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Book Review:

Crisis and ontological insecurity – Serbia's anxiety over Kosovo's secession

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Crisis and ontological insecurity – Serbia's anxiety over Kosovo's secession

Filip Ejdus (Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 237 p.

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Security is one of the most important facets of human existence, on a collective and individual level. Since the 1990s, the moulding of the security field resulted in the conceptualisation of a new security paradigm which incorporates the perspective of both states and individuals. The new approaches which emerged within this paradigmatic change recognised the significance of societal security for states and led to the development of the concept of ontological security—the security of the state's self-identity. It introduced the concept of ontological security posited by Anthony Giddens to the field of International Relations (IR), allowing us to explore connection between individuals, society and larger entities such as states'

striving for achieving order and continuity for their existence. In seeking ontological security, states often fail to prioritise their physical security and act in a seemingly irrational way to preserve their self-identity, which begs explanation and elaboration for why this is.

Filip Ejdus brings innovation to the Ontological Security Theory (OST) and its application to the IR field, both theoretically and empirically, in a thoroughly explored case study of Serbia and its perceived nemesis Kosovo. He draws on social-constructivist approach in IR to address a complex trade-off between the necessity to defend physical state security and the state's overwhelming need to maintain a sense of self-identity. *Crisis and ontological insecurity* traces how, as a result of this struggle, states can become gripped with anxiety, which ultimately leads to a collective emotional breakdown. Ejdus uses his analysis to explore and expand on the behavioural and emotional elements of the state's need to satisfy its ontological security. Drawing on the work of Giddens, narrative imaginations are tied to a sense of place and space grounded in material environment which transcends its common dimension to become central to the state's desired national homogeneity. By exploring the capacity of nation states to be ontological security seekers, the book makes two important contributions to the ontological security scholarship. First, it builds an argument about divergence between ontological security and ontological *in*security, which arises when the sense of collective identity is fractured (p. 43). The author argues that ontological *in*security is a result of critical situations, which he divides into four fundamental categories - namely situations endangering *the existence, the finitude, relations with other actors*, and *the autobiography of states.* The second contribution made to OTS concerns the aspect of material environment as a source of ontological security in world politics, which is elevated to become an important source for anchoring the state's collective identity narrative.

Ejdus starts by elaborating the basis for a discussion of the dispute between Serbia and Kosovo, building on these two new ontological security directions. As a condition for ontological security for states he identifies a master-narrative about a continuous self-identity through time and space. He then shows the conditions under which Kosovo became the ontic space of Serbia, referring closely to the actors and events that shaped the understanding of Kosovo as a central place of Serbian history in the 19th century. "Each nation has a love that warms its heart forever. For Serbia this love is Kosovo" (p.52) the author cites the Serbian politician *Milošević. His word famously established Kosovo as fundamental in the Serbian self-conception* and as an ontic space that Serbia does not intend to give up, even if this comes at the cost of increased factual insecurities.

Ejdus goes on to explain Serbia's relationship with Kosovo. He starts by laying out the historical background, going back to the initial conquest of Kosovo by Serbia in 1204, and the *battle of Kosovo* of 1389 which Serbia lost to the Ottoman Empire, and which is today seen as a central event in its history. Surprisingly, the author explains, this moment of Serbia's past was not given special relevance until the late 19th century. With the rise of nation states and a new wave of cultural nationalism, the battle of Kosovo became central to Serbia's nation building narrative and ideology. Since the Balkan wars in 1912, the region went through grave geographical changes and Ejdus, in a well-researched history, closely traces how the historical events and the political opinions vis-a-vis Kosovo have changed, interlinked and become indelibly intertwined in Serbia's popular discourses.

He points out three main actors pushing the ontological significance of Kosovo: the Serbian Orthodox church, the nationalist intellectuals, and the Serbian population living in Kosovo, all of whom were involved to a different extent throughout the process. The final steppingstone in embracing the Kosovo myth as the heart of the Serbian land is situated at the end of the 20th century, in the dusk of Yugoslavia, with the prospect of Kosovo's secession. The culmination of an increasingly uneasy relationship was a brutal repression against Kosovo Albanians by Serbian authorities that erupted into violent conflict in the late 1990s, ultimately leading to Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008. Kosovo was and remains until today a central issue in Serbian politics and for many of the population, while its secession represents a possible death of the state and the nation.

Concerning Serbia's current political standpoint, Ejdus comprehensively presents the apparent lack of rationality in the political activity of its government. Serbia's insistence regarding "keeping" Kosovo, according to the author, is not economically worthwhile; it prevents the Serbian refugees who fled from Kosovo during the conflict from returning, and it impedes Serbia's accession negotiations with the EU from making substantial progress. Today, Serbia follows a path of "both EU and Kosovo", which is a continuous struggle of its divided identity. On one side there is the European Serbia aiming for EU membership and seeing its place in the Western world, while on the other the more traditional and nationalistic side pursues the myth of Kosovo as Serbia's ontic space. To deal with this situation, Serbia has built a protective cocoon in the form of consequent avoidance of the contradiction inherent in this situation, which can be understood "as a rational pursuit of ontological securite" (p. 392) is the main argument in chapter six. Serbia submitted its official application for EU membership in December 2009, it also continues with its counter secessionist claims over Kosovo by blocking

membership of Kosovo in several international organisations and campaigning for derecognition.

In the concluding chapter, the author elaborates the critical situations and ontological insecurity, showing how collective actors become insecure when these fundamental aspects come into question and ruptured their routine. His argument holds that states, just like individuals, need a stable material environment and continuity of relationships with significant others to maintain their self-identity narrative. In the history of Serbia and Kosovo, he sees evidence that anchoring national identity scripts to material environments makes states appear more stable. However, to serve as such anchor the material environment must be discursively linked to the collective identity scripts as Kosovo was in the Serbian self-understanding. He concludes by stating that what matters more for the ontological security of states is how social agents interpret particular situations, and less how scientists evaluate them.

With his book, Filip Ejdus makes an important theoretical contribution to OST in the field of IR. At the same time, he provides a comprehensive analysis of the relationship between Serbia and Kosovo and the question of how today's tangled and emotionally charged situation has developed and where solutions maybe found, as well as Serbia's struggle with own self-identity. Therefore, the book is relevant not only for those interested in the concepts of ontological security and security more broadly, but for those who aim to gain a deeper understanding of the constantly brewing developments in world politics. If any critique of the book is to be raised, it is concerning the lack of engagement with other strands of literature that could strengthening the argument. For example, the sense of attachment to material environment is broadly analysed in social psychology, particularly place attachment and the sense of place that emerges from this connection and maintaining historical significance. In other words, where Ejdus points out that states "…[t]oo need stable material environments in order to keep their self-identity narratives going…" (p. 422), there is an opportunity to further engage with the scholarship establishing exactly this fact about collective behaviours intertwined with identity, for which the notion of space is central. This, however, does not in any way diminish the contribution to knowledge and OST of *Crisis and ontological insecurity*, but rather should serve as pointer to avenues for further exploration, not just for Ejdus, but other intellectual pursuits that aim to connect the IR field with other academic disciplines.