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Securitization and Relevance Theory: The Case of Populist Securitization in Serbia

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CRTA - Center for Research, Transparency and Accountability

DS - Democratic Party (Demokratska stranka)

DSS - Democratic Party of Serbia (Demokratska stranka Srbije)

EU - European Union

ICTY - International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia

NATO - North Atlantic Treaty Organization

ODIHR - Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

OSCE - Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

PM - Prime Minister

REM - Regulatory Authority for Electronic Media (Regulatorno telo za elektronske medije)

RTS - Radio Television of Serbia (Radio-televizija Srbije)

SAA - Stabilization and Association Agreement

SNS - Serbian Progressive Party (Srpska napredna stranka)

SPS - Socialist Party of Serbia (Socijalistička partija Srbije)

SRCE - Serbia Centre (Srbija Centar)

UAE - United Arab Emirates

UN - United Nations

UN OHCHR - United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

INTRODUCTION

Motivation

The matter of security is most often not an objective condition but a claim, made by someone, about something, directed at an audience that may or may not find it convincing (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998). We hear these claims every day, from politicians, from the media, from institutions, and some of them stick while others do not. Some shape public opinion and policy for years, mobilize groups, generate movements, while others are forgotten by the next news cycle. Behind each of these outcomes there is an underlying cognitive process in which an audience receives a claim, relates it to what it already knows and feels, infers its credibility and urgency, and arrives at a conclusion about whether it warrants attention or action. Even though this process happens quickly and often subconsciously, it is not random. It is shaped by contextual knowledge, collective assumptions, prior experience, emotional associations, and the communicative strategies of the speaker. The question of why certain security claims resonate more than others, and what role an audience plays in that process (Balzacq 2005; Salter 2008), is what originally drew me to this topic.

My academic background gave me a particular entry point into this question. I did my undergraduate studies in General Linguistics, where modules in pragmatics, discourse analysis, sociolinguistics, public communication and verbal and non-verbal communication gave me a particular way of looking at how meaning works beyond what is stated. When I began my masters' studies in Peace, Security and Development, I was happy to learn that many points of intersection already existed between linguistics and political science. This overlap was especially evident in the fact that both fields place focus on interpretation of meaning, public communication and discourse. My motivation for this thesis came from the very desire to deepen that connection through a concrete application that can further demonstrate what each field can offer to the other. Within this space, the securitization theory seemed like the obvious meeting point between the two fields.

Here was a framework in security studies that explicitly recognized the role of language in the construction of threats (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998). The framework, however, relies on the speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), a model that the field of pragmatics has largely outgrown through advances in the field of inferential communication (Sperber and Wilson 1995). In fact, the first time securitization was introduced to us during a lecture in

Critical Security Studies, I noticed this and knew I wanted to write about it. Not because I thought the theory was wrong, but because I saw an opportunity for a deeper exploration of its linguistic dimension. I later learned that several scholars had already pointed to the limitations of speech act theory and its inability to adequately account for how securitizing utterances operate within a specific context and how they are received and interpreted by the audience (Balzacq 2005; Salter 2008). Therefore, this made me think: why not see how a more contemporary theory from pragmatics would work with securitization? I immediately thought of the relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995). During my undergraduate studies, we intensively studied this theory as one of the most influential contemporary frameworks in cognitive pragmatics. Its framework explains how people make sense of what is communicated to them, how they decide what matters, what to pay attention to, and what to dismiss, based on the context they already inhabit (ibid.). The prospect of combining the two theories and the fields I am most passionate about was genuinely exciting to me. Furthermore, I believed that by offering a fresh perspective on the linguistic dimension of securitization, I could contribute to a better understanding of how we get drawn into political messages, what makes them resonate and what makes us mobilize, not as individuals but in a collective sense.

To test the applicability of the framework I wished to propose, I thought analyzing populist securitization would be a good testing ground, as populism has become one of the defining political phenomena of our time (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Wodak 2015). Moreover, as someone from Serbia, it made sense to ground this in a domestic case study, given that populism has been notorious to Serbian politics for decades, as I intend to demonstrate in the thesis. I specifically chose the December 2023 parliamentary, provincial and local elections because I was personally invested in this political moment. I had been critical of the ruling coalition for years, but the May 2023 mass shootings and the *Serbia Against Violence* protests that followed felt like a moment of genuine hope that broader societal mobilization was finally taking shape (Jevtić 2025, 4-5). I attended the protests throughout that year as a citizen, and the pre-election period that followed proved to be a particularly compelling case. For the first time in years, the opposition had managed to unite behind a common cause, and the ruling coalition responded with an intensive securitizing campaign aimed at discrediting and oppressing it. The question of whether and to what degree that securitization succeeded struck me as an ideal case for testing the framework I wished to propose.

Research Problem Statement

As introduced previously, the securitization theory (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998) established that security threats are often not objective realities but discursive constructions. An issue becomes securitized when a securitizing actor successfully frames it as an existential threat, shifting it from the domain of ordinary political debate into the domain of emergency politics (*ibid.*). This was a foundational insight that opened an important research agenda. However, the theoretical framework it uses to explain how securitization works, and particularly why it succeeds or fails, has been subject to sustained critique (Balzacq 2005; Salter 2008). By studying these critiques and the theory itself more closely, I identified three problems that I believe this thesis can address.

The first problem concerns the theory's linguistic foundation. As I noted earlier, classical securitization draws on speech act theory (Austin 1962; Searle 1969), proposing that the utterance of "security" constitutes a performative act that constructs a threat (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998, 26). The problem with the speech act theory, however, is primarily concerned with the speaker's intention and the illocutionary force of an utterance, that is, what the speaker aims to accomplish (Balzacq 2005). It does not adequately account for the perlocutionary dimension, i.e., how the utterance is actually received, processed, and evaluated by the audience in a specific social context (Balzacq 2005; Salter 2008). In practical terms, this means that the theory can describe what a securitizing actor does, but it struggles to explain is general audience-perception, as well as why some securitizing messages resonate with audiences while others do not. The second problem concerns the treatment of success. The classical framework treats securitization as essentially binary. Either an issue is securitized or it is not, with success attributed to the fulfillment of loosely defined "facilitating conditions" (Buzan, Wæver and de Wilde 1998). Salter (2008) proposed degrees of success, which I found to be a valuable contribution, but without a broader contextual element to explain what influences those varying degrees. As I will demonstrate in the empirical analysis, securitization can succeed with respect to some components of a message while failing with respect to others, and its effects can persist unevenly across different audiences and over time. A binary framework simply cannot capture this.

The third problem concerns context. In the classical framework, context tends to be treated as a passive background rather than an active mechanism that pre-structures how audiences receive and interpret securitizing messages. Balzacq (2005) rightly challenged this,

arguing that securitization must be understood within the context in which it occurs and proposed treating it as a "pragmatic act" rather than a speech act. I fundamentally agree with the direction of this critique, but I find that the concept of "context" remains underspecified. Where I see room to build on it is that, while Balzacq establishes that context is active and catalogues the kinds of contextual and audience-side factors that matter, he does not specify the cognitive mechanism by which a given contextual element becomes relevant to an audience, or why some elements achieve success while others do not. It is this mechanism that I argue relevance theory can supply. This concern with context is also connected to the framework's implicit bias toward western democratic systems, which several scholars have challenged (Vuori 2008; Wilkinson 2007), arguing that the process of securitization operates differently across political structures and cultures, and that local systems, histories, and power dynamics must be accounted for. Moreover, Hammerstad (2012) highlights that in less democratic contexts, the plans and actions of the government often do not align with public interests, raising further questions about how the audience-securitizing actor dynamic functions when institutional conditions constrain the audience's access to information and its capacity to accept or reject securitizing claims. The question of which specific contextual elements matter, how they become cognitively accessible to an audience, and how they interact with the securitizing message itself, I believe remains underexplored.

In this thesis, I aim to address these problems by integrating the relevance theory (Sperber and Wilson 1995) into the securitization framework. I argue that this combination is productive for several reasons. The relevance theory already provides what securitization theory has been searching for: a systematic account of how the receiver of a message processes communicative outputs, how context shapes interpretation, and why some messages succeed in capturing attention while others do not. Securitization theory, in turn, provides the specific political and security vocabulary that relevance theory lacks: a framework for analyzing how communicative processes are used to construct threats, legitimize extraordinary measures, and position actors within relations of power. Moreover, while relevance theory was originally developed to explain communication at the level of individual cognition (Sperber and Wilson 1995), its core principles can be extended to the collective level, which scholars have, in fact, already explored (see Rut-Kluz 2009). In societies where large segments of the population share what relevance theory defines as a *mutual cognitive environment*, i.e., a shared set of assumptions, experiences, memories, cultural norms and contextual knowledge that are manifest or may become manifest (Sperber and Wilson 1995), I believe that the cognitive

processes identifiable at the individual level can also be, to a certain degree, recognized in patterns at the collective level. I contend that this shared environment makes it possible for a securitizing message to achieve relevance not just with isolated individuals but with a broad public simultaneously.

The idea here is therefore that securitization can be understood not as a speech act but as an ostensive-inferential communicative process, in which the degree of its success depends on the degree of relevance it achieves. I believe this reframing has the potential to address all three problems identified above. It can replace speech act theory with a more updated linguistic foundation and offer a mechanism for explaining why securitization achieves varying degrees of success. Furthermore, it can give the concept of context a cognitive mechanism, by placing it in the broader *mutual cognitive environment*. i.e., the set of assumptions, experiences, and knowledge that the securitizing actor and the audience might share. Finally, it can allow for a micro examination of the underlying inferential structure, both deductive and non-deductive, through which securitizing messages are constructed and processed. By the deductive structure I mean the fixed logical form every securitizing proposition shares – that there is a threat, that something must be done, and that doing so would remove the threat. By the non-deductive structure, I mean the context-dependent assignments that fill in the logical form – who or what counts as threat and to whom, what action is being proposed, and which premises are used to support the claim and make it relevant.

To test this framework empirically, I chose to analyze the populist securitization carried out by the ruling coalition in Serbia during the December 2023 parliamentary, provincial and local elections, specifically its securitization of the opposition parties that contested it. As mentioned, this was a natural choice both because of my familiarity with the case and because of the analytical richness the Serbian context offers. The ruling coalition, led by the Serbian Progressive Party (SNS), has for over a decade systematically framed the political opposition as a threat to the nation, its sovereignty, and its citizens (Vladislavljević forthcoming; Milačić 2025; Spasojević and Lončar 2023). Moreover, this framing has not remained at the level of rhetoric. To sustain its hold on power and marginalize political opponents, the ruling coalition has relied on coercive measures, intimidation, and selective prosecution (Bieber 2018; Freedom House 2020; Spasojević and Lončar 2023), as well as the surveillance of activists and journalists through the police and security services (Amnesty International 2024). These patterns are embedded within an institutional environment marked by democratic erosion, clientelism, and the hybridization of the political system (Milačić 2025; Spasojević and Lončar

2023; Balkan Insight 2020). Additionally, they draw on decades of populist discursive continuity in which the same antagonistic frames have been repeatedly reinforced and rebranded across different political eras (Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018; Vladisavljević 2016). The discourse itself is delivered through a captured media landscape that determines which actors and narratives reach the public and which are systematically excluded (Dragojlov 2026). I believe that the intersection of all these conditions in a single case is what made Serbia analytically compelling.

The December 2023 elections, held at a moment of intense political polarization following the mass shootings and the *Serbia Against Violence* protests (Jevtić 2025), offered a concentrated window for this analysis. The ruling coalition's *Serbia Must Not Stop* campaign constituted an intensive securitizing effort aimed at discrediting a newly unified opposition, while the post-electoral trajectory provides evidence of how the discourse's effects unfolded over time. The specific claims I intend to put forward on the basis of this analysis and the questions I seek to answer are laid out in the following section.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The overarching research question I aim to answer through this thesis is: Can the integration of the relevance theory into the securitization framework address the limitations of the speech act theory in explaining how security matters are constructed by an actor, how they become relevant to an audience, why they achieve varying degrees of success, and what role shared assumptions, experiences and knowledge play in that process?

To answer this question, I propose the following hypothesis, understood as the central claim the thesis aims to explore through the theoretical framework and the empirical case study. My general hypothesis is that securitization is more accurately understood as an ostensive-inferential communicational process governed by principles of relevance than as a speech act. I contend that reconceptualizing it through the relevance theory can better capture the shared cognitive and contextual dimensions of how securitizing messages are constructed by an actor and more importantly received by an audience. Building on this general hypothesis, I advance three specific hypotheses. First, regarding the structure of securitizing messages, I suggest they all in general, regardless of context, share the same proposition, i.e., a common underlying logical structure in which a threat to a referent object demands a proposed action explicitly or implicitly. While this structure remains constant, the specific referents assigned to each

element, who is threatened, by what, and what must be done, are context-dependent variables which determine how relevant the threat becomes to an audience.

Second, regarding the effectiveness of populist securitization, I note that the populist variant assigns its roles predictably, a threatened ‘people’ or ‘nation’ set against a threatening ‘elite’, ‘opposition’, or ‘foreign powers’, a pattern already well established in the study of populism (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; Wodak 2015). I do, however, put forward that populist discourse is structurally suited to achieve high degrees of cognitive effect because it relies on simplified language, direct emotional appeals, and antagonistic framing that draw on shared assumptions already deeply familiar to the audience, thereby requiring minimal effort to process. My third and final hypothesis is that the success of securitization is more accurately assessed through the degree of relevance the discourse achieves with the audience, its durability over time, and the extent to which different components of the message are accepted or contested, rather than through binary outcomes. I believe this distinction matters especially in hybrid regimes like Serbia, where the political playing field is tilted toward the ruling party and electoral outcomes are also shaped by factors such as advantages of holding office, a captured media, oppressive measures directed at opponents, and various other irregularities in the pre-election period and the voting process (Spasojević and Lončar 2023; OSCE/ODIHR 2024a; CRTA 2024). I expect the empirical analysis to demonstrate that securitization can succeed with respect to some components of the message while failing with respect to others.

These hypotheses will be developed and formalized in the theoretical framework that follows, and subsequently explored through the analysis of the ruling coalition's securitization of the opposition during and after the December 2023 parliamentary and local elections in Serbia. The structure through which the thesis is organized is outlined in the following section.

Structure of the Thesis

The thesis is organized into four chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter 1 provides the literature review. It begins with an overview of classical securitization theory as developed by the Copenhagen School, followed by an examination of the key critiques that have been directed at it, particularly regarding its reliance on speech act theory, its treatment of success, and its underspecification of context. The chapter concludes with a discussion on populism, establishing the definitional foundations for the empirical analysis through the ideational framework and an assessment of right-wing populist rhetoric and the politics of fear. Chapter 2 develops the theoretical framework and methodology. First, it introduces relevance

theory and its core concepts, including inference, manifestness, the mutual cognitive environment, and the cognitive principle of relevance. It then proposes a relevance-theoretic approach to securitization, integrating these concepts with securitization theory, formalizing the deductive structure of securitizing discourse, and establishing the conditions for assessing its success. The chapter concludes with the methodology, which outlines the qualitative case study design, the analytical approach, and the limitations of the framework.

Chapter 3 constitutes the empirical case study of populist securitization in Serbia and is organized in two interconnected parts. The first part establishes the mutual cognitive environment through three analytical layers: Serbia's political trajectory from the Milošević era to the 2023 elections, the discursive continuities of populist mobilization from Milošević to SNS, and the media landscape as the delivery mechanism through which these patterns reach the audience. The second part applies the framework to the *Serbia Must Not Stop* pre-election campaign through a discourse analysis of selected securitizing messages from the campaign period. The chapter closes with an epilogue that traces the post-electoral trajectory from the December 2023 elections through the opposition's fragmentation in 2024 and the student-led mobilization that followed, assessing the differential durability of the securitizing discourse's components. Finally, Chapter 4 presents the discussion and conclusion. It revisits the research question and hypotheses in light of the empirical findings, reflects on the theoretical and methodological contributions of the thesis, addresses its limitations, and considers the broader implications of the framework for the study of securitization and political discourse.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical intervention proposed in this thesis departs from, and responds to, an existing body of scholarship on securitization, its critiques, and the study of populism. Before developing the relevance-theoretic framework in the following chapter, it is necessary to establish the theoretical landscape from which it emerges and the specific debates to which it responds.

1.1. Classical Securitization

Originally introduced by Ole Wæver in 1989, the securitization theory was further collaboratively refined and developed by Wæver himself, along with Barry Buzan and Jaap De Wilde (1998). The theory emerged during the transition from the Cold War era, which was a period of reshaping traditional security paradigms. Previously, security has been narrowly defined. Primarily it focused on military and nuclear threats, with states playing a central role in its conceptualization (Buzan et al. 1998, 1). However, during the late 1980s and 1990s, critical security studies have emerged, including the Copenhagen School of thought, which opposed this perspective and instead endorsed a broader understanding of security. The Copenhagen School's approach to security focused around the concepts of the regional security complex theory, securitization and sectoral security encompassing various levels of analysis and sectors (ibid.). This approach provided a fresh new framework that revolutionized security studies. It challenged conventional notions and provided a more comprehensive, multilayered approach to understanding security challenges globally, significantly expanding the scope beyond traditional military and nuclear threats. With this historical context established, the focus now turns specifically to the securitization theory (Buzan et al. 1998).

As originally articulated by Buzan et al. (1998), securitization is defined as an act of discursively framing an issue as an existential threat, thereby shifting it from the realm of ordinary political discourse to the domain of security and emergency politics (Buzan et al. 1998, 23-25). Framing entails shaping perception in a particular manner and the essence of the securitization theory lays in the notion that security threats are socially constructed. Buzan et al. (1998, 24) point out that "security" often operates as a self-referential practice. Even in the absence of a realistic threat, when a figure of authority (i.e., securitization actor) designates something as a threat and calls for emergency measures to address it, the perceived threat becomes tangible to an audience (i.e., the public, a target group etc.). Additionally, beyond its

reliance on social constructivism (ibid. 34), securitization draws from the speech act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle 1969), which emphasizes the role of language in creating and maintaining social reality.

At its center, the speech act theory poses that utterances perform action beyond their literal meaning (Austin 1962; Searle 1969). Three main types of speech acts are distinguished: locutionary acts (the basic act of producing an utterance), illocutionary acts (the actual or intended meaning behind the utterance, e.g., suggestions, demands, statements) and perlocutionary acts (the effects the utterance has on the listener, i.e., the emotions or actions it evokes) (ibid.). In this sense, Buzan et al. (1998, 26) propose that securitization is a 'speech act' – simply by uttering "security", the actor performs an illocutionary act, asserting that an issue poses a threat to a referent object. The perlocutionary dimension of such an act would be the impact or response that the securitizing speech act has on the audience. Moreover, by uttering "security" in relation to a certain issue, an actor attempts a "securitizing move", i.e., moving an issue on a spectrum from non-politicized further to politicized and finally to securitized (ibid., 25). However, the success of the move depends on a combination of the illocutionary and perlocutionary aspects of the process.

For each illocutionary act has its intended meaning, there are certain conditions that need to be fulfilled for it to achieve performative success, i.e., for it to be understood in its intended meaning (Austin 1962). While more detailed discussions of these conditions will follow, it is essential to note that they inspired Buzan et al.'s (1998, 32-33) 'facilitating conditions' for successful security speech acts. First, the speech act needs to follow the security form and grammar (with particular "sectoral dialects") which include the "existential threat, point of no return, and a possible way out". The second factor has to do with the securitizing actor – the actor who attempts to securitize an issue has to possess enough social or political authority to be able to convince the audience of the existence of a threat. Third, the threat itself is more likely to be accepted if it has previously been considered threatening. Finally, the acts' success is concluded with the audience's acceptance of the threat and its consent to the use of extraordinary measures, which counts as the perlocutionary aspect (ibid., 33).

In classical securitization theory, security threats are classified into five distinct sectors: military, political, economic, societal and environmental (Buzan et al., 1998, 49-163). For instance, the military sector focuses on existential threats concerning the state, populace, territory and military capacities (ibid., 49). The political sector explores threats to sovereignty, organizational stability and ideology of a social order (ibid., 141). The economic sector

encompasses threats to markets, finance and resources (ibid., 95); the environmental sector addresses threats to the biosphere, species and natural environments (ibid., 71); and finally, the societal sector concerns threats to collective identity, language, culture and more (ibid., 119). Moreover, the classical theory adamantly opposes overly broadening the security agenda beyond its intended scope, as doing so could render it meaningless. Buzan et al. (1998) stress the crucial importance of making clear distinctions between security and political concerns, particularly in the point that security demands a sense of urgency and exceptional measures. Thus, when a securitization act successfully meets the facilitating conditions and moves to the realm of security, emergency measures are likely to gain popularity beyond their usual extent. In line with the familiar saying, ‘desperate times call for desperate measures’, we can observe similar logic in addressing existential threats: a successfully securitized threat might not only legitimize the usage of extraordinary measures but may also justify deviation from the established rules (ibid. 22).

Since its inception, the securitization theory has evolved considerably and has been subjected to several modifications and critiques. While it is not feasible to address them all, certain key discussions merit further exploration for the purpose of this thesis. These include inquiries into whether the speech act theory is adequate to explain the intricate dynamics between a securitization actor and an audience and whether the original facilitating conditions sufficiently account for the success of a securitization attempt, while also considering potential nuances in degrees of success. Furthermore, for more context I will also address whether securitization functions merely as a top-down process, as originally suggested and if it functions the same way in less democratic contexts. The following subchapter addresses these discussions.

1.2. Critiques of classical securitization

The most fundamental critiques of classical securitization concerns its theoretical nucleus – the speech act theory. For this I shall first refer to Thierry Balzacq (2005, 172) who critiques discussions within the Critical Security Studies, noting their tendency to be overly formal, projecting a flawed understanding of security as a prescribed and unchanging set of practices. Balzacq contends that the speech act theory has its inherent shortcomings, making it unfit to comprehensively explain intricate security dynamics. He argues that securitization is audience-centered and thus reducing security to a mere speech act overlooks important external

factors and power dynamics, highlighting the need for a pragmatic perspective that incorporates “non-linguistic” knowledge into the securitization equation.

Balzacq (2005, 175) poses that illocutionary acts (i.e., what was meant and intended by the utterance), and perlocutionary acts (i.e., how the utterance was perceived, and what was evoked in the listener) differ significantly in the outcomes they aim for and the effects they produce. This leads us back to the ‘felicity conditions’ from Austin’s original work (Austin 1962, 14-15), which determine the success of an illocutionary act. These conditions include: 1. Preparatory conditions – the established conventions governing the procedural requirements for effective conveyance, such as specific words to use and who can use them in certain contexts; 2. Executive conditions – assessment of whether the procedures have been completed by all involved parties; 3. Sincerity conditions – requirements for participants to possess specific thoughts or feelings and intent to act accordingly; 4. Fulfilment conditions – the fulfillment of each participant on their intended conduct thereafter.

While illocutionary acts have prescribed conditions for success, perlocutionary acts are said to be context dependent and may have both intended and unintended consequences (ibid.). In essence, this means that perlocution does not necessarily abide by the rules conditioning the accomplishment of an illocutionary act. This is evident in everyday life: even if we say something with a specific intention respecting all rules of communication, it may not be understood or may not evoke an action as intended. This distinction matters for how we read Buzan et al.’s (1998, 24) claim that security is a self-referential practice. That claim pertains to how a threat is constructed, through the act of presenting it as a threat rather than through any objective danger, and not how a securitizing move succeeds. Success by contrast, is made to depend on factors external to the utterance, i.e., factors like the securitizing actor’s authority, the content of the alleged threat, and ultimately the audience's acceptance (Buzan et al. 1998, 32-33). The tension in the framework is therefore not that self-referentiality is false, but that success is made to rest on this perlocutionary, audience-side acceptance while little account is given of how that acceptance actually works (Balzacq 2005; see also Soares 2022). Because perlocutionary acts are context-dependent and do not necessarily conform to illocutionary logic, the success of a securitizing move cannot be read off the speech act itself. Therefore, we can infer that the classical securitization framework does acknowledge perlocution (having a certain audience in mind), yet paradoxically neglects its significance from the outset (ibid., 177). Because of this philosophical flaw, Balzacq (2005) posits that reducing security to a

speech act is a constricted theoretical position and instead proposes viewing it as a ‘pragmatic act’.

Pragmatics as a field in linguistics studies how context influences the interpretation of meaning, which is the essence of Balzacq’s idea behind the ‘pragmatic act’. He claims that security is produced and understood in a particular context which gives its meaning. Balzacq identifies two key advantages of this approach. Firstly, it highlights the interactionist aspect of achieving security through language (the performative effect). Secondly, it emphasizes the importance of contextual and, what Balzacq labels as non-linguistic cues, such as physical gestures, the social-time continuum (the temporal context in which the securitization act occurs), and shared action settings among social agents (the physical and social environment where interactions occur, encompassing the shared spaces and activities that social agents are engaged in) (Balzacq 2005, 178). Balzacq breaks down the pragmatic act into two interdependent levels – the *agent* and the *act* (Balzacq 2005, 179). The agent level includes (i) the authority and individual identity of the one ‘doing’ security; (ii) the social capital, which both enables and limits the action of the actor; (iii) the characteristics and capabilities of the target audience, as well as the alternative viewpoints presented within the pertinent social group — whether they be individuals or collective, ad hoc or institutionalized. The level of the act is defined twofold: one aspect involves appropriate vocabulary and grammar necessary for performing the act, while the other aspect includes the facilitating context and its mobilization through metaphors, emotions, analogies, stereotypes and other tools (‘heuristic artifacts’) (ibid., 179).

Moreover, Balzacq (2005) finds that classical securitization does not account for physical gestures, categorizing them as another non-linguistic factor that should be considered. I argue that it is inaccurate to categorize physical gestures as non-linguistic features (ibid., 178). Although pragmatic aspects such as the spatio-temporal, social, historical or cultural context might indeed be considered non-linguistic and purely contextual, physical gestures should not be excluded from linguistic consideration. Physical cues, including facial expressions and body movements, convey linguistic meaning and are integral to both non-verbal and verbal communication, often occurring simultaneously (Sperber and Wilson 1995). Moreover, even supraphonetic elements like intonation, rhythm, accent, volume, pace are also linguistic features that can contribute to meaning. I do agree that these linguistic elements were neglected in the original theory and I deem that they are important to consider in some cases, as they may contribute to or even carry the meaning of a securitization attempt.

Viewing securitization as a pragmatic act, comprehensively connects security to an external reality, but how does it actually achieve success with the audience? For securitization to be successful, essentially the illocutionary and perlocutionary acts must align in that “the agent and the audience reach a common structured perception of an ominous development” (Balzacq 2005, 181). On top of that, Balzacq suggests there are at least three conditions underlying the success of securitization: audience, context and securitizing agent. The first one has three components (i) garnering the audience’s assent (the perlocutionary effect) which depends on whether the historical context makes the audience more sensitive to its own vulnerabilities (ibid.,182); (ii) the audience’s readiness to be persuaded which depends on its perception and trust in the securitizing actor; and (iii) its ability to approve or reject a formal mandate to public officials (ibid., 192). The second set of factors relates to how contextual elements affect the audience’s responsiveness to the securitizing actor’s reasoning. This includes the prevailing cultural and social climate (*Zeitgeist*) that influences the listener, as well as the impact of the momentum on how the audience interprets the securitizing actor’s statement. The third set involves the securitizing actor’s ability to effectively use appropriate and persuasive language within a specific context to garner the target audience’s support for political purposes.

Before we move on to Salter’s take on securitization, I would like to highlight that the approach which will be further utilized in this thesis aligns with Balzacq’s emphasis on a pragmatic lens as well as his viewpoint that securitization is audience-centered. What this thesis aims to do is center the argument around the relevance theory, emphasizing cognitive and inferential processes conditioned by context and their connection to securitization. This is meant to theorize on which contextual information, knowledge, inferential and deductive processes are needed for security messages to be processed, accepted or rejected, successful or unsuccessful.

During the first decade of the 2000s, several scholars agreed on the failure of classical securitization in explaining what causes and constitutes a successful securitizing act or move (Balzacq 2005; Stritzel 2007; Salter 2008). Building on the critiques of Balzacq (2005) and Stritzel (2007) of the classical theory, Salter (Salter 2008) identifies similar shortcomings in assessing the success of securitization. Salter, like Balzacq and Stritzel, highlights two primary problems: the unclear speaker-audience relationship, and the oversight of the contextual dynamics in which the act occurs. Salter contends that while the ultimate success of the security speech act relies on audience acceptance (Buzan et al. 1998), the dynamics of this acceptance

are left significantly under-determined (Salter 2008, 324). Additionally, the success of desecuritization, which operates conversely, remains equally under-defined.

Therefore, he proposes an expanded understanding of facilitating conditions and obstacles in securitizing moves by using a dramaturgical metaphor (ibid., 326-329). Salter posits that securitization embodies the intricate composition of political and social communities, achieving varying degrees of success depending on the specific context within the same issues area and across different issues (ibid., 325). Using a dramaturgical metaphor, he argues that understanding the setting (comprising the stage, actors, and audience) facilitates a more accurate analysis of the success of securitizing performance. Delving further into the metaphor, he suggests that, much like drama, securitization relies on selecting information to convince an audience of a particular threat: “the over-communication of some facts and the under-communication of others a basic problem for many performances, then, is that of information control” (Goffman 1959, 141, cited in Salter 2008). He further proposes four settings that explain variations in the form, content, and success: the popular, the elite, the technocratic, and the scientific. In each of these different settings, the core rules for authority/knowledge (who can speak), the social context (what can be spoken), and the degree of success (what is heard) vary. Salter moves away from the classical binary scale, and defines success on a scale with four degrees. A low degree of success is evident when an issue is merely discussed about in security mode. Medium-low success is reached when the problem is accepted or rejected as a security matter. Medium-high success occurs when there is acceptance of using exceptional measures for tackling the issue, and a high degree of success is achieved when new emergency powers are granted an actor (Salter 2008, 325).

I contend that Salter’s dramaturgical approach does not significantly diverge, at least theoretically, from Balzacq’s perspective. Both scholars place emphasis on the importance of context and settings, the performative nature of securitization and the importance of attending to the perlocutionary effect (message perception), with Salter using a metaphor to illustrate these points. Fundamentally, Salter’s use of this dramaturgical metaphor may be more applicable in the sense that it provides a simpler lens for case analysis as it narrows down the types of settings and audiences. However, I believe Salter’s key contribution in his work is his idea of varying degrees of success (2008, 325) which I intend to further explore later on.

Having established that securitization must be viewed within and tailored to the external reality and its context, it is important to note that this process does not occur exclusively in a top-down manner or within specific political systems. Indeed, the classical theory mostly

portrays securitization as a top-down process in which the securitization actors are political elites who have the agenda-setting power and influence within a political system (Buzan et al. 1998). However, alternative perspectives, such as Hammerstad's (2012), suggest that this practice can also happen from bottom-up. In such cases, civil society and grass-roots activists take on the role of securitizing actors, alerting other civilians and convincing policymakers of the existence of an existential threat which demands their special attention or action. This further raises the question whether such initiatives achieve any success in less democratic settings where the needs and threat perceptions of 'rulers' often differ from those of the 'ruled' (ibid., 8). The 'ruled' often hold little power and have limited capacities to make a successful securitization move in less democratic contexts. Despite these dynamics, governments, policymakers and other political elites remain the core audience that needs to be convinced, as they wield the power and authority to address threats (ibid.). Moreover, even in cases of top-bottom securitization attempts in such contexts, one might ask why would policymakers even seek consent from the public if it generally has a marginal or even non-existing role in state affairs.

Through these questions, an evident bias of the classical securitization theory towards more western democratic systems and concepts becomes apparent. Vuori (2008) and Wilkinson (2007) challenge this assumed universality of the Euro-American model of the state, political culture and society. Both scholars point to the necessity of refining the securitization framework to accommodate diverse contexts. Vuori (2008, 65-66) asserts that there is an equal importance of security speech acts across all political systems, highlighting legitimacy as a key pillar of any social institution's endurance. Governments, accordingly, navigate a fine line between employing persuasion and coercion to maintain their existence (Wiberg 1998 as cited by Vuori 2008). Over the long term, governance based solely on coercion and oppression is inherently unsustainable, as resistance may present significant challenges to the ruling authority. Therefore, securitization becomes instrumental even within authoritarian regimes, serving to justify the employment of extraordinary measures and conceal the regime's lack of legitimacy (ibid.).

Additionally, Wilkinson (2007) argues that the original framework of securitization not only embodies western assumptions regarding political systems and organizations, but also regarding societal concepts. She further examines the context of Kyrgyzstan (ibid., 14-21), where one could identify many other levels of analysis internally that may not necessarily match the western descriptions of a state, civil society, identity, authority and more. While I

won't delve deeper into Wilkinson's (2007) analysis, as the focus of this thesis is on Serbia which typically aligns more closely with European perspectives and definitions, it is important to highlight, once again, that analyzing security dynamics in a specific context requires careful consideration of local systems, (pop-)cultures, actors, memories, influences and conceptualizations.

1.3. Defining Populism

Over the past two decades, there has been significant disagreements and "confusion" in academia about what populism is exactly and how it should be understood. For the purpose of this thesis, populism is approached primarily through the ideational framework developed by Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017), which offers a clear, analytically applicable definition and is, I believe, well suited to the study of political discourse and securitization. In addition, I will draw on the work of Wodak (2015) on right-wing populism and the "politics of fear" to capture the discursive mechanisms through which populist narratives construct threat, mobilize antagonism, and legitimize security-oriented responses in contemporary contexts.

In the past decade, a growing group of scholars have been conceiving populism through the ideational approach, regarding it a discourse, ideology, or a worldview (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 5). This approach considers populism to be a *thin-centered ideology* that creates a reality in which society is separated into two opposing and homogenous groups, *the real people* vs. *the corrupt elite*, and it insists that politics should be a reflection of the *general will* of the people (ibid.). According to Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, 6), a *thin-centered ideology* is one with a limited core of concepts and principles, relying sporadically on other ideologies to give it substance and directions. Therefore, populists tend to selectively choose and adopt various ideologies depending on the circumstances, recognizing their crucial role in appealing to a broader public. Defining populism in this way can also render it a spectrum and a transitory phenomenon – it can either fail, or succeed and evolve into something larger (ibid., 7). This phenomenon inevitably adopts motifs from other ideologies, forming different subtypes. This necessity to merge with different thoughts stems from its lack of complexity and focus, which prevents it from providing enough stability needed to endure and sustain itself over a longer period.

If populism is such a broad concept, how does one recognize it? Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, 9) assert it can be identified through three core concepts: *the people*, *the elite*, and *the*

general will. The notion of ‘the people’ has sparked many debates about whether it reflects an actual group in reality. However, it has become evident that it is rather a construct. Despite its flexibility, Mudde and Kaltwasser posit that ‘the people’ most commonly encompasses three meanings that are almost always used in combination: the people as sovereign, the common people and the nation. In all cases the underlying feature is the distinction between the ‘the people’ and ‘the elite’, usually in terms of political power, socioeconomic status, and nationality. ‘The people as a sovereign’ stems from the modern democratic idea that not only assigns political power and authority to ‘the people’, but also portrays them as ‘the rulers.’ Essentially, it can be summarized in the slogan: “You (people) have the power to generate change and determine your destiny.” This notion is closely linked to the ideals of the French and American Revolutions (ibid., 10).

The term ‘the common people’ refers to a broader class concept that combines socioeconomic status with specific cultural traditions and popular values (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 10). In invoking ‘the common people’, populists critique the dominant culture’s judgement towards ordinary folks’ judgments, tastes and values. This framing positions populists as opponents of elitist perspectives, affirming instead the dignity and knowledge found within “marginalized groups” based on their sociocultural and economic status. Moreover, populist leaders often adopt cultural elements that are rendered symbols of inferiority by “the dominant culture”. This form of disguise serves as performative attributes aimed at conveying a message of solidarity, stating “I am one of you,” thereby making populists more relatable to the general populace. This strategy seeks to unite and mobilize a discontented majority against perceived adversaries such as ‘the establishment’, while also accusing it of distorting the authentic connections between populist leaders and ‘the common people’ (ibid., 11).

The third and final interpretation relates to the concept of ‘the people’ as synonymous with the nation. Here, the concept refers to the national community, which can be defined either in civic or ethnic terms. For instance, it applies when discussing “the people of Serbia” or “the Dutch people”, encompassing all those considered native to a certain country and suggesting a shared communal life. Distinct communities represent nations often reinforced by foundational myths. Therefore, equating ‘the people’ with the entire population can be challenging, particularly in regions where multiple ethnic groups coexist (ibid., 11). In these contexts, diverse ethnic groups may perceive and experience communal life differently, making attempts to unify them under the concept of the nation challenging and even unsuccessful.

Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, 11-12) contend that the concept of ‘the elite’ has been significantly undertheorized compared to the former. As previously mentioned, a crucial aspect of this concept is morality, i.e., the distinction between the *pure* people and the *corrupt* elite. However, defining who constitutes ‘the elite’ requires consideration of a number of criteria. Typically, the elite are defined on power basis, including most people holding high positions within the politics, economy, academia, media, and the arts. Naturally, this definition excludes populists themselves and their supporters within these sectors. Even when populists hold the majority of political power, which would by their own logic make them ‘the elite’, they often manage to sustain their anti-establishment discourse by partly redefining the concept. Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, 12) argue that, populists frequently practice “paranoia politics”, suggesting that true power lies not with democratically elected leaders (i.e., the populists), but with “shadowy forces” intent on undermining the people’s voice. Here, it is important to note that this paranoia is not solely directed towards abstract forces, but also towards opposition parties and figures critical of populist leadership, as I will later explore in the case of Serbia.

While the ideational approach provides a clear and useful framework for identifying populist discourse, it has also been subject to critique for its strict emphasis on moral binaries. Ostiguy et. al (2021, 3) argue that although the ideational approach regards populism to center around distinct, often binary moral value (e.g., good vs. evil, pure people vs. corrupt elite), this is often not the case in practice. They further highlight that it has often been evident that the populist leadership is openly more corrupt than the established elite they sought to replace. Despite this, populist leaders frequently succeed in maintaining a perception that, although they might be corrupt, at least they are ‘on the side of the people’ materially, politically, and symbolically (ibid.). Moreover, as evidenced by cases in Latin America, populists have been characterizing ‘the people’ as ‘suffering’, ‘hard-working’, ‘neglected’ and ‘despised’, but never as inherently ‘pure’, be it morally, ethically, or otherwise. Instead, the focus is mostly placed on their perceived marginalization: damaged, plebeian, misunderstood, often discriminated against, exploited, or excluded from civic life. Therefore, Ostiguy et al. (2021, 3) maintain that populism is not an actual expression of moralism but rather a rhetorical or performative *staging of a wrong*.

Returning to the ideational approach, Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, 13) assert that populists often define the elite in economic terms, particularly by class. This strategy is commonly utilized by left leaning populist, who center their populist politics around a vague form of socialism. However, even right-wing populists frame the ultimate conflict between

the people and the elite as a struggle over economic power, arguing that the political elite cooperates with the economic elite prioritizing ‘special interests’ over ‘general interests’ of the people. Connecting the elite to economic power has proven useful for populist in power, as it enables them to “justify” their lack of political success by claiming sabotage by the elite, which, despite losing political power, continues to hold economic power. This form of populism has been particularly visible in post-communist Eastern Europe (ibid., 13).

Moreover, it is not rare that populists accuse the elite of not just dismissing the interest of the people, but also working against them and the interests of the country. This narrative further amplifies if merged with nationalism, creating moral and ethnic divides between the people and the elite, thereby resulting in ethnopopulism. Although Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017, 14) claim this form is not so prevalent in Europe, and that xenophobic populists in Europe do define the people based on ethnicity, but do not claim that the elite belongs to a different ethnic group, I would argue that ethnopopulism is quite significant in the Balkan region. I believe this is particularly popular in the former Yugoslav republics. Nevertheless, it appears that Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) did not find it necessary to include this part of Europe in their analysis. In the end, it is important to note that populists will combine different interpretation of the people and the elite (in terms of class, ethnicity, morality etc.), and adjust them to fit the given situation (ibid., 16).

The third and final core concept of the populist ideology is ‘the general will’. In the distinction between ‘the general will’ and ‘the will of all’, the former refers to “the capacity of the people to join together into a community and legislate to enforce their common interest”, while the latter “denotes the simple sum of particular interests at a specific moment in time” (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017, 16). Populism fosters the notion of a general will through its binary moral distinctions between the corrupt elite and the pure people. In this light, populists strive to demonstrate that they understand what the general will is, and are charismatic enough to establish a cohesive collective capable of defending it (ibid., 17). Unlike themselves who understand people’s needs, they deem the representative system as aristocratic, treating citizens as passive participants mobilized only during elections to choose representatives. Therefore, they advocate for themselves as the remedy, championing the ideal of self-government where citizens enact and enforce laws.

Nonetheless, the populists’ “understanding” of the general will does not emerge from a rational process constructed through public dialogue, but rather is based on ‘common sense’ (ibid., 18). This framing serves to unify diverse demands and identify a common enemy. By

invoking the general will, populism employs a distinct mode of expression that fosters the appearance of a cohesive identity (“the people”) which is empowered to oppose the existing order (“the elite”). From this perspective, populism can be viewed as a positive force of democratization. However, this is often misused for authoritarian tendencies. The general will relies on the unity of the people and a clear distinction between those who belong to the demos and those who do not, thus excluding them from equal treatment. Consequently, populism’s assertion that the general will is both transparent and absolute can justify authoritarianism and illiberal actions against those perceived as threat to the people’s homogeneity (ibid., 18).

While populism can be conceptualized in multiple ways, this thesis adopts a selective approach aligned with its analytical objectives. Having established the basic concepts of populism through the ideational framework, I now turn to Wodak's (2015) assessment of right-wing populism and its "politics of fear." This is particularly relevant for understanding the Serbian political landscape, given that the ruling party can be characterized as predominantly right-wing and populist. The ideational approach contends that populism goes beyond typical left-right distinctions. Therefore, what is right-wing populism? According to Wodak (2015), it is a form of populism predominantly combined with nationalism, nativism, traditionalism, free-market liberalism, body politics, fear-based rhetoric and other typically right-wing tendencies. What unites them all is twofold: first, the use of ethnic, religious, linguistic, or political minorities as a ‘scapegoat’ for current issues, constructing these representative group as a threat to ‘us and ‘our’ nation – a manifestation known as ‘politics of fear’. Second, every right-wing populist party appears to endorse what Wodak terms the ‘arrogance of ignorance’, appealing to common sense and anti-intellectualism (ibid., 2).

It is crucial to recognize that populist rhetoric is not merely about what is said (the content), but also about how the message is presented (form), to whom it is presented (target audience), and their adaptation to the external context (Wodak 2015, 3-4). In terms of both form and content, right-wing populism is intricately linked to significant socio-political issues that resonate with a populace, and align with the prevailing momentum. These concerns, whether real or perceived, encompass a range of fears, disaffections, and pessimism: anxiety about job security, concerns about perceived oppression by ‘the elite’, fears of losing national autonomy, erosion of traditional values, growing economic disparities, climate change, and more. Right-wing populists offer simple and straightforward answers to all the fears and challenges citizens might be facing by creating scapegoats and enemies, i.e., the ‘they’ who are responsible for ‘our’ current woes (ibid., 4). Additionally, they commonly use traditional,

collective stereotypes and images to depict these enemies. Depending on the context, the scapegoats may vary. 'They' are often characterized as foreigners based on race, religion or language, or 'they' represent 'the elite' within their own country and also in 'Brussels' or on the global level. Within this narrative, everything negative happening at a given moment is a result of 'the elitist conspiracies.' The basic toolkit of right-wing populist rhetoric thus includes scapegoating, flipping the victim-perpetrator roles, and the construction of conspiracy theories.

Wodak (2015, 4-5) maintains that the politics of fear is universal to all forms of populism. Drawing on Altheide (2002, 3, as cited in Wodak 2015), she argues that fear in political discourse does not remain tied to specific threats. Over time, with enough repetition and expanded use, it evolves from a reaction to particular dangers into a broader framework through which public life itself is interpreted. Fear becomes a shared perspective that cuts across political divides: while different sides may differ in what they fear, all invoke it and all point to those they hold responsible. In this sense, fear is not simply an emotion but a lens through which identities are formed and social engagement is structured. Even though fear has become a universal currency, right-wing populists have been particularly effective at exploiting it. According to Wodak (2015, 5), right-wing populist parties in Europe have been notably successful at constructing fear and legitimizing their policy proposals by appealing to the need for security. Furthermore, having established the ideational foundations of populism and the discursive mechanisms through which right-wing populist rhetoric constructs fear and mobilizes antagonism, the following chapter will introduce the theoretical framework through which these dynamics are analyzed in the context of securitization.

CHAPTER 2: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

In the preceding chapter, I explored relevant debates regarding the securitization theory and theories of populism. In this chapter, I aim to establish a theoretical framework that will guide the empirical study. At its core, I intend to place a novel, cognitive approach that integrates securitization theory with Sperber and Wilson's (1995) relevance theory derived from the field of pragmatics. I will start by introducing the relevance theory and its fundamental concepts: codes, contextual dependency, manifestness, relevance, optimality, inference, deductive processes, the cognitive principle of relevance, the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic and finally deductive processes. Subsequently, I will propose enhancements to the classical securitization theory by incorporating these insights, while also drawing upon Balzacq's (2005) observations. Additionally, I will construct a new framework for assessing the success of securitization acts, informed by Salter's (2008) scale. To further build context for the empirical case study, I will examine how populism intersects with this synthesized theoretical framework. Finally, I will outline the methodology that will be employed for the analysis.

2.1. Relevance Theory

The relevance theory first appeared in 1986, around the same time security studies began to expand beyond traditional paradigms. Developed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, this framework seeks to explain how communication works by focusing on the idea that communication is guided by the principle of relevance. At the heart of the theory is the idea that human cognitive processes are designed to achieve "the greatest possible cognitive effect for the smallest possible processing effort" (Sperber and Wilson 1995, vii). This means that individuals naturally direct their attention towards information that appears most relevant at any given moment. Fundamentally, communication strives to capture attention, suggesting that the conveyed information holds relevance. The relevance theory addresses very profound philosophical question like: why do we communicate? what do we communicate? how is communication achieved? what gives meaning to what we communicate? etc.

Communication is achieved when stimuli create thoughts, but how can a physical stimulus (sound, light, gesture etc.) evoke similar thoughts when the stimulus itself is nothing like the thoughts it generates? Many linguists have offered different answers to this question, with two main schools of thought emerging. One prominent approach is *the code model*,

primarily associated with the work of Shannon and Weaver (1949), which was dominant up until the 1970's. This model explains the process of communication using mathematical principles, positing that a sender encodes a message into a signal, transmits it through a channel, and a receiver decodes it back into understandable information (Sperber & Wilson 1995, 3-9). By assuming that all signs share a common nature, the code model attempts to explain all cultural phenomena using the same logic. However, this model has been criticized as overly simplistic, as it fails to address some key questions: How might the same message be interpreted differently across different contexts? How do we still make conclusions from incomplete utterances or even in the absence of explicit statements? What are the roots of misunderstandings? The second approach, which better explains these questions, is *the inferential model*.

The groundwork for the inferential model was set by Paul Grice in his 1975 paper "Logic and Conversation", and was further developed by Sperber and Wilson through their relevance theory. This model posits that communication generally relies on inference, where the linguistic code serves as a basis for reasoning (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 9-15). Decoding is an essential part of interpreting statements, but interpretation rarely ends with decoding alone. Therefore, the basic assumption is that meaning = stimulus/code (verbal/nonverbal) + context (physical, temporal, social, cultural etc.), with the stimulus being explicit and the context implicit. For example, if a person named Ana says, "I will come tomorrow," for someone to successfully infer this, they must know who 'I' refers to (i.e., Ana), understand which date is 'tomorrow' and where Ana is supposed to 'come'. In other words, the listener must understand the proposition of Ana's utterance, which in this case is "I [Ana] will come [to location x] tomorrow [date x]". If one views Ana's utterance as a sentence in isolation, its grammar alone cannot convey the contextual information that provides the sentence with meaning at that particular time and space. While the studies of syntax focus on the code, i.e., the combination of phonetic and semantic representation of a sentence, pragmatics studies the non-linguistic, contextual factor that lend meaning to it (ibid., 9-10).

According to Sperber and Wilson (1995, 10), thoughts are a semantic representation enriched with contextual elements. Utterances or physical gestures are there to convey thoughts, but also reveal the speaker's attitude towards thoughts; "in other words, they express 'propositional attitudes', perform 'speech-acts', or carry 'illocutionary force'" (ibid., 10-11). The same sentence, expressing the same thought, may be on some occasions used to express different emotions. To illustrate, if Ana says, "You're leaving" to Vera, it can be interpreted in

a number of ways: 1) Ana has decided that Vera is supposed to leave, 2) Ana is making a guess and asking Vera to confirm or deny whether she is leaving, or 3) Ana is expressing regret/outrage/sadness that Vera is leaving. Additionally, an utterance that explicitly conveys one thought may implicitly convey others (ibid., 11). For example, in the question, “Do you know what time it is?”, the speaker is explicitly asking whether the hearer knows the time, but implicitly suggesting that it is time to leave. Essentially, utterances can express an infinite variety of meanings and emotions. However, the question arises how do a speaker and a listener come to a common interpretation of an utterance. The answer to this question lays in the mutual-knowledge or the mutual cognitive environment hypothesis.

The premises used to interpret an utterance are known as context – a psychological construct comprised of the hearer’s assumptions about the world (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 15-21). These assumptions, not the actual state of the world, shape interpretation and include expectations, hypotheses, belief, memories, cultural assumptions, and perceptions of the speaker’s mental state. While linguistic communities share language and inferential abilities, they do not share the same assumptions of the world. Humans have cognitive abilities, and cultural groups have a lot of shared experiences and views. However, individuals are unique due to different life histories and personalities, leading to varied memories. Even witnesses of the same event can have different interpretations and memories of it. Therefore, what is needed for two interlocutors to understand each other? First, a speaker who attaches specific interpretations to an utterance must also expect the hearer to be able to envision a context which enables those interpretations to come to surface. A discrepancy between the intended context of the speaker and the interpreted context by the listener can lead to a misunderstanding. Consider the following interaction (1):

(1) Ana: “Would you like some coffee?”

Vera: “Coffee would keep me awake.”

Let us suppose that Vera did indeed desire coffee. However, Ana interpreted her response oppositely, assuming she did not want coffee because it would have kept her awake. Clearly, this mismatch between what Ana understood and what Vera envisaged to communicate lead to a misunderstanding. For this to be avoided, it is essential to ensure that the context understood by the listener matches exactly what the speaker intends, which demands navigating shared and unshared assumptions.

Moreover, in other cases, besides assuming intent, achieving successful communication requires establishing mutual knowledge, which can be harder to assume with certainty (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 20). Consider the following conversation:

(2) Ana: “Would you like some green tea?”

Vera: “I am avoiding caffeine.”

Vera’s intent was to convey, i.e., to imply that she does not want green tea with the full propositional form of her implication being: “[No, I (Vera) do not want green tea because] I am avoiding caffeine [and green tea contains caffeine]”. Vera assumes that Ana knows that green tea contains caffeine, in which case Ana would successfully infer her refusal. However, if Ana lacks this knowledge, Vera’s answer might be less clear to her. Or, even without this knowledge, Ana could assume that Vera’s answer was still relevant to the context and might draw the conclusion that green tea is somehow connected to caffeine and infer the intended meaning. This entirely depends on Ana’s individual cognitive abilities.

Sperber and Wilson (1995, 38) maintain that while human’s do share information, “mutual knowledge is a philosopher's construct with no close counterpart in reality.” Building on this concept, they propose the notion of a *cognitive environment*, suggesting that even when people share the same narrow physical environment and knowledge, their interpretations may still differ. They draw a parallel with sight, explaining that human cognitive ability, particularly in relation to sight, involves each individual being in a visual environment defined by all phenomena visible to them (ibid. 38-39). This visibility is influenced by both their physical environment and their visual abilities. Similarly, in communication, the focus shifts to conceptual cognitive abilities. Just as visible phenomena are crucial for visual cognition, *manifest facts* are essential for conceptual cognition. Ergo, a fact is *manifest* to an individual at a given time if they can mentally represent it and accept its representation as true or probably true. Furthermore, a *cognitive environment* of an individual consists of the set of all facts that they can perceive or infer, and are manifest to them. It includes not only facts an individual is currently aware of but also the facts they have the potential to become aware of in their physical environment. The knowledge they have already acquired enhances their ability to recognize new facts. Memorized information, or background knowledge is as essential aspect of cognitive abilities.

In addition, there is a specific differentiation between manifest and fact, as well as different degrees of manifestness (ibid. 39-40). Cognitively, mistaken assumption can seem as truthful as factual knowledge. Any assumption, whether true or false, may be manifest if the

environment provides sufficient evidence for it. Moreover, an assumption is more manifest if an individual is more likely to consider it, based on their physical environment and cognitive abilities. Certain phenomena are more obvious or important in our cognitive environment, such as sudden, loud noises (the doorbell, an explosion, sudden shouting etc.), compared to less noticeable sounds like a ticking clock. When a phenomenon is noticed, some assumptions about it are more accessible than others. For example, if a doorbell rings, the most strongly manifest assumption is normally that someone is at the door. Moreover, our notion of manifestness is weaker than actual knowledge or assumptions (ibid. 40). Many assumptions that individuals are capable of making, even if they haven't actively thought about them, are still considered manifest. This includes assumptions they could logically deduce but haven't yet explored. We can clearly see that in example (2) where Ana does not have it yet manifest that green tea contains caffeine, but this information can become manifest resting on the assumption that Vera's utterance is relevant to her question. All in all, manifestness can encompass potential discoveries and false assumptions, whereas knowledge cannot.

Any shared cognitive environment among people is a *mutual cognitive environment* (ibid., 41). Sharing a cognitive environment implies the potential for individuals to make the same assumptions, but not necessarily that they actually do. For example, people living in the same country have a mutual cognitive environment which can include the political and economic system, societal rules and structures, cultures, religions, languages, common historical knowledge, media consumption, educational framework, public health information and more. This shared environment is vast and complex, and not all individuals within it will make the same assumptions about it. The diversity of physical and cognitive environments presumably leads to differences in political opinions, perspectives and experiences overall. Ergo, the main difference between mutual knowledge and mutual manifestness lies in their strength and certainty (ibid., 43). Effective communication relies on mutual understanding between communicators and audience in selecting codes and context. Mutual knowledge enables symmetrical coordination, where both the communicator and the audience share responsibility, unlike "the weaker" concept of mutual manifestness. Despite this, it is crucial not to entirely dismiss mutual manifestness. Sperber and Wilson (1995, 43) urge that communication in fact often involves asymmetrical coordination, where the communicator bears the primary responsibility for preventing misunderstandings. By ensuring that certain assumptions or knowledge (mutual manifestness) are made apparent to the audience, the communicator minimizes the likelihood of the audience misinterpreting the message.

Now turning to our central question: which specific assumptions are individuals most likely to construct and process in their cognitive environment? Sperber and Wilson (1995, 46) propose that the crucial factor that makes information worth processing is its relevance. Relevance theory's fundamental idea is that every ostensive stimulus, in the process of communication, carries the presumption of its own optimal relevance. An ostensive, demonstrative stimulus is a verbal or non-verbal stimulus that contains a clear intention of communicating a specific message (ibid., 49). Furthermore, ostensive-inferential communication occurs when a recipient perceives such a stimulus as communicative and relevant to them, and leads them to interpret the stimulus believing it contains information valuable enough to justify the processing efforts (ibid., 63). Ostensive-inferential communication includes a communicator's *informative* and *communicative intention*. An informative intention is to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions (ibid., 58), and a communicative intention is to make it mutually manifest to the audience and communicator that the communicator has a specific informative intention (ibid. 61). The ostensive stimulus signals the sender's communicative intention to inform the recipient about their informative intention, which the recipient infers depending on its relevance. It is important to note, however, that these two intentions do not always align. A communicator may have an informative intention without making their communicative intention explicit, and the recipient may still successfully infer the intended meaning if they find the available cues relevant enough to process. Conversely, inference can occur even in the absence of a deliberate communicative act: if the contextual cues are sufficiently manifest, the recipient may draw conclusions that the communicator did not explicitly intend to convey (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 65-71).

Now, let us discuss more extensively the concept of relevance. The relevance theory's core concept, 'relevance', is based on a property of sight, sound, thoughts, utterances, conclusions, memories and other cognitive inputs (Clark 2013, 30). Every ostensive stimulus, in the process of communication, carries the presumption of its own optimal relevance. This means that a communicator will choose the most relevant way to express their intended meaning, and the listener, in turn, will attempt to maximize the relevance of the communicated input using contextual information (Sperber and Wilson, 1995). Relevance theory also explains that while there is no shortage of inputs which may have at least some relevance for us, we lack the capacity to process them all. Consequently, relevance is not an all-or-none matter but a matter of degree. This degree is defined by *the cognitive principle of relevance* which is a balance between cognitive effects that an input produces and processing effort it requires (Clark

2013, 30).¹ This balance also heavily relies on background knowledge and assumptions that are or become manifest when processing an input. Consider the following examples:

(3) Contextual information: Ana lives in a house in Belgrade, Serbia. Ana looks outside a window and notices that:

- a) There is a pigeon in the garden.
- b) There is a lion in the garden.

Observing a pigeon in the garden is unlikely to produce much cognitive effect, as pigeons are generally common in Belgrade, and this observation does not convey new information. Therefore, this probably will not capture Ana's attention, i.e., will not be too relevant to her, unless she has a particular fondness for pigeons. Even with this fondness, spotting a lion in the garden will inevitably produce more cognitive effect due to the unexpectedness of having a lion in one's garden in Belgrade. This observation would prompt Ana to consider various assumptions: Is her garden dangerous? Is it possible for lions to roam freely in Belgrade? Are there any other wild animals running loose? Is she hallucinating? Should she warn others or call the police? etc. Therefore, in this sense observation b) holds a higher degree of relevance than observation a) because it produces more cognitive effect (ibid., 31).

- (4) c) There is a lion in the garden.
d) When I look outside, there is a lion in the garden.
e) There is a lion in the garden and the square root of 81 is 9.

Supposing that the lion is the most important thing to notice in the garden and that nothing new can be derived from suggestion that one needs to look outside to see the lion, then c) is more relevant than d). In the cognitive principle terms, c) produces the same amount of cognitive effects as d) but with less effort needed to process the words (ibid. 32). Furthermore, if the square root of 81 does not add any significant value, then c), and even d) are a better way of informing someone about a lion than e). This is because the range of effects derivable in all cases are similar but e) requires the recipient to exert more effort in processing it. Examples like this illustrate why the definition of relevance is based on assumptions about both effort and effect (ibid., 33).

Another important principle of the theory is *the relevance-guided comprehension heuristic* (Clark 2013, 34-37). A heuristic approach to problem-solving employs a partial

¹ Cognitive effects for an individual are defined as adjustments to the way an individual represents the world (Clark 2013: 31).

method which is not guaranteed to be the best, most exact, or completely rational, but is sufficient enough to achieve the current, short-term goal of approximation. This principle suggests that any ostensive stimulus is optimally relevant for an addressee to process, while also being the most relevant one the communicator was able to produce. This means that the addressee seeks the specific interpretation the communicator intended to convey, which justifies their effort. The cognitive system processes the message until it reaches a satisfactory interpretation, assuming it matches the communicator's intention. For example:

(5) Vera: "Do you regret snapping back at your boss when he scolded you today?"

Ana: "I am a human being."

It would be odd if Vera assumed that Ana is merely stating which biological species she belongs to, because this is mutual knowledge and would not justify further cognitive effort. Therefore, Vera's mind will search for alternative solutions, and settle on the most contextually logical one. In this case, Ana was referring to a certain human experience of feeling anger, which normally occurs when being scolded. Once Vera arrives at this conclusion, her cognition will not search for other interpretation, as that would be an excess processing effort (*ibid.*).

Pragmatics generally has the goal of explaining what is not clear from the "explicit meaning" of an input. Therefore, it concerns itself with resolving ambiguities, assigning referents to referential expressions, pragmatic enrichment, implicatures and more. These are all inferential processes necessary for someone to infer what is intended by a particular ostensive communicative act (Sperber and Wilson 1995). As previously mentioned, the starting point is the coded meaning of a linguistic expression or a nonverbal stimulus, which serves as the basis for further processing an interpretation. Moreover, the addressee follows a heuristic strategy for interpreting the ostensive stimulus. Relevance theory further explains other pragmatic processes involved in interpreting verbal and nonverbal communicative acts, which occur to the expectation of relevance.

According to Sperber and Wilson, there are non-demonstrative (non-deductive) inferences and demonstrative reasoning (deduction) (*ibid.*, 65-103). A non-deductive inferential process in communication involves drawing conclusions supported by evidence but are not always fully reliable or true. For this reason, communication can fail even with optimal conditions, leading to potential misunderstandings by the recipient (see example (1)). It mostly relies on guesswork, meaning it involves making educated guesses within a specific context. While guesswork relies on evidence or ostensive stimuli, it can also incorporate deductive

reasoning. Deduction, i.e., demonstrative inference is a process where the conclusion is always true based on evidence, and formal logic. For example:

- (6) All birds have feathers (premise P)
All sparrows are birds (premise Q)
Sparrows have feathers (logical conclusion R).

Even if both of the premises and the conclusion are factually incorrect, a logically valid argument is one that follows logical processes:

- (7) If the moon is a piece pie, then everyone is happy. (premise $P \rightarrow Q$)
The moon is a piece of pie. (premise P)
Everyone is happy. (conclusion Q)

Deductive inference involves a set of inferential, logical rules which ensure the validity of specific conclusions (ibid.). These rules are derived from formal logic, and serve to guarantee that true conclusions follow from true premises. For instance, the sentence, “It is raining outside and I am inside,” takes a form of conjunction introduction ($P \& Q$) which is deducted from two valid premises “It is raining outside” (P). “I am inside” (Q). In this context, the conjunction can alternatively be eliminated to form (P, Q). Moreover, there is *modus ponendo ponens*) – another logical form which illustrates that “If it is raining outside, then I am inside” ($P \rightarrow Q$), and it is indeed raining (P), so we can logically conclude that I am inside (Q) (ibid., 87). Similarly, there is *modus tollendo ponens* which demonstrated the negative: “If I am *not* inside, then it is *not* raining” ($\neg P \rightarrow \neg Q$) (ibid.). Additionally, these logical forms can be combined: $P \& \neg Q$; $\neg P \rightarrow Q$; $\neg P \& \neg Q$; $P \& Q \rightarrow R$ and more.

To demonstrate how non-deductive and deductive inference happen simultaneously, consider the following example (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 65-103):

- (8) Ana: “Do you have to water the plants today”
Vera: “It is raining so I don’t have to water the plants”
Ana concludes: Vera does not have to water the plants today.

The deductive part of the interpretation:

P - It is raining outside.
Q - Vera has to water the plants.
Ana asks if Q is true;
Vera answers $P \& P \rightarrow \neg Q$;

Ana concludes $\neg Q$ (modus ponendo ponens)

The non-demonstrative part of the interpretation:

- a) Assigning a referent to the pronouns 'I' or 'you' (Inference based on physical context);
- b) Recognizing where and when it is raining. (Inference based on spatio-temporal context);
- c) Understanding the full propositional form, or the implicit part of "I don't have to" → "I don't have to [water the plants because it is raining];"
- d) Making further assumption. For instance, if Ana's intention was to establish whether Vera is going to be free in the afternoon, then she might assume that because Vera does not have to water the plant, she will be free in the afternoon.

The preceding discussion has introduced concepts of inference, manifestness, the mutual cognitive environment, the cognitive principle of relevance, and the interplay between deductive and non-deductive reasoning. These concepts together provide the analytical toolkit that I will now apply to the study of securitization.

2.2. A Relevance-Theoretic Approach to Securitization

Relevance theory is an extensive and fairly complex theory that offers numerous potential solutions to many previously unanswered questions. In the preceding subchapter, I have concentrated on segments of the theory relevant for this thesis. Although I believe that many other aspects of it could also be applied to and integrated with the study of securitization, I will first attempt to establish a foundation based on the core principles discussed.

In line with Balzacq (2005), I maintain that securitization should be analyzed through context in which it occurs. While I do concur with his pragmatic approach, I propose one based on relevance and inference. In addition, I agree with Balzacq's critique of the speech act theory and hold that it should be replaced as a theoretical nucleus of the securitization theory. The speech act theory was indeed highly influential for a long time, initially emerging as an attempt to explain the interpretation of what is not explicitly uttered or conveyed, i.e., the non-declarative (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 243). Over time, however, its limitations became evident. Sperber and Wilson (1995, 244) themselves criticize the theory's tendency for over-categorization, which overlooks the importance of context and the dynamic nature of communication. They argue that while speech act theorists classify language functions such as

assertions, requests, or promises, they fail to justify why these classifications are crucial for comprehension itself. Understanding a stimulus does not require knowing which speech act category it falls within but instead relies more on contextual information and its relevance (ibid.). For instance, indirect speech acts like irony, rhetorical questions or metaphorical statements can be understood without consciously categorizing them as such. The speech act theory's inability to effectively account for the perlocutionary aspect, i.e., how a message is processed and the actions it evokes, represents a significant limitation. This limitation suggests the need to reconsider its role within the securitization theory which is, in essence, rather audience-centered (Balzacq 2005).

I propose that securitization be understood not as a speech act or a pragmatic act, but as an ostensive-inferential communicational process, which may develop into discourse. The reason I believe it to be insufficient to stop at the pragmatic act (Balzacq 2005), is because communication operates across multiple dimensions. I suggest that the securitization process is initiated by an ostensive-stimulus (verbal or non-verbal) which in itself contains a code (the syntax, semantics) and the contextual which gives actual meaning to it and is often implicit (pragmatics). These stimuli then construct a wider discourse or narrative which achieves different degrees of successful. Securitization as an ostensive-inferential communicational process involves an interaction between a securitizing actor (a communicator) and an audience (recipients). The securitizing actor initiates ostensive stimuli, i.e., securitizing stimuli, that contain the intention of conveying a message about the existence of an existential threat, and an explicit or implicit proposal of action for its elimination. The actor and the audience exist within a mutual cognitive environment, the shared set of assumptions, experiences, memories, cultural norms and contextual knowledge that are manifest or may become manifest to them (Sperber and Wilson 1995). The actor bears the primary responsibility for communicating securitizing stimuli using elements that are broadly manifest within this shared space (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 43). In doing so, the actor will produce the most relevant stimulus they are able and willing to produce, given their communicative abilities and strategic intentions. The audience, in turn, will process the stimulus following the path of least effort until a satisfactory interpretation is reached.

The degree of relevance of the stimulus, determined by the balance between the cognitive effects it produces and the processing effort it demands, is what I argue corresponds to its degree of success as a securitizing act. Moreover, I posit that securitizing stimuli operate on two levels: a constant underlying deductive structure and context dependent, non-deductive

elements which give it meaning. Each securitizing stimulus, understood as the ostensive communicative act between the actor and audience, carries within it, what I will call, a securitizing proposition – the logical claim about who is threatened, by what, and what must be done. While the stimulus is the communicative vehicle, it is the proposition that follows the deductive structure I formalize below. The distinction matters because the same proposition can be delivered through different stimuli, across different media, at different moments, and each instance may achieve a different degree of relevance depending on the context in which it is received. The underlying deductive structure of a securitizing stimulus embodies the following logical form, which I will call ‘the securitization logic’:

$$(P \rightarrow Q) \wedge (Q \rightarrow R) \Rightarrow (P \rightarrow R)$$

Premise P: There is a threat (y) [to a referent group (x)];

Premise Q: Action (z) must happen;

Premise R: Threat will be eliminated;

Premise $P \rightarrow Q$: If there is a threat (y) [to a referent group (x)], action (z) must happen. (modus ponendo ponens)

Premise $Q \rightarrow R$: If action (z) happens (Q), the threat (y) will be eliminated (R). (modus ponendo ponens)

Conclusion $P \rightarrow R$: If there is a threat (y) [to a referent group (x)], then it will (must) be eliminated. (modus ponendo ponens)

Although this reasoning might appear intuitive, I assert that this is the logical formula of any securitizing stimulus or broader narrative regardless of context. Most premises can remain implicit, but this does not mean they’re absent. For instance, if someone shouts, “There is a snake in the house!” the existence of the threat (premise P) is implied without being explicitly labeled as such. This inference relies on a manifest assumption that snakes can be harmful to humans (which is assumed to be common knowledge). Given this, the threat would still be perceived even if someone merely pointed at the snake with a concerned facial expression. In fact, even without any verbal or non-verbal cue, a mere glance at the snake would get us to the conclusion that there is a threat confronting us. In this sense, some threats, particularly natural or physical ones present in nature (e.g., venomous animals, earthquakes, electricity, or other natural hazards), can be understood as self-evident as our prior knowledge alone is sufficient for their recognition as a threat. Moreover, the necessity of action (premise

Q) and the expectation, or proposition of eliminating the threat (premise R) arise naturally from recognizing it, even if not explicitly stated. Although this example comes from everyday life, I contend that the same logic applies to securitization. However, when the threat is securitized, it is obviously not self-evident as a snake in one's house can be. Rather, it is constructed discursively through an ostensive-inferential communication process using both deductive and non-deductive elements.

The non-deductive aspects of securitizing stimuli are variables which entirely depend on contextual elements, making them the flexible components. This includes the assignment of roles to the referent under threat (x), the threat itself (y), and the proposed action (z); inference based on spatio-temporal context, i.e., recognizing location and time period of an event, including the country and system in which it occurs and considering its unique history, language, and culture; understanding the full propositional form of an input which depends on the preceding points; and making further assumption which is more individualized, and depends on background knowledge, implicit biases, the source of information etc. This also includes considering prior knowledge/assumptions about the communicator (i.e., securitizing actor or actors) and their relevance to the topic.

Now let us discuss what would make securitizing stimuli considered populist. While the deductive structure of populist stimuli remains the same as that of other types of securitizing stimuli – $[(P \rightarrow Q) \wedge (Q \rightarrow R) \Rightarrow (P \rightarrow R)]$ – they are characterized by a set of recurrent contextual (non-deductive) elements. In populist securitization, the referent object under threat (x) = 'we', 'the people' or 'the general will' & the threat (y) = 'they', 'the elite', 'the foreign (shadow) powers', 'the opposition (which may be supported by foreign powers)', etc. The action proposition (z) = the measures presented as necessary for eliminating the threat (y) which would protect the threatened (x). For the move to count as securitization rather than ordinary politics, these measures must go beyond normal political procedure. The specific content of (z) remains variable and dependent on the nature of the perceived threat, reflecting the principle that different problems require different solutions. The defining features of populist securitization lie in the construction of the threatened collective (x), the antagonistic framing of the threat (y), and the exceptional character of the proposed action (z), through which the populist logic of 'us' vs. 'them' is apparent.

Having established the constitutive structure of securitizing stimuli and features that distinguish populist ones, I now want us to consider another critical aspect of securitization processes – the conditions for their success or failure. Before delving into these conditions, I

would like to note that I consider the proposed framework to be slightly more suitable to cases of top-down securitization, but not limited to them. Rather, the applicability of the framework varies according to the direction of the securitization process, the context, mutual cognitive environment and the audiences. In top-down scenarios the securitizing actors (i.e., the communicators) are typically government entities, decision-makers, political figures, elites, or individuals with authoritative roles, while the audience consists of the general public or specific target groups. The cognitive processing of a given message occurs within the minds of the targeted individuals in a shared context and cognitive environment. In such cases, audience acceptance is primarily sought for the purposes of legitimization and justification of action.

In bottom-up securitization, the same ostensive-inferential dynamics remain relevant, but they operate differently. Cognitive processes are crucial at the horizontal level, where groups of citizens seek to convince other fellow citizens to recognize a threat and to mobilize collective action. However, the ultimate success of bottom-up securitization depends on a rather vertical process, in which political elites or decision-makers must also be persuaded to recognize the issue and adopt certain measures. At this level, perception and acceptance is shaped not only by cognitive reasoning of the decision-makers, but also largely depend on a range of factors, including political, geopolitical, legislative, economic, or geo-economic considerations, with variation based on the political structure of a country. In this sense, while cognitive processing remains a necessary component of bottom-up securitization, it may not be sufficient on its own to translate securitization into action or policy outcome. An important exception can be in cases of large-scale mobilization, where sustained collective action can displace existing elites and directly reshape political authority. As the empirical analysis in this thesis focuses on a top-down scenario, I shall focus on this direction in the discussions that follow.

Going back to the conditions for success, traditionally much of the success of a securitizing attempt has been attributed to the securitizing actor, that is, who can speak security and how they do it (Buzan et al. 1998; Balzacq 2005). It has often been asserted that individuals or groups with sufficient social or political authority can effectively do so, particularly in a top-down scheme. I suggest that the basis of this authority demands closer examination. I posit that this authority itself is fundamentally a question of how manifest the audience's assumptions about a given actor are, and for what reason. For instance, a political actor renowned for their work on infrastructure is likely to be seen as more credible when discussing threats to that sector compared to, say, health threats. Even if this political actor possesses substantial social

and political capital, their authority in the eyes of the public remains context-dependent. It hinges on the audience's knowledge of the actor, the areas where they have been entrusted with responsibility, and the public's overall perception of this actor, which itself rests on background information (Sperber and Wilson 1995). In this sense, I contend that the success condition related to the securitizing actor depends on their overall standing with the audience, their linguistic abilities, and their capacity to identify which contextual references can enhance the relevance of their intended message. Moreover, by ensuring that certain assumptions, whether true or false, are made apparent to the audience, the securitizing actor minimizes the likelihood of the audience misinterpreting or rejecting the message entirely.

I agree with Balzacq's (2005) assertion that securitization is ultimately audience-centered, in the sense that its success depends on whether the audience finds the securitizing message relevant and credible. However, I would add that this framing risks understating the securitizing actor's capacity to shape the very conditions under which the audience forms its judgment. Through institutional and media influence, sustained discursive repetition, and control over the channels through which information reaches the audience, I assert that the actor can determine which assumptions become manifest in the shared cognitive environment. Therefore, the actor can pre-structure what the audience will find credible and urgent. The process remains audience-centered in its outcome, but not necessarily in its origin.

As Buzan et al. (1998) highlight, the securitization process ultimately relies on the acceptance and consent of the audience, and this matters even in less democratic systems due to the necessity of justifying legitimacy (Vuori 2008). Here, I believe relevance becomes central (Sperber and Wilson 1995). In a pool of daily securitizing stimuli, individuals will prioritize some threats over others, and I maintain this depends on the threat's degree of relevance. As previously established, stimuli that are experienced as more relevant strike a balance between cognitive effect and processing effort, which is the cognitive principle of relevance (Clark 2013, 30). This balance hinges on the background knowledge and shared assumptions within a mutual cognitive environment (Sperber and Wilson 1995, 41). The more cognitive effect a stimulus produces and the less processing effort it demands, the more relevant it is and, in the context of securitization, the more successful. Furthermore, I assert that in a state with a certain political, social, economic, and cultural system, which constitutes a large and complex mutual cognitive environment, messages containing contextual elements, whether temporal, spatial, or historical, that widely resonate within this shared space are more likely to succeed.

In line with this, I suggest that the reason populism resonates so strongly with mass audiences is precisely because it strikes a favorable balance between cognitive effect and processing effort. Essentially it makes complex political claims easily processable and compelling. Populists are renowned for tapping into recurring patterns of grievance and struggle that have deep historical roots. The rhetoric of 'the people' vs. 'the elite' generates a high degree of cognitive effect by connecting to shared historical trauma and collective understandings of power struggles. Even in the original securitization theory, Buzan et al. (1998) highlight the historical relevance of a securitization act as something crucial to its success, and in relevance-theoretic terms this is explained by how background knowledge and assumptions determine the degree of relevance of stimuli. In addition, populist rhetoric typically employs direct and simplified language (Wodak 2015; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), thereby reducing the cognitive effort required for processing. I suggest that this further helps explain its persuasive power, especially when compared to more complex or abstract forms of public communication.

If the degree of success directly corresponds to the degree of relevance, the question then becomes how these degrees are to be defined. Informed by Salter's (2008, 325) scale, I shall similarly assess securitizing stimuli on a spectrum from less successful to more successful. Less successful securitizing stimuli are those that hold lower degrees of relevance for the audience. In such instances, the proposition of a threat may be discussed in security terms, recognized as such, yet fail to generate sufficient support or advocacy for the adoption of exceptional measures. Consequently, the discourse may remain confined to a limited group of individuals and fail to resonate with a broader audience. Less successful attempts may typically lack enduring significance, fading away relatively quickly or achieving limited impact. Securitization attempts in which the threat is categorically rejected as a matter of security also fall within this category. By contrast, more successful securitization processes are those recognized by the audience as relevant and which evolve into sustained or recurrent discourses over an extended period. Such discourses possess the capacity to garner acceptance for the usage of extreme measures, thereby enabling the securitizing actor to justify the expansion of emergency powers or, in some cases, the exercise of authority beyond established legal or democratic constraints.

Additionally, I posit that this scale requires three further considerations. First, the success of a securitizing discourse should not be assessed as a single outcome, as different components of the same proposition may achieve different degrees of relevance. For instance,

the framing of a particular actor as a threat may resonate deeply while the proposed response may not achieve equivalent acceptance. Second, success must also be assessed temporally. Securitizing discourses that achieve high relevance can persist in the audience's cognitive environment well beyond the moment of their initial articulation, continuing to shape assumptions and constrain political action even when the broader political mood shifts. Third, the degree of relevance can be reinforced not only through the continued messaging of the securitizing actor, but also through the audience's own subsequent experience, which may independently confirm discursively constructed assumptions, deepening their manifestness in ways that no communicative strategy alone could produce.

Finally, it is important to note that securitization is rarely a form of direct communication between parties. It relies on various media, including television, radio, print, and digital platforms, through which securitizing actors convey their messages to the audience. Each medium has its own characteristics, which may frame the same message differently and make different contextual information manifest. For example, the same securitizing message may be condensed into a single striking headline in print, where it demands little processing effort and emphasizes alarm or it can be embedded within a longer televised address, where it draws additional force from the authority of the speaker. The message might also be circulated on digital platforms, where it may appear alongside competing interpretations. In each case the message is the same, but the medium makes different contextual assumptions manifest and alters the effort required to process it.

Beyond format, the editorial-political alignment of a medium also shapes interpretation. An event may be framed by outlets aligned with the securitizing actor as confirmation of the threat, while outlets independent of, or opposed to that actor may contest it or omit it altogether. In this sense, the media environment does not merely transmit securitizing stimuli but actively mediates them, adding a layer of interpretation that itself shapes the degree of relevance the stimuli achieve with the audience. This is especially significant in contexts where the securitizing actor exercises influence over the media landscape, as the capacity to determine which messages reach the audience and through which channels becomes itself a condition of securitizing success (see Bieber 2018; Dragojlov 2026). The audience, in turn, processes and interprets these messages based on what is most manifest to them, shaped by their personal experiences, cognitive abilities, and the broader mutual cognitive environment they inhabit as members of a community.

2.3. Methodology

To test the theoretical applicability of the framework laid out in the preceding chapter, I shall further conduct an empirical case study using qualitative methods. Building on the conceptualization of securitization as an ostensive-inferential communicative process grounded in relevance theory, and informed by an understanding of populism as a discursive logic structured around antagonistic constructions of the ‘the people’ vs. ‘the elite’, the analysis takes the form of a qualitative, theory-driven discourse analysis. It does not adopt a single codified method but operationalizes the relevance-theoretic framework developed above through an analytical procedure of my own construction, while drawing on the works of Mudde and Kaltwasser (2017) and Wodak (2015) to identify populist discursive features. Since no established approach operationalizes securitization in inferential, relevance-theoretic terms, developing this analytical framework is itself part of the thesis’s contribution.

The case study will examine the pre- and post- election periods of the snap parliamentary, provincial and local elections in Serbia, held on 17 December 2023. These elections were called following the political crisis triggered by the May 2023 mass shootings and the *Serbia Against Violence* protest that followed. The focus of the analysis will be on how the position (i.e., the ruling coalition holding a big majority in parliament and total control of government) uses populist securitization to frame the political opposition as a security threat and to what degree it was successful. Pre- and post-election periods are typically prone to the articulation and intensification of securitizing discourse, as moments of heightened political competition and public visibility which is why I have selected them as the temporal focus of the case study. The elections in 2023 were marked by an evident polarization between the ruling coalition, *Serbia Must Not Stop* (*Srbija ne sme da stane*), and the opposition coalition *Serbia Against Violence* (*Srbija Protiv Nasilja*). I believe this antagonistic political context provides a fertile setting for examining the precise dynamics under analysis and showcasing the proposed theoretical framework.

The upcoming analysis will be organized in two interconnected parts. The first part will place focus on identifying the mutual cognitive environment in which the securitizing actors (i.e., members of the *Serbia Must Not Stop* coalition), ‘the threat’ (i.e., the opposition), and the audience (i.e., the public) exist. In line with the relevance theory, a cognitive environment consists of contextual information and background knowledge and shared assumptions that are manifest or potentially manifest to individuals and that enable inferential interpretation of discourse (Sperber and Wilson 1995). The first, the historical and conditions that have shaped

the Serbian political landscape from the Milošević era to the events leading up to the 2023 elections, draws on scholarship on Serbia's competitive-authoritarian and hybrid trajectory (Ramet and Pavlaković 2005; Levitsky and Way 2010; Vladisavljević 2016, forthcoming; Bieber 2018; Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018; Kralj, Sircar and Dolenc 2024). This is also supplemented by democracy and press-freedom indicators (Freedom House 2020; Transparency International 2023; Reporters Without Borders 2023) and an overview of the 2023 crisis (Jevtić 2025). The second, the discursive continuities through which populist mobilization has been repeatedly reactivated across different political eras, draws on the literature on populism in Serbia and the Balkans (Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018; Vachudova 2020; Spasojević and Lončar 2023; Milačić 2025; Vladisavljević forthcoming). The third, the media landscape that functions as the delivery mechanism through which these patterns reach the audience, draws on analyses of media capture in Serbia (Bieber 2018; Dragojlov 2026; Freedom House 2020) alongside election-monitoring and audience data that also document the pre-election period directly (CRTA 2022, 2024; OSCE/ODIHR 2024a).

The second part of the case study will consist of a discourse analysis of the *Serbia Must Not Stop* pre-election campaign and of the post-electoral trajectory through which the degree of relevance of the discourse can be assessed. The pre-election period follows the timeframe from 1 November 2023 to 16 December 2023, beginning with the official announcement of the elections (Government of the Republic of Serbia 2023). The post-election period, i.e., the epilogue, extends from 18 December 2023 to the present, encompassing the contested election results, the June 2024 local elections, the November 2024 Novi Sad railway station canopy collapse, and the student-led mobilization that has unfolded since. This extended post-election timeframe allows the analysis to assess not only the immediate audience response to the campaign discourse, but also the durability and contestation of the securitization in the period that followed.

For this second part, I will work with a selected corpus of primary sources rather than an exhaustive one. For the pre-election period, the core stimuli are President Vučić's official election-announcement address on the public broadcaster RTS (1 November 2023); the official *Serbia Must Not Stop* campaign materials, including its slogan and central messaging (Srbija ne sme da stane 2023a, 2023b); and the addresses of leading coalition figures at the principal campaign rally in Belgrade (2 December 2023), complemented by the rallies in Kraljevo (24 November 2023), Užice (29 November 2023), and Kragujevac (14 December 2023) to confirm the consistency of the discourse. For the post-election period, the corpus will extend to official

statements and media coverage surrounding the contested results, the June 2024 elections, the Novi Sad collapse, and the student-led mobilization which are still ongoing. Stimuli will be selected according to three criteria: prominence and reach, prioritizing the most widely broadcast and circulated messages; representativeness of the campaign's central securitizing frame; and explicit construction of the opposition as the threat. Interpretations will be operationalized through triangulation across campaign materials, independent reporting, and the election-observation reports of CRTA (2024) and OSCE/ODIHR (2024a), in order to limit reliance on any single source and to mitigate the interpretive bias inherent in qualitative analysis. Each selected stimulus will then be analyzed through the procedure set out below.

The discourse analysis is meant to operationalize the framework by examining the securitizing stimuli through both their deductive structure and their non-deductive content. The deductive structure follows the logical formula established in the theoretical framework: $(P \rightarrow Q) \wedge (Q \rightarrow R) \Rightarrow (P \rightarrow R)$. In other words, if there is a threat (y) to a referent object (x), action (z) must happen ($P \rightarrow Q$); if action (z) happens, the threat (y) will be eliminated ($Q \rightarrow R$); ergo, if there is a threat (y), it must be eliminated through (z) ($P \rightarrow R$). The non-deductive content concerns the specific variables filled into this structure, which are context dependent. In the context of the populist securitization selected for analysis: the referent object under threat (x) is constructed as 'the people', 'the citizens of Serbia', or 'the nation'; the threat (y) is the opposition framed as a corrupt, treasonous, or incompetent elite; and the proposed action (z) is electoral support for the ruling coalition and the justification, or even normalization, of coercive and oppressive measures against the opposition, civil society articulated as the necessary protective measure.

The analysis will examine several interconnected dimensions through which the securitizing stimuli operate. First, it will consider how the securitizing actors strategically activate assumptions that have been rendered cognitively manifest through the institutional, discursive, and media conditions established in the first part. Second, it will examine the linguistic register in which the stimuli are communicated. Particular attention will be placed on how populist rhetorical features minimize processing effort and maximize cognitive effect, ultimately achieving relevance. Third, it will consider what the campaign discourse focuses on and what it strategically avoids, since the selective absence of certain references is itself part of the securitizing operation. Finally, the epilogue will be used to assess the differential durability of the securitization's components, distinguishing between assumptions that have entered the cognitive environment durably and those that are being actively contested.

The methodological framework developed here may offer broader applicability to the study of securitization processes, both through the analysis of the mutual cognitive environment across its political, historical, discursive, and delivery layers, and through the analysis of populist securitizing stimuli via their deductive and non-deductive components. While relevance theory has already been applied to political discourse beyond its original linguistic domain (e.g., Rut-Kluz 2009), what this framework adds is the operationalization of securitization in relevance-theoretic, inferential terms.

That said, the framework also has limitations. The most significant is that it operates at the collective rather than the individual level. Relevance theory was originally developed to describe how individuals process communication and arrive at meaning (Sperber and Wilson 1995). In adapting it to security discourse, this thesis works with the cognitive environment shared by an audience as a whole, while recognizing that subgroups and individual members of that audience will process the discourse in their own way depending on what they find relevant. The framework can therefore identify which assumptions are likely to be cognitively manifest to the public, which framings require less processing effort given the discursive and political history behind them, and which constructions of (x) , (y) , and (z) achieve relevance with the audience as a whole. What it cannot do is establish how any individual citizen processes a particular securitizing stimulus, or whether the inferences they draw match those the framework predicts at the collective level. These limitations are acknowledged as intrinsic to this kind of theory-driven qualitative research, and are addressed through careful contextualization, source triangulation, and transparent analytical reasoning. With these considerations in mind, the following chapter turns to the empirical analysis, applying the methodological framework to the 2023 elections in Serbia and the trajectory that has followed.

CHAPTER 3: POPULIST SECURITIZATION IN SERBIA'S 2023 ELECTIONS

The analysis is structured to follow the logic of the framework. It begins by reconstructing the mutual cognitive environment in which the securitizing actors, the constructed threat, and the audience coexist, across three interrelated layers. The first section traces the political and historical conditions that have shaped the contemporary Serbian political landscape. This includes the period from the late twentieth century to the present, focusing on the trajectory from the Milošević era through the post-2000 democratic opening and into the hybrid regime that reemerged under SNS rule. The second section examines the discursive conditions, tracing the populist continuities through which the construction of "the people" against an antagonistic "them" has been repeatedly reactivated across different political eras. The third section turns to the delivery mechanism, analyzing the media landscape through which these historical and discursive patterns are served to the audience. The fourth section applies the constructed framework to the discourse analysis of the *Serbia Must Not Stop* pre-election campaign. Here securitizing stimuli articulated during the campaign period are examined through their deductive structure and non-deductive content. Finally, the epilogue extends the analysis into the post-electoral trajectory, using the events of the period from December 2023 through to the present to assess the relevance, durability and contestation of the securitization's components.

3.1. Serbia's political trajectory: From Milošević to the 2023 elections (the political and historical conditions)

While impossible to cover every aspect of Serbia's political trajectory since the late 20th century, without trying to oversimplify, the following offers an overview of key events and discursive patterns that have contributed to shaping the political landscape and the overall public consciousness in Serbia. This overview serves to establish the mutual cognitive environment in which the securitizing actors, the constructed threat, and the audience coexist.

Tito's Yugoslavia constitutes an important historical reference point for contemporary Serbian politics, particularly in light of the political and institutional uncertainty that followed Tito's death in 1980 (Ramet and Pavlaković 2005, 3-8). The subsequent rise of Slobodan Milošević and the wars of the 90's were, however, far more influential in shaping Serbia's post-socialist trajectory and its enduring political challenges. Milošević's regime operated as a competitive authoritarian system (Vladisavljević 2016; Levitsky and Way 2010, 104-113) marked not only by war but also by an illiberal, authoritarian, and kleptocratic governance, in

which state institutions were systematically weakened, corruption flourished, and political opponents and independent media were frequently targeted and suppressed. Political and economic power became concentrated in the hands of regime loyalists, undermining democratic institutions and rule of law (Ramet and Pavlaković 2005). These dynamics fostered deep distrust toward formal institutions and normalized informal power structures, the effects of which did not disappear with the regime's collapse (*ibid.*).

Following Milošević's overthrow on 5 October 2000, a renewed sense of optimism emerged towards the possibility of establishing a more equitable and democratic political system (Ramet and Pavlaković 2005; Vladislavljević forthcoming). However, Serbia entered this transition at a particularly difficult moment. The post-conflict period required the simultaneous pursuit of several highly demanding and politically sensitive tasks: rebuilding the rule of law and democratic institutions, restructuring a devastated economy and transitioning to a market-oriented system, combating organized crime deeply embedded in the state, and confronting the legacy of war through highly sensitive war crime trials before the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia (ICTY). Milošević's extradition to The Hague in 2001, although deeply unpopular among a part of the population, was also widely interpreted as an initial signal of political will to move forward, restore international credibility and engage, however reluctantly, in the processes of reconciliation and accountability (Ramet and Pavlaković 2005; Vladislavljević forthcoming).

This fragile reform momentum was quickly disrupted in 2003, when reformist Prime Minister (PM) Zoran Đinđić was assassinated by a criminal network linked to the state structures (Bieber 2018, 341; Vladislavljević forthcoming, 8). His killing represented a major setback for democratic consolidation, exposing how deeply the state was intertwined with informal power networks, and demonstrating the limits of reformist authority in a frail post-conflict society. In 2006, Montenegro's independence referendum led to the dissolution of the State Union, after which Serbia became an independent state and adopted a new constitution (Vladislavljević forthcoming, 9-10). Moreover, throughout this period, the unresolved status of Kosovo remained a central and deeply polarizing issue in Serbian politics and foreign policy (Bieber 2018, 341; Subotić 2016). Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 further entrenched political divisions and reinforced nationalist narratives, while also shaping Serbia's relationship with the EU and international actors (*ibid.*).

In 2004, Vojislav Koštunica of the Democratic Party of Serbia (DSS), who had served as president during Đinđić's tenure, became Prime Minister, while Boris Tadić of the

Democratic Party (DS) assumed the presidency (Ramet and Pavlaković 2005). Koštunica's government (2004-2008) was characterized by a standstill in reforms, institutional stagnation and ambivalence toward deeper democratic transformation (Orlović 2008 as cited by Bieber 2018, 341). Following Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008, Koštunica's government collapsed, further contributing to political instability (Vladisavljević forthcoming, 10). As a result of all this turbulence and unresolved structural issues, the state remained vulnerable to the further entrenchment of clientelism, corruption, and informal power networks (Listhaug, Ramet and Dulić 2011). In 2008, Boris Tadić entered his second presidential term, and an important shift in power dynamics occurred. Although Mirko Cvetković (DS) formally held position of PM, political authority increasingly concentrated in the presidency (Bieber 2018, 341). This concentration of influence is why the 2008-2012 period is occasionally referred to as the Tadić era (ibid.).

During the Tadić era, Serbia made tangible progress on its path towards the European Union. The country signed the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA) with the EU (Ministry of European Integration 2023b), and in 2009 Serbian citizens were granted visa-free travel to the Schengen Area (European Commission 2009). Then followed a period of Euro-optimism, with public support for EU accession exceeding 70% (Ministry of European Integration 2023a). In March 2012, Serbia was also granted EU candidate status (European Council 2012). Despite these advancements, the period was still defined by persistent structural weaknesses that limited the depth of democratic establishment (Vladisavljević forthcoming, 8). Corruption and clientelism remained embedded within political and administrative institutions, while party affiliation continued to influence access to public employment, state resources, the media sphere, and decision-making processes (Listhaug, Ramet and Dulić 2011). Rather than being dismantled, patronage networks were still common, and in some sectors, they became further entrenched, particularly through control over public enterprises (Dragojlov 2026, 393).

As a result, the coexistence of pro-EU and pro-democratic rhetoric with ongoing clientelism, economic stagnation, weak media freedom, and limited accountability was becoming increasingly contradictory (Bieber 2018, 341). Public dissatisfaction and reform fatigue grew as repeated promises of democratic transformation kept failing to materialize in everyday governance. The 2012 elections marked a turning point, but not for the better. The Serbian Progressive Party (SNS) came to power, taking advantage of the widespread disillusionment with the existing political elite (Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018, 112-113;

Vladisavljević forthcoming, 14-15). It is important to note that between 2008-2012, two prominent former figures from the ultranationalist and populist Serbian Radical Party, Tomislav Nikolić and Aleksandar Vučić, rebranded themselves as pro-European reformers and founded the SNS party on promises of combating corruption and bolstering economic development (Vladisavljević forthcoming, 10-11; Bieber 2018). While this shift initially generated cautious optimism, the SNS and its allies would ultimately intensify the gradual erosion of democratic institutions from within (Vladisavljević forthcoming, 10-14).

In 2012, Nikolić became President while Vučić assumed leadership of the Serbian Progressive Party (Vladisavljević forthcoming, 11). On top of that, Vučić who previously served as Minister of Information under Milošević (Dragojlov 2026, 392), became Deputy Prime Minister. His dual function within the government and the ruling party enabled him to steadily expand his political influence, resulting in his appointment as Prime Minister following the 2014 parliamentary elections. Between 2014 and 2017, Vučić strategically marginalized Nikolić and consolidated power around himself, which ultimately led to his election as President in 2017 (Vladisavljević forthcoming, 11; Kralj, Sircar and Dolenec 2024, 1197). An important moment during this period was the signing of the Brussels Agreement in 2013, which facilitated the dismantling of Serbian parallel institutions in Kosovo and their eventual integration into Kosovo-administered structures, without Serbia formally recognizing Kosovo's legal or constitutional framework (Vladisavljević forthcoming, 11). According to Vladisavljević, this decision was primarily aimed at securing legitimacy and trust from the international community, particularly in light of SNS's nationalist and extremist political past during the 1990s (ibid.).

Simultaneously, Vučić pursued a strategy of diversified foreign policy engagement. While formally placing priority on Serbia's accession to the EU, he expanded cooperation with China, especially in the sectors of mining, construction, and manufacturing (Vladisavljević forthcoming, 11-12), which strengthened his domestic image as a pragmatic economic modernizer. He simultaneously preserved close ties with Russia, as Serbia was still highly dependent on Russian gas supplies and Moscow's continued support for Serbia's position on Kosovo in international forums, particularly the UN Security Council. In parallel, strong economic ties were developed with United Arab Emirates (UAE) through the Belgrade Waterfront project (Vladisavljević forthcoming, 12). This form of "all-sides" diplomacy became a defining strategy of the ruling coalition to present themselves as a strong geopolitical player to the public. Domestically, SNS also launched highly publicized anti-corruption

campaigns, which significantly boosted the popularity of both the party and Vučić as its central political figure (Vladisavljević forthcoming, 12).

Over time, however, these campaigns increasingly appeared performative, as corruption and clientelism persisted and became further entrenched (Vladisavljević forthcoming, 12-13). The ruling coalition actively redirected blame for past economic stagnation and failures towards the opposition, which contributed to the consolidation of public disdain for former governing parties and their allies (ibid.). At the same time, limitations on political competition, media independence, and voters' rights became increasingly evident. By 2016, the civil society organization CRTA assessed that elections in Serbia could no longer be considered free or fair, citing extensive pressure of public sector employees and the systematic misuse of state resources in favor of the ruling party (CRTA 2016 as cited in Vladisavljević forthcoming, 14). The media environment was also progressively captured, with major outlets operating in line with regime interests and gradually delegitimizing the opposition (ibid.).

By the late 2010s, the erosion of institutions had become increasingly visible. Power was concentrated around the presidency, independent media were largely marginalized, electoral conditions were deeply unequal, and incidents of political pressure and intimidation against opposition figures, activists, and journalists became more frequent (Freedom House 2020). These dynamics triggered mass protests in 2018-2019, initially prompted by the violent assault on opposition politician Borko Stefanović in late 2018, and later sustained under the banner 'One in Five Million' (Spasojević and Lončar 2023, 1387). Although the protests mobilized large segments of society, they failed to produce substantive institutional change. As Spasojević and Lončar (2023, 1394-1395) observe, the regime proved most effective when it strategically ignored the protests while simultaneously demonizing opposition parties.

In 2020, in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, the ruling party called early parliamentary elections, and local election in many cities and municipalities. The opposition decided to boycott these elections under claims of an uneven playing field and lack of media pluralism (Spasojević and Lončar 2023, 1385). As a result, the SNS and its coalition partners, principally the Serbian Socialist Party (SPS), secured an overwhelming parliamentary majority, with SNS winning over 60% of the vote, which allowed them to further consolidate control over decision making (Kralj, Sircar and Dolenec 2024, 1198). While the boycott allowed the ruling coalition to discredit the opposition as ineffective, it also intensified international and domestic criticism (ibid., 1211-1212). Under pressure, the government agreed to hold early parliamentary election, regular presidential elections and local elections (in some places) in

April 2022. Although the ruling coalition lost some parliamentary seats that time, it retained a comfortable majority, while the opposition remained fragmented and weakened by electoral fatigue and limited access to media (ibid., 1213).

A new phase of political instability emerged in May 2023, following two consecutive mass shootings. On 3 May, a 13-year-old student used his father's gun to carry out a shooting at the Vladislav Ribnikar Elementary School in Belgrade, killing nine students and one security guard (Jevtić 2025, 1-2). This was the first school shooting in Serbia's modern history. The following day, a 20-year-old man, reportedly inspired by the previous incident, randomly targeted young people in one of Belgrade's peripheral districts, killing nine and seriously injuring at least twelve others (ibid.). These events profoundly shocked Serbian society and triggered an intense public debate about the normalization of violence, tabloid sensationalism, and aggressive rhetoric in pro-government media, with protesters demanding that commercial pro-government media cease promoting violence in the public space, which they considered to have contributed to the conditions that made such tragedies possible (Jevtić 2025, 2).

Violence was increasingly perceived not as isolated criminal offences but as a grave symptom of broader systemic, political failures and the violent discourses that were omnipresent in media and, by extension, in society (Jevtić 2025, 1-2). Collective mourning rapidly transformed into sustained public mobilization, giving rise to mass protests under the slogan "Serbia Against Violence" (Srbija protiv nasilja). These protests were reported to be the largest since 2000 (Reporters Without Borders 2023). Over the course of 2023, more than 25 *Serbia Against Violence* protests were held across multiple cities and municipalities (Jevtić 2025, 5), and while initially civic and non-partisan, opposition parties gradually assumed a central organizational role (Jevtić 2025, 1-2; Spasojević and Lončar 2023, 1387). Survey data from this period indicated that the breadth of public dissatisfaction with the government. Roughly half of Serbian citizens supported the protests, with support reaching almost two-thirds in Belgrade, and significant participation came not only from independents but also from supporters of the ruling parties and from non-voters (Mihailović et al. 2023, cited in Milačić 2025, 53). As protest demands were repeatedly ignored, opposition actors increasingly argued that meaningful change was impossible under existing institutional conditions and began calling for early elections as a necessary mechanism to resolve the political crisis (Jevtić 2025, 4-5). On 1 November 2023, the government officially dissolved parliament and called early elections for 17 December 2023 (ibid.).

According to Transparency International's Corruption Index, in 2023, Serbia's score for perceived level of corruption was 36 out of 100, ranking 104 out of 180 countries (Transparency International 2023). Moreover, Freedom House's Nations in Transit report, classified Serbia as a 'transitional' or 'hybrid regime' for the first time (Freedom House 2020; Balkan Insight 2020) and it has remained so ever since.² In a hybrid regime, the plans, needs and actions of the government often do not align with public interests (Hammerstad 2012, 8), although, one could argue that public interests are largely influenced by political discourse which relies on media conveyance. Furthermore, in such regimes, the media becomes a convenient 'agenda setting' and manipulation tool (ab)used by the government which we will discuss later in chapter 3.3 (Dragojlov 2026, 395). All of these trends contributed to Serbia's drop to the 91st place out of 180 in the 2023 World Press Freedom Index, dropping 12 positions (Reporters Without Borders 2023).

Taken together, the institutional path outlined above, spanning the authoritarian rupture of the 1990s, the fragile and incomplete reforms of the post-Milošević era, and the gradual hybridization of the political system under SNS, has produced a particular set of conditions within which Serbian citizens form political judgments today. The persistence of clientelism, the erosion of independent institutions and mechanisms, the recurrence of unresolved national crises and the structural asymmetry in governmental and oppositional access to the public sphere together constitute the political and historical layer of what the relevance theory describes as the audience's mutual cognitive environment. These are all manifest assumptions that make certain claims about threat, urgency and necessary action cognitively accessible. Nevertheless, the political and historical conditions alone do not determine how the audience interprets securitizing messages. Equally consequential is the discursive history that has formed this environment with recurring narratives, antagonists, and emotional anchors which we will discuss in the following chapter.

3.2. Populist continuity: From Milošević to SNS (the discursive conditions)

Serbia's political discourse has been shaped by a persistent pattern of populist mobilization, a phenomenon which can be traced back through multiple political eras and which has significant implications for the cognitive environment in which contemporary securitization occurs. Stojiljković and Spasojević (2018, 113) highlight that a remarkably high

² A 'transitional' or 'hybrid regime' is a gray zone between a democracy and an authoritarian regime

degree of citizen distrust in political institutions, combined with a widespread perception of elite corruption, has consistently provided fertile ground for the thriving of populist discursive patterns in Serbia. Therefore, it is worth tracing the trajectory of this discursive patterns, and in particular the shift from left-wing to right-wing populism, as it continues to shape collective cognition to this date.

The populist tradition relevant for the selected case study can be traced to the dissolution of Yugoslavia and the rise of Slobodan Milošević, where the antagonistic construction of ‘the people’ took the ethnonational form that later actors would reactivate and refill. Milošević defined ‘the people’ as the Serbian nation, and constructed a far wider set of enemies, both internal (Albanians, Croats, Bosniaks and the political opposition) and external (NATO, Western powers, foreign media, foreign mercenaries) (Vladisavljević 2016, 40-41). As Vachudova (2020, 3) argues, ethnopopulism affords political leaders greater flexibility than ethnic nationalism in identifying friends and enemies, and this flexibility was central to Milošević’s strategy. His securitizing narratives were framed around protecting ‘our nation’ from internal and external threats (Vachudova 2020, 3; Ramet and Pavlaković 2005; Subotić 2016), a discursive pattern that resonated with existing fears and grievances while being expressed in a way that required minimal processing effort from the audience. Domestically, the regime used state-controlled media to denounce opposition leaders as corrupt traitors of the nation, while those deemed insufficiently patriotic were systemically excluded from the coverage altogether (Vladisavljević 2016, 41). Over time, however, it became evident that this discourse was used to legitimize an illiberal, authoritarian, and kleptocratic system (Vladisavljević 2016, 42; Levitsky and Way 2010, 104-113; Ramet and Pavlaković 2005).

Following the overthrow of Milošević in 2000, populist mobilization temporarily receded. During the Koštunica era political rhetoric concentrated around sovereignty, constitutionality, and national dignity rather than the active opposition of ‘the people’ against an elite. Vladisavljević (forthcoming, 7) notes that while Koštunica’s party did insist on national identity and territorial integrity, especially in relation to Kosovo, there was no cult of personality around Koštunica. There was also no major populist mobilization. The discursive logic shifted from constructing the enemy to defending the state which was a subtle but significant distinction. Likewise, during the Tadić era, political discourse was centered on pro-EU narratives, promises of a better future, democracy, modernization and reform (Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018, 110-111). In this period, a shallow but significant pro-European consensus emerged. The competition among the leading parties shifting from the dominance

of identity politics towards economic and governance issues, thereby narrowing the ideological space occupied by relevant parties (ibid., 111). Nonetheless, as Milačić (2025, 48) point out, the unresolved Kosovo issue remained a foundational divide in Serbian politics. This divide was one that neither Koštunica nor the Tadić governments resolved, and that would ultimately provide discursive raw material for Vučić and the SNS to exploit upon their rise to power in 2012.

The disappointing outcomes of the post-2000 governments, combined with the effects of the 2008 global economic crisis, created fertile grounds for political actors from 1990s to revamp and rebrand themselves (Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018, 114-115; Vladislavljević forthcoming, 14-15). Using populist rhetoric, they presented the ruling elite at the time as traitors, kleptocrats, foreign mercenaries, and political sellouts, particularly in relation to Kosovo. SNS's pre-election campaign in 2012 also relied heavily on constructing the government as responsible for unemployment, social decline, and national humiliation (ibid.). In what Stojiljković and Spasojević (2018, 115) describe as a classic populist narrative, SNS positioned itself as the party of the ordinary people, speaking against an alienated elite. The Democratic Party and the G17 party became symbols of corruption, tycoons who had enriched themselves through opaque privatizations, and keeping close ties with the international community. This framing naturally resonated with the electorate frustrated by unfulfilled promises and economic stagnation (ibid., 112-115).

After assuming power in 2012, SNS leaders formally maintained a pro-EU stance, declaring EU accession a strategic priority. However, their rhetoric increasingly started depicting the West, primarily EU and the US, as shadow powers working against Serbia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. In using this flexible discourse, SNS adopted a colorful approach to its European rhetoric. While EU membership remained a declared strategic goal, the institutions in Brussels themselves were frequently depicted as hostile or unreasonable, whereas bilateral relationships with influential member states were presented in a positive light (Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018, 116). This dual discourse allowed SNS to cultivate international cooperation and legitimacy while simultaneously nurturing domestic suspicion towards external actors. By doing so, they ensured that these foreign powers could serve as a scapegoat for whenever government policies failed to deliver on promises (Spasojević and Lončar 2023, 1385-1386). Moreover, the party strategically engaged in memory politics, selectively activating elements of a deep national narrative of victimhood and great-power injustice and capitalizing on unresolved collective traumas (Subotić 2016). Longstanding

narratives surrounding Kosovo, and grievances such as Jasenovac, were reactivated as symbols of national martyrdom and injustice (Subotić 2016; Milačić 2025).

This discursive strategy also securitized a broader set of issues, placing them beyond the realm of political debate. Denialist narratives concerning international judicial findings related to the Srebrenica genocide were normalized at the highest levels, with senior SNS officials and coalition partners publicly contesting the genocide classification and even celebrating the perpetrators (Matern and Ruppert-Karakaş 2025). Elements of Milošević-era rehabilitation also started reappearing in public discourse (Subotić 2016), while heavy instance of securitizing geopolitics and international law were frequently deployed (Milačić 2025, 48). In parallel, opposition actors, especially those associated with the previous governments, were framed as elites aligned with Western interests and therefore complicit in undermining the nation (Vladislavljević forthcoming, 13; Spasojević and Lončar 2023, 1392-1394). Moreover, journalists, civil society organizations and even citizens questioning the government's narrative were often labeled as being a foreign mercenary working for foreign interests (ibid.). This authoritarian shift is fundamentally linked to the denial of post war crimes and a reliance on nationalist exceptionalism, which effectively renders political dissent as an act of treason (Matern and Ruppert-Karakaş 2025). Spasojević and Lončar (2023, 1393) point out that this mass-production of enemies relies on vague and contradictory claims about diverse but unspecified international, regional and domestic adversaries. By repetitively drawing on these references, shared memories, disappointments, and emotionally charged symbols, SNS discourse widely resonated with the public. In relevance theoretic terms, it produced substantial cognitive effects by activating manifest patterns while using language that requires relatively little processing effort from the audience.

Furthermore, Vučić exploited the fragmentation and organizational weakness of the opposition, portraying it as incompetent, disconnected, and incapable of governing (Milačić 2025, 54-55; Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018, 119). This strategy was reinforced by the capture of large segments of the media landscape, which enables SNS to dominate narrative production and marginalize oppositional voices in the public sphere (Bieber 2018, 347; Dragojlov 2026, 395; Milačić 2025, 51-52). With time, a personality-centered form of leadership gradually emerged around Vučić, not primarily through charisma in the classical sense, but through sheer visibility. His constant presence across television, tabloids, and social media normalized his authority and reinforced perceptions of indispensability (Milačić 2025; Vladislavljević forthcoming). In addition, SNS members collectively adopted a distinctly

populist communication style (simplified language, colloquial expressions, vulgarity, and direct emotional appeals) which will be demonstrated in the following analysis of stimuli. In relevance-theoretic terms, SNS positioned itself as the actor capable of speaking efficiently, with minimal processing effort, about issues of security, identity, and national survival, thereby asserting not only political dominance but discursive authority over who is entitled to speak, and on what terms.

What emerges from this trajectory is not a series of discrete populist episodes, but rather a continuous discursive tradition in which the same structural elements have been repeatedly assembled, reactivated, and rebranded to suit different projects. The construction of an antagonistic divide between ‘the people’ and a corrupt or treasonous ‘them’, the figure of the indispensable leader, the recurrent appeal for national survival, outsourcing of blame onto foreign powers and domestic collaborators, and the use of historical grievances have together formed a deeply familiar discursive repertoire. Across successive generations, the Serbian public has been exposed to variants of the same antagonistic frames, and as a result these patterns no longer require argumentative justification to be understood. Instead, I assert they are already cognitively manifest. In this sense, the continuity outlined above has produced a pre-existing cognitive framework within which new securitizing stimuli can be processed almost automatically, since the categories antagonists, and emotional effects they produce have been rehearsed for decades. The contemporary SNS discourse, which will be further examined within the selected case study, does not need to construct its threats from scratch, but rather to position itself within the framework that the audience already inhabits. Ergo, what remains to be examined is the media mechanism through which these familiar narratives reach the public on a daily basis. The following chapter will turn to the media environment in which the 2023 pre-election discourse was produced, amplified and sustained.

3.3. The Media Landscape as Delivery Mechanism

The institutional trajectory and discursive continuities outlined in the preceding sections do not operate in isolation. Their political effects heavily rely on the distribution channels through which they reach the public, and in contemporary Serbia, this transmission is facilitated by an environment that has been substantially captured by the ruling coalition (Dragojlov 2026; Bieber 2018). Therefore, the media landscape is the central mechanism through which the populist discursive patterns described above are repeatedly made cognitively

accessible to the audience. While I have examined broader structural conditions of media capture in Serbia, in this section I will narrow the focus to the dynamics that shape what citizens see, hear, and process on a daily basis. This includes the dominance of pro-government tabloid broadcasters, the public's actual media consumption patterns, and the intensified information asymmetry that defined the 2023 pre-election period.

Bieber (2018, 347) argues that the structural nature of the contemporary media capture under SNS is, however, distinct from the direct state control that characterized the Milošević era. He further posits that the capture was realized through a combination of loyal outlets owned by businesses with opaque ownership structures, sustained economic pressure on independent media, and a wider environment of threats and self-censorship within journalism. Dragojlov (2026) later refines this picture by emphasizing that the state nevertheless remains a central actor in this arrangement, deploying a captured regulatory authority and operating as an intermediary in advertising contracts. This suggests that the distinction between direct state control and clientelist capture is less clear-cut than it may appear. Within this configuration, pro-government tabloid broadcasters such as TV Pink and TV Happy play a particularly visible role, combining entertainment-oriented programming with politically charged content that consistently amplifies governmental narratives while delegitimizing opposition actors, civil society organizations, and critical journalists (Bieber 2018; Dragojlov 2026). Their reach has been further enabled by the media regulator's (REM) persistent failure to act on documented violations of broadcasting standards (Dragojlov 2026, 396-398). This was particularly evident in June 2023, when, in the midst of the *Serbia Against Violence* protests, Reporters Without Borders (2023) called out the Serbian authorities for failing to reform REM, renewing licenses for pro-government broadcasters despite legal violations, and tolerating intimidation of independent media and journalists. This was also flagged in the post-election reports of CRTA and ODIHR, which further evidenced that 29 complaints submitted during the campaign period (CRTA 2024, 64-65, 123-125; OSCE/ODIHR 2024a, 19). Therefore, this captured media environment did not merely transmit political content, it actively determines which actors and narratives become visible to the public, and which are systematically excluded.

Such conditions take on particular significance in light of the public's media consumption habits. CRTA's 2022 survey on the electorate's informational practices found that television remained the primary source of political information for Serbian citizens. Online portals followed in second place while social media, print media, and interpersonal communication played a secondary role (CRTA 2022, 5-6). Importantly, a majority of

respondents expressed trust in pro-government broadcasters (CRTA 2022, 5-6), indicating that the captured media space was not perceived as such by a large segment of the audience. This is a particularly important point, as the perceived credibility of an information source significantly affects the relevance of the messages it transmits. In relevance-theoretic terms, the actors and narratives that dominate television coverage are also the ones rendered most cognitively manifest to citizens. Simultaneously, the marginalization and negative framing of the opposition reinforced the ruling coalition's broader strategy of delegitimizing and securitizing its political opponents. The disproportionate allocation of media space thus does more than reflect existing power asymmetries, it continuously reproduces them by determining whose voice is relevant to speak on political, economic, and security matters.

These dynamics intensified considerably during the 2023 pre-election period. In its final election report, CRTA (2024, 8-9) concluded that media conditions were noticeably unequal and clearly biased in favor of the ruling coalition, more so than in previous electoral cycles. Moreover, ODIHR's final election observation report reached a similar conclusion, finding that pre-election media coverage was largely characterized by bias and that most national broadcasters lacked genuine analytical reporting, which "detracted from the voter's ability to make informed choices" (OSCE/ODIHR 2024a, 17). Based on an analysis of approximately 1,500 hours of programming across RTS 1, TV Pink, TV Prva, TV Happy, and TV B92 between 1 November and 17 December 2023, CRTA found that 72% of total media time was devoted to representatives of the ruling coalition, while in regular news and prime-time informational programs the ruling majority accounted for 90% of coverage, with opposition actors marginalized or framed predominantly negatively (CRTA 2024, 26-30).

Although not formally a candidate, Vučić alone occupied approximately one third of prime-time airtime and two-thirds of informational programming (CRTA 2024, 8, 69). This contributed to widespread public confusion, with around 60% of citizens believing he was running and nearly a quarter believing presidential elections were being held (ibid.). ODIHR similarly concluded that the elections were "dominated by the involvement of the President", creating "unjust conditions" and an asymmetric advantage of office, particularly through the media promotion of government projects by non-candidate officials (OSCE/ODIHR 2024a, 1, 17). Both reports also documented harsh rhetoric, polarization, and delegitimizing language amplified through the media, alongside personal discreditation, verbal abuse, and intimidation of journalists which contributed to a culture of impunity and pervasive self-censorship (CRTA 2024, 72-73; OSCE/ODIHR 2024a, 18). Within this informational environment, the *Serbia*

Must Not Stop coalition was able to disseminate its securitizing narratives almost unchallenged, while the opposition was systematically marginalized and discursively delegitimized. The following section therefore turns to the specific securitizing stimuli articulated during the campaign and examines how they were constructed, delivered, and made cognitively manifest to the audience.

3.4. Serbia *Must Not Stop* pre-election campaign (01.11.-16.12.2023.)

On 1 November 2023, President Aleksandar Vučić addressed the public live on national television via the public broadcaster RTS (Radio Televizija Srbije) to officially announce the elections. After the signing of the official decree related to the holding of elections scheduled for 17 December 2023, his message to the public was as follows: ³

- (9) “Dear citizens of Serbia, I wish you happy elections. We live in times that are difficult for the entire world, times of global challenges, wars, and conflicts. Times in which it is necessary for all of us to be united in the struggle to preserve the vital national and state interests of the Republic of Serbia. Times in which we will be exposed to numerous pressures, both because of our position regarding Kosovo and Metohija and because of other regional and global issues. It is extremely important that Serbia preserves peace, stability, and internal cohesion, and demonstrates its democratic character. I would say that this campaign is an opportunity to present different ideas, programs, and policies to citizens in a civilized manner – ideas and policies that should compete with one another, but that must never, at any moment, endanger our vital state, national, and popular interests. I wish all participants in the upcoming campaign success in presenting their ideas and political goals, and I wish that they do so in a democratic and civilized way. For the citizens of Serbia, it is important that the best prevail, that the best programs and ideas prevail. I am convinced that through these elections we will further strengthen democracy in our Serbia, while at the same time ensuring a secure path into the future for our children and our country. Long live Serbia, and may you have successful elections.” (RTS Sajt – Zvanični kanal 2023, 2:03-3:56)

³ All quotes and statements in this subchapter are translated by ChatGPT;

If we analyze this message closely, we can clearly identify the basic logic of a securitizing stimulus as defined in the theoretical framework: ⁴

“We live in [times that are difficult for the entire world, times of global challenges, wars, and conflicts (*y*)].”

→ An explicit, though broad, articulation of the existence of an existential threat (*y*) (Premise P);

“...in which it is necessary for [all of us (*x*)] [to be united in the struggle to preserve (*y* ^ *z*)] [the vital national and state interests of the Republic of Serbia (*x*)].”

→ A suggestion of what needs to happen (*z*) for the object under threat (*x*) to be safe from the threat (*y*) (Premise P; Premise Q; Premise R implicit);

“[Times (*y*)] in which [we (*x*)] will be exposed to [numerous pressures (*y*)], both because of [our position regarding Kosovo and Metohija and because of other regional and global issues (*x*)].”

→ (Premise P): Giving a narrower, but still broad reference to the object under threat (*x*), and maintaining a broad idea of (*y*); (Premises Q and R remain implicit)

“It is extremely important that [Serbia (*x*)] [preserves peace, stability, and internal cohesion, and demonstrates its democratic character (*z*)].”

→ (Premise Q) An articulation of the proposed action (*z*) aimed at protecting the referent object (*x*); (Premises P and R remain implicit);

This message represents the first official address of the election period and as such establishes the overall tone and cognitive environment in broad yet distinctly securitizing manner. What is particularly notable is that all premises of the logical formula (P, Q & R) are present and are interconnected. Within the proposed logic of the securitization stimuli, $(P \rightarrow Q) \wedge (Q \rightarrow R) \Rightarrow (P \rightarrow R)$, none of the premises can be separated or isolated from one another, whether they are articulated implicitly or explicitly. Furthermore, the variables (*x*), (*y*), (*z*) have multiple references, even so, the references are framed in a manner that allows them to overlap and equate to one another within a coherent securitizing narrative. The breadth and ambiguity of the assigned references, especially the threat, allow for future specification, enabling

⁴ $(P \rightarrow Q) \wedge (Q \rightarrow R) \Rightarrow (P \rightarrow R)$ - Premise P: There is a threat (*y*) [to a referent group (*x*)]; Premise Q: Action (*z*) must happen; Premise R: Threat will be eliminated;

subsequent securitizing stimuli to be retroactively anchored in this initial framing. Moreover, by invoking widely shared assumptions about global instability and national vulnerability, the discourse aims to maximize cognitive effect while minimalizing processing effort, achieving high degrees of relevance. Additionally, even though the truthfulness of certain elements of the statement may be debatable in practice – for instance, the implication that Serbia must “preserve peace, stability, and internal cohesion, and demonstrate its democratic character” as if those are an established status quo – the overarching logic of the securitizing discourse remains truthful at the meta-logical level. In other words, regardless of the empirical accuracy of specific claims, the internal structure of the securitizing stimuli operates consistently by constructing a shared perception of threat, necessity, and protective action.

Although this initial address does not yet assign a referent to the threat, it nonetheless performs an important function within what Wodak (2015) defines as *politics of fear*. Rather than naming a clearly identifiable enemy, the speech constructs a dim atmosphere of anxiety through references to “global challenges”, “wars and conflicts”, “pressure” and threats to “Serbia” and its “vital national and state interest”. This represents initial stages of fear construction in which insecurity is normalized and emotional vulnerability is activated before responsibility is assigned. The absence of a clear “they” does not weaken the securitizing stimulus, rather, it increases its discursive flexibility by allowing future actors or events to be retrospectively inserted into an already established framework. In this sense, the address already exhibits elements of populist discourse – it constructs a collective “we” under threat while leaving the identification of a responsible “they” open for later articulation. This in itself implies an antagonistic people vs. enemy discourse.

Now that the cognitive environment and overarching logic of the campaign period was established let us examine the specific messages articulated in the *Serbia Must Not Stop* coalition campaign (Srbija ne sme da stane 2023a). First of all, the slogan itself is a proposed action (*z*) and short for “In these times of uncertainty, Serbia must not stop” (Srbija ne sme da stane 2023a). In the slogan we notice also a broad proposition of a lingering threat (*y*) – “the uncertain time” – which effectively connects to the President’s opening message (9). Moreover, some associated the slogan to the reform-oriented rhetoric of Zoran Đinđić, where a similar slogan was used in 2002 to frame Serbia’s trajectory during a period of profound political and economic transformation (AJB Video 2023; Danas 2023). As mentioned, Serbia was in a vulnerable position due to post-war reconstruction and reforms and by reviving this discourse, the slogan makes manifest memories of hardship and instability, especially for those who

remember those times. In activating shared memories of past trauma and hardship, the slogan appears as a reminder that legitimizes the proposed action and discourages political discontinuity. Additionally, media close to the government constructed a contrast between the slogan and the *Serbia Against Violence* protest call “Everything has to stop”, propagating it as part of the broader campaign messaging (Informer.rs 2023; Srpski Portal 2023).

Furthermore, in the *Serbia Must Not Stop* election messages, the threat and the threatened were more closely defined:

- (10) “[There is a danger that progress will stop. Who stand in the way of that path? An opposition obsessed with fighting [Vučić (x)] instead of fighting for [the people (x)]; and opposition that creates chaos. An opposition that includes those who want to give Kosovo a seat in the United Nation, recognize Srebrenica as genocide, and impose sanctions on our friends. (y)] [The citizens of Serbia (x)] fear [what would happen if right-wing parties were to come to power, as their inexperience and lack of knowledge could lead to economic isolation or even open conflict (y)]. [[We (x)] do not want to repeat the mistakes of the past and therefore [Serbia (x)] needs experienced leadership to protect national interest (z)].” (Srbija ne sme da stane. 2023b)

This statement represents a further step in the securitizing discourse, now building on the already established atmosphere of global instability and uncertainty. In this framing, Serbia is presented as progressing under the ruling coalition’s leadership, but the central rhetorical question is: *who is threatening this process?* Who is standing in the way of Serbia’s future and its vital national interests constructed through long-standing narratives of geopolitical injustice and martyrdom, especially in relation to Kosovo and Srebrenica (x)? Who neglects “the people” (x) and obsesses over the overthrow of Vučić (x)? Who could lead the country into isolation or even open conflict (y)? The answer is made explicit: the opposition. The threat now has a face to it – the opposition which is portrayed as chaotic, irresponsible, and dangerous. By associating the opposition with highly sensitive national issues (Kosovo, Srebrenica, sanctions against Russia), the discourse embeds the threat in emotional and historically manifest reference, thereby strengthening its relevance. At the same time, the referent object (x), i.e., “the people”, “the citizens of Serbia”, “we” and the constructed national interest as the general will is repeatedly invoked and expanded. Nonetheless, if we also look at the language used, it is notably simplistic and characteristic of populist rhetoric and as such it reduces the cognitive processing effort required from the audience, making the message more immediately accessible and emotionally resonant.

As established, the central message of the *Serbia Must Not stop* campaign is the very securitizing narrative of the opposition being a threat to the people and that voting for them would be the ultimate solution. Now let us examine a number of examples that further demonstrate this in practice. Here are some key securitizing stimuli in relation to the opposition expressed by *Serbia Must Not Stop* candidates and supporters i.e., the securitizing actors, during the pre-election rally in Belgrade on December 2 (Tanjug News Agency Official 2023):

(11) Miloš Vučević (President of the Serbian Progressive Party / SNS; first on the electoral list “Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia must not stop”) (Tanjug News Agency Official 2023):

“On Sunday 17 December, before [the citizens (*x*)] are [important, fateful elections (*y*)], but also easy and simple ones...” (ibid, 49:33-49:49)

→ (Premise P): framing the elections as a matter of life or death, i.e., as an extremely threatening situation rather than a routine democratic choice (*y*); (Premise Q and R remain implicit)

“...On 17 December, before [the citizens (*x*)] there will be, on one side, [those who plundered [our (*x*)] entire economy, who, in the first 12 years of this century, destroyed everything [we (*x*)] had been creating for decades, who brought shame on [us (*x*)] abroad, devalued [our ideals (*x*)], and, out of greed, stole [the future of our children (*x*)]; those same ones who blocked roads, bridges and highways multiple time in the past weeks and months because they want [Serbia (*x*)] to stop again so that it would be better for them and harder [for everyone else (*x*)] (*y*)]. And on the other side, [there is only one list, one policy, and the answer (*z*)] to [that destructive politics which ruined Serbia up until 2012 (*y*)]. There is [us, the list ‘Aleksandar Vučić – Serbia Must Not Stop’ (*z*)].” (ibid., 49:50-51:07)

→ (Premise P): the construction of the opposition, their ‘greedy actions’ in the past and more recently as the threat (*y*) to ‘us’, ‘the citizens’, ‘our ideals’, ‘our future’, ‘Serbia’ (*x*) – notably the securitizing actor also includes themselves within the threatened collective; (Premise Q): the proposition that the *Serbia Must Not Stop* list as the solution (*z*) to stop the greedy elite and a catastrophic scenario they would cause (*y*); (Premise R): the proposition that the threat (*y*) needs to be prevented from harming (*z*) the object of threat (*x*);

“...[it (the ruling coalition) (z)] is the strongest guaranty that [[Serbia (x)] will never return to the years up until till 2012 (y)] – to [the years of hopelessness, defeat, poverty, and the plundering of both the citizens and the state; to the years when [we (x)] were forced to be ashamed of one another (y)], because [we (x)] were led by [the worst (y)] – when we were led by [the “yellow elite”, those who would today, once again, plunder Serbia (y)]... Then, it was bad for [everyone (x)], [every one of us (x)] lived worse than today, only for [them – that small group who was and still is led by Dragan Đilas(y)] – it was better.” (ibid., 51:24-52:07)

→ (Premise P): A direct construction of the threat (y) through retrospective securitization of the pre-2012 period, framed as a time of existential harm to the referent object (x): hopelessness, defeat, poverty, shame, and systematic plunder. Moreover, the threat is embodied through the “yellow elite” embodied in Dragan Đilas; (Premise Q): the ruling coalition is explicitly presented as the necessary preventive measure (z), i.e., “the strongest guarantee” against the return of the constructed threat (y), with electoral support implied as the activating mechanism; (Premise R): The prevention, or elimination of the threat (y) is causally linked to the continued rule of the securitizing actor (z);

“...That would be a knockout blow to [the Serbian state (x)]. That would be the final strike against [hope that we have the right to a better future (x)]. That would be a defeat of [our national interests (x)]. That would be a defeat for [the hope that citizens will tomorrow live better (x)] than in the past, when the state was led by those who today want to plunder it (y)].” (ibid., 53:01-53:23)

→ (Premise P): a highly dramatic construction of the threat through an extreme, life or death scenario in the event that the ‘other side’ wins the elections; (Premise Q and R remain implicit)

(12) Aleksandar Vučić (President of Serbia; senior SNS figure and name-bearer of the list) (Tanjug News Agency Official 2023):

“No one can forbid [us (x)], as [they (y)] forbade us believe it or not for decades, to [make a film about Jasenovac, to speak about Serbian victims (x)]. No one can forbid us from [naming a boulevard the Boulevard of the Heroes of Košare (x)]. No one can

forbid us from [respecting our heroes, our warriors, the fighters for Kosovo and Metohija, the fighters for Serbian interests (x)]. No one can forbid us from protecting [our national interests (x)].” (ibid., 1:42:02-1:42:31)

→ (Premise P implicit): construction of a persistent threatening elite (y) while using ‘no one can forbid us’ as an anaphora that is aligned with the suppression of national memory, identity, and sovereignty in abstraction; (Premises Q and R remain implicit);

“[For me, politics, programs, plans, Serbia are everything. For me Serbia is everything (z)]. And I will rule not govern with [those who will destroy [Serbia (x)] (y)]. That is the difference between us. I want Serbia and its future and progress, not its destruction. I don’t want theft, I don’t want the closing of factories” (ibid., 1:47:02-1:47:21)

→ (Premise P): construction of an existential threat (y) to the referent object (x), where political opponents are framed as ones capable of destroying Serbia; the securitizing actor also merges himself with (x); (Premises Q and R remain implicit);

(13) Tomislav Nikolić (Founder/first president of SNS; former President of Serbia; speaker at the rally) (Tanjug News Agency Official 2023):

“[Serbia (x)] [must not stop (z)]. [Anything other than [an SNS victory (z)] is gambling with the fate of Serbia (y)].” (ibid., 1:04:50-1:04:59)

→ (Premise P): framing the electoral outcome as an existential gamble in which any alternative to the proposed solution (z) constitutes a direct threat (y) to (x); (Premise Q): SNS’s victory as the only prevention, or solution (z); (Premise R implicit)

“[Keep listening to him (Vučić). Don’t let his and your enemies shake you. Don’t doubt his moves – he knows more than others and works more than them (z)].” (ibid., 1:06:41-1:06:55)

→ (Premise P): establishing that the common enemy is the threat to both the audience and President Vučić; (Premise Q → R): explicit call for trust in the securitizing actor, presenting obedience and loyalty as necessary action (z) to prevent the threat (y) from materializing;

“[Everyone else would like the Progressives to write off [Kosovo and Metohija (x)], so that if they ever win, they won’t have to deal with that problem (y)].” (ibid., 1:07:44-1:07:54)

→ (Premise P): implicit construction of the opposition (*y*) as willing to surrender core national territory; (Premises Q and R remain implicit);

- (14) Aleksandar Šapić (Leader of the list “Belgrade must not stop”; candidate for Mayor of Belgrade; speaker at the rally) (Tanjug News Agency Official 2023):

“I am going to pose a question: what will we teach [our children (*x*)] in kindergartens and schools tomorrow [if they (*y*)] get the chance to run [Serbia (*x*)] or run [Belgrade (*x*)]? [Are we going to teach [them (*x*)] that brother and sister are no longer brother and sister but ‘child one’ and ‘child two’? Are we going to teach [them (*x*)] that mother and father are no longer mother and father but ‘parent one’ and ‘parent two’? Are we going to teach [them (*x*)] that the [Serbian people (*x*)] are a genocidal people?... Are we going [children (*x*)] that [Kosovo and Metohija (*x*)] are not an integral part of our country (*y*)?” (ibid., 1:24:44-1:25:45)

→ (Premise P): construction of the opposition as a threat (*y*) to children, family values, education, gender and national identity and collective memory while expanding (*x*) to include culture, history, and identity; (*y*) all of this is framed through moral panic and future-oriented fear.

- (15) Lazar Ristovski (Actor; public supporter of the list; speaker at the rally) (Tanjug News Agency Official 2023):

“[Many of my colleagues (*x*)] support the president, but [they (*x*)] don’t dare speak out publicly because, [whoever stands on our side (*x*)], is condemned by [the elite opposition and oppositional media (*y*)] (ibid., 1:17:13-1:17:29)

→ (Premise P): proposition of the opposition and aligned media as a coercive elite (*y*) threatening freedom of expression and artistic autonomy (*x*); (Premises Q and R remain implicit);

“[When actors become political philosophers, experts for agriculture or architecture, or experts for zoology; when illiterate people want to be [ministers of education (*x*)]; when aggressive so-called judges want to dispense [justice (*x*)]; when some want to be eternal revolutionaries; when looters want to run [the state (*x*)] – then things have gone too far. (*y*)” (ibid., 1:18:01-1:18:37)

→ (Premise P): a moralized construction of the threat (y), portraying political opponents and critical elites as incompetent, illegitimate, and dangerous to the proper functioning of the state (x); (Premises Q and R remain implicit);

In all of the examples above (12-15) we can clearly identify the proposed deductive logic of the securitizing discourse. Even when some premises aren't expressed explicitly, they are still there. Now, across all addresses, we can also clearly observe the use of non-deductive referents that prove the use of populist securitization: (x) = 'the people', 'us', 'our future', 'our national interests', 'our identity' are threatened by (y) = 'the morally corrupt and greedy opposition', 'the elite', 'the incompetent thieves'. Moreover, another common thread for each of the examples are elements of right-wing populism as defined by Wodak (2015) in the common mentions of national and gender identity, collective memory and traditional values. One that can stand out as such even more than others is example (14) where there were on top of threat to the conservation of national identity, traditional family values and gender identity are also put forward. Furthermore, in all examples, we clearly see a lot of references to the past government and their "incompetence" and "destructiveness". In one instance, in his address, Vučević explicitly refers to the opposition as 'the yellow elite', which is a clear populist marker (Wodak 2015; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). This term is an established pejorative label often used by the ruling coalition to describe everyone from the political, economic, and cultural establishment associated with Serbia's post-2000 governments, especially those led by the Democratic Party (DS). The yellow color is traditionally linked with the Democratic Party's visual identity.

Even though the opposition in 2023 consisted of parties and coalitions whose members were not all necessarily associated with post-2000 governments, we can notice in all examples that they are discursively grouped into one basket, enabling generalization and lowering cognitive processing effort. Nonetheless, individual opposition figures who were indeed linked to the previous governments are commonly referenced as a tactic to put a face to the threat. For example, in his address Vučević explicitly mentions Dragan Đilas (RTV 2023), who in SNS rhetoric often embodies the 'yellow elite'. All of these populist techniques serve to make the threat more manifest in the cognition of the masses and the deliberately use of direct and simplistic language also reduces processing effort. While the mere proposition of a threat already produces high degree of cognitive effect, anchoring it in past grievances, assigning it

to recognizable faces, while communicating it through direct language further strengthens its relevance for the audience.

Having demonstrated the proposed framework through the analysis of selected statements expressed during the rally in Belgrade, this pattern becomes even clearer when also looking at other pre-election rallies held in Kraljevo (24 November; ALO.rs 2023a), Užice (29 November; RINA.rs 2023), and Kragujevac (14 December; ALO.rs 2023b). Across all of these events, the securitizing discourse remains consistent: the opposition is portrayed as a ‘threatening elite’ responsible for the deterioration of citizens’ lives prior to 2012, while the ruling coalition positions itself as the source of stability, progress, and protection. Recurrent antagonistic framings structure the narrative across all addresses – *they* ruined the economy, *we* created jobs and infrastructure; *they* serve foreign powers, *we* serve the will of the Serbian people; *they* “sold” Kosovo and advocate sanctions against ‘our friends’, *we* preserve dignity and sovereignty. These narratives match closely with the overarching campaign messages previously analyzed (Srbija ne sme da stane 2023b). Additionally, the evidence of progress facilitated by the ruling coalition is highlighted through newly opened factories, higher average wages, infrastructural projects like new highways, railways, medical equipment and expanded health services. These achievements are materially and physically manifest to citizens and therefore achieve a high degree of relevance and by grounding them in such tangible, also place-specific accomplishments, the discourse enhances both its credibility and its relevance within the audience’s cognitive environment.

Interestingly, the May tragedies were not once mentioned in any of the analyzed pre-election rallies. The only reference appears on the *Serbia Must Not Stop* campaign website where they are briefly addressed within the section of achieved policy measures rather than a central campaign issue (Srbija ne sme da stane 2023b)

- (16) “For the happiness of every child: Every child has the right to a happy and safe childhood and to quality education. The May tragedies deeply shook Serbia and led us to serious self-reflection. A greater number of school police officers, the introduction of video surveillance, and expanded authority for teachers have been implemented to ensure children’s safety. Further investments are being made in digitalization, along with additional salary increases for teachers and professors.”

In the statement (16), we can observe that the tragedies are framed as events that prompted concrete corrective action that will prevent recurrence, rendering it as a resolved issue. The tragedies are thus treated as isolated incidents rather than symptoms of broader structural or

political problems. In contrast, within the majority of the opposition's pre-election campaigns – most notable that of the *Serbia Against Violence* coalition – the May tragedies were a main point for securitizing the ruling coalition. Opposition actors advanced claims that the government was mainly responsible for the tragedies due to the normalization and systemic spread of violence. Throughout 2023, more than 25 *Serbia Against Violence* protests were organized across multiple cities and municipalities, often involving the marches on major streets, highways and bridges (Jevtić 2025). The ruling coalition, in turn, early on accused the opposition of “abusing” the tragedies for political gain and consistently rejected calls for perceiving them as structural incidents (Informer.rs 2023; Srpski Portal 2023). As a result, the tragedies themselves were excluded from the ruling coalition's campaign agenda, while protest action, particularly the blocking of the streets and critical infrastructure were used to securitize the opposition and their supporters, portraying it as disruptive and destabilizing (see in example 11).

Drawing on the framework adopted in this thesis, the *Serbia Must Not Stop* campaign emerges as a case where the campaign discourse heavily relies on the established cognitive environment. Through selected discursive tactics, the campaign reactivates what was already in place from decades of populist continuity. The institutional conditions had already constrained the oppositions' visibility. The captured media environment had already amplified the SNS framing while marginalizing competing voices and in this sense, the campaign does not construct its securitization from scratch. Rather, it positions itself within an environment that has already been prepared. Moreover, the absence of the May tragedies from the campaign agenda belongs to this same operation. They were not left out by accident but deliberately avoided, since their inclusion would have forced the $(x)/(y)/(z)$ variables into a configuration that did not suit the actor.

The campaign's reliance on the prepared environment extends to the proposed action itself. Therefore, before turning to the question of success, it is necessary to take a closer look at the proposed action (z) . Throughout the campaign, (z) appears most explicitly in its electoral form, i.e., the call to support the ruling coalition as the “experienced leadership” capable of protecting the referent object (x) . An electoral appeal does not in itself exceed the bounds of normal politics, and on its own it would place this discourse closer to plain populist communication than to completed securitization. What distinguishes the case as securitization is that the same logic works to justify, and normalize, measures against the opposition that do exceed those bounds. These measures are neither hypothetical nor confined to the campaign –

as the preceding sections have demonstrated, the measures form a sustained feature of the regime, from the capture of the media landscape and the systemic marginalization of opposition voices to the intimidation of journalists and opponents, misuse of state resources, and the framing of dissent as treason. The campaign discourse does not create this coercive system but legitimizes one already in operation, just as it reactivates a cognitive environment already in place. Within the campaign itself, this justification appears in the framing of the opposition as agents of “chaos” who “block roads, bridges and highways” (example 11) and whose victory would deliver a “knockout blow” to the state, constructing opponents not as legitimate competitors but as a threat whose containment is a matter of national survival. These measures intensify and become most overt in the post-electoral period, examined in the epilogue.

3.5. Epilogue

What were the results of the 17 December 2023 elections, and did SNS succeed in its securitization of the opposition? These answers, as will become clear, are not reducible to the vote count alone. The elections granted a decisive parliamentary majority to the *Serbia Must Not Stop* coalition, confirming SNS's dominant position within the Serbian political system (RIK 2024; CRTA 2024; OSCE/ODIHR 2024a). This dominance also remained on the local level, where SNS and its coalition partners secured majorities in the vast majority of municipalities. Beyond the captured media environment and structural advantages of office, the ruling coalition benefited from a party infrastructure of unparalleled scale, with a membership reported at approximately 700,000 (Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018, 121). Its patronage network extends from government ministries to local administrations and public enterprises across the country. This kind of infrastructure yields SNS an organizational reach that no opposition party can match (Kralj, Sircar and Dolenec 2024, 1197; Milačić 2025, 52).

Therefore, the electoral outcome alone cannot adequately measure the success of the securitization analyzed in the preceding sections. The structural advantages of office, captured media, and contested electoral conditions each independently shaped the result in ways that cannot be disentangled from the effects of the discourse itself (Bieber 2018; Dragojlov 2026, 395; Milačić 2025, 52). On the election day itself, CRTA and OSCE/ODIHR observers documented widespread irregularities, particularly in Belgrade (CRTA 2024; OSCE/ODIHR 2024a; Balunović 2023). Based on the prior, the *Serbia Against Violence* coalition and other opposition parties formally contested the conduct of the vote and demanded annulment of the

local results (Tanjug 2023). In the weeks that followed, tens of thousands of citizens gathered in sustained protests over the conduct of the vote, demanding the repetition of the elections and improvement of electoral conditions (Milačić 2025, 53). The fact that the opposition maintained sufficient organizational capacity to mobilize this level of street pressure indicates that the securitizing framing of the opposition had not yet achieved unconditional acceptance by large portions of the audience.

Under domestic and international pressure, the government agreed to hold re-elections of the Belgrade local ballot on 2 June 2024, alongside regular local elections in 88 municipalities including Novi Sad and Niš (Milačić 2025, 55; Serbia Elects 2024a). However, the structural conditions of the electoral environment, particularly with respect to media access, the conduct of the regulator (REM), and the misuse of public resources, remained largely unaddressed in the intervening period (OSCE/ODIHR 2024b). In this context, *Serbia Against Violence* fractured over the question of whether to participate or boycott (Milačić 2025, 55-56). The decisive factor in June 2024 was therefore not boycott as a coalition-wide strategy, but the selective withdrawal of the coalition's largest single party, the Party of Freedom and Justice (Stranka Slobode i Pravde), joined by the smaller Serbia Centre (SRCE) and Together (Zajedno), from the ballots where the opposition had the most realistic chance of competing (Balkan Insight 2024a). The boycotting bloc withdrew from the highest-profile races, most consequentially Belgrade and Niš, while six former smaller parties from the coalition regrouped under a new banner *I Choose to Fight* (*Biram borbu*) and contested the elections without the coalition's main electoral weight (Serbia Elects 2024b; European Forum for Democracy and Solidarity 2024). The split was publicly acrimonious, with former coalition partners openly criticizing one another's strategies. As a result, SNS went on to win decisively in Belgrade and most other municipalities (Balkan Insight 2024b; RFE/RL 2024). In its statement on the June 2024 elections, OSCE/ODIHR (2024b) concluded that "the dominance of the ruling party as well as the fragmentation of the opposition reduced their competitiveness, while allegations of widespread pressure on public sector employees and misuse of public resources favored the ruling coalition."

I contend that the June 2024 fragmentation marked a turning point in the relevance dynamics analyzed in this thesis. As established in the preceding sections, the SNS securitizing discourse had for years rested on the construction of the opposition as fragmented, incompetent, and incapable of governing, an assumption rendered cognitively manifest through repetition and through the captured media space (Milačić 2025, 54-55; Spasojević and Lončar 2023,

1394-1395; Stojiljković and Spasojević 2018, 119). The opposition's conduct in spring and early summer 2024 confirmed this framing through observable behavior. In relevance-theoretic terms, this empirical confirmation deepened the relevance of the SNS securitizing framing within the public's mutual cognitive environment. An assumption previously sustained by discursive repetition alone now drew on independently observable evidence. While SNS bears clear responsibility for the institutional and discursive conditions that constrained the opposition's organizational capacity (Bieber 2018; Dragojlov 2026; Spasojević and Lončar 2023), the opposition's strategic choices in 2024 produced a layer of confirmation that no discourse alone could have generated. Milačić (2025, 55) further argues that the opposition failed to develop an attractive alternative addressing voters' socioeconomic and cultural concerns, and that the absence of a coherent counternarrative on Kosovo significantly undermined its credibility with the public, leaving the SNS securitizing framing essentially uncontested in its core claims. The result is a cognitive environment in which the assumption of opposition incapacity operates at a substantially deeper level of manifestness than in 2023, since it is sustained simultaneously by discursive repetition and by observable evidence.

On 1 November 2024, when the recently renovated concrete canopy of the Novi Sad central railway station collapsed, ultimately killing sixteen people (Vladisavljević forthcoming, 17; Balkan Insight 2025; Business and Human Rights Resource Centre 2025). The renovation had been completed only months earlier as part of a project linked to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, and within days the disaster was widely interpreted as a consequence of systemic corruption and inadequate institutional oversight, with protesters adopting the motto "corruption kills" (Vladisavljević forthcoming, 17; Business and Human Rights Resource Centre 2024; Balkan Insight 2025; Al Jazeera 2024). Initial protests took the form of silent commemorations, but escalated rapidly following the physical assault on students of the Faculty of Dramatic Arts in Belgrade on 22 November 2024 (Serbia Elects 2025). Faculty blockades spread across the country, and by spring 2025 the student-led movement had become the largest sustained protest mobilization in modern Serbian history, with demonstrations recorded in over 400 towns and cities and an estimated 275,000 to 325,000 demonstrators converging in Belgrade for the 15 March protest alone (European Parliament 2025; Global Campus of Human Rights 2026). As Vladisavljević (forthcoming, 17) notes, the mobilization facilitated the engagement of discontented teachers, lawyers, farmers, artists, and many others, reflecting "the largest popular mobilization against authoritarianism in Serbia since communism." Sustained pressure forced the resignation of Prime Minister Miloš Vučević in

late January 2025, followed by the formation of a new government under Đuro Macut in April (European Parliament 2025; Serbia Elects 2025).

Throughout 2025, the student movement moved from demanding institutional accountability to pursuing political change directly, ultimately putting forward its own independent electoral list rather than endorsing any existing party (Global Campus of Human Rights 2026; IPS Journal 2026). The list drew over 400,000 signatures of support from citizens across the country (ibid.). Crucially, the students have consistently rejected proposals to run on a joint electoral list with the existing opposition parties, regarding them, as one recent analysis summarizes, as "part of the existing system and as partly responsible for the country's problems" (OSW 2026). This distance is not merely tactical. It is intelligible only against the cognitive environment that years of SNS securitization and the June 2024 fragmentation jointly produced. The students and their supporters are not contesting the substance of the SNS framing of the opposition; they are operating within it. They have identified the discursive constraint that they cannot directly overcome, namely the established opposition's discredited standing, and have routed around it by constructing an alternative political vehicle that will not depend on it. The list is envisioned to include independent experts, academics, athletes, and representatives of civil society rather than established politicians, with proposed candidates remaining confidential until the election is called in order to shield them from harassment by the authorities and pro-government media (OSW 2026; New Union Post 2026). In this respect, the students' strategy represents a direct response to the failures Milačić (2025, 55) diagnoses: rather than inheriting the opposition's damaged credibility and absent counternarrative on the most divisive national issues, they have bypassed both entirely. Polling data from October 2025 indicates that this strategy has resonated with a significant portion of the electorate: a CRTA survey reported 44% support for the student list against 32% for Vučić's movement signaling wide approval from the audience (CRTA 2025, cited in OSW 2026).

The epilogue of the 2023 elections makes several analytical points visible that the electoral outcome alone could not. The success of SNS's securitization of the opposition cannot be measured by the vote which was overdetermined by institutional and structural advantages, but it can be read directly against the scale of securitizing success defined in the framework. On the proposed spectrum from less to more successful securitization, the construction of the opposition as a threat (*y*) sits at the more successful end, having been recognized as relevant, sustained as a recurrent discourse over more than a decade, and rendered manifest even to those now mobilizing against the regime. Moreover, the three additional considerations attached to

this scale are each confirmed. First success is not a single outcome, since the components of the proposition diverge – the threat-framing (*y*) resonated deeply, while the proposed action (*z*) of continued SNS rule was never genuinely consented to and came to rest on coercion. Second, success proved durable over time, as the (*y*)-framing continued to shape political action well beyond the 2023 campaign, holding firm even as the wider mood turned against the regime. Third, its relevance was reinforced based on experience as the opposition's fragmentation ahead of the June 2024 elections independently confirmed the long-constructed assumption of its incapacity, deepening the manifestness of that assumption in a way no messaging alone could achieve. The clearest illustration of how deeply this framing has settled is that the student-led mobilization has positioned itself around the established opposition. I believe this shows that the framework's claim that the mutual cognitive environment and the assumptions manifest within it shape political action even when directed against the regime that helped construct and facilitate it.

What the post-electoral period also reveals is which components of the discourse are now being actively contested. The proposed action (*z*), continued SNS rule and the coercive measures presented as necessary to sustain it, never secured genuine acceptance. Moreover, for years the public confided in the established opposition to challenge those measures, but the durable (*y*)-framing of the opposition as incapable and partly responsible meant that relying on it appeared unlikely to resolve what was being rejected. The student movement therefore reassigned the variables rather than embracing the existing alternatives: SNS itself is cast as the principal threat (*y*), the established opposition as responsible for the continuation of or even complicit in the threat rather than a viable alternative, and the student list as the proposed solution (*z*). In response, the regime has attempted to securitize the movement directly, framing students and their supporters as terrorists, foreign-backed agents, and instruments of a "color revolution" against the constitutional order, with repression presented as the necessary protective action (Ejdus et al. 2026; European Parliament 2025). These coercive measures are not new, the targeting of opponents, media capture, and intimidation have long sustained the regime, but they have intensified and grown more openly extending to physical attacks on demonstrators, mass detentions, censorship, the intimidation of academics, journalists, and civil society, and the alleged use of an acoustic weapon against protesters at the 15 March mobilization in Belgrade (UN OHCHR 2025; European Parliament 2025). The securitization has therefore achieved differential success across its components, accepted in its construction of the threat and rejected in its proposed solution.

CHAPTER 4: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This thesis set out to answer whether the integration of relevance theory into the securitization framework can address the limitations of the speech act theory in explaining how security matters are constructed by an actor, how they become relevant to an audience, why they achieve varying degrees of success, and what role shared assumptions, experiences, and knowledge play in that process. Having developed the theoretical framework and applied it to populist securitization of the opposition in Serbia during and after the December 2023 elections, I am now able to revisit this question and assess the hypotheses I proposed in the beginning of the thesis. As laid out in the research problem statement, three specific limitations of the classical securitization framework were identified: its reliance on the speech act theory, its binary treatment of success, and its vague treatment of contextual considerations. I contend that the framework developed in this thesis demonstrates that relevance theory can address all three, and that the empirical analysis provides the grounds for this claim. It replaces the speech act model with an inferential one, offers a way to measure success by degree through the cognitive principle of relevance, and engages the concept of the mutual cognitive environment instead of pure context, since it includes both the assumptions already manifest to the audience and those that can become manifest through inference. What remains is to test the hypotheses against the analysis and to weigh what the findings offer and where they fall short.

At the heart of the relevance-theoretic securitization framework I proposed a claim that every securitizing message, regardless of who delivers it, where, and to whom, follows the same underlying logical structure: $(P \rightarrow Q) \wedge (Q \rightarrow R) \Rightarrow (P \rightarrow R)$. There is a threat to us, something must be done, and if it is done, the threat will be eliminated through the implementation of extraordinary measures. The question was whether this would hold when applied to real securitizing discourse, and the campaign analysis suggests that it does (section 3.4). Across all analyzed stimuli, from the president's opening address to the rally speeches of party leaders and other public figures, this structure was consistently present, whether its premises were stated explicitly or left for the audience to infer. What distinguished one stimulus from another was not the underlying logic, which remained the same, but the specific referents assigned to each variable, i.e., who was positioned as threatened (x), what was constructed as the threat (y), and what was proposed as the necessary response (z). Vučević filled these variables with economic grievance and the specter of pre-2012 hardship. Vučić filled them with national memory and sovereignty. Šapić filled them with children, family, and gender identity. Ristovski filled them with cultural freedom and expression. Yet the same deductive structure

carried all of these variations equally. Moreover, the populist character of the discourse revealed itself in the predictability of the assigned variables. Across all statements and every setting, ‘the people’ were the threatened (x), ‘the elitist, incapable, foreign serving opposition’ were the threat (y), while the proposed response (z) was twofold: the call to keep the ruling coalition in power to prevent the evil opposition from ruining the nation, coupled with the justification of coercive measures against the opposition and their supporters that go beyond ordinary political competition. I argue that this demonstrated consistency supports the first hypothesis, and shows that the formula is not merely as a theoretical abstraction but also as analytical tool that can be used for discourse analysis.

Nevertheless, identifying the logical structure does not, on its own, explain why a stimulus succeeds. A perfectly logical proposition may still fail entirely if no one finds it relevant. The question of why *Serbia Must Not Stop* discourse resonated as deeply as it did leads back to the establishment of the *mutual cognitive environment* across the Serbian historical and political trajectory (section 3.1), discursive continuities of populist mobilization (section 3.2), and the captured media landscape (section 3.3). What those analyses established is that the campaign did not build its securitization claims from nothing. In fact, the institutional conditions of the hybrid regime had already been sustaining the antagonistic framing of the opposition for more than a decade, which meant that the securitization analyzed in this thesis was not constructed from scratch but rooted in something that had been repeatedly made manifest over time. On top of that, by occupying the media space, the ruling coalition’s narrative was the one that the public would encounter the most on a daily basis. This omnipresence, combined with the use of simplified language, binary conceptualizations, direct emotional appeals, and references to past traumas of the wars of the 1990s and the failures of the post-2000 governments, made sure that the discourse consistently drew on assumptions already manifest at the collective level, producing high cognitive effect. At the same time, the language employed was simple and direct enough to reduce the processing effort required from the audience. The result was a discourse that struck precisely the balance the relevance-theoretic framework predicts – high cognitive effect at low processing effort, making it not only cognitively impactful but immediately accessible and compelling. This, I contend, is what makes populism popular which is consistent with the second hypothesis. I do, however, recognize that this remains a theoretical inference, and that individual-level reception data would be needed to verify it empirically.

The campaign discourse analysis alone could only demonstrate how the securitization was constructed and why it was likely to achieve relevance. What it could not establish was the actual degree of its success. For that, the epilogue proved essential. What the post-electoral trajectory revealed was something more nuanced than mere success or failure. The securitization of the opposition achieved a high degree of relevance and this is most evident in the fact that it persisted beyond the electoral moment in 2023, beyond the local elections and Novi Sad canopy collapse in 2024, and into the largest sustained mobilization which is still ongoing. Even among those who are currently protesting and fighting the regime, the assumption that the established opposition is a threat remains at the surface. The proposed action (z), by contrast, was rejected. It was never merely the call to "vote for us"; had it been, the discourse would have amounted to ordinary populist communication rather than a securitizing move. What makes it classify as securitization is that the same logic justified, and worked to normalize, a coercive apparatus directed at the opposition and later the protest movement, the surveillance, intimidation, criminal proceedings, and arrests the analysis documented at each stage. The fact that the systemic coercion has only intensified as consent for continued SNS rule eroded is itself a measure of the threat construction's lack of success. A proposed action that had genuinely been accepted would not need this level of coercion to sustain it.

Furthermore, one feature of this outcome deserves emphasis, since it does not follow from the campaign discourse alone. The acceptance of the opposition as a threat did not merely persist through repetition but was confirmed from a direction the actor did not control. When the opposition fragmented during the June 2024 local elections, the audience was given manifest evidence of what SNS had asserted for years, not because the discourse instructed them to accept it, but because the opposition's own conduct demonstrated it. I contend that an assumption sustained until then by discursive repetition was deepened by independently observable evidence, which shows that the mutual cognitive environment can be shaped not only by an actor's communicative strategy but also by events beyond it. I would stress that this does not amount to acceptance of the SNS securitization as a whole; what was confirmed was the narrower premise that the established opposition could not be relied upon to challenge the very thing the audience was rejecting. I take this to support the third hypothesis and to show why a binary measure of success falls short, since relevance has to be graded by component and followed over time to capture a securitization whose threat construction is confirmed even as its proposed action is refused.

Beyond the assessment of the hypotheses, I believe the thesis contributed to a number of additional points. The formalization of the securitizing proposition through the logical formula offers a way of examining securitizing stimuli on a deeper level. I contend that grasping the underlying structure allows the analyst to separate what is constant from what is contextual, and to trace how a single proposition can be made manifest through different stimuli, explicitly or implicitly, each achieving a different degree of relevance. The distinction between the securitizing proposition and the securitizing stimulus further enables this, since it makes visible how one logical claim can travel across speakers, media, actions and moments, arriving at a different outcome each time. The reconceptualization of context as the mutual cognitive environment, set across political-historical, discursive, and media layers, offers a way of examining the conditions within which audiences receive and process securitizing stimuli that goes further than simply invoking "context" as a background condition. It also makes analytically visible which established assumptions are being activated and which new claims are being attached to them, a distinction that proved central to the campaign analysis. I believe this layered approach is applicable beyond the Serbian case, though the specific layers identified here, the political-historical conditions, the discursive continuity, and the media landscape, were chosen because they proved most relevant to it. Analysts working with other cases may identify different or additional layers shaping the cognitive environment in their own context.

Furthermore, the qualification I introduced regarding the audience-centered nature of securitization, that the process remains audience-centered in its outcome but not necessarily in its origin, also speaks to broader questions about authority, communicative power and audience agency. As demonstrated, in hybrid political systems securitizing actors have the capacity to shape the very cognitive environment within which the audience forms its judgment. Finally, I argue that the refinement of the success scale, with its three additional considerations of differential success across components, temporal durability, and empirical reinforcement, proved analytically productive in the epilogue and offers a richer way of assessing securitizing outcomes than either the classical binary model or Salter's four-degree scale alone could provide.

These contributions notwithstanding, several limitations should be acknowledged. The most fundamental follow from the two extensions the framework makes to relevance theory. The first is a move from individual to collective cognition. Relevance theory was developed mostly to explain how individuals process communicative stimuli (Sperber and Wilson 1995),

and although it has since been applied to discourse beyond that original domain (e.g., Rut-Kluz 2009), extending it to the relationship between a securitizing actor and a mass audience required a deliberate move to the collective level, where I have worked with the shared cognitive environment of an audience rather than the cognitive processes of any single individual. The concept of the mutual cognitive environment is Sperber and Wilson's own (1995, 41), and the evidence suggests that identifiable patterns do emerge collectively. What this design cannot do is establish how any particular individual processes a given stimulus, or whether the inferences they draw match those the framework predicts at the collective level. This is a limitation of methodology rather than of the framework itself, since verifying individual-level processing would require complementary methods such as interviews, focus groups, or experimental measures of processing effort and cognitive effect, which fall outside the qualitative, discourse-analytic approach adopted here. I therefore see it less as a boundary on what the framework can explain than as an avenue for the kind of mixed-method research that could test its predictions directly. The thesis also rests on a single case. While the Serbian case offered exceptional analytical richness, the framework was demonstrated here only on top-down, populist, electoral securitization; its applicability to other contexts, other hybrid regimes, different forms of populism, bottom-up dynamics, and non-electoral securitization, remains to be tested. I designed the approach to be generalizable, but that generalizability has not yet been shown beyond the present case.

Beyond that, I believe the framework raises questions that extend past the scope of this thesis. For the study of securitization, I contend that relevance theory offers a viable alternative to speech act theory as a linguistic foundation, with the cognitive principle of relevance, manifestness, and the mutual cognitive environment providing tools for analyzing not only what securitizing actors say but why audiences find certain messages compelling. Relevance theory is already well established across pragmatics, media, and communication studies. What this thesis adds is its application to Critical Security Studies, and that application could now be carried to other security cases, the securitization of migration, public health, or environmental threats, to test whether the deductive structure and the relevance-based assessment of success hold across different contexts. For the study of populism, I believe the thesis contributes an account of why populist discourse is structurally effective as a communicative strategy, one that experimental methods measuring processing effort and cognitive effect against non-populist framings of the same issue could test more rigorously than the qualitative approach I adopted here.

A further question concerns the seemingly conservative character of securitization as I have described it. If the process works by reactivating assumptions already manifest in the audience, then it appears bound to reproduce inherited discourses rather than generate anything new, which raises the question of whether securitization can ever bring about structural change, or be progressive or even emancipatory. I would address this by distinguishing two senses in which securitization might be called conservative. In a cognitive sense, it necessarily is, and this follows directly from relevance theory itself. According to the relevance theory, nothing is relevant in isolation. An input becomes relevant only against assumptions the audience already holds, so that even a genuinely new phenomenon is never processed as pure novelty. Recent anxieties about artificial intelligence, for instance, do not arise from nothing but draw on assumptions already manifest from earlier experiences of technological change and its mishandling. In this sense no securitizing move, however novel its object, begins from a blank slate, and what my framework offers is precisely a way of tracking which prior assumptions a new claim attaches itself to. Cognitive conservatism of this kind, however, does not entail political conservatism.

The fact that the securitization analyzed here worked to preserve an existing order, reactivating an inherited antagonism in the service of entrenchment, is a feature of this particular case rather than a necessary property of securitization as such. As I noted earlier, securitization does not have to run in this direction. In its bottom-up form, where citizens securitize an issue to convince one another and to compel those in power, sustained mobilization can displace existing elites and reshape political authority rather than entrench it. In essence, this is what the student-led movement in Serbia has been about: a bottom-up securitization that recasts the regime itself as the threat and seeks, through sustained mobilization, to displace it rather than to preserve the order it built. Other emancipatory securitizations work the same way. None escapes the requirement of prior assumptions. Each instead draws on a different set and turns them toward structural change rather than the preservation of an existing order. The securitization of climate change draws, for instance, on lived experiences of extreme weather, distrust of institutional inaction, and a sense of responsibility toward future generations. The securitization of mass atrocities against vulnerable populations draws on shared moral assumptions about genocide, the memory of past atrocities, and a sense of collective responsibility to protect and not repeat. The cognitive mechanism is identical – what differs is the political direction in which it is turned. On this reading, my framework is not confined to explaining how dominant actors entrench

themselves. It also provides a way of asking what an emancipatory securitization would require in order to succeed, namely the manifest assumptions onto which a progressive threat construction could be made relevant. I leave this as an open avenue, but one the framework is well placed to pursue.

For all that potential, what I most wanted to show through this thesis is that the success of a securitizing discourse is never just about what is said. It is about what the audience already carries with it at the collective level, what has been made manifest through years of political and historical conditions, discursive repetition, and media exposure, and how current claims attach themselves to that pre-existing framework. In Serbia, the students now challenging the regime embody this tension. They are mounting the kind of bottom-up move that could, in principle, reshape the order, yet they remain bound by the cognitive environment that produced them, navigating its limits while searching for new paths within it. If this thesis has demonstrated anything, it is that understanding how such environments are built and how they persist matters, not just for the study of securitization, but for anyone trying to find those new paths.

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