Book Review

Filip Ejdus. 2020. *Crisis and Ontological Insecurity. Serbia's Anxiety over Kosovo's Secession*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan. xiv + 202 pp.,
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Illustrative of its concise composition, Filip Ejdus's monograph starts off by taking the reader straight to the central research question: "Why states sometimes risk their material interests and even physical security to keep a certain identity narrative going?" (1). Ejdus, associate professor at the Faculty of Political Sciences of the University of Belgrade, presents answers to this question in a case study of "Serbia's seemingly irrational but nevertheless relatively consistent behaviour vis-à-vis Kosovo since the breakup of Yugoslavia" (3). After a short introduction, which usefully outlines the book's arguments and structure, Chapter 2 situates the study within the field of international relations and more particularly in relation to the concept of ontological security.

This chapter sets a rigid conceptual framework for the empirical analysis. Ejdus adopts a state-centric approach which considers states as ontological security seekers. He thereby prioritises the endogenous factor of biographical continuity. His book fills two research gaps: first, Ejdus conceptualises ontological insecurity as a state's inability to deal with fundamental questions related to its existence, finitude, relations with others, and continuity. Critical situations destabilise the confidence that is taken for granted with respect to these four fundamental questions, and force states to discursively and consciously engage with these insecurities. Second, Ejdus stresses that ontological security is not only realised at the level of interpersonal or interstate relations, but also through the material environment, for which he coins the concept of "ontic space".

Chapter 3 analyses why, when, how, and by whom Kosovo was created as the ontic space of Serbia's self-identity. Drawing on state-of-the-art secondary literature in addition to some research of media sources and cultural artefacts that have shaped Serbian collective memory with regard to Kosovo, Ejdus deconstructs the making of Kosovo as such an ontic space. He shows how geopolitical shifts in the last quarter of the nineteenth century transformed Kosovo from a symbolic legend into an ontic space. From this period onwards, Kosovo was introjected into Serbian self-identity as a symbol *and* concrete territory through politics,

education, sciences, the arts, and religious life. Ejdus also presents half-hearted attempts to turn Kosovo into a Yugoslav ontic space during the interwar period, and to silence Kosovo's ontic status for Serbian national identity in the decades after World War II.

Chapter 4 sketches the rise of Serbian anxiety over Kosovo in socialist Yugoslavia. After a schematic overview of the Kosovo question in the second half of the 1960s, the book in more detail presents the reactivation of Kosovo as an ontic space of Serbia's self-identity in the 1980s. This was a reaction to increasing ontological insecurity over the demographic and political loss of Kosovo. At this stage, efforts at reactivation unfolded as a bottom-up process centred on the Serbian Orthodox Church, Serbian nationalist intellectuals, and Kosovo Serbs. In the late 1980s, ontological anxieties over Kosovo were co-opted by Slobodan Milošević during his rise to power. Finally, the year 1989 saw Kosovo fully crystallise as an ontic space in politics and popular culture. Although Ejdus discards claims that present the Kosovo myth as a prime generator of genocidal violence during the 1990s, he does stress that ontological anxieties over Kosovo played an important role in the acts of violent repression and in Serbia's uncompromising position in negotiations preceding and during the 1998–99 war in Kosovo.

Kosovo's declaration of independence in 2008 represents the ontological crisis determining Serbian politics ever since. It occupies a key position in Ejdus's line of argument and is the topic of Chapter 5. Presenting an in-depth analysis of the Serbian reaction, including interviews with important political actors, Ejdus convincingly shows that Kosovo's declaration of independence opened up fundamental questions of existence, finitude, biography, and relations with others. In order to fend off these challenges, "Serbia's leaders tried to recover the lost sense of continuity by routinising a new master-narrative built around a defiant vow that Serbia will never recognise Kosovo, regardless of the price" (116).

In the final chapter, Chapter 6, Ejdus analyses the use of this new master narrative in Serbian elections and Serbia's positioning in the EU-facilitated negotiations with Kosovo. He provides a solid analysis of the dissonance between Serbia's policy objective of EU integration and that of "eternal" non-recognition of Kosovo. Although both policy goals are contradictory—and the public is aware of this—political elites in Serbia have opted for "a form of anxiety-controlling mechanism of avoidance" (128). This implies that consecutive Serbian governments have pursued a policy of EU integration and even made important compromises in the framework of the EU-facilitated normalisation of relations with Pristina, while avoiding the ultimate issue of Kosovo's status becoming an explicit agenda point. At the same time, Serbian governments have constantly reassured the public that Serbia will never give up Kosovo and this is not part of Serbia's EU integration agenda. The more normalisation efforts unfold and space for

avoidance shrinks, the fiercer Serbia seems to pursue its policy of non-recognition and counter-secession—mostly in the domain of diplomacy. The book ends with a sobering and important message, countering expectations that Serbia will ultimately give up and recognise Kosovo in exchange for benefits related to EU-membership: "On the contrary, short of a thorough self-identity transformation, which does not seem to be in the cards at present, Serbia will most likely continue its rigid attachment to the non-recognition policy. This is the anchor that, however imperfectly, shields the state from fundamental questions that were set into motion by the first cracks in the Yugoslav order and which have been haunting Serbia until this day" (150).

This book is essential reading for social scientists with a particular interest in Kosovo and Southeastern Europe, as well as for political scientists in international relations. It is also crucial for policy-makers dealing with the Kosovo issue and the seemingly ambiguous and contradictory politics of Serbia in this regard. Ejdus presents valuable insights into the Serbian politics of avoidance, which have remained firmly in place since 2008. It is to be hoped that the book will also inspire international policy-makers to reflect more consciously upon their own politics of avoidance when it comes to the status of Kosovo.

The book's major strength is that it convincingly explains contemporary Serbian politics of avoidance in the light of the historical frame of reference of Kosovo as an ontic space of Serbia's self-identity, and the ontological anxiety caused by Kosovo's declaration of independence. It indicates that what to an outsider might appear to be empty phrases about the emotional importance of Kosovo should not be discarded all too easily. Such "phrases" resonate broadly with the Serbian population and derive from long-lasting efforts towards making Kosovo the single most important ontic space of Serbian self-identity, and keeping it there. Historians of Yugoslavia and Kosovo might find the historical overview schematic and stringent, but the central points on the making and subsequent maintenance of Kosovo as an ontic space of Serbia's modern self-identity are supported by a solid historical analysis that by far transcends those more usually found in political science studies.

Without wishing to undermine the strengths of this book, I close with a point for discussion. As a historian, I am slightly puzzled by the apparent stability of Kosovo as an ontic space since the late nineteenth century. Ejdus does deconstruct the making of Kosovo as an ontic space in this period and situates it firmly within the particular geopolitical context. He also refers to efforts to "Yugoslavise" and "silence" Kosovo in the first and second Yugoslavia. Thus, he avoids easy claims about the "eternal" centrality of Kosovo to Serbia's identity. Once made into an ontic space, however, it seems that there is very little room for change, and that the biographical continuity of the Serbian state centred on Kosovo as an ontic space

continues to determine political life. The ease with which Kosovo was reactivated and politically co-opted in the 1980s and the resonating anxieties about Kosovo among the broader population are analysed almost exclusively from the perspective of the inherent, Kosovo-based biographical continuity of Serbia. Limited or no attention is paid to exogenous factors such as the social history of Kosovo, Serbia, and Yugoslavia, or to the role of external actors, above all the Kosovo Albanians and the international community. This reflection is no historical nit-picking, as it relates to the central analytical question of the book. While internal biographical coherence based on ontic spaces is important to understand Serbia's seemingly irrational politics with regard to Kosovo, the book would have benefited heuristically from giving more weight to potential interactions with exogenous agency in the domain of political and social relations.