigned by the parties.

4 EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS: THE KOSOVO-SERBIA NEGOTIATION PROCESS

4.1 THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT

According to King, Keohane and Verba (1994), the Process Tracing method is also referred to as “historical analysis”. Thus, and taking into account its use for empirical investigations, it is considered appropriate to resume historical elements, in chronological order, which facilitate the understanding of current events involving the parties in question, whether conflicts, failures or attempts to approach.

Given the above, in the first instance, both Serbia and Kosovo have complex and multifaceted contexts, reflecting the heterogeneity of the region, which has different cultures, religions, civilizations and, therefore, ethnicities (as can be seen in Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Different ethnic compositions in the former Yugoslavia region.



Contrary to what may be assumed, during the time of Yugoslavia's existence, the Federation proved to be an especially stable country with a certain bargaining power in the international system, as soon as it was one of the precursors of the so-called Non-Aligned Movement during the Cold War (Van der Pijl, 2006). Much of this national vigor was due to the administration of Josip Broz Tito, Yugoslav leader for 27 years (1953-1980), who, due to his character and manner of governance, as well as his promotion to a supranational Yugoslav citizenship, derived articulation and firm command over a vast territory in the Balkans, despite the deep differences that existed (Knudsen; Laustsen, 2006; Nogueira, 2015). Knudsen and Laustsen (2006, p. 97) point out that: "Tito era Yugoslavia reflected socialist unity and relative economic prosperity transcending ethnic differences [...]" In line, Bieber and Daskalovski

(2005) address that Tito's government encouraged ecumenism in order to emphasize internationalism and, above all, Yugoslav unity as a whole, thus suppressing the nationalism existing in the territory.

However, after Tito's death in 1980, a series of events plagued the hitherto indivisible Yugoslav federation. In Kosovo, the first riots occurred as early as March 1981, when ethnic Albanian Kosovar students called for more freedom within Yugoslavia and for recognition of Kosovo as a republic. Meanwhile, in Serbia, nationalists brought to light that Serbs in Kosovo lived under threat and were discriminated against by Albanians (Calu, 2020; Nogueira, 2015). Added to this conjuncture is the collapse of socialism throughout Eastern Europe and the gradual Western advance into the region (Halliday, 2007; Van der Pijl, 2006). During this period, the new Yugoslav administrations, centered mainly on Slovene and Croatian elites, presented difficulties for the federation to continue fully without religious, cultural and, above all, ethnic differences coming to the fore. According to Figure 1, it can be seen that in the same 1980s, Serbs constituted about 37% of the Yugoslav population, concentrating not only in Serbia, but in several of the other republics and political-administrative units, such as Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Vojvodina and Kosovo. In this way, it is interpreted that Serbian demands, not only social and cultural, but also governance, would have considerable weight in Yugoslav politics, just as it is inferred that the other ethnicities would not arbitrarily comply with Serbian demands (Çinar, 2019; Greble, 2021).

In addition to highlighting the growing ethnic tensions in the region, this whole context heightened nationalist pressures within the country, especially taking into account that after this in Serbia there was a sudden growth of such rhetoric, which supported the rise of Serb Slobodan Milošević to power first in Serbia and then in Yugoslavia. Milošević, subsequently indicted by the International Criminal Court in The Hague for war crimes during the Yugoslav Wars (1991-2001), sought – in a failed manner – to recentralize the Yugoslav federal structure, so as to benefit his leadership and consequently Serbian demands throughout the territory. To exemplify, some of his actions, in 1989, were the invalidation of Kosovo's autonomous *status* and the replacement of local officials to reestablish Serbian domination in unity (Calu, 2020; Çinar, 2019).

Without success towards a return to the Yugoslav federation, little by little the six republics – according to the Constitution of 1974 – that is, Slovenia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Montenegro and Serbia, were declaring their independences and, consequently, decreeing the end of Yugoslavia, formalized in 2003. In turn, Kosovo, seen by Serbia as its own political-administrative unit, and in which 93% of its population is ethnic Albanian and Muslim, unilaterally proclaimed its independence in 2008, based mainly on differences in ethnicity in relation to Belgrade¹ (Greble, 2021; Stanicek, 2023). Although many countries, such as the USA and 21 members of the EU, have recognized the movement on the part of the Kosovars, the Serbs, for their part, have not submitted to the request for emancipation, considering Kosovo part of their territory as indicated in their constitution and United Nations (UN) Resolution 1244². Such a scenario characterizes one of the most notable current conflicting cases that concern not only the ethnicities present in it, but also Interstate negotiations and the field of international relations as a whole (Stanicek, 2023).

4.2 FROM THE BRUSSELS AGREEMENT (2013) TO THE 2023 PROPOSAL

Despite efforts at negotiations between the parties after 2008 – as in 2010, when the International Court of Justice concluded that Kosovo's declaration of independence did not violate international law – the beginning of dialogue between the parties only began in 2011, under EU mediation. However, even if the European bloc encouraged a comprehensive normalization, it was only in 2013 that Serbia and Kosovo signed the First Agreement of Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations, also called the Brussels Agreement (Stanicek, 2023). A milestone in the Belgrade-Pristina³ relationship, it aimed, among various points, to decentralize the Kosovar government, especially in the north, where there is a majority of ethnic Serbs; establish an Association of Serbian-majority Municipalities with limited autonomy within Kosovo; eliminate “parallel” structures created by Belgrade in northern Kosovo; and, above all, create an institutional channel of communication between the parties (Deda, 2013).

¹ Capital of Serbia and the former Yugoslavia (Knudsen; Laustsen, 2006).

² The resolution established the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK) and authorized an international civilian and military presence in the region (Calu, 2020).

³ Pristina: capital do Kosovo (Knudsen; Laustsen, 2006).

In spite of the signing of Serbia and Kosovo, the Brussels agreement had partial implementation. In addition to the legal ambiguity, something that influenced its ratification only in the Kosovan parliament and not in the Serbian one, certain points agreed in it never led to advances, such as the Association of Serbian-majority Municipalities, which Kosovo was never willing to create. In this regard, in 2015, the rivalry between the parties persisted, as on the Kosovan side, the Constitutional Court declared parts of the agreement unconstitutional, claiming that the proposed model harmed the sovereignty and constitutional order of the country; while on the Serbian side, Belgrade accused Kosovo of non-compliance with the points (Stanicek, 2023).

In 2018, to aggravate the situation, Kosovo imposed 100% tariffs on Serbian products, resulting in the suspension of negotiations. After that, in 2020, it was the turn of the USA to act as a mediator, during the administration of Donald Trump. Economic commitments were signed, but not legally binding. With no lasting practical outcome and no direct focus on ethnic-identity issues and Kosovan recognition, problems persisted. Thus, in 2022, despite the Franco-German attempt to reactivate dialogue, tensions increased, including with conflicts between Serbs and Kosovan forces occurring on the border (Stanicek, 2023).

Given this scenario, and taking into account that Kosovo formalized an application for EU membership in 2022, the European bloc proposed, in February 2023, the Agreement on the Path to Normalization, reaffirming points not implemented in the Brussels Agreement of 2013, as well as understanding that such resumption is a key condition for progress in the normalization process. Composed of 11 points, the new declaration sought to establish the basis for a peaceful and functional coexistence between Kosovo and Serbia, providing for respect for sovereignty, non-use of force, protection of religious heritage and ethnic and minority rights (EEAS, 2023a; Stanicek, 2023).

However, Article 4, which provided that neither of the two can represent the other in the international sphere or act on its behalf, was interpreted by the Serbs as implying *de facto* recognition of Kosovan sovereignty. With this, in March 2023, the EU reconvened the parties in the North Macedonian city of Ohrid for the discussion of the Ohrid Annex, which detailed the implementation measures of the February agreement, including deadlines and joint mechanisms. Among the points addressed, the following stand out: both parties undertake to

fully comply with the agreement and to implement its articles without reservations; Kosovo proposes to start negotiations to establish the Association of Serbian-majority Municipalities; the two must fully respect territorial integrity and mutual sovereignty, under the terms of the agreement; future negotiations will continue to be mediated by the EU, and any non-compliance could affect the accession process of both to the bloc (EEAS, 2023b; Stanicek, 2023).

Nevertheless, despite the apparent acceptance, Aleksandar Vučić, Serbian president, publicly stated that Serbia would never recognize Kosovo, either *de jure* or *de facto*. For his part, Albin Kurti, the Kosovan Prime Minister, has been adamant about giving up formal recognition as a condition for moving forward. Finally, the EU, through the voice of the Vice-President of the European Commission, Josep Borrell, regretted the lack of concrete commitment on both sides, marking another failure in the Kosovo-Serbia negotiations (Stanicek, 2023).

5 CAUSAL MECHANISMS AND THEORETICAL DISCUSSION: ETHNICITY AS THE CORE OF THE IMPASSE

Taking into account the conflictive and turbulent history between the parties present in the negotiation, the presentation of four causal mechanisms is adequate, not only as an empirical description, but as a theoretical-methodological interpretation. This approach aims to show that issues such as ethnicity and identity constitute causal drivers and a significant part of the non-implementation of the agreements.

5.1 COMPETING MEANINGS OF “NORMALIZATION”

During the Yugoslav period, after the victory of Serbia and the allies in the First World War, the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes was constituted in 1918 – which would later be called only the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. As the very name of the country indicates, many of the ethnicities present in the territory were not considered a constituent nation of the federation, but rather an ethnic minority, such as the Kosovar Albanians. Thus, the period between 1918 and 1941 was characterized by Serbian domination and discrimination against ethnic Albanians, mainly through Serbian colonization programs in Kosovar territory. However, between 1941 and 1945, the turbulent period of the Yugoslav monarchy, there was a change in

this situation. With a strong increase in Albanian nationalism, the moment was marked by intense discrimination against ethnic Serbs (Bieber; Daskalovski, 2005). The ethnic rivalry there would only be modified in 1945, with the change of regime in the country and the establishment of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia.

The new Yugoslavia was built on the principle that a strong federal state needed to be based on a weak Serbia, which had dominated the monarchy before the war (Van der Pijl, 2006). In this way:

The new communist leadership, emerging from the liberation struggle against the Nazi occupiers, therefore agreed to make Serbia's territory smaller (21 per cent of the area) than the actual area inhabited by Serbs (36 per cent of the population) (Van der Pijl, 2006, p. 268).

Such a policy was achieved in part by granting wide autonomy to the Serbian provinces of Vojvodina to the north and Kosovo to the south, due respectively to the Hungarian and Albanian proportions that existed there (Van der Pijl, 2006). Oliveira (1999) points out that the Serbs were harmed by this scenario, since the socialist administration of Yugoslavia – especially Tito – had denied them the possibility of living together in a single Republic. Thus, with the imminent collapse of the country in the 1990s, the Serbian view realized that its ethnicity was therefore at the mercy of the resurgence of nationalisms (Oliveira, 1999).

Although the internal deadlocks of the former Yugoslavia occurred in the form of armed conflicts, the divergence has also been, and continues to be, expressed through semantics, in particular in the distinct use of the notion of “normalization”. After the February 2023 Agreement, and its respective annex, one point became even more evident in the Serbia-Kosovo relationship: whereas Kosovans associate normalization with full recognition of the province's sovereignty, Serbs associate it with only a technocratic and functional relationship (Stanicek, 2023). Such reading remains present in political discourse. In 2023, Prime Minister Albin Kurti stated that “full normalization means mutual recognition” (Taylor-Braće, 2023), while Aleksandar Vučić claimed that “Serbia wants to have normal relations with Kosovo”, but without signing any legally binding international document, since “it does not recognize its independence” (Reuters, 2023). This reflects exactly what Bennett (1998) characterizes as a conflict between subjective cultures, considering that, by not sharing a common symbolic language, they interpret the same term with opposite meanings. In addition, this first causal mechanism also deepens the concepts of misperception and misunderstanding of Kimmel

(2006), as it shows, in practice, how the absence of a shared symbolic field between different political cultures generates negotiations with incompatible expectations, mutual frustrations and, at the limit, the failure of the implementation of agreements.

5.2 SERBIAN MEMORY AND PERCEPTIONS OF IDENTITY THREAT

From the Serbian point of view, Kosovo occupies a central place in the country's imagination, being not only a territorial or administrative issue, but a fundamental piece in the collective identity of the state. In the first analysis, the Kosovan territory is considered the cradle of the Serbian nation because it contains numerous important religious and historical sites (Bieber; Daskalovski, 2005). Religiously, Bieber and Daskalovski (2005) point out that for Serbs who follow the Orthodox Christian religion, Kosovo is seen as the "Jerusalem" of the Serbian Orthodox Church. Historically, Kosovo was the site of a battle between the Serbs and the Turks in 1389. Although militarily inconclusive, such a date was symbolically appropriated as an act of national sacrifice and tragic heroism, becoming a founding myth of Serbian nationalism; so much so that Milošević's government sought to draw parallels between the fragmentation of Serbian forces in 1389 and the nation's situation in the 1980s (Bieber; Daskalovski, 2005; Knudsen; Laustsen, 2006).

Furthermore, although the Albanian population of Kosovo had for decades demanded greater autonomy within the former Yugoslavia and obtained a certain degree of political and legal accommodation in the 1974 Constitution, the same Constitution made clear the existence of Kosovan territory only as a political-administrative unit of Serbia. Similarly, Belgrade continues to follow the Yugoslav norm, in particular regarding the non-*status* of a republic and the non-formal right to Kosovan separation. Thus, for the Vučić administration, Kosovo has never been a sovereign federal entity, so it cannot be treated as a subject of external self-determination (Nogueira, 2015). In addition, according to Stanicek (2023), another international legal instrument used to reinforce this position concerns UN Resolution 1244 of 1999, which reaffirmed the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Yugoslavia.

In any case, the symbolic memory of Kosovo for Serbs acts as a causal mechanism of political resistance: by associating the territory with a non-negotiable historical, spiritual and moral heritage, the Serbian administration finds symbolic and identity limits to any form of

diplomatic concession. This position is reiterated explicitly by President Aleksandar Vučić, who on different occasions declared that he “will not recognize Kosovo” and that under no circumstances will he “sign or accept the independence of Kosovo” while he is president (Kosovo Online, 2023). This makes any attempt at “normalization” fraught with deep political meaning – and, as Bieber and Daskalovski (2005) and Calu (2020) argue, makes the dispute over Kosovo transcend strategic rationality and enter the terrain of nationalism and collective memory. This scenario explains why Vučić agrees to negotiate but never signs or ratifies the agreement. As Kimmel (2006) observes, in contexts of high symbolic and identity load, negotiating actors tend to build their own political microcultures, with meanings, values and internal normative limits. When there is no common symbolic basis that allows the emergence of a new shared narrative, the negotiation process collapses – just as is observed in the Serbian case, where the meanings attributed to Kosovo prevent the discursive displacement necessary for the recognition of the other.

5.3 THE ABSENCE OF MUTUAL TRUST AND THE CONFLICT LEGACY

Bieber and Daskalovski (2005) establish that both collective consciousnesses – Albanian and Serbian – see themselves as a total victim, antagonized by the opposite side. The authors point out that there is an absolute asymmetry in the interpretation of various historical and social facts. History and memory, for example, are selective and filled by the portrait of the “victim image”. Thus, such a scenario exposes that, in fact, the absence of concrete gestures of mutual trust reveals the existence and persistence of a conflictive legacy and accumulated distrust. According to Bieber and Daskalovski (2005, p. 52):

Albanians and Serbs do not live only in segmented territories, but in segmented realities and segmented time, claiming the monopoly in the victim status. An apparent absence of dialogue between Albanians and Serbs exists. Both societies, Albanian and Serbian, want ethnically pure and separate societies, and both groups claim to have suffered during the communist regime.

On the one hand, the Kosovar-Albanian perspective brings out that one of the Serbian traditions concerns ethnic cleansing and the understanding that Kosovo has always been only a colony of Serbia; with this oppression being, in itself, a determining argument for secession on the part of Kosovars. On the other hand, Serbs express that with the large forced migrations of Serbs from Kosovo between the 1960s and 1980s, retaliation concerns the need to protect their

remaining ethnicity on the territory of the province. In addition, even from the Serbian perspective, Kosovo has a traditional and patriarchal structure that creates mutually closed ethnic communities, something that, intrinsically, would already be responsible for hindering numerous attempts at negotiation and cooperation between nations (Bieber; Daskalovski, 2005).

Given this scenario, what is observed is the crystallization of a pattern of mutual distrust that blocks any attempt at symbolic rearrangement between the parties. Instead of building a new common ground of understanding, Kosovar-Albanians and Serbs continue to operate from parallel and mutually exclusive interpretive universes. As Kimmel (2006) points out, trust is a structuring element for the formation of “microcultures” in the negotiation process, that is, new shared meanings that only emerge from the effective interaction between the sides. Without this element, negotiations remain doomed to reproduce closed identity patterns, in which each gesture of the other is interpreted as a threat, and not as an attempt at cooperation.

5.4 THE LIMITS OF INTERNATIONAL MEDIATION

Especially since the end of the Cold War, the concerns of the international community regarding the events that have plagued the republics and provinces of Yugoslavia have not been uncommon. Van der Pijl (2006) mentions that it was in this context that the main Western powers saw in the region an opportunity to, in addition to perpetrating new partners and promoting European cooperation, make new deals with the regimes that were gradually straying from socialist policies. In addition, if it were not for the USA to launch the Kosovo war in the 1990s, through NATO, as well as a good part of the EU to recognize Kosovar claims as legitimate, the status of the province with an ethnic Albanian majority – and which in fact has vast mineral resources on its territory – would hardly be discussed (Van der Pijl, 2006; Stanicek, 2023).

In this sense, based on Bieber and Daskalovski (2005), one of the problems related to the negotiation failures between Serbia and Kosovo concerns the “transition perspective”, which treats the impasses merely as “technical”, ignoring the complex interethnic relations. In this context, the EU demonstrates this perspective. The political-economic bloc has a limited role in external mediation in conflicts with ethnic-identity roots, failing to propose shared

interpretations that transcend competing meanings – as seen in the meeting for the implementation of the Ohrid Annex – being unsuccessful to work with the cultural codes of the parties involved, and failing to observe that local power structures and class relations are, in this context, more determining than patterns of trade and power (Bieber; Daskalovski, 2005; Stanicek, 2023).

Such treatment of the impasse, in a technical-administrative way, ignores that the obstacles to normalization between Kosovo and Serbia are not only limited to legal adjustments, institutional arrangements or operational schedules. On the contrary, it is a process permeated by historical meanings, symbolic values and identity perceptions that operate as independent variables in the behavior of actors, and that are deeply rooted in divergent interpretations. European mediator Josep Borrell himself publicly acknowledged this stagnation, noting that “unfortunately, despite the broad international and EU support, Serbia and Kosovo have achieved very little progress” and that the EU will continue to put pressure on both sides (Politiko, 2024), highlighting the limits of external mediation in the face of disputes of an identity nature. Based on Bennett (1998), communication between different cultures requires more than literal translation of words or negotiation of technical terms – it requires the sensitive reading of value structures, beliefs and meanings attributed to each gesture or proposal. The absence of such a reading by the EU contributes to the maintenance of symbolic incommunicability between Kosovo and Serbia, blocking the emergence of shared meanings and, consequently, the effective implementation of the agreements.

6 FINAL REMARKS

This article sought to answer the following research question: how do ethnic-identity elements influence the causal mechanisms present in the normalization negotiations between Kosovo and Serbia? The central hypothesis, that the obstacles to negotiations do not arise only from material or institutional interests, but from causal mechanisms rooted in symbolic and identity disputes, was shown to be true throughout the analysis. Applying the qualitative method of Process Tracing, it was possible to reconstruct the links between discourses, decisions and perceptions that shaped the failure of agreements.

The research identified four interdependent causal mechanisms. The first demonstrated the semantic and symbolic divergence on the concept of “normalization”, revealing how the parties assign different meanings to central terms of the process. The second addressed the symbolic memory of Kosovo for Serbs, highlighting that Belgrade's resistance is not only due to strategic calculations, but to deep identity narratives that see the territory as a non-negotiable historical and spiritual heritage. The third showed the absence of mutual trust, the result of a long trajectory of accumulated hurts and conflicting identities, blocking any shared symbolic rearrangement. The fourth showed the limitations of international mediation, which, by privileging a technical-administrative approach, ignores the cultural and subjective codes in dispute, reinforcing the incommunicability between the sides.

As observed, ethnicity acts not only as a background, but as a causal mechanism transversal to the four identified axes. The way actors read each other, respond to concessions, and interpret terms is rooted in identity disputes and divergent cultural structures. Process Tracing has then proved to be an effective methodological tool to access these unobservable causalities in a direct way, but empirically traceable through the interpretative reconstruction of the decision-making process.

The analysis indicates that the failure of the agreements stems not only from a lack of political will, but from the operation of symbolic and cultural mechanisms that shape the strategies and limits of the actors. The rhetoric of defense of honor and national history is not a mere discursive ornament, but a constitutive element of the rationality of action. In this sense, the absence of a common channel of symbolic communication – as Kimmel (2006) and Bennett (1998) warn – reinforces the rigidity of national positions. When there is no recognition of the subjective culture of the other, each gesture is read as a threat, and not as cooperation.

Therefore, it is concluded that effective mediations in conflicts with high identity burdens require more than legal solutions or economic incentives: they demand sensitive cultural reading, construction of common language and symbolic actions that inaugurate new fields of mutual recognition. The approach used here can contribute not only to understanding the specific impasse between Kosovo and Serbia, but also as an analytical model for other contexts marked by ethnic, symbolic disputes and difficult diplomatic resolution.

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