

# Symbolic boundaries and the negative classifications of the ‘Successful Other’ at the intersection of ethnicity, religion, gender, and refugeeeness

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## ABSTRACT

Our paper focuses on how members of the national ingroup respond when confronted with ‘successful others’ who challenge prevailing perceptions of immigrants and national belonging. We empirically investigate this through a case study on Alma Zadić, Austria’s Minister of Justice since January 2020. Her non-Austrian origin initiated a heated public debate on the legitimacy of an immigrant or refugee holding one of the country’s most important political positions. We analyse public discourse using interpretive analysis of online newspaper forum comments, employing the symbolic boundaries approach combined with the concept of negative classifications. The results reveal the cultural repertoires that members of the arrival society make use of when they negatively categorise an alleged newcomer of taking up a position that is considered exclusively reserved for the established. We contribute to the cultural sociology of social inequality and advocate for greater consideration of the intersectional entanglement of symbolic boundaries.

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## Introduction

It could be assumed that upwardly mobile immigrants are highly appreciated, as they depict the (best case) model of what is typically considered as successful integration. However, existing literature indicates that this is not necessarily the case (Hüttermann, 2000; Neckel & Sutterlüty, 2008; Pratsinakis, 2018; Sutterlüty & Neckel, 2006). Hüttermann (2000) shows how ‘advancing strangers’ often become the target of

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stigmatisation and discrimination, while Neckel and Sutterlüty (2008, 2010) examine the negative classifications faced by economically successful immigrant entrepreneurs. Drawing on research about everyday nationalism Pratsinakis (2018) emphasises that it

is only when established nationals perceive a challenge to their own position as 'occupiers of the center of national space' (Hage, 2000, p. 19) and to their ability to define the contours of culturally acceptable behavior that the 'other' becomes a source of anxiety. (Pratsinakis, 2018, p. 10)

This literature shows that nationality (by birth) is considered as capital, whose value members of the national in-group perceive as being endangered by successful immigrants. Our paper focuses on the question of how members of the national ingroup – the established – respond when confronted with social facts that neither align with their perception of immigrants nor their idea of fundamental superiority established through national belonging, that is, on their (not necessarily conscious) defence strategies. How do they negotiate the situation when alleged outsiders start taking up positions that have long been considered as reserved for the established? How is the boundary between the ingroup and the outgroup maintained under these conditions? Finally, which cultural repertoires are drawn upon to accentuate, strengthen, or even re-establish this boundary that has become porous?

Empirically, we provide a comprehensive case study that was based on Alma Zadić's appointment as the Austrian Minister of Justice in January 2020.<sup>1</sup> Zadić is referred to as the first Austrian minister with a 'migration background'. Her non-Austrian origin initiated a heated public debate on the legitimacy of an immigrant holding one of the most important political positions in the country. In order to illuminate this public discourse, we draw on comments from Austrian newspapers' online forums and apply discourse analysis, as suggested by Keller (2011). Our theoretical framework primarily incorporates the sociology of symbolic boundaries, as set out by Lamont (1992; Lamont & Molnár, 2002) and applied and further developed in the fields of ethnicity and migration by Wimmer (2008, 2013) and Jaworsky et al. (2023). These approaches serve as a promising heuristic tool for analysing the conceptional distinctions between 'us' and 'them' and how these distinctions shape scripts of action as well as the symbolic order. To gain a more systematic view of the processes of everyday stigmatisation through which symbolic boundaries are maintained, we additionally employ the theory of negative classifications, as developed by Neckel and Sutterlüty (2008, 2010).

Their approach focuses on the pejorative and negatively connoted ascriptions that social actors mobilise to declassify and stigmatise less-powerful social groups. This perspective sharpens our view on the interplay of classifications and social exclusion and how symbolic-level concepts of everyday interaction become relevant for the social order on a macro level. Furthermore, it provides an effective analytical tool for a more detailed reflection about the interdependencies and intersections of different dimensions of social inequality.

By focusing on negative classifications in our empirical analysis we successfully reveal that the discourses of delegitimation concerning Zadić's ministerial role do not solely focus on her categorisation as an immigrant and refugee; the symbolic boundary between the established and the outsider is further strengthened through her categorisation as an alleged Muslim from the Balkans and as a woman and mother.

Our analysis goes beyond the case of Alma Zadić, as it contributes to a better understanding of *how* boundaries are drawn against certain immigrants in Austria. The findings provide two key contributions to recent debates. First, focusing on the negative classifications of the successful other starkly shows that the following is true for people defined as 'outsiders': Even when perfectly integrated (according to common understandings of integration), certain 'others' are never considered full-fledged members of society (Elias & Scotson, 1994, pp. xlvi–xlvii; Merton, 1948, p. 200). This supports conclusions about how social efforts function to maintain and re-establish a symbolic order that seeks to exclude people on the basis of their origin and the characteristics attributed to them. Doing so helps uphold identity-affirming hierarchies and protect the value of capital acquired through birth. Second, concentrating on a single person allows the case study to look deeper into how negative classifications intersect along different dimensions (ethnicity, religion, gender, refugeeeness) to maintain and strengthen the symbolic boundary between the established and outsiders, thus also contributing to recent debates on intersectionality in migration research.

The paper is structured as follows: The first section outlines our case study by emphasising the specific constellation of immigrants from ex-Yugoslavia and explaining why this group is particularly suitable for uncovering negative classifications that the established draw on to pejoratively categorise successful immigrants. We then discuss different theoretical approaches to symbolic boundaries and explore their potential for our endeavour. After describing our data and methodology, we share our findings and show that the symbolic boundary between the established

and the outsiders is strengthened by multilevel, negative classifications that are sedimented in the cultural repertoire.

### **Former Yugoslavian immigrants in Austria and the case of Alma Zadić**

Immigration from former Yugoslavia to Austria is particularly appropriate for empirically clarifying our research questions. When combined, immigrants from this region comprise Austria's largest immigrant group, amounting to over 400,000 current residents (Statistik Austria, 2022). Furthermore, the Austrian majority society maintains an extensive repertoire of stereotypes and clichés about immigrants and their descendants from former Yugoslavia. Despite the frequent generalisation of an 'ex-Yugoslavian community' (Franz, 2011, p. 148), this population is characterised by a great heterogeneity that not only concerns ethnic affiliation, but also social and biographical backgrounds.

The immigration occurred across three primary phases: First, Austria's *Agreement on Labour Recruitment* with former Yugoslavia took place between 1966 and the early 1970s. By 1991, nearly 200,000 Yugoslavian citizens lived in Austria (Fassmann & Reeger, 2008); most had a working-class background, came from rural areas (Franz, 2011, p. 153), typically worked in lower-paid sectors, and faced discrimination in the labour and housing markets. In 1991, the dissolution of the Federal Socialist Republic of Yugoslavia initiated the second phase of immigration to Austria. The country received 13,000 people from Croatia and around 90,000 people from Bosnia–Herzegovina (Valenta & Ramet, 2011, p. 4) between 1991 and 1995, who were accepted as 'de facto refugees'. While a large majority of Croatian refugees returned after the war ended in 1995, most refugees from Bosnia–Herzegovina chose to stay in Austria and received permanent residence status in 1998 (Hageboutros, 2016; Halilovich et al., 2018). This roughly signifies the onset of the third phase of immigration to Austria, which has persisted until the present day. Particularly, the former refugees were differentiated from the guest workers and their descendants, since they had different educational backgrounds and also came from urban areas. Although they increased the heterogeneity of Austria's ex-Yugoslavian population with regard to their backgrounds, most of the refugees faced social decline (Halilovich et al., 2018, p. 97) and the status differences between ex-Yugoslavian immigrants and the Austrian majority society persist. However, people with origins in former Yugoslavia are beginning

to appear in positions, like for instance in the parliament, as journalists, or in higher education, that do not fit to the still widespread assumption that all ex-Yugoslavians are working class or, at most, work in the service sector. That this situation can also be a problematic experience for established residents, was distinctly observable throughout Alma Zadić's appointment as an Austrian Minister – the first one with a so called 'migration background'.

On 7 January 2020, Zadić was sworn in as the new Austrian Minister of Justice. She studied law at the University of Vienna, completed a master of law at Columbia University, and, in 2017, received her PhD from the University of Vienna.

Although she was one of the most qualified among the ranks of new Austrian ministers, her appointment provoked the greatest public attention. She received thousands of hate messages and derogatory comments across social media channels, alongside several death threats, which eventually necessitated personal protection. Outside these arenas of explicit social vilification, a noteworthy pattern emerged in the commentary on Zadić's swearing-in: Pan-European daily and weekly newspapers rarely focused their coverage on her experience and skills as an attorney and politician. Instead, they directed their attention towards a biographical fact: Zadić was a refugee from Bosnia–Herzegovina who came to Vienna in 1994.

We aim to analyse this overemphasising of Zadić's origin by drawing on cultural sociological research on inequality, which not only focuses on the objective distribution of economic, social, and cultural capital, but also on the subjective and reciprocal assessments and evaluations of individuals and social groups (Jarness, 2018; Lamont et al., 2014; Neckel & Sutterlüty, 2010; Nielsen, 2021; Sachweh & Lenz, 2018). Following this line of research, labelling Zadić as an 'ethnic other' serves as a symbolic boundary that is actualised and overly accentuated, particularly when the established symbolic order is perceived as fragile or threatened.

### **Symbolic boundaries and negative classifications**

The notion of 'symbolic boundaries' has gained popularity over the last two decades, having been mostly inspired by Michèle Lamont's symbolic boundary approach (1992; Lamont & Molnár, 2002) which she developed by critically reading Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction* (1984). Bourdieu's theory emphasises the cultural dimension of social structures by showing how social classes are not only characterised by their material

resources, but more symbolically by their likes and dislikes – and how their aesthetic judgements are used to categorise members of other classes.

Lamont (1992) expands on this by empirically showing that cultural capital plays a significant role in class-specific distinctions in France and the USA. Additionally, she emphasises that differences between classes can also be reinforced by moral factors, such as honesty and integrity, and socio-economic criteria, including wealth, power, and occupational success. She labels these types of distinctions as ‘symbolic boundaries’, a term that has become one of the most influential concepts in contemporary cultural sociology concerning social inequality. Symbolic boundaries are defined as ‘conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, and even time and space’ (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). These categorisations are expressed through attitudes and practices, patterns of likes and dislikes, and more generally through processes of (e)valuation. Symbolic boundaries are fundamental for creating lines of inclusion and exclusion and serve as a medium ‘through which people acquire status and monopolize resources’ (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). The theoretical exploration of symbolic boundaries shares certain parallels with research in social psychology examining processes of stigmatisation and intergroup relations (Tajfel, 2010; Tajfel & Forgas, 1981). However, Lamont does not restrict her analysis of boundaries to the symbolic sphere, but asks what relevance symbolic boundaries play in reproducing and/or transforming social structures on a macro level. These social boundaries ‘are objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities’ (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). Lamont and Molnár explain that symbolic boundaries are sociologically relevant, particularly because their analysis can significantly contribute to the description and explanation of social boundaries and their associated exclusion processes (Lamont & Molnár, 2002, p. 168). This has also been pointed out in the study by Edgell et al. (2020) who show that creating symbolic boundaries is usually linked to the readiness to establish social boundaries that uphold material and political disparities.

While Lamont primarily focuses on boundaries along social class, Andreas Wimmer developed his theoretical model to explain ethnic boundaries (Mijić & Parzer, 2017). Drawing on a great number of empirical studies concerning the relevance and manifestations of ethnicity in different social contexts, Wimmer has developed a comprehensive,

multilevel process theory to understand the '(un)making' of ethnic boundaries (2008) by accounting for interactions between economic, political, and cultural processes. He invokes Bourdieu to conceptualise 'ethnicity as the outcome of a political and symbolic struggle over the categorical division of society' (Wimmer, 2008, p. 985). Wimmer's objective is to comprehend the central features of these struggles, that is to uncover how they are influenced by the structure of the social field within which they take place and how they affect those structures by changing or reproducing the ethnic division (Wimmer, 2013, pp. 4–5). By emphasising that the social analysis of ethnicity should focus on the processes of ethnic boundary-making and by understanding these processes as embedded in a specific social structural environment, Wimmer makes a significant contribution to sustainably avoiding essentialist approaches to ethnicity. Furthermore, he conceptualises integration differently than typical theories of assimilation, wherein integration 'happens' as soon as cultural differences decline. By contrast, Wimmer perceives integration processually: as the shifting of ethnic boundaries and the transformation of their main features (Wimmer, 2013, p. 29; Parzer & Astleithner, 2018; Parzer & Mijić, 2024). Also in quantitative research on immigrant and national identities, the concept of symbolic boundaries has recurrently found application (Bail, 2008; Neumann & Moy, 2018). Neumann and Moy's study delves into the intricacies of attitudes toward immigrants and immigration policy, against the backdrop of Europe's 'migrant crisis'. Analysing data from the 2014–2015 European Social Survey unveils that Europeans' symbolic boundaries regarding immigrants are shaped by sociodemographics, consumption of political news, and social trust, with intergroup contact playing a complex role in influencing support for specific groups and broader immigration policies (Neumann & Moy, 2018).

One of the most seminal applications of the boundary approach in the context of migration in European societies is provided by Jaworsky and her colleagues (2023; Jaworsky & Krotký, 2021; Rétiová et al., 2021). They accomplish this by integrating the concept of 'boundary' and 'boundary work' with research on attitudes towards immigrants. Employing a cultural sociological approach and utilising the case of Czechia as an illustrative example, the authors demonstrate how various actors engage in boundary work across different levels (micro, meso, and macro) and negotiate symbolic boundaries intersubjectively by drawing on diverse cultural repertoires, yielding various outcomes:

[...] studying symbolic boundaries in relation to migrants on all levels from a cultural sociological perspective, allows us to gain a better understanding of not only the processes through which existing boundaries are discursively reproduced and maintained over time, but also, and perhaps even more importantly, of the processes through which they are contested and eventually shifted. (Rétiová et al., 2021, p. 11)

To sharpen our focus on the symbolic struggles over the categorical division of society, which is essential for analysing our case, we complement the boundary approach with the theory of negative classifications, as developed by Neckel and Sutterlüty. According to their theory, processes of categorisation play a crucial role in (re-)producing the symbolic order of social inequality in a society. Within everyday social interactions, individuals and groups are assigned to different categories and thereby placed in the (apparently) appropriate position on the social ranking scale (Neckel & Sutterlüty, 2010, p. 223). By applying pejorative or stigmatising attributions, 'the established' consolidate their group's charisma by simultaneously shaming the 'outsiders' (Elias & Scotson, 1994). Ongoing classification struggles aim to assert one's perspective of reality, that determines how 'others' should be categorised as inferior and symbolically excluded (Neckel & Sutterlüty, 2010, p. 221). These conflicts commonly use more or less institutionalised classification patterns or media and political interpretations (Neckel & Sutterlüty, 2010, pp. 220–221).

The authors distinguish ideal-typically between 'gradual classifications' and 'categorical classifications'. While gradual classifications are constructed based on quantitative differences, categorical classifications are qualitative judgments. Neckel and Sutterlüty refer to the logic of difference inherent to gradual classification as conjunctive (Neckel & Sutterlüty, 2010, p. 223). Categorical classifications are, on the other hand, qualitative judgments of 'otherness' made about persons and groups, which are classified according to whether they are similar or different. That is, while gradual negative classifications perceive 'weaker' persons and groups as subordinate, but not as inferior, and grant them the ability to change, categorical negative classifications are characterised by pejorative attributions towards people and groups that are viewed as outsiders, who are even denied a change of equal opportunity (Neckel & Sutterlüty, 2010, p. 224). Although gradual classifications might increase the potential for conflict, they are not automatically disintegrative. Categorical negative classifications, however, harbour a high potential for exclusion. They are not accessible to the mechanisms of



‘conflict-mediated integration’ that is central to the cohesion of modern society, since they do not remotely address social conflicts, but only exclusion (Neckel & Sutterlüty, 2010, p. 225). Studies on solidarity, for instance, reveal that the willingness to engage in solidarity significantly varies depending on who benefits from it, shedding light on who is symbolically defined as in-group or out-group (Hofmann et al., 2019).

The theory of negative classification provides two key strengths for our case study. First, focusing on negative classifications enables taking culture’s impact on social inequality more rigorously into account. This is in line with Bourdieu, who showed the social significance of dislikes (and not only likes) in processes of social distinction (Bourdieu, 1984). Similarly, negative classifications can be seen as the core element of symbolic and social boundaries, which are highly relevant for social exclusion. In their analysis, Neckel and Sutterlüty show how mutual classifications between social groups that are produced in everyday interactions represent a central element of the symbolic order of inequality, but also have a decisive influence on opportunities for action and processes of social exclusion: negative categorical classifications produce and enforce a legitimate worldview, according to which outgroup members appear inferior, and through which they are devalued and symbolically excluded from the circle of recognised members of society (Neckel & Sutterlüty, 2008, p. 18). Second, by differentiating between gradual and categorical classifications, the theory of negative classifications provides a toolkit for analysing interdependencies and intersections of various symbolic boundaries.

## Data and methods

In order to capture the cultural repertoires that actors draw on when reinforcing symbolic boundaries to defend the established social order, we analysed postings on internet discussion forums of some of the most influential Austrian newspapers. Discussion forums are a rich and vibrant source of data (Giles, 2017) and provide promising access to the classifications and categorisations that circulate in a certain society at a specific time (Schuster & Weichselbaumer, 2021). While postings are frequently criticised for being biased because of their emotional and often-exaggerated style of expression – particularly when it comes to heated debates – we argue that emotionality and exaggeration do not change the meaning itself, but only the way of expressing it. There is a vibrant debate regarding the confrontational tone in online discussions.

Rossini (2022) suggests a differentiation between incivility, which may unveil meaningful discursive engagement and prove beneficial for democracy, while intolerance has the potential to harm democracy by fostering social exclusion. Nevertheless, it is crucial to take into account whether the analysed forum is moderated or not. In the case of newspapers, moderation is usually implemented across all forums. This implies that even more offensive postings may have been removed.

We collected a corpus of material, comprising ten threads from online forums of the Austrian newspapers *Der Standard* ([www.derstandard.at](http://www.derstandard.at)), *Kleine Zeitung* ([www.kleinezeitung.at](http://www.kleinezeitung.at)), and *Neue Kronen-Zeitung*, ([www.krone.at](http://www.krone.at)) between January 2020 and August 2020. We selected *Neue Kronen-Zeitung* because, with over 1.7 million readers, it has the widest daily newspaper reach and is overwhelmingly the most popular tabloid in Austria. *Der Standard* is among the quality newspapers with the broadest reach (542,000 readers); ideologically, this newspaper tends to be situated on the left-liberal spectrum. The *Kleine Zeitung*, with 708,000 readers, is one of the largest regional newspapers and is published in Styria, Carinthia, and East Tyrol (Statistik Austria, 2023).

By employing a purposive sampling strategy,<sup>2</sup> we conducted an extensive search for articles published in 2020 that focused on Alma Zadić's appointment and/or her role as minister. We specifically targeted articles generating discussions with more than 100 postings, considering this as an indicator of the demand for discussion (the range lying between 100 and 3,000 postings per thread). Two waves of heated debates could be identified – the first following her official appointment as minister and the second when she announced her pregnancy in August 2020.

Concerning the identified threads, we organised our data using the-matic coding principles, as recommended by Ritchie et al. (2005). In the initial step, we carefully reviewed all threads, selecting postings thematically related to Alma Zadić while excluding off-topic contributions. In the subsequent step, we isolated postings that assessed Zadić's abilities, competencies, experience, and qualities for the position of Austrian Justice Minister. For the purposes of this paper, our focus narrowed to the 178 postings that questioned Zadić's suitability for a ministerial office.

While one author handled the initial selection of articles, threads, and postings, the subsequent data analysis process, including code development and the incorporation of text passages into existing codes, was a

collaborative effort between both authors. Through collaborative interpretation and analysis of the material, our team adheres to a foundational quality assurance measure for interpretive procedures. The team's interpretations were focused on cultivating a variety of perspectives and exploring the intricacies of different readings to develop a more nuanced and complex understanding of the subject matter. Regarding research ethics, we have incorporated the considerations suggested by Hennell et al. (2020), who highlighted several ethical dilemmas of using social media in qualitative social research. Although the distinction is not always clear, online newspaper forums are usually considered publicly accessible (compared to social media accounts that allow users to restrict access, for instance, Facebook or Instagram). Nevertheless, we consider it essential to protect the authors of the analysed comments from suffering any reputational damage or embarrassment from our research. Therefore, we refrained from disclosing the usernames (despite them being almost exclusively pseudonyms); furthermore, our translations of the postings from German to English impedes searching for the users or their posts via search engines.

Our data analysis is based on the interpretive paradigm of social research, which aims to reveal actors' interpretations of the social world. Methodologically, we follow Reiner Keller (2011), who proposes combining Foucault's idea of discourses (1971) with Berger and Luckmann's sociology of knowledge (1966). Keller's emphasis on classifications as a main element of discourses is particularly relevant for our research – and fits perfectly to Ann Swidler's notion of 'cultural repertoires' (1986) that has become a central theoretical tool in Lamont's work on symbolic boundaries.

First, we inductively carved out what kind of negative classifications are used to question Zadić's suitability, fit, and competence for an Austrian ministerial office. In other words, which ascribed affiliations (or non-affiliations) were invoked in arguments opposing Zadić holding a ministerial office. The analysis shows, that for her negative classification the categorisations of (forced) migration background, ethnicity, religion, and gender are intersectionally applied, while questions of class and education – that is, gradual classifications – usually are not mentioned at all. Second, we took a closer look at how negative classifications extend beyond this specific case: By referring to the theory of symbolic boundaries we argue that the negative classifications ascribed to Alma Zadić were not new creations, but merely updates of an extensive cultural repertoire.

## Findings

### *The immigrant as non-Austrian (or not 'Austrian' enough)*

Most of the analysed postings denied Alma Zadić the right to be an Austrian parliamentarian or to head a ministry because she is considered as 'not Austrian' (categorical) and/or 'not Austrian enough' (gradual). Here, doubting the authenticity of her self-portrayal as an Austrian creates a clear demarcation between 'Austrian' and 'non-Austrian' – between the established and the outsider. In this regard, being Austrian is perceived as the only clear prerequisite for legitimately holding an Austrian ministerial office:

I don't care about one's origin. But the Austrian politics should be reserved for Austrians! It's too sensitive to give it in strangers' hands. Ms. Zadić surely is qualified for many areas and she would have had the chance to be successful in other positions. On the other hand, we have many Austrians, who have similar qualifications. It would not have been necessary to give this job to a stranger! (8:14)<sup>3</sup>

This is just one of many similar comments that question Zadić's suitability for minister by referring to her not being Austrian (enough). However, none of these comments consider it necessary to define what 'Austrianness' or 'being Austrian' actually means. The fact that Zadić was not born in Austria is considered a sufficient condition for categorising her as a 'stranger', regardless of her citizenship, the time she has already been living in Austria, or her self-identification as being (also) Austrian. What is most irritating to many is her claim that she is Bosnian *and* Austrian. This contradicts a widespread 'either – or' logic that has no place for multiple belongings or any ambiguities:

If she is for Austria, she should take off her Bosnian roots. Has nothing to do with our land. If she prefers to be Bosnian, she should go there. Easy and simple. (9:2)

The analysis reveals three ways that posters seek to legitimise the stance that only native-born Austrians, who perceive themselves as nothing else but Austrian, are allowed to hold ministerial office: through (a) competencies, (b) ability or willingness to represent Austria, and (c) commitment.

- (a) *Competencies*: The analysed comments regularly question whether the immigrant, Zadić, possesses the necessary competencies and knowledge to become a minister:

Justice minister in Austria???? That's a provocation for Austrian lawyers, what can she know about laws in Austria? (9:7)

However, besides disputing the/her professional competencies, they also challenge her language skills:

A language course wouldn't be bad. Stammering to no end. And this woman is in Austria since the age of ten. (2:8)

(b) *Representation*: One of the most urgent questions seems to be whether an immigrant can properly represent Austrians:

As minister, she has to serve the Austrian people, not the Bosnian ones. She has to stand in for Austrian interests, not (only) for those of migrants. (1:2)

This comment expresses a clear symbolic boundary between 'the Austrians' and 'the migrants' and – by bracketing 'only' – at least indicates that Austrians should be treated with priority. By pointing this out, the comment's author seems to have fundamental doubts that a migrant minister is able and willing to do so. This is mirrored in further postings which express the concern that 'real' Austrians may actually be disadvantaged:

Against us Austrians, she will show the full hardness, while all others will be treated with kid gloves again [...]. (8:19)

(c) *Commitment*: The third dimension revolves around doubting an immigrant's commitment to Austria, which is expected to be expressed through their 'assimilation efforts'. While Zadić fulfils all the common criteria for what is considered 'well integrated' – she speaks perfect German, is highly educated, and professionally successful –, comments widely question if she is serious about her cultural integration and assimilation. In other words, the dispute whether her 'being Austrian' and her commitment to Austria, is genuine and authentic – or, as many comments assume, only a deception:

How intensively she has really lived as an Austrian is still unclear. (8:3)

By doubting her competencies, her ability or willingness to represent Austria, and her commitment to the Austrians, the established try to legitimise their position that non-native Austrians should not be appointed to ministerial posts. The legitimacy of one's own perspective, which draws a distinct symbolic boundary between the 'real' Austrians

and the immigrants – the non-Austrians – is further reinforced by these posters making themselves the actual victims of the outsiders. For example, several comments emphasise that Zadić was only selected for minister *because* she is an immigrant:

A person, not a migrant, who learned and did the same, could never have had such a top career, because she would have remained invisible in the mass. It's due to her migration background that Ms. Zadić has succeeded, but it was not her merit. (8:9)

The classifications expressed in these comments not only delegitimise Alma Zadić as minister, but also devalue her education and her previous professional success by revising otherwise powerful meritocratic principles: It is not about 'if you are good enough you will succeed, even if you belong to a disadvantaged group' but 'if you belong to an allegedly disadvantaged group, you will succeed, even if you are not good enough'.

In addition, comments repeatedly highlight that being an immigrant immunises them against any criticism:

She is young, a wife and with a migration background, there's nothing that she could make wrong, every critique would be denounced as discrimination. (1:53)

As true Austrians, the commenters see themselves as being disadvantaged compared to the immigrants and, therefore, as victims. Furthermore, some express their fears of eventually becoming 'strangers in their own land' – a narrative known from Arlie Hochschild's analyses of the American far right (Hochschild, 2016).

We should not make the mistake of letting ourselves be governed by economic refugees; at some point, we won't be able to decide anything in our land anymore. Then we will be the strangers in our own country. (1:4)

This scenario is often described as the outcome of an ongoing process, which has yet to be taken seriously, such as the almost prophetic-sounding comment below:

[...] You will all see that soon Zadić will be at the forefront of the campaign for voting rights for non-Austrians. Ten years ago you were still laughing at me when I wrote that they want to take away your national pride. Slowly, all this is becoming reality .... (8:22)

Ultimately, the data analysis clearly reveals that it does not matter how well immigrants are actually integrated into the arrival society or to what extent they meet the criteria used to judge 'good integration'. In

itself, a non-Austrian origin seems to be sufficient for rationalising a person's incomprehensible inclusion and for the multiple ways that they are negatively classified. However, a closer look suggests that being a 'migrant from the Balkans', Europe's periphery, which is mostly considered as 'semi-developed', 'semi-civilized', 'semi-oriental' by 'the West' (Todorova, 2009) evidently plays a significant role in Zadić's 'assessment'.

### ***Balkan-other as an 'Incomplete Self'***

Zadić's ex-Yugoslavian origin becomes the object of a variety of stereotypical attributions, which are used to further call her suitability for a ministerial office into question. The 'Austrian view' of fellow citizens from former Yugoslavia is characterised by ambivalences that have been previously described by Maria Todorova (2009) in *Imagining the Balkans*. Following Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Todorova developed *Balkanism* and argues that the Balkans and its people are perceived by (West-)European Societies as 'incomplete selves'. As incomplete selves, they represent a sphere between the own and the foreign; with exclusionary attitudes oscillating between positive attributions of a 'consumable Balkan' (in terms of, for example, music and cuisine) and negative stereotypes of danger and criminality (Krasny, 2015, p. 128; Mijić, 2020).

Several postings portray Bosnia–Herzegovina as a backward country with a high propensity for crime and women's rights violations:

Bosnia is not considered as positive example regarding women's rights, equality, secularism and corruption. (1:13)

Furthermore, Alma Zadić is doubted as being truly emancipated from her origin: even before her inauguration, a rumour was spread that she had previously been convicted of a criminal offence and was therefore ineligible to hold a ministerial position – and certainly not that of a justice minister. Casting doubt on Zadić's legitimacy as a minister, for example, 'How can someone who has been prosecuted become minister of justice?' (1:8) was one of many questions that appeared in the analysed online newspapers forums. However, the fact that the proceedings were by no means criminal, but merely media law, was largely lost in this wave of indignation. Because she was born in former Yugoslavia, she is classified as a person from the 'Balkan region' and, hence, uncivilised. Thus, in response to Zadić's indignation about the hostility she received, one user argued:

Can she finally start working now and stop making herself a topic. Well, we've noticed that you've been insulted on the Internet. Can you stop talking about yourself now and making yourself the centre of attention? I don't know how it works in Bosnia, but here we expect you to work and not just to cry. (2:7)

The casual way that these negative classifications are attributed to Zadić clearly reveals just how deeply these clichés about the Balkans and its people are anchored in the Austrian society's cultural repertoire. However, not all ex-Yugoslavians are regarded in the same way. Because of their Christian backgrounds, Serbs and Croats are more easily considered as belonging to the 'European family', whereas those with Muslim backgrounds are affected by the country's general Islamophobic atmosphere (Rosenberger & Mattes, 2015).

### ***Christianity vs. Islam – exclusion due to attributed religious affiliation***

Religion can be viewed as a significant factor influencing both exclusionary and inclusive processes of boundary drawing (Brubaker, 2012; Dahinden & Zittoun, 2013). As Dahinden and Zittoun (2013, p. 11) pointed out 'religious boundaries' can be constructed by referring to 'religious elements' like the veil or the beard, but also by factors like gender relations or ethnicity. By equating Bosnian origins with the Muslim religion, and by the stark juxtaposition of Christianity versus Islam, Zadić is regarded as particularly inappropriate for her ministerial position. On the one hand, this is because of a cultural difference that is perceived as insurmountable; on the other hand, it is because Islam is often associated with Islamism or Islamist terror. Although Zadić has no religious affiliation, ethnic and religious attributions are superimposed on her, and questioning the legitimacy of her political position is based upon a strict demarcation between Christianity and Islam:

[...] a justice minister [...] who is Muslim, cannot stand in for the interests of Austrians. (8:13)

The bright symbolic boundary between Christians and Muslims is further strengthened by negatively classifying Islam as a threat to the Western European Societies:

Ministers who are oriented to Christianity are no threat to our state, something that cannot be claimed for those who have a tendency towards Islam. Islam is not tolerant and the way it presents itself today, it is a danger for the occident. (8:4)



Within the context of these comments, they pretend that it is neither a problem for Zadić to have a migrant background nor come from the Balkans. Rather, the concern is that she might be religiously indoctrinated:

If Ms. Zadić has a migration background is completely irrelevant! It is decisive whether migrants are able to break away from their religious indoctrination of any religion which they have experienced in their childhood. Only then we can prevent our legal system from being thrown back into the Middle Ages and from being dominated by Imams, Mullahs, Rabbis, Patriarchs ... (1:45)

This commentator discernibly tries to gain legitimacy by not only negatively classifying Islam, but by including other religions – Judaism, and Orthodox Christianity.

The three categorisations – as immigrant, as person from the Balkans, as alleged Muslim – are closely intertwined. The negative classifications surrounding these categorisations contribute to a stabilisation of the symbolic boundary between the European self and the non- or semi-European other. As mentioned above, there is also regular criticism of how women are treated in Balkan or Muslim societies. Yet, our analysis reveals that in the case of Zadić, the fact that she is a woman is also used to delegitimise her position. In her analyses on the far-right discourses, Wodak, for instance, shows how the critique of the treatment of women in Islamic communities is possible, while simultaneously striving to uphold pronounced patriarchal structures in one's own society (Wodak, 2015). Similarly, Dahinden and Zittoun (2013) explore the prevalent and influential categorisation centred on the binary contrast between 'European women enjoying equality' and 'Muslim women facing oppression' – a compelling construct also evident in debates about Alma Zadić's eligibility for the position of a minister.

### ***Gender-specific negative classifications***

In one of the early analyses exploring the role of women within a nation, Anthias and Yuval-Davis delineate five ways through which women are expected to contribute to the national project. It becomes evident, that they predominantly should take on a passive role, as biological reproducers or transmitters of the national culture (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1989; Thomson, 2020). The fact that a woman claims a high Austrian political office that has long been exclusively reserved for men further rationalises negative classifications. In Zadić's case, her pregnancy announcement

heightened the relevance of this gender-related boundary. A common narrative in the online forum discussions was that mothers have no place in top political positions:

Women in politics! Well, then she did everything RIGHT, an overpaid job and then let someone make you a baby ... one can live quite nicely from this ... (10:2)

She was being accused of having strategically worked her way up to an ‘overpaid’ ministerial position, only to be impregnated and live at taxpayers’ expense. This allegation goes hand-in-hand with the belief that mothers are not suited to hold important positions:

I don’t like that. The job of justice minister is a full-time job, so the child either falls by the wayside emotionally or it immediately ends up being taken care of by someone else or the job suffers. Being a female justice minister is not a part-time job. (7:2)

Even before her pregnancy announcement, Zadić faced various allegations that women are unsuitable for ministerial positions, with women being too emotional as a prevalent reason:

That’s the problem with women in leadership positions. They never can hide their personal feelings, that’s why they never act rationally, but mostly out of emotion. [...] There are things that the female brain works better than the male, but when it comes to leadership qualities, the male is 90 percent at an advantage. (8:24)

In Alma Zadić’s case, gender, religion, and ethnicity or origin prove to be the central dimensions along which negative classifications are expressed. This is probably because categorical classifications are more suitable for perpetuating social exclusion than gradual classifications. Conversely, class, which is a central component of intersectionality research, remains largely unaddressed. However, focusing on Alma Zadić reveals an additional dimension that is rarely considered in intersectional analyses: her categorisation as a refugee.

### ***Refugeeness and the symbolic boundary***

The connection between symbolic boundaries and the usage of labels like ‘migrant’ or ‘refugee’, has most recently been critically discussed in existing research (Rapoš Božič et al., 2023) as well as the benefits and challenges associated with the refugee status (Ludwig, 2016). Two basic narratives can be identified concerning Alma Zadić’s refugee experience: first, the narrative of upward mobility, which plays out in newspaper

headlines like ‘From refugee child to justice minister’<sup>4</sup> or ‘Alma Zadić – the refugee girl who became Minister of Justice’.<sup>5</sup> However, this promotes the meritocratic idea that people who are willing enough to perform can ascend to any position from any position in Austria, and simultaneously overlooks how the refugee experience is often accompanied by enormous social downward mobility in Austria (due to limited access to the labour market or major barriers to the recognition of educational qualifications). Hence, this narrative stabilises symbolic boundaries through its positive classification of the (Austrian) ingroup.

The second narrative is again characterised by an unambiguous negative classification of the others, although it is primarily directed at refugees like Zadić, who do not return to their ‘home country’. While Zadić’s education and achievements are acknowledged, she is labelled as a ‘traitor’ who permanently settled in Austria instead of returning the knowledge she acquired there to her ‘home country’, where it is being desperately needed:

Why didn’t she return to her old homeland after the reason for her escape had ceased to exist? Any help, especially from particularly talented people, would have been urgently needed there! (8:2)

This attribution of irresponsibility is often further accompanied by the positive characterisation of the ingroup’s ancestors, who themselves had to experience war:

Our grandparents and parents also had a hard time during the war, but unfortunately, they did not have the opportunity to flee. Through hard work, they built Austria into what it is today. This should also be honoured once! (1:57)

## Discussion and conclusion

Existing research suggests that successful strangers pose a challenge to a society’s taken-for-granted knowledge, which also includes its knowledge about immigrants and their expected position within the social order (Hüttermann, 2000; Neckel & Sutterlüty, 2008; Pratsinakis, 2018). By appearing in unexpected positions, that is, by transcending taken-for-granted status boundaries between the established and the outsiders, successful strangers challenge identity-affirming hierarchies and thus become a problem for the majority society (Hüttermann, 2000, p. 275). Through prohibiting forms of discrimination, social boundaries become, not least, more permeable, which devalues the cultural capital acquired through nationality. Members of the established group might

perceive this loss of value as a significant threat – a danger that personifies itself in the successful stranger. Within the scope of our analysis, we have investigated how the established perceive this threat and deal with it and shed light on their efforts to stabilise the social order through negative classifications. These stabilisation measures take place on a merely symbolic level, but they do not appear out of the blue. Rather, they must be considered as parts of the cultural repertoires that are being elicited due to a perceived threat. By focusing on the negative classifications, we succeeded to show how people try to symbolically strengthen and/or re-establish the boundary between the established and the outsiders. Likewise, we demonstrated that stigmatising delegitimisation strategies directed towards the successful immigrant are based on much more than the differentiation between ‘immigrant’ and ‘non-immigrant’. When attempting to stigmatise a successful immigrant and delegitimise their achievement, members of the in-group utilise all available means, that is, they make use of all stereotypes and prejudices from the cultural repertoire that are applicable to this particular case. Ethnicity or the fact that someone originates elsewhere are not the only characteristics considered essential, but also their geographical origin, religion, gender, and the reason that they are here in the first place. From our analyses, it remains inconclusive which negative classifications are most pertinent in shaping the production of symbolic boundaries. There is, however, an indication that ethnicity, geographical origin, and religion intertwine like the layers of a Matryoshka doll, while gender- and refugee-status-related negative classifications contribute distinctive nuances to this interplay.

By emphasising the role played by categorisation and classification practices in processes that draw lines of social exclusion, our findings contribute to the cultural sociology of social inequality, as suggested by Lamont and her colleagues (2014). To them, ‘cultural processes’ are the missing link for explaining how individual micro-level actions affect macro-level social structures. These processes mobilise collectively produced categories and classification systems (Lamont et al., 2014, p. 582): a collectively accessible ‘toolkit’ of cultural repertoires that individuals intentionally or unintentionally draw on to (re)produce symbolic boundaries. Thus, the aim of sociological analysis is *not* to examine individuals’ opinions, beliefs, or attitudes, but rather the cultural repertoires they draw on and how these are related to social boundaries.

Our research significantly advances intersectional studies in cultural processes. It demonstrates that negative classifications related to ethnicity and migration, along with additional categorical differentiations, play a

crucial role in stabilising the boundary between established groups and outsiders. It has become evident that exploring the interconnected nature of these negative classifications is essential.

This satisfies Lamont's call to examine 'how different cultural processes intersect [...] in order to better theorize how inequality is produced and reproduced through the conjuncture of different fundamental processes' (Lamont et al., 2014, p. 582). In methodological terms, we see the benefits of focusing on one person – in our case, Alma Zadić – to systematically study classification practices along different dimensions, arguing that delegitimation works best when multiple structural factors are simultaneously accentuated. A comparative analysis of similar cases in other countries or contexts would, however, be helpful in delineating specific patterns for the Austrian context while also elucidating general patterns.

While Lamont et al. mainly focus on the question of how and under what circumstances symbolic boundaries become social boundaries, that is, how symbolic-level classifications and categorisations transform into lines of social exclusion, our research highlights this in reverse. Hence, using negative classifications can be seen as a reaction towards changing social structures, or according to Lamont's terminology, boundary work takes place at the symbolic level as a reaction to transforming social boundaries. Regarding our empirical case, social boundaries have arguably become more porous, because individuals from previously excluded social groups like Alma Zadić are now entering spheres, which for a long time have been regarded as reserved for established members only. Losing the familiar social order is perceived as a threat that (at least) parts of a society react to with negative classifications. In other words, the negative classifications that are stored in the cultural repertoire become salient – especially in times of social change – since they serve as an important tool to preserve (and save) the familiar social order, re-establish old certainties, and cement the social boundaries that have become porous and cracked.

However, we cannot conclusively provide an answer to how these intersecting negative classifications actually affect the macro-level structures of inequality; in other words, if the efforts to re-establish the old social order have been successful. Evidently, no immediate effect of negative classifications on structurally consolidated social boundaries can be assumed; for instance, Alma Zadić remains in office. Nevertheless, as representations of discriminatory evaluation patterns that are stored in the cultural repertoire, negative classifications can have a restrictive influence on the

agency of entire social groups that are classified as outsiders. However, since the outcomes of cultural processes are complex and typically open-ended, their effects on social boundaries, or their causal pathways to inequality, cannot be definitively identified (Lamont et al., 2014). It is the task of further empirical research to examine the impact of this kind of 'boundary work' on the density of social boundaries.

Subsequent analyses should also take into account positive classifications along with counter-speech, which is employed to contest some of the arguments raised against Alma Zadić's eligibility. Specifically, an examination of the interactions between users (with opposing attitudes) and their relational dynamics could illuminate the trajectory and dynamics of contentious debates.

There are, indeed, many postings in which users express their excitement about having an immigrant (woman and mother) as minister. At first glance, it might be assumed that such positive classifications would contribute (more or less) automatically to a weakening of ethnic boundaries. However, in light of theoretical considerations particularly as put forward by Wimmer, the following has to be taken into account: as long as categorical classifications (for example, of ethnicity, gender, or religion), are mobilised (when evaluating the suitability of people for particular positions), the symbolic boundaries between different categories will most likely not be affected at all. The benevolent 'cosmopolitans' who speak up for Zadić are themselves not immune from attributing a dominant role to origin as 'master status' in the assessment of a non-native's qualities. Zadić's origin is often accentuated in supporting contributions, which thus also establishes an ethnic boundary, that is, when her origin is emphasised as evidence of her quality and distinctiveness. In many other positive postings Zadić's success is attributed to her boundary crossing. Recalling Wimmer, it is to be assumed, that in these cases, too, the boundaries itself remain untouched: the portrayal of Alma Zadić's path 'from refugee child to minister' highlights that this development is an exception (almost impossible to think of) which, if not to chance, can only be attributed to the individual perseverance of Zadić herself. This, in turn, ultimately points to how deeply anchored and how persistent our notions of symbolic order are.

## Notes

1. We first approached this topic in a rudimentary and explorative way in the context of a Festschrift for Sighard Neckel (Mijić & Parzer, 2021).

2. We used a predefined set of keywords, including ‘Alma Zadić’, ‘Minister’, ‘Ministry of Justice’, ‘inauguration’, and ‘Austria’.
3. The abbreviations at the end of the quotations refer to text passages in our data corpus. The first digit denotes the thread number, while the second refers to the specific posting within that thread.
4. <https://apps.derstandard.de/privacywall/story/2000112828299/alma-zadic-vom-fluechtlingskind-zur-justizministerin>, accessed: July 1st, 2022.
5. <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/themen/reportage/neue-regierung-in-oesterreich-alma-zadic-das-fluechtlingsmaedchen-das-justizministerin-wurde/25393688.html>, accessed: July 1st, 2022.

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