

The Crescent over the Hagia Sophia and the Serbian Cross

Ontological Security and the Foreign Policies
of Serbia and Turkey

Dmitry V. Yefremenko, Daniil O. Rastegaev

Dmitry V. Yefremenko, PhD in Political Science

Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences (INION RAS), Moscow, Russia
Center for Interdisciplinary Studies
Deputy Director

SPIN-RSCI: 4587-9262

ORCID: 0000-0001-6988-472X

Researcher ID: Q-1907-2016

Scopus AuthorID: 55372669100

E-mail: efdv2015@mail.ru

Tel.: +7 (499) 128-0643

Address: 51/21 Nakhimovsky Prospect, Moscow 117997, Russia

Daniil O. Rastegaev, MA in International Relations

Institute of Scientific Information on Social Sciences (INION RAS), Moscow, Russia
Department of Political Science
Junior Research Fellow

SPIN-RSCI: 5949-2739

ORCID: 0000-0002-1158-9987

Researcher ID: HII-7674-2022

E-mail: rastegaev.2000@mail.ru

Tel.: +7 (495) 225 62 83

Address: 51/21 Nakhimovsky Prospect, Moscow 117997, Russia

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Abstract

The article examines the foreign policy of two countries—Turkey and Serbia—through the lens of ontological security, according to which macropolitical communities perceive security threats through perception of their own history and of their place in the world. As Turkey reshapes its identity, it is facing challenges rooted in the specifics of the Republic’s formation: neo-Ottomanism and a desire to regain leadership in the Islamic world, which contradict the ideological and institutional heritage of the Republic’s founder, Mustafa Kemal Atatürk. Problems related to the Kurdish minority and recognition of the Armenian genocide add to the general dissonance. Serbia, whose statehood is based on the foundation laid by Slobodan Milošević, has to adapt the Kosovo myth of its foundation to the current geopolitical realities of the Southwestern Balkans. The “victimhood” and defensive narratives designed to reduce ontological insecurity barely manage to maintain the stability of this macropolitical community

Keywords: IR theory, ontological security, macropolitical community, identity, Self, Other, national biography, Turkey, Serbia, Kosovo, Atatürk, Erdoğan, Milošević.

How many dimensions are there in world politics? It is not a purely academic question, since the positioning of actors within this realm largely predetermines the effectiveness of their decisions, which, in turn, continuously transform the fabric of world politics. There seem to be at least five dimensions: the three-dimensional geographical Euclidean space, plus the temporal (historical) dimension and the dimension of the political imaginary, i.e. the representation of space-time in collective identity, cultural memory, political narratives, and social communications. The “fifth dimension” solidifies, at the level of a macropolitical community’s identity, ideas about the territory of a state and historical grounds for control over it. Joseph Ernest Renan argues that national identity is formed in the process of answering questions like ‘When did we begin to exist as a community with a common memory?’ and ‘What is the area of our historical existence?’. This generates a vision of a common future that

defines the fundamental unity of a community's attitudes, concerns, and goals (Subotic, 2016). This also permits integration of perceptions of a nation's resilience and continuity—its ontological security—into the analysis of international relations.

In this article, we consider the relationship between the ontological security and foreign policy of Turkey and Serbia, with which Russia has very close but very different ties. Like Russia, over the past century, both countries have gone through historical upheavals, the collapse of the previous model of statehood, and a “re-assembling” of the nation. It is simply impossible to understand their foreign policies without the “fifth dimension.” But first, we will consider the basic interpretations of ontological security in the study of world politics.

KEY APPROACHES IN BRIEF

More than 60 years have passed since the term ‘ontological security’ was first used by British psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Ronald David Laing. It has since occupied its own niche in IR theory, without competing against the main theoretical approaches. Many studies have summarized the various theories of ontological security's effects upon states' behavior (e.g.: Khudaykulova and Neklyudov, 2019; Sevastyanova and Yefremenko, 2020). But we will focus on those authors who are most relevant to the subject of this article.

The leading constructivist Alexander Wendt was the first to apply the concept of ontological security to IR. Defining ontological security as “predictability in relationships to the world, which creates a desire for stable social identities,” he included it among the four basic interests of a nation-state related to its corporate identity (along with physical security, external recognition, and development possibilities) (Wendt, 1994, pp. 385, 388). Wendt also identified a link between the formation of corporate identity and the territory of a state (Wendt, 1999).

Wendt's wife Jennifer Mitzen (2006) significantly contributed to substantiating ontological security's transfer into IR theory. Separating states' individual agency from their pursuit of physical security, and establishing the interconnection between a citizen's ontological security and that of his state, Mitzen offered explanations for a number of

otherwise anomalous state behaviors. In particular, she argues that the quest for ontological security may propel states into the security dilemma: sometimes conflicts create a sense of certainty that increases the ontological security of a state even while reducing its physical security.

This line of thought is further developed by Brent Steele, who focuses on states' satisfaction of self-identity, even at the expense of physical security. In his opinion, nation-states pursue ontological security in order to sustain consistent self-concepts. The state's Self is constituted and supported through narratives that generate routine foreign policy actions (Steele, 2008). The most debatable point here is whether the state can be considered a subject of ontological security. We assume that states may pursue ontological security, but the actual subject is the macropolitical community behind the state. This collective subject has an identity and stable (but not rigid) perception of its own past and future, hopes, emotions, and fears. However, it is not the macropolitical community that takes action domestically and abroad, but rather political elites and leaders in control of the state. It would be an oversimplification to see their mission solely as maximally satisfying the public's ontological-security-derived expectations and aspirations. A state's behavior is variable and can be directed at:

- a. its own macropolitical community;
- b. other states, whose attitude indicates the outside world's recognition (or non-recognition) of the community's demands and expectations;
- c. the environment in which interaction with other states takes place.

Mitzen and Steele differ in their views of the institutionalization of Self by a community. Which is primary—its relationship with the outside world, or the endogenous construction of its own biographical narrative (or “national biography,” according to Berenskötter; see below)? Catarina Kinvall's view bridges these two approaches. Viewing identity as “becoming,” she argues that the “self-notion” underlying a community's ontological security develops through its continuous relationship with others, and cannot be separated from “Self-Other” representation (Kinvall, 2004).

Felix Berenskötter (Berenskötter, 2014) contributed the concept of a national biography to ontological security research. Referring to Martin Heidegger's phenomenology, he extrapolates the idea of Dasein (being-in-the-world) to states: a state is an entity, institutionalized by a narrative that establishes a basic understanding of the past, present, and future. This narrative is a "national biography," which does not feature all events that have happened in a community but only those that "matter." Such attention to historical memory leads to the securitization of the biographical narrative and immensely increases the potential for conflict.

Filip Ejdus (2020) follows Anthony Giddens in adding the concepts of 'critical situation' and 'ontic space' to the theory of memory and ontological security. "Critical situations," as defined by Giddens and quoted by Ejdus, are circumstances of radical and unpredictable disjuncture "that threaten or destroy the certitudes of institutionalized routines" (Giddens, 1984, p. 62). Critical situations remove the protective cocoon created by routines and move fundamental questions, previously taken for granted, into the realm of discursive consciousness (Ejdus, 2020, p. 16).

Giddens, for example, argues that the routinization of relationships, so central to the sense of biographical continuity, always occurs in certain "settings of interaction." Drawing on the ideas of Giddens and Neil Leach (Leach, 2006) about 'ontic space' as the material environment of the community and the state, Ejdus emphasizes that the "sense of place" is an important source of ontological security as it provides, according to Giddens "a psychological tie between the biography of the individual and the locales that are the settings of the time-space paths through which that individual moves" (Giddens, 1984, p. 367). States need an additional anchor for their collective self-identity script that will stabilize their sense of self and conceal or mend its essentially contested, fragmentary, and plural nature. In the face of transient relationships with significant Others, states use landmark cityscapes or familiar landscapes to tell stories about their continuous selves and provide a material anchor of agency (Ejdus, 2020, p. 26).

Such a space can be constructed in two ways: introjection (absorption of the material environment into the Self) and projection

(extrapolation of the Self onto the material environment) (Ibid, pp. 27-28). The idea of ‘ontic spaces’ echoes Pierre Nora’s idea of ‘places of memory’ (*lieux de mémoire*) (Nora, 1989) but is broader, as it is more than just mnemonic.

Naturally, an array of studies have criticized the ontological security approach, including its conflation of “Selfness” with identity and of ontological security with securitization (Browning and Joenniemi, 2017). However, this does not appear to diminish the heuristic value of ontological security studies.

TURKEY: NEW ARROWS IN THE AGE-OLD QUIVER?

The 2023 centenary of the Turkish Republic offers a good starting point for analysis of Turkey’s ontological security issues, as it marks 100 years since the launch of one of the most vivid examples of political constructivism, which “reassembled” the nation after the collapse of the universal (Islamic) empire. In addition, the Turkish Republic celebrated its centenary under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, a leader who claims a role in national history comparable to that of the Republic’s founding father.

It is no exaggeration to consider modern Turkey the living legacy of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (Anscombe, 2014). One can and should analyze the ideological origins of Kemalism by considering how the goal of westernization and modernization was articulated in the Ottoman Empire, starting with the Tulip Era (1718-1730) and the Nizam-I Cedid period (1789-1807), and further through Tanzimat and the Young Turk Revolution. But the Ottoman Empire’s unsuccessful westernization gave partial advantages to non-Muslim minorities that were more open to European influence, disappointing and angering the Muslim majority (Lewis, 1961). Of fundamental importance is the original Kemalist combination of westernization and Turkish nationalism (which was novel, unlike pan-Turkism). The basic principles of Kemalism—the so-called Six Arrows (*Altı Ok*): republicanism, populism, nationalism, laicism, statism, and reformism—proclaimed a decisive break with the imperial legacy and implied an internally ambivalent attitude towards the West as both a model of national development and a threat to Turkish sovereignty.

In fact, aware of the Western threats to the state's physical security, Atatürk sought to overcome them through radical westernization, while the ontological security of the Turkish Republic's emerging macropolitical community was threatened mainly by the Islamic-universalist legacy of the sultanate and caliphate, and by pan-Turkism that contradicted the model of a territorial state in Anatolia alone. Atatürk's republicanism became a specific version of "state nationalism" to be borne by the new Turkish nation, regardless of its internal ethnic or other divisions (Bölükbaşı and Yücel, 2021). Initially, Atatürk explained his fear of solidarity with pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism by political expediency. In a 4 October 1920 letter to Enver Pasha in Moscow, Atatürk warned against openly demonstrating "efforts and actions to consolidate and organize the national movement that is about to emerge in Islamic countries such as Turkestan, Afghanistan, and Persia ... so as not to arouse suspicion or concern among the Russians..." (Atatürk, 2018). Later, after the establishment of the Republic, Atatürk remained negatively disposed towards pan-Turkism and pan-Islamism, primarily because they threatened to destabilize the Six Arrows.

Consideration of ontological security in conjunction with Turkey's domestic and foreign policies casts new light on the memory of the Armenian genocide and the conflict with Kurds.

The Kurdish problem, critical to the physical security and territorial integrity of modern Turkey, is complicated in terms of ontological security by the asymmetry of the parties involved. Turkey and the ontological security of its macropolitical community are opposed not by another state and its macropolitical community, but by the largest ethnic group without its own state, spread across four different states. This asymmetry intensifies the conflict and dims the prospects for its mutually-acceptable resolution. In cases like this, as B. Rumelili and A. Çelik show, the ontological security dilemma is almost inevitable, since the ontological security of one side undermines that of the other (Rumelili and Çelik, 2017).

Stubborn refusal to recognize the genocide of Armenians, Assyrians, and Pontic Greeks during the First World War is a political

strategy deeply related to ontological security. Moreover, in this respect, there is no gap between the Republic and the Ottoman Empire, since the final round of ethnic cleansing was carried out by Atatürk's troops (the Burning of Smyrna in 1920). Atatürk admitted his country's material inferiority to the West (and viewed westernization as the way to overcome it) but insisted upon full moral equality with the West, rejecting any interpretations of the distant or recent past that stigmatized Turkey or made it morally inferior to Europe (Lazar, 1923). In fact, by rejecting any form of responsibility for the mass deaths of Armenians, Assyrians, and Pontic Greeks, Atatürk sought to avoid giving the European powers the slightest cause for discrimination against the new Turkey or interference in its internal affairs.

Over time, the refusal to recognize and condemn the genocide became increasingly unjustified from the standpoint of political realism, since generational change in the political leadership hypothetically allowed Ankara to take the step and thereby remove a factor aggravating its relations with various genocide-recognizing countries and supranational associations. However, by recognizing the genocide, assuming responsibility for it, and committing to even symbolically atone for the guilt, Turkey would be undertaking an extremely painful revision of its national biographical narrative. Specifically, the most important part of the narrative, that pertaining to the period of the Republic's establishment.

Switching the self-perception of a macropolitical community from "a priori righteousness" to "atonement for guilt" places that community in a state of ontological insecurity (Zarakol, 2010). In the case of Turkey, many generations of its political elite have actively refused to recognize the genocide, nullifying all rhetoric about moral or legal responsibility. External pressure, directed primarily at the political elite, meets a fiercely negative response in Turkish society and further strengthens the macropolitical community's determination to refuse to recognize the Armenian genocide, essentially transforming this refusal into one of the pillars of its ontological security.

Incumbent Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has achieved the greatest degree of freedom in reinterpreting Atatürk's legacy.

It is difficult to say to what extent he sees himself as an opponent of the Turkish Republic's founder, although Atatürk's formal political heirs—the Republican People's Party—are Erdoğan's direct competitors. There is no doubt that, like Atatürk, Erdoğan declares full moral equality with the West, but he actually goes even further by claiming moral superiority, which is ensured not only by Turkey's economic successes and international achievements but also—and this is where he steps far away from Atatürk—by its Islamic identity, leadership in the Turkic world, and reverence for Ottoman traditions. These starkly contrast with the European Union's postmodern value matrix, which does not suit even some of its member states. Therefore, growing differences in identity and ethical principles make Turkey's accession to the EU extremely problematic. What makes things even worse is the humiliating wait in the EU anteroom over the past several decades. This also exposes one of the dividing lines within Turkish society, since strict adherence to Kemalist precepts, to which about half of Turkish voters are loyal, should ultimately lead Turkey to the European Union, while Erdoğan's policy, zigzagging as it is, not only pushes the country away from the European membership but also increasingly clearly emphasizes the risks of European integration from the viewpoint of ontological security. Erdoğan's Euroskepticism and Atatürk's westernizing impulse can both be traced to frustration with Turkey's lagging behind the West and Europe's de facto refusal to recognize Turkey as an equal, but the consequences will obviously be different. Ultimately, the question is whether European integration can ensure the continuity of Turkey's Self, or are there other, more reliable ways to do this in the modern world?

Characterizations of Erdoğan as autocrat, populist, Islamist, pan-Turkist, neo-Ottomanist, etc. fail to encompass the full scope of his political program. Erdoğan is prone to risky political maneuvering between the main centers of power on the international stage. But he similarly maneuvers between ideologies and between cultural and political traditions. Fethullah Gülen has had a much deeper influence on the identity and political position of millions of Muslims in Turkey and beyond by questioning the Kemalist principle of laicism. An

alliance with Gülen ensured a U-turn towards Erdoğan's Justice Party and helped built a constituency for political Islamism. The subsequent rift between Gülen and Erdoğan was rooted in a struggle for influence over society not only via political relations, but also via education and other determinants of a macropolitical community's identity and self-perception.

Cooperation between Erdoğan and Ahmet Davutoğlu provided the foreign policy of modern Turkey with conceptual depth that did not always accord with the expansive political style of the Turkish leader. But Davutoğlu's main principles—proactivness, multidimensionality, “zero problems with neighbors,” smooth diplomacy, and soft power (Davutoğlu, 2013)—combined with the new geopolitical scale mandated by Ottoman heritage and Islamic civilization, have mostly (except for the “zero problems with neighbors” policy) outlived Davutoğlu's partnership with Erdoğan. As a theorist of Turkish foreign policy, Davutoğlu justified departure from its unequivocally pro-Western stance by pointing to the fundamental contradictions between Islamic and Western civilizations caused by differences in their paradigms and epistemology (Hazır, 2023). In fact, this laid claim not only to leadership in the Turkic world, but also to the right to represent the interests of the entire Islamic civilization amid the ongoing transformation of the world order and eradication of the West's hegemony. Davutoğlu's defection to Erdoğan's opposition did not prevent the continued implementation of these principles, although they have yet to find their final expression in Ankara's withdrawal of its application for EU membership.

Erdoğan's maneuvering is not only driven by his individual style and by his desire to retain and extend his power, but it also represents his reaction to the difficulties of the Kemalist project's full-scale implementation, which piled up over the course of the 20th century. While Erdoğan is not a consistent anti-Kemalist, he is a Turkish politician most ready to step beyond the boundaries of Atatürk's political and ideological construct.

The denial of the Armenian genocide is where Erdoğan has most consistently been following in Mustafa Kemal's footsteps. Now that

Azerbaijan has restored its sovereignty over Nagorno-Karabakh, which can justifiably be considered a military-political triumph not only of Ilham Aliyev but also of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Ankara is nearing strategic success on the genocide issue, notwithstanding the obvious parallels between the Armenian exodus from Karabakh and the “death marches” of 1915-1916.

It would be an oversimplification to attribute Artsakh’s collapse solely to the personality and pro-Western orientation of Armenian Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, while ignoring his predecessors’ blunders. However, it is Pashinyan who is responsible for losing the Second Karabakh War, for missing opportunities to achieve a compromise settlement, for officially recognizing Karabakh as an integral part of Azerbaijan, and for provoking the final exodus of Armenians from a region where they lived for more than two thousand years. Pashinyan’s government prioritized military-political realities, even though Artsakh comprises one of the pillars of the Armenian macropolitical community’s ontological security. Another pillar is the memory of the genocide. After normalizing relations with Baku, with which Pashinyan obviously has to agree, normalizing relations with Turkey will very likely be the next step. Armenia objectively needs this, given its current situation. But the price is also quite clear: there will not be a single word, in the documents normalizing relations, about the genocide. This will undercut the second pillar of Armenia’s ontological security, while Erdoğan will be able to declare that the principle of “zero problems with neighbors” has been implemented with respect to Armenia without a single concession.

SERBIA: SECURITIZATION OF VICTIMHOOD

What is happening now to Armenia repeats the bitter experience of Serbia in a somewhat moderated way. The historical background and specific circumstances differ greatly, but analogies are quite appropriate regarding ontological security.

The case of modern Serbia features two intertwining basic ontological (meta)narratives that are introjected into virtually every

specific event narrative. These are defensive (“*Serbs have never started or fought wars of conquest*”) and victimhood (“*Serbs have most often become victims of violence by larger opponents*”) narratives. They were actualized through Slobodan Milošević’s development of the idea of the “people” as the central protagonist of history, in order to deconstruct “proletarian Yugoslavism” (Stojanović, 2011). Therefore, any counter-narrative that erodes the idea of Serbian “victimhood” and “defensiveness” generates ontological insecurity. That is why almost all key events in Serbian history—from the Battle of Kosovo to the issue of Albanian-Kosovar independence—are interpreted in the spirit of “defense” and/or “victimhood” of the Serbian “people.” Anything that does not fit is pushed out of the national biography.

The Battle of Kosovo myth or (more delicately) legend is of exceptional importance for Serbian national identity. It gained its canonical form through folk songs collected by Vuk Karadžić in the early 19th century, when the Serbian political nation was consolidating. Contemporary political connotations of the battle appeared as early as the beginning of the 19th century, in the writings of those who fought for Serbian independence from Ottoman domination, in a manner typical of European nation-building at the time. The narrative supported a communal identity and “basic consensus,” and formed the political climate necessary to combat Turkish domination (Ejdus, 2020).

At the state level, official anniversaries of the Battle of Kosovo, first in 1889, spurred the formation and substantive transformation of a national myth. The political messages of the 1889, 1939, and 1989 anniversaries—commemorated in the Kingdom of Serbia, the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, and the SFRY—were so different that some authors identify three different Kosovo myths (Lomonosov and Kolobov, 2007). This is excessive; the Kosovo myth is multilayered, adaptable, and suitable to various political tasks.

However, the political price of the words spoken on the Kosovo Field during the commemorations turned out to be very high, as they not only reflected Belgrade’s long-term international agenda but also took hold in mass consciousness. These words often outlived those who uttered them: the rhetoric and symbolism of the 1889 commemoration

largely determined Belgrade's actions before and during the Balkan Wars; Slobodan Milošević's impassioned speech at Gazimestan still, in a sense, defines what is acceptable for the Serbian politicians who are forced to deal with his disastrous legacy.

The Kosovo myth has outlasted the various political and ideological incarnations of Serbian statehood. In contrast to Kemalist Turkey, Serbia never had a century to develop any one model. Even modern Serbian statehood, created by Milošević, has been crippled by the fiasco of the Greater Serbia project. This is why the Kosovo myth plays a constitutive role in Serbian ontological security. But all narratives about the "Ottoman past" are focused on defense or victimhood; for the most part, Serbia seeks to replace the memory of that period (e.g., even by redeveloping Belgrade (Resanović, 2019)) or eradicate it completely (e.g., Serbian archaeology lacks a subdiscipline for the Ottoman period (Todorović, 2021)).

In interpretations of WWII or Yugoslavia's breakup, memory is accompanied by forgetting. The victimhood narrative is strongly and constantly supported by the memory of the extermination of Serbs by the Croatian Ustaše and of the Balkan analogue of Auschwitz—the Jasenovac concentration camp. The defensive narrative about World War II requires a more sophisticated approach since resistance to external invasion was intertwined with fierce ethnic, political, and ideological strife. In the process of deconstructing the socialist narrative about anti-fascist partisans as "the only positive" WWII heroes, the Chetniks and their leader Draža Mihailović (who in socialist Yugoslavia were portrayed as practically equal to the Ustaše) have now been presented as national heroes, officially rehabilitated and memorialized (Sindbæk, 2009; Trošt and David, 2022).

This altered assessment of the Chetniks is symptomatic of a deeper process of partisans' "decommunization" and even "de-Yugoslavization," and their insertion into a narrative of a specifically Serbian victory in World War II, with more attention to Serbian "victims of socialism" (Đureinović, 2018). The strategy of selective remembrance, coupled with the forgetting of not just the Chetniks' cruelty, but also the collaborationism of Milan Nedić's Serbian Government of National

Salvation, underlines the difference between the Serbian and Turkish ontological-security defense mechanisms. Due to the tragic history of interethnic confrontations in the Western Balkans, almost every accusation of Serbian violence or cruelty can be met with a victimhood narrative and claims that the Serbs suffered much more than others.

This manipulation is even more evident in the discourse about the breakup of Yugoslavia. Accusations against (ethnic) Serbs of genocide against Croats, Bosniaks, and Kosovo Albanians, made not only by representatives of these ethnic groups but also by international and supranational institutions (the International Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia, the European Parliament, various non-governmental organizations), force Belgrade to use different rhetoric for internal and external audiences.

Some episodes, directly related to the war crimes committed by Serbs, are transformed into a victimhood narrative. For example, the memory of the Srebrenica massacre is either replaced by parallel stories about real war crimes by Bosniaks and Croats, or it is transformed into a narrative of defense against a critical external threat (Rastegaev, 2023). At the same time, Serbia's course towards European integration—to which the country's geopolitical and geo-economic situation gives it virtually no alternative—forces Belgrade to not only make extremely painful concessions regarding the status of Kosovo, but also to at least partially accept responsibility for Srebrenica (without officially recognizing it as genocide).

Cooperation with the ICTY was an unavoidable burden for any government in Belgrade, particularly grave as the majority of Serbs refuse to believe that Serbs could indeed commit such crimes (Subotić, 2010). This alone has significantly damaged Serbian ontological security.

Serbia's aspiration to join the European Union also threatens its ontological security. Membership would confirm the postulated European identity of the Serbs, but it would also require that they adopt unacceptable historical narratives and functionally admit the moral and political righteousness of those who bombed them in 1999. In fact, to pass through the eye of the Brussels needle, a nation that feels

victimized has to not only put up with defeat and its consequences but also assume full responsibility for Milošević's policy.

Serbia's ontological security is not limited solely to a biographical narrative. In particular, the Serbian Orthodox Church—an important actor in constructing the collective identity of the Serbs—is building a narrative about “Serbian traditional values” as part of the confrontation with the collective “Other,” that is, the West, Europe, and Western civilization and culture (Jovanov and Lazar, 2017). Also, the Church remains a major player on the mnemonic Kosovo Field. Not only due to the “Serbian Jerusalem” metaphor, the symbolism of the cross of Saint Sava, or the religious components of the biographies of the battle's heroes, but also due to the Church's strong anti-Westernism and solidarity with Russia and Russian Orthodoxy.

At the same time, it is worth noting that the Cyrillic alphabet is gradually losing its ontological status in Serbian society. Initially, the Cyrillic alphabet was considered a basis of Serbian identity (harkening back to Serbian Prince Stefan Nemanja, who converted to Orthodoxy and adopted Cyrillic in the 12th century) (Prosvirina, 2019). The Krajina Serbs' defense of Cyrillic against the imposition of Latin was one of the causes of the ethnopolitical conflict in Croatia. In modern Serbia, both Cyrillic and Latin scripts are used equally (even though according to the constitution, the official alphabet in Serbia is Cyrillic) (Ivković, 2013), which is especially noticeable on official government websites where both scripts are used. For comparison, the transition to Latin in Turkey, carried out by Atatürk as part of his westernization policy, is not questioned today, not least because most Turkic post-Soviet countries are also adopting Latin, which is becoming a new bond consolidating the Turkic world.

Kosovo remains the main and growing threat to Serbian ontological security. Since 2008, the Serbian government has developed a rather eclectic combination of strategies implying “permanent non-recognition” of Kosovo's independence and concealing the fact that this non-recognition is the main obstacle to EU membership. At the same time, the authorities seek to create for pro-EU Serbs the illusion that Serbia can ultimately join the EU while avoiding formal recognition of

Kosovo. President Aleksandar Vučić has mastered this art of balancing and convinced his counterparts in the EU and the United States that any other leader would act based on the Kosovo myth rather than Serbia's European aspirations. But while taking certain steps to promote dialogue with Brussels and Washington, Vučić always stops short of anything that would require Serbs to exchange their old Kosovo-associated identity for a "new European Self" (Ejdus, 2020). Overstepping this line would trigger an acute crisis of ontological security, leading to an internal political crisis and the loss of legitimacy for a government that has "abandoned" Kosovo.

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The title of this article refers to symbols that illustrate, one way or another, the ontological security of two macropolitical communities. Since the 14th century, the Serbian cross, or the cross of Saint Sava, with four c-shaped firesteels at the corners, has embodied a call for the unity of the Serbian people. It is no surprise that at the beginning of the 19th century, this symbol was emblazoned upon the banners of those who fought for liberation from the Ottoman yoke. But it was also used in the heraldry of the collaborationist Nedić regime. During the Tito era, socialist Serbia was forced to use a coat of arms depicting firesteels but without a cross. Modern Serbian heraldry has restored the original meanings of faith and Saint Sava's drive for unity. But the constant sense of ontological insecurity, produced by the unresolvable dilemma of the Kosovo myth and European integration, can also be called a Serbian cross. Politicians in Belgrade understand that they cannot recognize political realities and consequently bid a final farewell to Kosovo, as this remains unacceptable to the Serbian macropolitical community.

President Erdoğan's prominent decision to reconvert the ancient Hagia Sophia into a mosque has several meaningful implications. Erdoğan is the second historical figure to thereby celebrate the triumph of Islam over Christianity; the first was Mehmed the Conqueror, who entered the church on 30 May 1453 and sang Surah 48, Al-Fath (The Victory) inside it. Apart from being a purely religious act, the

construction of minarets and a crescent above the Hagia Sophia signified the establishment of a new Islamic universal empire—the Ottoman Empire. These meanings were and still are extremely important for Erdoğan. But equally important is his competition with the historical figure whose transformation of the Hagia Sofia into a museum has now been overridden. Erdoğan argued with Atatürk in absentia, and most modern Turks turned out to not be on Atatürk's side, reflecting significant shifts in their underlying identity.

Recognition by authoritative external actors of the status and image of a state, as it has been created (or rather gained through much suffering) by the macropolitical community, is very important for its ontological security. Problems related to this cannot be long ignored by leaders, who ultimately must make a choice. If they recognize the impossibility of changing external actors' attitude in the foreseeable future, and instead try to convince their own community to accept the loss of the status that is prescribed by the national biography, they risk losing votes, legitimacy, and/or power. On the other hand, if they act in accordance with the macropolitical community's aspirations, seeking to change the external actors' attitude, they risk misfortune for the state and its people, sometimes to the point of jeopardizing physical security. However, there is often room for maneuver between the two extremes, as exploited e.g., by Vučić.

Furthermore, if there is a chance to change the general conditions of international interaction despite the associated risks, then a careful readiness for confrontation can, under favorable circumstances, lead to a change in opponents' behavior or even to a general reconfiguration of the balance of power. Such a conflict can itself strengthen ontological security, even at the expense of physical security. This concerns Russia perhaps first of all (Hansen, 2016; Yefremenko, 2022).

Turkey, under Erdoğan, has resorted to belligerent rhetoric quite often (as in the case of the Israel-Hamas war) but used its armed forces abroad (mainly against Kurdish forces in Iraq and Syria) on a rather limited scale. However, Turkey exemplifies remarkable skills in both shaping the identity of the internal community and transforming external interactions, thereby crossing into a higher league of international

players. Serbia cannot reproduce these achievements, as it is simply too weak relative to the EU, the United States, and NATO. Belgrade will not be able to ease the situation on its own, but its hopes for the alteration of this situation by a friendly but distant power, forced to challenge Western dominance, may prove illusory. Ultimately, the struggle led by Russia aims to transform the entire world politics, and nearly all resources have been committed to this end. However, there is no guarantee that this transformation will ensure the ontological security of Russia's friends in the Balkans. Inflated expectations, associated with identity and self-presentation in historical time and space, should be counterbalanced by arguments offered by the good old arsenal of political realism.

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