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Catharsis, rearticulation of desire and ontological insecurity: The case of Serbia's attachment to Kosovo

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Abstract

One of the central insights of critical and constructivist International Relations (IR) scholarship is that identity-seeking matters in world politics. Ontological Security Studies (OSS) has expanded on this insight, emphasising that actors may prioritise maintaining a stable sense of self over physical security and other concerns. Yet the question of radical identity change, particularly its affective dimension, remains under-explored. To address this gap, we draw on Lacanian psychoanalysis and argue that ontological security is sustained by fantasies aimed at filling a primordial lack that can never be resolved. This lack generates anxiety, which actors attempt to soothe by attaching their desires to empirical signifiers – objects-cause of desire – that promise wholeness. Our argument centres on the idea that the rearticulation of desire occurs through the affective mechanism of catharsis, manifesting as either metaphor or metonymy. We illustrate our argument through the case of Serbia's cathartic (re)articulation of Kosovo as its object-cause of desire. In particular, we juxtapose earlier successful articulations of Kosovo as a metaphoric substitution for other desires with more recent, less effective attempts to rearticulate the north of Kosovo and the submerged cultural heritage in Gazivode Lake as metonymic substitutions for the rest of the territory.

Keywords: catharsis; cultural heritage; Gazivode; Kosovo; ontological security; Serbia

Introduction

One of the key insights of constructivist, post-structural, and critical approaches in International Relations (IR) over the past several decades has been that the behaviour of actors in world politics can be understood as a form of identity-seeking. This insight has been articulated in various ways by successive generations of scholars, who cannot all be fully acknowledged here.[1] One of the most vibrant literatures within this diverse research agenda has centred on the concept of ontological

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[1]Some of the most groundbreaking works on the role of identity in IR are David Campbell, *Writing Security: United States Foreign Policy and the Politics of Identity* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992); Yosef Lapid and Friedrich Kratochwil (eds), *The Return of Culture and Identity in IR Theory* (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1996); Erik Ringmar, *Identity, Interest and Action: A Cultural Explanation of Sweden's Intervention in the Thirty Years War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Peter J. Katzenstein (ed.), *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Iver B. Neumann, *Uses of the Other: 'The East' in European Identity Formation* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999); Alexander Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Ted Hopf, *Social Construction of International Politics: Identities and Foreign Policies, Moscow, 1955 and 1999* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Lene Hansen, *Security as Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006).

security, which was introduced into IR in the 1990s[2] and later developed into a distinct theoretical agenda in the 2000s,[3] now known as Ontological Security Studies (OSS).[4]

Since then, three distinct, often overlapping but distinguishable, perspectives have emerged.[5] The earliest one to appear was the sociological perspective. Largely inspired by the sociologist Anthony Giddens, this approach conceptualises ontological security as a sense of continuity in the world and the ability to 'go on' with a stable self-identity narrative.[6] The psychoanalytic perspective drawing on the work of Jacques Lacan posits that ontological security is not an achievable state of mind, but rather a fantasy driven by the desire to compensate for a primordial lack.[7] Finally, the existentialist perspective, drawing on the works of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Tillich, conceptualises ontological security as a drive to contain anxiety, an integral aspect of the human condition that can never be fully eliminated.[8]

[2]Alexander Wendt, 'Collective identity formation and the international state', *American Political Science Review*, 88:2 (1994), pp. 384–96; Jef Huysmans, 'Security! What do you mean? From concept to thick signifier', *European Journal of International Relations*, 4:2 (1998), pp. 226–55; Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

[3]Catarina Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism: Self, identity, and the search for ontological security', *Political Psychology*, 25:5 (2004), pp. 741–67; Brent J. Steele, 'Ontological security and the power of self-identity: British neutrality and the American Civil War', *Review of International Studies,* 31:3 (2005), pp. 519–40; Jennifer Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics: State identity and the security dilemma', *European Journal of International Relations*, 12:3 (2006), pp. 341–70; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London: Routledge, 2008); Ayşe Zarakol 'Ontological (in)security and state denial of historical crimes: Turkey and Japan', *International Relations*, 24:1 (2010), pp. 3–23; Will Delehanty and Brent J. Steele, 'Engaging the narrative in ontological (in)security theory: Insights from feminist IR', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 22:3 (2009), pp. 523–40; Alana Krolikowski, 'State personhood in ontological security theories of international relations and Chinese nationalism: A sceptical view', *Chinese Journal of International Politics*, 2:1 (2008), pp. 109–33.

[4]Despite its diversity, it is often treated as a distinct theoretical approach in Critical Security Studies. See Columba Peoples and Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2020). For good overviews of this research agenda, see special issues and symposia on ontological security in *Cooperation and Conflict* (2017), *Journal of International Relations and Development* (2018), *European Security* (2018), and *International Theory* (2020).

[5]There are many ways to map this research agenda, and none is without limitations – including the one used here. The map we propose, and the labels we use (sociological, existentialist, and psychoanalytic), should be understood as categories of analysis rather than categories of substance. While scholars often combine insights from these different perspectives, they usually, either explicitly or implicitly, give analytical primacy to one of them, which justifies this mapping exercise.

[6]Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'; Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*; Filip Ejdus, *Crisis and Ontological Snsecurity* (Cham: Palgrave, 2020).

[7]Catarina Kinnvall, 'European trauma: Governance and the psychological moment', *Alternatives*, 37:3 (2012), pp. 266–81; Jakub Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression: Fantasy as a factor in international politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22:1 (2019), pp. 243–68; Linus Hagström, 'Great power narcissism and ontological (in)security: The narrative mediation of greatness and weakness in international politics', *International Studies Quarterly*, 65:2 (2021), pp. 331–42; Marco A.Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the "self" of ontological security: The case of Brazil's ambivalent postcolonial subjectivity', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 46:2 (2018), pp. 142–64; Ali Bilgic and Jordan Pilcher. 'Desires, fantasies and hierarchies: Postcolonial status anxiety through ontological security', *Alternatives*, 48:1 (2023), pp. 3–19; Martin Maitino and Marco A. Vieira, 'Ontological security and climate policy in Jair Bolsonaro's Brazil: Understanding the emotional underpinnings of environmental destruction', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4:3 (2024), ksae079; Ceren Melis Kıcıroğlu and Nuri Fudayl Kıcıroğlu, 'Türkiye–Greece–Cyprus, and the West: A Lacanian family portrait', *Critical Studies on Security* (2024), pp. 1–18; Pasko Kisić-Merino, 'The role of right-wing enjoyment in the normalisation of the far right', *Review of International Studies* (2025), pp. 1–23; Ali Bilgic, 'Queering ontological (in)security: A psychoanalysis of political homophobia', *Critical Studies on Security* (2024), pp. 1–16; Jakub Eberle and Jan Daniel 'Anxiety geopolitics: Hybrid warfare, civilisational geopolitics, and the Janus-faced politics of anxiety', *Political Geography*, 92 (2022), p. 102502, available at: {https://doi.org/10.1080/21624887.2024.238055}.

[8]Bahar Rumelili, 'Integrating anxiety into international relations theory: Hobbes, existentialism, and ontological security', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020) pp. 257–72 (p. 269); Bahar Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety: Existentialism and the current state of international relations', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 24:4 (2021), pp. 1020–36; Xander Kirke and Brent J. Steele. 'Ontological security, myth, and existentialism', *Review of International Studies*, 49:5 (2023), pp. 905–23; Karl Gustafsson and Nina C. Krickel-Choi, 'Returning to the roots of ontological security: Insights from the existentialist anxiety literature', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:3 (2020), pp. 875–95.

While these different perspectives have all enriched OSS, they have not ventured much beyond anxiety to illuminate the affective dimension of identity change. To address this gap, this article theorises *catharsis* as a previously overlooked affective mechanism of identity transformation in world politics. *Catharsis* derives from the Greek word κάθαρσις, meaning purging, cleansing, or purification. Drawing on Lacanian theory, we define catharsis as a process in which repressed desires surface, enabling one object-cause of desire (*objet petit a*) to be replaced by another. Objects-cause of desire can be understood as signifiers that are embedded into wider affectively appealing and resonating narratives (i.e. fantasies) about the Self and promise identity closure, be it at the individual level, or at the level of collectives, such as states. As we argue in the article, this process may take the form of *metonymy*, where the whole is displaced and represented by one of its parts, or *metaphor*, which involves the substitution of an entire chain of signification with another. Catharsis, taking the form of metonymy or metaphor, explains the affective component underlying often radical changes in identity, when one signifier embodying identity-closure is substituted by another.

We illustrate our argument by examining the changing role of Kosovo as Serbia's object-cause of desire over time. Specifically, we first highlight two cases of metaphoric deferrals of desire, the shift from Bosnia and Herzegovina to Kosovo in the late 19th century and from communism to nationalism in the 1990s. Then, our empirical section dives into a recent attempt at a metonymic deferral of desire in which North Kosovo was proposed as a substitute for the rest of Kosovo around 2018 in the context of a potential land swap between Serbia and Kosovo.

By shedding light on the affective mechanism of catharsis underpinning the transformation of dominant articulations of identity, these theoretical and empirical insights not only enrich the OSS and the Lacanian approach to IR but also contribute to broader conversations on transformation and change in identity-seeking, emotions, and affect in critical and constructivist IR. Moreover, the concept of catharsis could prove useful beyond IR, extending to the multidisciplinary fields of nationalism studies, memory studies, and political psychology by explaining the contingency of established representations of the Self and its desires, highlighting how even the most sedimented articulations can change.

The remainder of the article is structured as follows. In the next section, we briefly review the three different strands in OSS, identify a gap, and introduce the central questions motivating our research. We then draw on Lacanian psychoanalysis to theorise catharsis as the affective mechanism underpinning the shift from one object-cause of desire to another in world politics. Specifically, we argue that the cathartic replacement of one object with another can occur through either metaphor or metonymy. In the final section, we illustrate our theoretical argument with a case study of Kosovo's evolving role as Serbia's object-cause of desire.

Ontological Security Studies: Three perspectives

Ontological security is a concept coined by Glaswegian psychiatrist Ronald D. Laing, who defined it as a sense of 'presence in the world as a real, alive, whole, and, in a temporal sense, a continuous person'.[9] While Laing focused on patients with extreme forms of ontological insecurity, Anthony Giddens examined the pursuit of ontological security by 'healthy' individuals in the context of globalisation and high modernity. He thus adapted the concept for sociology, redefining it as 'the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action'.[10] For Giddens, the routines of daily life and the emotional stability they provide serve as the primary

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[9]Ronald Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 39.

[10]Anthony Giddens. *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1991), p. 39.

bulwark against existential anxieties especially in high modernity, characterised by rapid social transformation.

The concept was introduced to IR in the 1990s, initially as an idiom to describe one of the state's basic interests[11] and as an alternative to previous conceptualisations of security.[12] In the 2000s, it evolved into a new IR theory[13] and eventually developed into a separate research agenda within Critical Security Studies.[14] As a research agenda, Ontological Security Studies revolves around several key debates concerning the unit of analysis, sources of insecurity, stability and change, the role of materiality, and the concept of anxiety. However, one way to also classify often overlapping but still distinguishable approaches within OSS is by discerning their major disciplinary influences.

The earliest emerging is the *sociological* strand in OSS. Mostly influenced by the work of Anthony Giddens, this approach focuses on reflexive agents who seek to maintain their biographical continuity, especially in the face of crises, through more or less rigid attachment to routines of daily life. For Alexander Wendt, one of the first IR theorists to employ this concept, ontological security refers to 'predictability in relationships to the world, which creates a desire for stable social identities'.[15] Similarly, Jennifer Mitzen defines it as 'the need to experience oneself as a whole, continuous person in time – as being rather than constantly changing – in order to realize a sense of agency'.[16] From this perspective, ontological security is maintained through daily routines and disrupted by critical situations, unpredictable events that catch agents off guard.[17] The inability to maintain biographical continuity generates anxiety, often leading to seemingly irrational behaviour aimed at re-establishing a 'healthy' sense of self.[18]

From the sociological point of view, anxiety resulting from ontological insecurity is an exceptional and debilitating condition that arises when agents are unable to construct a stable sense of self. In world politics, it emerges in critical and unexpected situations that paralyse actors' agency and necessitate defensive actions to manage or suppress this incapacitating affect.[19] Those agents with low basic trust will rigidly seek continuity while those with a higher basic trust will be more open to adaptation and change. Hence, from the Giddensian vantage point, ontological insecurity leads to paralysis, whereas ontological security enables agency.

Although the pursuit of ontological security is oriented towards (biographical) continuity, Giddens-inspired works treat change as the outcome of reflexive adaptation, whereby agents may modify their routines including identity narratives, in order to maintain a coherent and healthy sense of self.[20] As Trine Flockhart put it, 'although routinisation of practice and a stable identity may be preferred by agents, action that changes established routines is sometimes a necessary undertaking, especially in response to disruptive events or unintended consequences'.[21]

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[11] Wendt, 'Collective identity formation and the international state', p. 385.

[12] Huysmans, 'Security! What do you mean?'; McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests*.

[13] Kinnvall, 'Globalization and religious nationalism'; Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'; Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*.

[14] Columba Peoples, and Nick Vaughan-Williams, *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2021).

[15] Wendt, 'Collective identity formation and the international state', p. 385.

[16] Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics', p. 342.

[17] McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests*; Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations*; Filip Ejdus, 'Critical situations, fundamental questions and ontological insecurity in world politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 21:4 (2018), pp. 883–908.

[18] Bahar Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties* (London: Routledge, 2015); Amir Lupovici, 'Ontological dissonance, clashing identities, and Israel's unilateral steps towards the Palestinians', *Review of International Studies*, 38:4 (2012), pp. 809–33.

[19] Mitzen, 'Ontological security in world politics'.

[20] Jelena Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change', *Foreign Policy Analysis*, 12:4 (2016), pp. 610–27.

[21] Trine Flockhart, 'The problem of change in constructivist theory: Ontological security seeking and agent motivation', *Review of International Studies,* 42:5 (2016), pp. 799–820 (p. 806).

While most of Giddens-inspired works in OSS focused on anxiety and its role in continuity and change, several works also emphasised the role of shame. For Steele, shame is anxiety caused by the inability of actors to reconcile past or prospective actions with their biographical narratives.[22] This disconnect between state self-identity narratives and its actions lead to defensive actions such as apologies or denial and, as Youde points out, 'contributes to a state's process of developing and revising its national identity'.[23]

The reliance of the ontological security scholarship on Giddens was critiqued on several grounds, including for its 'status quo' bias,[24] reduction of ontological security to identity-seeking,[25] assumptions that actors have a single identity,[26] overlooking of unconscious processes,[27] and binarisation of ontological security–insecurity[28] among other things.[29] As Mitzen and Kinnvall point out, 'reading Giddens especially in light of his historical diagnoses readily results in pessimism about the trajectory of (international) politics in late modernity' and tilts towards the study of securitisation and politics of fear.[30]

To move beyond Giddens, some scholars have turned to existentialist philosophy, including the works of Søren Kierkegaard, Martin Heidegger, and Paul Tillich. From this *existentialist* perspective, anxiety is not merely one affect/emotion/mood among others, triggered by critical situations or extraordinary circumstances. Rather, it is an integral part of the human condition, something that can be evaded but never entirely eliminated.[31] It may be confronted in inauthentic ways, such as through the projection of external objects of fear and the stabilisation of identity narratives, or authentically, by embracing ambiguity and possibility. Existentialist accounts reject the ontological security/insecurity binary and instead highlight the revelatory and emancipatory potential of an authentic life that embraces anxiety.

Finally, the *psychoanalytic* perspective in OSS, mostly inspired by the work of Jacques Lacan, emphasised the unconscious dimension in ontological security dynamics.[32] Lacanian ideas first entered IR as a lens for critically assessing social constructivism[33] and the study of identity.[34] Ever

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[22] Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 13.

[23] Jeremy Youde, 'Shame, ontological insecurity and intercountry adoption', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 27:3 (2014), pp. 424–441 (p. 429).

[24] Richard N. Lebow, *National Identities and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Catarina Kinnvall and Jennifer Mitzen. 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics: Thinking with and beyond Giddens', *International Theory*, 12.2 (2020), pp. 240–256 (p. 240).

[25] Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, 'Ontological security, self-articulation and the securitization of identity', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 52:1 (2017), pp. 31–47.

[26] Lebow, *National Identities and International Relations*.

[27] John Cash, 'Psychoanalysis, cultures of anarchy, and ontological insecurity', *International Theory*, 12:2 (2020), pp. 306–21.

[28] Anne-Marie Houde, 'Navigating anxiety: International politics, identity narratives, and everyday defense mechanisms', *International Political Sociology*, 18:1 (2024), p. olad028.

[29] C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki, 'The positions of ontological (in)security in international relations: Object relations, unconscious phantasies, and anxiety management', *International Theory*, 17:1 (2025), pp. 118–50.

[30] Kinnvall and Mitzen. 'Anxiety, fear, and ontological security in world politics', p. 248.

[31] Rumelili, 'Integrating anxiety into international relations theory'; Bahar Rumelili, '[Our] age of anxiety'; Xander Kirke, and Brent J. Steele. 'Ontological security, myth, and existentialism', *Review of International Studies*, 49.5 (2023), pp. 905–23; Karl Gustafsson and Nina C. Krickel-Choi, 'Returning to the roots of ontological security: Insights from the existentialist anxiety literature', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26:3 (2020), pp. 875–95.

[32] Not all psychoanalytic works in OSS draw on Lacan. For a Kleinian approach, see Gellwitzki, 'The positions of ontological (in)security in international relations'; C. Nicolai L. Gellwitzki and Anne-Marie Houde, 'Narratives, ontological security, and unconscious phantasy: Germany and the European myth during the so-called migration crisis', *Political Psychology*, 44:2 (2023), pp. 435–51.

[33] Badredine Arfi, 'Fantasy in the discourse of "Social Theory of International Politics"', *Cooperation and Conflict*, 45:4 (2010), pp. 428–48.

[34] Charlotte Epstein, 'Who speaks? Discourse, the subject and the study of identity in international politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 17:2 (2011), pp. 327–50.

since, they influenced works on foreign policy,[35] the war on terror,[36] Covid-19,[37] the politics of cyberspace,[38] neoliberalism,[39] Brexit,[40] and more. As Zevnik and Mandelbaum argue, Lacanian ideas not only provided a new lens but also introduced a new ontology of void as a starting point for theorising the role of affect, and psychoanalysing world politics. This perspective also offered a different ethical standpoint, one that embraces the incompleteness of the subject and anxiety.[41]

From the Lacan-inspired psychoanalytical perspective, ontological security is not an achievable state of mind, but rather a fantasy driven by the desire to compensate for a primordial lack.[42] Filling the ontological lack is a perpetually unattainable goal. To soothe the anxiety caused by this persistent suffering, agents use fantasies to transform the ontological lack into an empirical one through objects-cause of desire, which promise the restoration of the Self's completeness. In contrast to the sociological approach described above, Lacan-inspired works posit that anxiety is a regular state of mind, while ontological security is merely a fantasy, one that is always out of reach.[43] They have not, however, discussed how, why, and under what conditions objects-cause of desire change in world politics.

In sum, the sociological, existentialist, and psychoanalytical perspectives on ontological security outlined above have enriched our understanding of identity-seeking and change in world politics, albeit in different ways. The sociological perspective construes change as the adaptation of a reflexive agent to a shifting social environment and hence struggles to account for radical transformations of self-identity. Existentialist approaches, by contrast, allow for the possibility of radical identity change as an expression of authentic agency, though often without sufficient attention to structural constraints. For Lacanians, agency is always restrained by structures. Identity-seeking, as well as identity change, occur in relation to discursive structures, such as objects-cause of desire. In other words, the Lacanian perspective offers a dialectical and relational understanding of agency and desire in IR as always caused by objects-cause of desire that, in turn, co-constitute a state's identity. Furthermore, none of the approaches have ventured sufficiently beyond anxiety (and shame) to understand the affective component of identity change. To address these gaps, in the next section we draw on the work of Lacan to import the concept of catharsis into OSS and IR as another affective mechanism behind identity transformation in world politics.

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[35] Ty Solomon, *The Politics of Subjectivity in American Foreign Policy Discourses* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2015).

[36] Andreja Zevnik, *Lacan, Deleuze and World Politics: Rethinking the Ontology of the Political Subject* (London: Routledge, 2016).

[37] Catarina Kinnvall, and Ted Svensson, 'Trauma, home, and geopolitical bordering: A Lacanian approach to the COVID-19 crisis', *International Studies Quarterly*, 67:3 (2023), p. sqad053.

[38] Jeppe T. Jacobsen, 'From neurotic citizen to hysteric security expert: A Lacanian reading of the perpetual demand for US cyber defence', *Critical Studies on Security*, 8:1 (2020), pp. 46–58; Jeppe T. Jacobsen, 'Lacan in the US cyber defence: Between public discourse and transgressive practice', *Review of International Studies*, 46:5 (2020), pp. 613–31; Jeppe T. Jacobsen, 'Microsoft's challenge to US militarization of cyberspace: A Lacanian study of norm entrepreneurship', *International Studies Quarterly*, 67:3 (2023), p. sqad051.

[39] Henry Maher, 'The free market as fantasy: A Lacanian approach to the problem of neoliberal resilience', *International Studies Quarterly*, 67:3 (2023), pp. sqad050.

[40] Moran M. Mandelbaum, 'Interpellation and the politics of belonging: A psychoanalytical framework', *International Studies Quarterly*, 67:3 (2023), p. sqad055.

[41] Zevnik and Mandelbaum. 'Introduction to special issue', p. 2.

[42] Cash, 'Psychoanalysis, cultures of anarchy, and ontological insecurity'; Marina Vulović and Filip Ejdus, 'Object-cause of desire and ontological security: Evidence from Serbia's opposition to Kosovo's membership in UNESCO', *International Theory*, 16:1 (2024), pp. 122–51; Vieira, '(Re-)imagining the "self" of ontological security'; Ali Bilgic and Jordan Pilcher, 'Desires, fantasies and hierarchies: Postcolonial status anxiety through ontological security', *Alternatives*, 48.1 (2023), pp. 3–19; Jakub Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression: Fantasy as a factor in international politics', *Journal of International Relations and Development*, 22 (2019), pp. 243–68.

[43] Vulović and Ejdus, 'Object-cause of desire and ontological security'; Sean Homer, *Jacques Lacan* (London: Routledge, 2005).

A Lacanian view of catharsis and its relevance for IR

The concept of catharsis, which is important to Lacan's work but undertheorised, remains unaddressed in OSS and IR more broadly.[44] Catharsis helps theorise how and under what (affective) conditions the object-cause of desire of collective subjects, such as states, can change over time. So far, researchers have observed that the object-cause of desire is not a stable referent and that desire changes or slides from one object to the other.[45] However they have not addressed in sufficient analytical depth the exact affective and discursive mechanisms underlying this change. We propose that those are catharsis, articulated through metonymy and metaphor. Our study therefore unpacks the affective and discursive mechanisms at play when a fantasy that promises fulfilment fails to deliver, forcing subjects to seek new fantasies, each centred around a new object-cause of desire. This will be explored in greater detail in the next section.

To theorise catharsis as an important affect in ontological security dynamics we turn to Lacanian psychoanalysis, which conceptualises the subject as inherently incomplete and perpetually pursuing the fulfilment of their identity. This is achieved through desire that circles around signifiers that temporarily anchor the subject's identity and are embedded into broader fantasmatic narratives about the complete self. This complete self can ultimately never be achieved and the very appeal of objects-cause of desire stems from the fact that they can never truly be attained. They can be understood as the void at the core of identity, with specific signifiers (be it empirical ones, or more abstract ones) embodying the ultimately false promise of fullness of identity.[46] In other words, the object-cause of desire gives the void its name through concrete signifiers, be it empirical ones, such as material artefacts or environments (important national artefacts, sacred territories etc.),[47] or more abstract ones such as 'sovereignty', 'freedom',[48] or 'nationalism'.

Even if states manage to capture or attain an empirical or abstract object (as signifier) representing fullness, it will cease to function as an object-cause of desire, necessitating the articulation of a new one to desire. This is how agency can be understood in Lacanian terms, as a desire-driven endeavour. In the scholarly debate on (the indivisibility of) sacred spaces in world politics,[49] this assumption is particularly relevant, as it enables us to examine whether and how objects-cause of desire can change, and why the fantasmatic narratives sometimes provide fulfilment while at other times fail to generate the necessary affective investment.

To answer the above question, we rely on Jacques Lacan, who theorises the affective mechanism of catharsis as a necessary precondition for generating investment in an alternative fantasy, at the heart of which lies a different object-cause of desire. Lacan interprets catharsis as the 'unveiling' of the subject when confronted with the enigma of their own desire.[50] As he puts it, catharsis is 'the articulation in speech of the truth about desire'.[51] In simpler terms, Lacan understands the subject as, first and foremost, a desiring being that perpetually seeks to fill the void at the heart of identity through acts of identification with objects-cause of desire, as mentioned above. Desire

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[44]Some works in IR where catharsis has been touched upon although not systematically theorised are Brent J.Steele, 'A catharsis for anxieties': Insights from Goffman on the politics of humour', *Global Society*, 35:1 (2021), pp. 102–16; Anand Menon, 'From crisis to catharsis: ESDP after Iraq', *International Affairs*, 80:4 (2004), pp. 631–48; Vendulka Kubálková, 'The twenty years' catharsis: EH Carr and IR', in Vendulka Kubálková, Nicholas Onuf, and Paul Kowert (eds), *International Relations in a Constructed World* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1998), pp. 25–57.

[45]Jacobsen, 'From neurotic citizen to hysteric security expert', pp. 50–1; Charlotte Heath-Kelly, 'Forgetting ISIS: Enmity, drive and repetition in security discourse', in Daniel Bertrand Monk (ed.), *'Who's Afraid of ISIS?' Towards a Doxology of War* (London: Routledge 2020), pp. 85–99.

[46]For an overview of this literature, see Vulović and Ejdus, 'Object-cause of desire and ontological security'.

[47]Vulović and Ejdus, 'Object-cause of desire and ontological security', pp. 127–32.

[48]Christopher S. Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment', *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 32:3 (2019), pp. 224–244 (p. 230); Eberle, 'Narrative, desire, ontological security, transgression', *Journal of International Relations and Development,* 22 (2019), pp. 247–48.

[49]Ron E. Hassner, *War on Sacred Grounds* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2010).

[50]Jean-Michel Vives, 'Catharsis: Psychoanalysis and the theatre', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 92:4 (2011), pp. 1009–27.

[51]Dylan Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 6.

is always caused and embodied by these objects (signifiers), which mask the subject's constitutive lack and promise a fullness of being attainable only at the level of fantasy.[52] Fantasies grip subjects into pursuing one course of action over another through their affective pull. In other words, 'the logic of … a fantasmatic narrative is such that it structures the subject's desire by presenting it with an ideal as well as an impediment to the realization of that ideal', which can ultimately never be realised.[53]

For Lacan, the unconscious is structured like language, and desire, being caused by *objets petit a*, is structured in the same way. Two concepts explain how repressed desires, which sometimes appear in dreams, come to the surface and are articulated in language: *metonymy* and *metaphor*. Metonymy, or displacement, involves the transfer (deferral) of signification from one object (signifier) to another – specifically, the deferral of the incarnation of desire (as *objet petit a*) onto something else or a different object within the same chain of signification as the original. This is why Lacan describes the relationship between signifiers as metonymic: a part, one object in the signifying chain, comes to represent the entire chain as such.[54] Metonymy indicates a relationship between two signifiers, where the whole is displaced and represented by its part.

Metaphor, or condensation, on the other hand, involves the substitution of an entire chain of signification with another. This occurs when the desire for one object is replaced by an entirely different one. In other words, metaphor arises when two signifiers are not related as part of the same signifying chain. Thus, metaphor explains how signifiers are substituted to take on an entirely new form, acquiring new meaning, while metonymy describes how signifiers are displaced by others within the same signifying chain, preserving their association with the previous meaning.

For Lacan, catharsis involves the operation of metonymy and metaphor as mechanisms for articulating repressed desires in speech. Lacan also theorises transference, which refers to the very act of deferring desire from one object to another, and should therefore be distinguished from catharsis as a precondition for this deferral to happen in the first place.[55] Accordingly, we argue that the cathartic expression of previously repressed desires and ideas can generate the necessary affective investment in political subjects, enabling the substitution of one object-cause of desire for another, whether through condensation (metaphor) or displacement (metonymy). Understanding desire as deferred from one object to another underscores the fact that desire is always rooted in *objets petit a*, as we remain perpetually desiring subjects. Thus, to express previously repressed desires, subjects must substitute one object with another, that is, defer their desire.

The moment of *repression* is crucial for understanding catharsis in Lacan. He claims that 'the truth we repress',[56] meaning that we repress the truth that we are lacking subjects. Furthermore, the form of metonymy 'gives oppressed truth its field',[57] which can be interpreted to mean that objects-cause of desire (as metonymic expressions) aim to overcome this lack by offering means of identification for the subject. Lacan's understanding of catharsis as being 'the articulation in speech of the truth about desire'[58] allows us to theorise catharsis as an affective mechanism that makes itself visible in the forms of metonymy and metaphor. They are the means of linking objects (empirical or abstract) to the self to temporarily and fantasmatically overcome the lack at the heart of subjectivity. We therefore argue that catharsis is the *force* underlying this mechanism, while metaphor or metonymy are its *forms*. Post-structuralist scholarship has recognised that affective investment

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[52]Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006).

[53]Jason Glynos, 'Ideological fantasy at work', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 13:3 (2008), pp. 275–296 (p. 283); Browning, 'Brexit populism and fantasies of fulfilment', p. 230.

[54]Lacan, *Ecrits*, pp. 428–9.

[55]Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 434.

[56]Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 433.

[57]Lacan, *Ecrits*, p. 423.

[58]Evans, *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, p. 6.

in discourses or *objets petit a*[59] underlies all discursive articulations[60] and should therefore not be sidelined in political analysis. This affective dimension constitutes a process which is internal to the field of meaning,[61] with political subjects pursuing the experience of enjoyment (*jouissance*) as a motivating force behind desire-driven narratives.[62] Subjects experience enjoyment, as a form of pleasurable suffering, in the circling around the ultimately unreachable object-cause of desire, as it can only function as an object of desire if it is posited as lacking.[63]

Affect and enjoyment are experienced 'as investments which infuse signification, fortifying meaning and discourse'.[64] Affective investment of collective subjects in an alternative fantasy under-pinning an object-cause of desire is necessary in order for it to acquire more permanence, or in other words, a hegemonic status.[65] In the end, this investment produces enjoyment, which helps its sustainment over time. As mentioned above, the ultimate goal of desire-driven discourses is the experience of enjoyment by positing an object-cause of desire, which promises to deliver it.

Since states and other collectives are composed of individuals, they, too, fantasise about different empirical embodiments of their objects-cause of desire. The tantalising absence of full enjoyment, perpetually out of reach because ontological lack can never be filled, is then attributed to internal and external others, fuelling processes of securitisation. This is how the political alchemy of security discourse transforms the debilitating anxiety of an ontologically incomplete subject into a more manageable fear of concrete, threatening others.[66] While alternative fantasies that could fill the void at the heart of identity are continuously repressed, the bar between the conscious and the subconscious is occasionally lifted, allowing repressed desires to surface temporarily. This creates a cathartic sensation and aids the identification with alternative objects-cause of desire when old ones fail to generate the necessary enjoyment.

While all states have their objects-cause of desire, they are not static but evolve over time, even though they can persist for decades. Fantasy discourses are never entirely stable but are especially susceptible to transformation during periods of war, peacebuilding, or rapid social, political, and economic change. These events are akin to the concept of dislocation, which refers to the every-day structural instability underlying all discourses.[67] The core argument of this article is that such changes occur through the affect of catharsis, which can manifest as either metonymy or metaphor.

In Eastern Europe, for example, the end of the Cold War involved the metaphorical replacement of the fantasy of a communist, classless society with that of returning to the West.[68] Another exam-ple of metaphorical substitution is Finland's handling of the Karelia question. During the Second World War, Finland lost the territory of Karelia, considered essential to its national identity, to the Soviet Union. However, after the war, it gradually replaced its object-cause of desire with other sig-nifiers, such as peace, security, and neutrality, and later, after the Cold War, with European Union (EU) membership.[69]

[59]Yannis Stavrakakis, *Lacanian Left: Essays on Psychoanalysis and Politics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007).

[60]Ernesto Laclau, *On Populist Reason* (London: Verso, 2005).

[61]Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 124–5.

[62]Lacan, *Ecrits*; Stavrakakis, *Lacanian Left*.

[63]Jason Glynos, 'The grip of ideology: A Lacanian approach to the theory of ideology', *Journal of Political Ideologies*, 6:2 (2001), pp. 191–214.

[64]Stavrakakis, *Lacanian Left*, p. 96.

[65]Yannis Stavrakakis, 'Jacques Lacan: Negotiating the psychosocial in and beyond language', in Ruth Wodak and Bernhard Forchtner (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics* (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 82–95.

[66]Huysmans, 'Security! What do you mean?'; Rumelili, 'Integrating anxiety into international relations theory'.

[67]Nadine Klopf, and Dirk Nabers, 'Dislocation: Toward a framework for the study of crises', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 4:2 (2024), pp. 1–14.

[68]Jakub Eberle, 'Desire as geopolitics: Reading the glass room as central European fantasy', *International Political Sociology*, 12:2 (2018), pp. 172–89.

[69]Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi. 'The ontological significance of Karelia: Finland's reconciliation with losing the promised land', in Bahar Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 137–154 .

Catharsis in world politics can also occur through metonymy, that is, when a part of the object-cause of desire is substituted for the whole. A notable example of metonymic substitution is the 1922 partition of Ireland. Through this partition, Great Britain and Ireland agreed to divide the island into the Republic of Ireland, which gained independence, and Northern Ireland, which remained part of Great Britain. In this sense, a part (Northern Ireland) came to represent the entirety of Great Britain's desire and claim over the island, while the Republic of Ireland relinquished part of its territory (Northern Ireland) to secure independence for the rest of the country and end the war. The process was formally concluded with the 1998 Good Friday Agreement, which confirmed Northern Ireland's status within the UK while the Republic of Ireland amended its constitution to remove its claim over Northern Ireland.[70]

In sum, catharsis is an important yet previously overlooked affective mechanism in the transformation of collective fantasies, desires, and identities, which are characteristic of critical situations, discursive dislocations, and systemic changes in world politics. In the next section, we illustrate how catharsis operates through metaphor and metonymy in the case of Serbia's attachment to Kosovo.

Catharsis, Kosovo, and rearticulation of Serbia's desires

In this section, drawing on Lacanian psychoanalysis, we illustrate the cathartic effects of metaphorical and metonymic deferrals of desire from one object to another in the context of Kosovo's evolving significance for Serbian national identity and ontological security-seeking. We first exemplify this dynamic through a successful case of metaphoric deferral of desire from Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia's object-cause of desire in the late 19th century, to Kosovo as the incarnation of Serbian identity at the beginning of the 20th century (material signifiers). Then we use another case of successful metaphoric deferral from communism and its vision of a classless society to nationalism and the revival of Serbian medieval national history following the collapse of communism in the 1990s (abstract signifiers). Finally, we depict a failed metonymic deferral of desire from southern Kosovo to northern Kosovo around 2018, when the partition discourse emerged (material signifiers). In each case, we explain how cultural heritage and medieval national history functioned as cathartic forces and appealing fantasies that facilitated affective investment in alternative signifiers. We also analyse why, in some cases, this affective investment in new objects-cause of desire was successful, while in others, it failed.

We argue that the metonymic substitution of Northern Kosovo for the rest of Kosovo in 2018 failed due to the indivisibility of Kosovo as Serbia's sacred space and because the affective narratives (i.e. fantasies) woven around the heritage of Helen of Anjou in Northern Kosovo were unable to compete with the medieval heritage of the Nemanjić dynasty in the south of Kosovo. This heritage includes the four major holy sites and monasteries: Dečani, the Patriarchate of Peć, the Church of the Virgin of Ljeviš, and Gračanica. After all, these four monasteries still exist in their material form and remain frequent pilgrimage sites for Serbs from both Serbia proper and Northern Kosovo, as well as neighbouring countries such as Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. By contrast, the heritage of Helen of Anjou is not even visible to the eye, revealing itself only when the water level of Lake Gazivode drops drastically during hot summers, allowing the remains of what is believed to be her castle to emerge.

For the first two empirical subsections, we rely on a review of the literature on this topic and desk research, as these are well-researched themes in academic scholarship, which we interpret through a Lacanian lens. The third subsection, on partition discourse, is far less explored, with the exception of a few articles,[71] while the cultural heritage of Helen of Anjou in the context of affective

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[70]On how the peace process in Northern Ireland also generated ontological insecurity, see Audra Mitchell, 'Ontological (in)security and violent peace in Northern Ireland', in Bahar Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties* (London: Routledge, 2015), pp. 99–117.

[71]Marina Vulović, 'The Serbian Progressive Party's re-articulation of the Kosovo myth within the internal dialogue on Kosovo, 2017–2018', *European Politics and Society*, 24:4 (2022), pp. 518–34; F. Aslı Kelkitli, 'Could land swaps break the

narratives and mobilisation in Serbian politics is virtually absent from the literature. Therefore, we draw on media analysis of articles discussing Helen of Anjou's heritage in 2018 (digital material) and print media reports from the 1970s on the construction of Lake Gazivode (archival material). Additionally, we conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Ibarski Kolašin, which is the area around the Lake Gazivode, in March 2024 to examine local perceptions and investments in these affective narratives before and after the 2018 partition attempt.

Our digital material was collected using keyword search on Google, while the archival material (all issues of the newspapers *Jedinstvo* and *Politika* between 1972 and 1977 during the construction of Lake Gazivode) was systematically evaluated for references to Helen of Anjou and the related heritage. Our ethnographic fieldwork with 15 local respondents was carried out from 11 to 15 March 2024. The timeframe simultaneously constitutes one of the limitations of our method, since we did not conduct the interviews in 2018, when the partition idea was debated. However, given that we evaluate our case study through the lens of Lacanian concepts such as fantasies and objects-cause of desire, all of which have permanence in discourse, we posit that they would not have significantly changed even if we had conducted our ethnographic work in 2018. Also, another methodological limitation is that we only investigated the Serbian discourse on Kosovo, without bringing into the picture the Kosovo Albanian point of view. This gave our analysis analytical focus on the evolution of Serbia's desires but occluded how these discourses evolved relationally as 'narratives in dialogue'.[72]

The historical construction of Kosovo as Serbia's object-cause of desire

Serbia's modern history began with the First Serbian Uprising (1804–13) against the Ottomans. Throughout the first half of the 19th century, Serbia gradually expanded its autonomy within the weakening Ottoman Empire, eventually gaining independence at the 1878 Congress of Berlin. Although the newly independent state did not include the territory of present-day Kosovo, it had already set its sights on this symbolically significant land, soaked with the blood of medieval heroes and dotted with Orthodox Christian monasteries.

However, this territorial aspiration emerged only in the final years before the Congress of Berlin as a substitute for the thwarted desire to expand into Bosnia and Herzegovina. Since the early 19th century, Serbian nationalism had sought to extend into other Serbian-inhabited lands, most notably Bosnia. Being an emerging nation-state in Europe at the time involved not only national unification but also territorial expansion. Thus, mapping the lands to be acquired was part of the pursuit of ontological security. The revolutionary anthem of the Serbian Uprisings, *Vostani Serbie* (*Arise, Serbia*), did not even mention Kosovo. The territory was absent from all national plans formulated during or after the uprisings, including *Načertanije* (*The Outline*), the most significant 19th-century grand strategy of the Serbian national movement. However, with the rise of Prussia and the unification of Germany, the Habsburg Empire was pushed out of Central Europe and forced to expand into Southeast Europe. Following the Great Eastern Crisis (1875–8), it was granted permission to occupy the Ottoman province of Bosnia and Herzegovina.[73]

Geopolitically pushed out of Bosnia and Herzegovina by a much greater power, Serbia redirected its territorial aspirations towards the Ottoman vilayet of Kosovo. This shift sparked a significant fantasmatic effort to construct Kosovo as the cradle of the nation and a space tied to the golden age of medieval glory.[74] The central historical event in this narrative, which remains at the core of Serbia's national identity, is the mythical Battle of Kosovo in 1389, when, according to legend, God granted the Serbs the status of a heavenly people. During the First Balkan War in 1912, Serbia

Kosovo–Serbia impasse?', *Survival:Global Politics and Strategy*, 63:3 (2021), pp. 71–98; Eiki Berg and Shpend Kursani, 'Back to the future: Attempts to buy, swap, and annex territories in contemporary sovereignty practices', *Global Studies Quarterly*, 3:2 (2023), pp. 1–12.

[72]Jelena Subotić, 'Genocide narratives as narratives-in-dialogue', *Journal of Regional Security*, 10:2 (2015), pp. 177–98.

[73]Filip Ejdus, *Crisis and Ontological Security: Serbia's Anxiety over Kosovo's Secession* (Cham: Palgrave, 2018).

[74]Ibid., p. 47–8; Dušan Bataković, *Kosovo i Metohija: istorija i ideologija* (Beograd: Čigoja štampam 2007), pp. 20, 54.

'liberated' Kosovo and annexed it into the Kingdom of Serbia – a move that remains the key legal basis for Serbia's claim over Kosovo to this day.

Successful metaphor: From classless society to national revival during the 1990s

Following the death of Josip Broz Tito in 1980, who had ruled Yugoslavia in an authoritarian manner and held it together, there was an eruption of previously suppressed collective memories and emotions tied to ethno-national history. During Tito's rule, nationalism was condemned and suppressed as a dangerous force that threatened Yugoslav brotherhood and unity.[75] His death unleashed anxiety and ontological insecurity about the future of the Yugoslav project, while the Yugoslav intelligentsia increasingly engaged with the national question within socialism and began reinterpreting the nation through the lens of history and religion.

In Serbia, this shift concretely took the form of substituting Yugoslavism with Serbism, or reviving the Serbian nationalist idea.[76] It was closely linked to the cult of religious Orthodoxy, embodied by St Sava, the first archbishop of the autocephalous Serbian Church; the medieval state of Rascia (11th–13th century); the subsequent imperial expansion of the 14th century under the Nemanjić dynasty; and the myth of the martyrdom of Prince Lazar in the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. These historical and mythological elements helped the ruling elites to restore a sense of ontological security despite the dissolution of Yugoslavia and became the cornerstone of Serbian national identity and Kosovo politics during the Milošević regime in the late 1980s and 1990s.[77]

Tensions in Kosovo began to rise after Tito's death in 1980, culminating in mass protests in 1981 demanding that Kosovo be granted the status of a Yugoslav republic. The Yugoslav authorities interpreted this as a counter-revolution and imposed a state of emergency. This only further heightened ethnic tensions between the majority Kosovo Albanians and the minority Kosovo Serbs, accelerating the emigration of the latter from the province but also existential anxieties about the looming disintegration of Serbia. The Milošević regime exploited these sentiments by placing Kosovo at the centre of its politics of national revival, thereby fostering a sense of ontological security in the face of centrifugal tendencies that threatened to tear Serbia apart.

Perhaps the most prominent expression of Serbian nationalism was the Memorandum of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts (SANU) from 1986.[78] In the Memorandum, Serbia's intellectual elite drew attention to the alleged 'persecution and expulsion' of Serbs from Kosovo, which, along with other factors, such as the discrimination against Serbs and Serbia within Yugoslavia, was destabilising the entire country.[79] This was an implicit call for the nationalisation of Kosovo, a policy that would later be realised under Milošević.

Milošević's famous speech at Gazimestan in 1989, the site of the medieval Battle of Kosovo, where Prince Lazar and the invading forces of the Ottoman Empire both lost their lives, solidified Serbia's Kosovo policy for the years to come, ultimately culminating in the Kosovo War of 1998–9. Within this nationalist ontological security seeking, Serbian medieval cultural heritage, specifically, the four UNESCO-protected monasteries of Dečani, the Patriarchate of Peć, the Church of the Virgin of Ljeviš, and Gračanica, all built by the Nemanjić dynasty in southern Kosovo (the Metohija region), played a particularly important role. The Serbian Orthodox Church's discourse on this

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[75]Rei Shigeno, 'Nationalism and Serbian intellectuals', *Perspectives on European Politics and Society*, 5:1 (2004), pp.135–59.

[76]Aleksandar Pavković, 'From Yugoslavism to Serbism: The Serb national idea 1986–1996', *Nations and Nationalism*, 4:4 (1998), pp. 511–28.

[77]Florian Bieber, 'Nationalist mobilization and stories of Serb suffering: The Kosovo myth from 600th anniversary to the present', *Rethinking History*, 6:1 (2002), pp. 95–110; Sabrina P. Ramet, 'Dead kings and national myths: Why myths of founding and martyrdom are important', in Sabrina P. Ramet, Ola Listhuang, and Dragana Dulić, *Civic and Uncivic Values: Serbia in the Post-Milosevic Era* (Central European University Press, 2010), pp. 267–98; Jelena Subotić, 'The church, the nation, and the state: The Serbian Orthodox Church after communism', in Sabrina Ramet (ed.), *Orthodox Churches and Politics in Southeastern Europe* (Cham: Palgrave, 2019), pp. 85–110.

[78]The unfinished text was leaked to *Večernje novosti* daily newspaper and was criticised by the communist authorities as nationalistic.

[79]SANU, *Memorandum (leaked and unfinished document)*, Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences (24 September 1986).

cultural heritage and the sacredness of these sites propagated a compelling affective narrative, reinforcing the broader population's investment in Kosovo as Serbia's *objet petit a*.

Still today, following the wars of Yugoslav succession in the 1990s, as well as Kosovo's declaration of independence from Serbia in 2008, the claim to Kosovo resonates strongly in Serbian political discourse, particularly its policy on Kosovo, given that Serbia does not recognise Kosovo as an independent state. Serbia's policies on Kosovo centre not only on preserving a certain self-identity narrative that 'Kosovo is the heart of Serbia' and 'Serbian Jerusalem' but also on the selective (de)activation of certain narratives to serve new policy needs, especially EU membership and the normalisation dialogue with Priština.[80] One of its aims is the self-management of the Serb community, primarily in North Kosovo, as well as the protection and preservation of the Serbian cultural and religious heritage in Kosovo, particularly the four monasteries mentioned above.

Interest in the medieval heritage of this area was revived following the collapse of communism in the early 1990s, the rise of nationalism, and the broader resurgence of medieval heritage across the Yugoslav space. From a Lacanian perspective, this development can be interpreted as a form of cathartic condensation (metaphor) or the deferral of desire from one object to another in a paradigmatic relationship, namely, from communism and its fantasy of a classless society to ethno-nationalism and its fantasy of restoring medieval grandeur.[81] Ontological security and the fullness of identity was no longer sought in an imagined future where an idealised version of communism would achieve a truly classless society but rather in an idealised past, when the nation experienced its own Golden Age. The Nemanjić dynasty and its heritage in Kosovo, as well as Kosovo itself as a sacred ontic space, a material extension of the collective self, have thus been articulated as the central pillars of this ethno-nationalist fantasy.

The fact that the communist regime under Tito suppressed ethno-national narratives only reinforces the explanatory power of catharsis as an affective mechanism. Following the collapse of communist rule in Yugoslavia and the dislocation caused by this traumatic event, collective subjects sought alternative forms of identification, embodied in empirical objects-cause of desire. For the Serbian national collective, this object-cause of desire became Kosovo, an ontic space that not only served as a territorial embodiment of nationalist history through its connection to the medieval Serbian Empire but also symbolised the Kosovo myth.[82] Claiming Kosovo as Serbian provided the Serb community with a crucial source of enjoyment during a period of nationalist identity revival after the fall of communism. The religious and cultural heritage in Kosovo has played a decisive role in sacralising and emotionalising the discourse on Kosovo, primarily propagated by the Serbian Orthodox Church but also by political leaders, thus offering the affective pull necessary to facilitate this substitution.[83]

Within the context of this metaphor,[84] attention was primarily focused on the two golden centuries of the Nemanjić dynasty (12th–14th century) and their activities in Kosovo. Since most

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[80]Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change'.

[81]One should emphasise that this transition did not happen abruptly, but incrementally. Already during the 1980s, the communist fantasy of a classless society had begun to lose its grip. This period was characterised by a gradual disidentification from communism and an identification with nationalist fantasies, which ultimately achieved a hegemonic status during Milošević's rule and the nationalist mobilisation tied to the Yugoslav wars of the 1990s.

[82]Marina Vulović and Filip Ejdus. 'Object-cause of desire and ontological security'.

[83]Emil Hilton Saggau, 'Kosovo crucified: Narratives in the contemporary Serbian Orthodox perception of Kosovo', *Religions*, 10:10 (2019), pp. 1–18; Vulović, 'The Serbian Progressive Party's re-articulation of the Kosovo myth within the internal dialogue on Kosovo, 2017–2018'.

[84]Not every metaphoric substitution was successful in the analysed case. After the mass mobilisation against the Milošević regime in Serbia and its collapse after 5 October 2000, there was an attempt to metaphorically substitute Kosovo – over which Serbia de facto lost sovereignty after the Kumanovo agreement in 1999, which ended the Kosovo war and resulted in the retraction of all Yugoslav security personnel from Kosovo – with the European Union as an alternative way to offer fulfilment of identity. Joining the block was presented as the ultimate solution to all of Serbia's problems, one of which was the undetermined status of Kosovo, which declared itself independent unilaterally in 2008. However, instead of managing to generate the necessary affective investment in this fantasy, Kosovo's affective pull became even stronger, since Serbia had to symbolically 'fight' for this territory in the wake of its declaration of independence. As Lacanian scholarship has previously argued, the

interest centred on male rulers who founded or expanded the state, the story of Helen of Anjou, the only female ruler in Serbian medieval history, also raised as a Catholic, stood out prominently. She gained attention in mass media through an apocryphal story, likely invented in the 1990s, which claimed that before her arrival from Western Europe, her husband, King Uroš, planted lilac flowers in the Ibar River valley around his estate at the Maglič castle near Kraljevo to make her feel at home. This story was popularised largely through an annual event called *The Days of the Lilacs* (Serb. *Dani Jorgovana*).

The festival was the brainchild of public broadcaster journalist Milan Glišović, who, after a trip to France in the 1990s and his discovery of medieval ties between Serbian and French rulers, initiated the commemorative event. It has been organised yearly in Kraljevo and Raška by the Yugoslav-French (later Serbian-French) society *Helen of Anjou*. Even the revival of this festival aligns with the broader metaphoric substitution of communism with nationalism and the quest for restoration of ontological security after the dissolution of Yugoslavia in the 1990s.

However, despite this romantic but historically dubious story linked to a site about 100 kilometres north of Gazivode, there was little public interest in the actual location of the queen's seat, Brnjak, where Lake Gazivode would be created some 660 years after her death. This story remained a minor footnote in the broader fantasy that constructed the entire area of Kosovo as a sacred ontic space, with the strongest emphasis placed on the Nemanjić-built monasteries located south of the Ibar River, as previously mentioned.

Unsuccessful metonymy: North Kosovo for the rest of Kosovo in 2018

Interest in North Kosovo and Helen of Anjou was revived and brought into the spotlight in 2018 amid discussions about a potential land swap deal between Belgrade and Priština.[85] At that time, five years after the signing of the Brussels Agreement (2013) on normalisation, Serbian president Aleksandar Vučić and Kosovar president Hashim Thaçi opened negotiations on a possible resolution to the Kosovo conflict, proposing an exchange of equivalent territories: the Albanian-populated Preševo Valley in southern Serbia for the Serb-populated north of Kosovo.[86]

The role of the heritage of Helen of Anjou in deferring desire from South to North Kosovo

Interest in Gazivode Lake was sparked by Dušan Jovović, an employee of the Serbian Government's Office for Kosovo and Metohija, who announced in 2018 the production of a documentary film about the 'lost castles' of Helen of Anjou, allegedly submerged in the 1970s. This was followed by a surge of interest in this purportedly submerged cultural heritage in Serbian media. In fact, as of March 2024, 23 out of 35 online articles about the submerged ruins linked to Helen of Anjou were published in 2018.

The media ecstatically reported on the project, which also involved divers equipped with sophisticated technology from Saint Petersburg, Russia. Virtually all reports used sensationalist language, referring to the 'secrets hidden underwater for almost half a century' and describing the 'priceless cultural heritage' supposedly discovered beneath the lake. The ruins were said to include the palace of Helen of Anjou, the first girls' school in medieval Serbia, a bell tower, and two medieval churches. Some reports even speculated about the possible discovery of Helen of Anjou's remains, which had mysteriously disappeared sometime in the 20th century. As one report put it: 'A secret hidden for

appeal of *objets petit a* stems precisely from the fact that they are posited as lacking or stolen and can thus effectively act as temporary anchors of identity.

[85]Aleksander Zdravkovski and Sabrina P. Ramet, 'The proposed territorial exchange between Serbia and Kosovo', *Insight Turkey*, 21:2 (2019), pp. 10–22.

[86]On transformation of Serbia's narratives on Kosovo following the conclusion of the 2013 Brussels Agreement, see Subotić, 'Narrative, ontological security, and foreign policy change'.

almost half a century at the bottom of Lake Gazivode, which was created in 1977, has finally come to the surface.'[87]

According to media narratives, the truth about what lay beneath the water was systematically concealed by the Yugoslav authorities, not only due to their communist aversion to national and medieval histories but also because of alleged Albanian hostility towards the Serbs. The submergence of the Ibarski Kolašin area in North Kosovo and the displacement of Serbs from Kosovo were framed as 'ethnic cleansing' and 'a disaster worse than the hordes of Shiptars' (a derogatory Serbian term for Kosovo Albanians), invoking past pogroms committed against Serbs by Albanian *kaçaks* (bandits) at the turn of the 20th century.[88] These media narratives thus construct the fantasy of the threatening Albanian *Other*, who deprives the Serb community of its cultural heritage and collective enjoyment.

According to filmmaker Dušan Jovović, before the creation of the lake, an archaeological team was sent to explore the area. However, their work was rushed, lasting only three months. During this time, they identified 30 sites, yet half of the documentation went missing.[89] The revelation of long-submerged truths, hidden beneath the lake and suppressed by the twin forces of communism and Albanian nationalism, was met with excitement. One report noted that this was evident on the faces of the Russian divers: 'Their expressions, as they emerged from the water, both joyful and astonished by what they had discovered, undoubtedly testify to the significance of these finds.'[90] It is clear how the fantasmatic narratives woven around the alleged discovery of the ruins promised to produce enjoyment.

In these media reports, the region is referred to as 'the sacred Serbian land', 'the Jerusalem of Europe', and 'the Serbian Atlantis',[91] suggesting that the renaissance began in Serbia. Meanwhile, Jovović is dubbed 'the Serbian Indiana Jones'.[92] Interestingly, these reports consistently describe him as a doctor of digital arts and an enthusiast who invested his own money into the project, while his role within the Government Office for Kosovo and Metohija is rarely, if ever, mentioned.[93] In his words,

> I am blessed to have been able to engage in and see some things that had until then only been mentioned in theory. It is certain that a dose of adventure in the blood is needed for someone to engage in this, but also the persistence of a donkey. I truly believe that the Serbian Ark of the Covenant is the whole of Kosovo and Metohija.[94]

Even though Vučić and Thaçi secured tacit approval for the land swap initiative from some members of the US administration and officials in several EU capitals, the controversial proposal was ultimately abandoned due to strong opposition from the populations of Serbia and Kosovo, as well as from neighbouring countries, Germany, and the EU.[95] Consequently, interest in the lost castle of Helen of Anjou soon waned, and the film project about it was abandoned.

[87]'Gazivode, reč o kojoj priča cela Srbija', Kurir, (8 September 2018), available at: {https://www.kurir.rs/vesti/drustvo/3117165/gazivode-rec-o-kojoj-danas-prica-cela-srbija-a-tek-kakvu-tajnu-krije-na-dnu-jezera-pronadjena-groblja-ckrva-blaga-jelene-anzujske-to-nije-sve-ronioci-sokirani}.

[88]'Nacionalno blago na dnu jezera', Republika, (8 October 2023), available at:{https://www.republika.rs/vesti/drustvo/473108/jezero-gazivode-spomenici-na-dnu}.

[89]'Gazivode udavile srpsku istoriju', Kossev, (12 January 2018), available at: {https://kossev.info/gazivode-udavile-srpsku-istoriju/}.

[90]Ibid .

[91]'Srpska Atlantida', Blic, (16 May 2018), available at:{https://www.blic.rs/slobodno-vreme/vesti/srpska-atlantida-na-dnu-jezera-gazivode-pronadeno-neprocenjivo-blago-kraljice-jelene/v5tcvsp}.

[92]'Gazivode udavile srpsku istoriju', Kossev.

[93]'Srpska Atlantida', Blic.

[94]'Srpska Atlantida', Blic.

[95]'Germany warns on Serbia–Kosovo land swap idea', Reuters, (31 August 2018), available at: {https://www.reuters.com/article/world/germany-warns-on-serbia-kosovo-land-swap-idea-idUSKCN1LG19E/}.

Judging by media narratives and the fact that the film project, crucial in propelling the story, was initiated by a government employee, one could assume that the sacralisation of the artificial lake was strategically orchestrated from above. From this perspective, the goal was a metonymic deferral, intended to make the loss of sacred spaces in the south more palatable by emphasising that sacred land exists in the north as well. When examining the historical context of Belgrade's interest in the cultural heritage of Ibarski Kolašin during the 1990s, we can observe a metaphorical deferral of desire, from communism and economic progress to the revival of national history within the framework of Serbian nationalism, as discussed in the section above.

Although the existence of this cultural heritage in Ibarski Kolašin was acknowledged during the communist era, evident in the 1969 TV special *Karavan*, produced by the public broadcaster, which explicitly mentions the remains of Helen of Anjou's castle in the village of Brnjak, as well as her summer residence, it was not widely discussed in later years due to the creation of Gazivode Lake, which submerged this heritage.[96]

In fact, our analysis of articles published in *Politika* and *Jedinstvo* between 1972 and 1977 did not yield a single reference to this medieval cultural heritage in and around Gazivode Lake (there was one mention of ancient heritage dating to the 2nd century, located approximately 27 km from Mitrovica).[97] This changed in the 1990s, when Serbia 'rediscovered' Helen of Anjou's heritage in the Raška and Kraljevo regions and established *The Days of the Lilacs* festival in her honour in 1993.

However, the cultural heritage of Helen of Anjou in Ibarski Kolašin was preserved through oral history in this region throughout the communist period and even earlier. Grigorije Božović, one of the most prominent academics from this region in the early 20th century, references sites and heritage associated with Helen of Anjou in his stories *Sa zelene londže, Kolašinska posla*, and *Pokraj sasušenih hrastova*, all published in the first half of the 20th century.[98] Additionally, in 1931, the primary school in the village of Brnjak (where the largest part of Gazivode is located) was named *Queen Helen of Anjou*.[99] During the communist period, it was renamed *Petar Kočić*, after a Bosnian-Serb national figure.[100]

The impression that the memory of Helen of Anjou was suppressed during communism was also reflected in our interviews with locals, forming a prominent fantasmatic narrative tied to the perceived broader repression of Serbian history and cultural heritage during this period. Locals claimed that they could not publicly discuss Serbia's medieval heritage at the time and could only preserve it in whispers.

As one local inhabitant, who was relocated due to the creation of the lake and had briefly attended the elementary school named *Helen of Anjou* before the Second World War, recalled: 'During communism, we could not openly talk about these memories. Nobody could say a word about it because Udba (i.e., the Yugoslav secret police) would immediately take you away.'[101] Some also reported that, while awareness of the heritage remained, and children used to play around the ruins before they were submerged, the communist leadership did not actively promote it. Additionally, locals recounted: 'Communism fought against the Nemanjićs, and Albanians fought against the Serbs. With the construction of the lake, they [communists/Albanians] wanted to cut off the Serbian line of heritage in these lands. Why should there be anything left of Serbian medieval history here? That is why the Serb population also left these lands.'[102]

[96] 'Karavan ibrom of Zvečana do Rožaja 1969: Kolašin kojeg više nema', Kossev, (16 November 2019), available at: {https://kossev.info/karavan-ibrom-od-zvecana-od-rozaja-1969-kolasin-kojeg-vise-nema}.

[97] Danilo Kocić, 'Naselje iz drugog veka.' *Jedinstvo* (5 December 1977).

[98] Grigorije Božović, *Moj divni Kolašin: Priče i putopisi iz Starog Kolašina* (Zubin Potok: Stari Kolasin, 2019).

[99] Ivanka Mušikić Popović and Sait Kačapor, 'Školstvo i prosveta u Ibarskom Kolašinu 1918–1941', *Zbornik radova Filozofskog fakulteta*, 43:2 (2013), pp. 85–98; Vučina Dobrić, *Prosvetiteljstvo i školstvo u Starom Kolašinu* (Zubin Potok: Stari Kolasin, 2010), p. 451.

[100] Dobrić, *Prosvetiteljstvo i školstvo*; interview 5.

[101] Interview 5.

[102] Interviews 2–4.

However, locals also mentioned that short-lived archaeological excavations took place in Brnjak a few years before the lake's construction, around ruins believed to be tied to Helen of Anjou. One respondent's father had been involved in the excavations, but they yielded no significant results. Many expressed regret that the communist leadership showed little concern for cultural heritage when the region was submerged.[103]

After the fall of communism and Serbia's renewed interest in this heritage, the local population gained the opportunity to express previously suppressed narratives more freely. One notable example is the *Days of the Lilacs* festival, which began in Kraljevo and was first organised in Ibarski Kolašin in 1997 in cooperation with Glišović. Since 2014, it has been held there almost annually.[104] The festival was also organised in 2024, shortly after our visit to the site, and was marked by the planting of lilac trees in and around the Brnjak Monastery,[105] which was built in 2018 with financial support from the Serbian government.[106]

The heritage and stories surrounding Queen Helen of Anjou also embed this region within the broader context of Serbian autobiographical narratives and belonging in the historic lands of Kosovo, often regarded as the cradle of Serbdom. As one of our respondents eloquently put it:

> I am glad that I was born in such a place, because there is a kind of unbroken thread between the traditions of the Middle Ages, the medieval Serbian state of Rascia, and the current moment. Regardless of the circumstances there are some spiritual ties that determine the identity of a people.[107]

Other respondents also emphasised that Ibarski Kolašin has 'always been part of Old Serbia' rather than what is today called Kosovo,[108] underscoring the region's enduring connection to its medieval Serbian heritage and the Nemanjić dynasty.

There also appears to be a fantasmatic narrative surrounding the holiness of sites associated with Helen of Anjou in and around Gazivode among the local population. Numerous stories recount miraculous healings that occurred in the past, particularly linked to the church that was submerged under the lake.[109] Additionally, beyond miraculous healings, there are also tales of extraordinary skill development, such as learning to knit simply by sitting next to a stone believed to be the remains of the former knitting school founded by Helen of Anjou, passed down through generations.[110] At family gatherings, local villagers frequently retell stories about Helen of Anjou. As one respondent described: 'The entire area around the submerged ruins exudes her spirit. We come there to pray. She made the entire area holy.'[111]

Occasionally, when the lake's water level drops, the ruins can be seen emerging slightly along the shoreline where the village of Sastavci once stood, a site believed to have been the location of the queen's medieval castle.[112] At the same time, one of our respondents emphasised that Helen of Anjou's heritage should not be considered a sacred site but merely historical ruins, which cannot be compared to the 'official' holy sites of the Serbian Orthodox Church in southern Kosovo.[113]

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[103]Interviews 14–15.

[104]Interview 1.

[105]'Dani jorgovana u manastiru Brnjak', Kosovo Online, (25 May 2024), available at: {https://www.kosovo-online.com/vesti/kultura/parlic-kroz-manifestaciju-dani-jorgovana-cuvacemo-znacaj-srpske-kraljice-jelene}.

[106]'Ovde 600 godina nije zvono zazvonilo', Telegraf, (28 July 2020), available at: {https://www.telegraf.rs/vesti/srbija/3218794-ovde-600-godina-nije-zvono-zazvonilo-reci-koje-su-potresle-igumaniju-na-posedu-jelene-anzujske} accessed 13 February 2025.

[107]Interviews 14–15.

[108]Interview 1.

[109]Interviews 2–4.

[110]Interviews 2–4.

[111]Interviews 2–4.

[112]Interviews 2–4; Interviews 6–9.

[113]Interview 1.

Regarding opinions on Jovović's 2018 movie, many locals view it as disingenuous and driven by greed. Rather than conducting rigorous, scientifically grounded research, some believe Jovović's motivations were purely commercial, a marketing ploy[114] and a money-making tool,[115] framing the story as one of *forgotten* heritage, despite the fact that the local population has never forgotten it.[116]

At the same time, they interpret the film within the context of the 2018 land swap policy discourse, when Serbia was adamant about 'not giving up Gazivode' and sought to demonstrate that 'the lake was not only important for energy supply and irrigation, but that it was also tied to mass resettlements in the past and Serbian cultural heritage'.[117] The construction of Brnjak Monastery, dedicated to Helen of Anjou, in 2018 with financial support from the Government Office for Kosovo and Metohija reinforces this perspective.

One respondent even compared the hype surrounding the movie to 'the Loch Ness monster', a for-profit exploitation of local heritage.[118] The instrumentalisation of this heritage by both cultural entrepreneurs and politicians from Belgrade is seen in the broader context of the local population's sense of marginalisation by Serbia's political centre. Many believe that Belgrade has not only successively 'given up everything Serbian in Kosovo to Kosovo Albanians'[119] but has also neglected the region culturally, with politicians 'only taking an interest in it when it comes to politics'.[120]

Why did the metonymic substitution fail?

First and foremost, the population in both Serbia proper and North Kosovo did not support the idea of partition. As various polls indicate, both North Kosovo Serbs and Serbs from South Kosovo were strongly opposed to it (66 per cent against, while 33 per cent in favour in North Kosovo; 80 per cent against, while 20 per cent in favour in South Kosovo),[121] while Serbs from Serbia proper also largely rejected the idea (41.8 per cent opposed, while only 24.5 per cent in favour).[122]

The Serbian Orthodox Church publicly opposed the partition, calling it a 'deeply unsettling and concerning' idea that lacked the support of the majority of Serbian citizens. They argued that such a decision would mean Serbia was giving up 'the most important' part of Kosovo, where the holy sites and churches are located,[123] effectively 'forever abolishing every historical right of Serbia in these lands of Serbian spirituality and statehood'.[124] This statement highlights the deep affective attachment to religious and cultural heritage in the South and the broader population's inability to conceive of partitioning the sacred land, thus preventing them from investing in this alternative fantasy.

A similar understanding of Kosovo as indivisible, with the cultural heritage of Helen of Anjou forming an inseparable part of Serbia's historical and cultural heritage in Kosovo, was echoed by our respondents in North Kosovo. The heritage of Helen of Anjou plays a key role in the fantasmatic narrative linking Serbia's claim to the entirety of Kosovo with its medieval history and golden age.

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[114]Interview 1; Interviews 14–15.

[115]Interviews 6–9.

[116]Interviews 14–15.

[117]Interviews 6–9.

[118]Interview 1.

[119]Interviews 6–9.

[120]Interview 1.

[121]Miodrag Miki Marinković, Miloš Timotijević, and Senka Kostić, Analize trendova 2019: stavovi srpske zajednice na Kosovu, (November 2019), available at: {https://dialogue-info.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Analiza-trendova-2019.pdf}.

[122]Institut za evropske poslove, Stavovi građana Srbije prema Kosovu, (March 2019) available at: {https://iea.rs/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/14-Stav-gra%C4%91ana-Srbije-prema-Kosovu-mart-2019.pdf}

[123]'Srpska Pravoslavna Crkva nije za zamrznuti konflikt, postoji zabrinutost zbog razgraničenja' (7 November 2018), available at: {https://www.blic.rs/vesti/drustvo/srpska-pravoslavna-crkva-nije-za-zamrznuti-konflikt-postoji-zabrinutost-zbog/qey0plt}.

[124]Ibid.

The local population recognised the government's partition attempts and the instrumentalisation of Helen of Anjou's heritage through the movie as manipulative. The disconnect arose because Belgrade 'discovered' Helen of Anjou in 2018, whereas the local population had long been aware of her and celebrated her legacy, as evidenced by Grigorije Božović's early 20th-century writings and the ongoing retelling of her stories at family gatherings.

It can therefore be argued that the object-cause of desire of an undivided Kosovo remained unchanged not only for the North Kosovo population but also for the majority of citizens in Serbia proper. The stories of Helen of Anjou could only generate enjoyment in the population if they were understood within the broader, holistic claim of Serbia to Kosovo, both spatially, as a sacred land, and temporally, as the birthplace of the Serbian medieval state and the anchor of national identity.

The weakness of the affective pull of the fantasy of Helen of Anjou also lies in its somewhat ethereal nature: there is no proven material existence of this heritage, it is submerged under a lake and not visible to the eye. By contrast, the heritage in the South, particularly the four UNESCO-protected monasteries, has withstood the test of time. These monasteries remain active pilgrimage sites and are regarded as sacred within the Serbian national and religious narrative. They play a crucial role in why Kosovo is considered a sacred ontic space in the first place. As one respondent put it, the heritage of Helen of Anjou 'is just ruins; it is not a holy site, the latter would be more important for Serbs'.[125] Additionally, Helen of Anjou is not a prominent figure in Serbian medieval history. She is a woman, of Western origin, and Catholic by birth, all traits that diverge from the archetypal hero in the Serbian national historical canon, exemplified by figures like Prince Lazar, St Sava, Dušan the Great, and other male members of the Nemanjić dynasty.

In order to successfully defer desire from one object-cause of desire to another, the affective pull of the alternative fantasy must be stronger than that of the previous one. In this sense, the government would have needed to present Helen of Anjou and the associated heritage sites as more central to Serbia's self-understanding than the heritage in the South, something it failed to achieve. We argue that this is because Kosovo is perceived as a sacred space in its entirety and therefore cannot be divided. At the same time, the heritage of Helen of Anjou is seen as forming an inseparable bond with the rest of Serbian medieval heritage in Kosovo and thus cannot be considered more important than other sites. Instead, this heritage constitutes an indivisible part of Serbia's historical claim to Kosovo as a whole.

In sum, the recent attempt of the government to use stories of Helen of Anjou to emotionally prepare the ground so that the land swap could be implemented while preserving the biographical continuity ultimately failed to generate the affective investment necessary to establish an alternative fantasy as hegemonic. This is because the (holy) heritage in the South resonated far more strongly with the Serbian public than the (less holy) heritage in North Kosovo, making it impossible to metonymically replace one object-cause of desire with another. This failure of metonymic deferral sheds light not only on catharsis as a mechanism of identity transformation in ontological security dynamics, but also on the agency of elites and the structures of language and the unconscious that constrain their actions.

Conclusion

In this article, we have drawn on Lacanian psychoanalysis to problematise how desire, fantasies, and identities change in world politics. We argue that catharsis, understood as the deferral of repressed desires from one object-cause of desire to another, either through metonymy or metaphor, is a necessary affective mechanism underlying this change. Following post-structuralist understandings of the form and force of discourse, we contend that catharsis functions as the driving force behind this transformation, while metonymy and metaphor shape its linguistic expressions (form).

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[125]Interview 1.

All states have their objects-cause of desire, represented by a signifier incarnating fullness of identity, promising to provide ontological security. However, following Lacan, this is merely a fantasy, as the incomplete subject can ultimately never fill this void. Accordingly, ontological security is also nothing but a fantasy of the lacking subject, although a powerful one, at the centre of which lies the object-cause of desire.

While objects-cause of desire have some permanence (incarnations of identity in collective subjects such as states do not change every day but can even remain constant for decades), they still can change under the right conditions. This is because all discursive structures are marked by incompleteness and instability. Thus, our article contributes to scholarly discussions on identity construction in world politics as an ongoing process of identification with shifting objects-cause of desire. We contend that the affective mechanism enabling this shift is catharsis, which operates either through the forms of metaphor or metonymy. Our article also highlights the dialectic nature of identity-building discourses, since Lacanian psychoanalysis contends that we emerge as subjects only in relation to the objects-cause of desire. Ergo, the construction of Kosovo as Serbia's object-cause of desire has produced the identity of the Serbian collective subject as such, and vice versa.

We illustrate our theoretical argument through the changing role of Kosovo as Serbia's *objet petit a* and examine two successful metaphoric deferrals of desire in the past (the late 19th century and the 1990s), as well as one unsuccessful metonymic deferral around 2018, when a potential land swap between Belgrade and Pristina was proposed. In each case, we demonstrate how Kosovo's cultural and religious heritage functioned as the affective, cathartic pull – in other words, a fantasy, that facilitated the attempted substitution of the object-cause of desire.

The metonymic deferral constituted the core of our empirical section. Drawing on press analysis, archival research, and interviews on the ground, we examined the curious speculations and the alleged discovery of medieval remnants, dating from the period of Serbian rule under Helen of Anjou, submerged in North Kosovo. We argued that this served as a governmental attempt at metonymic displacement for the cultural heritage that was expected to be formally lost if the land swap deal were accepted. However, because Kosovo is understood as a sacred ontic space in the Serbian nationalist narrative, it could not be divided, and the idea failed to generate the necessary affective investment among the broader population needed to achieve the wanted substitution of Serbia's object-cause of desire.

Our article highlights the broader implication that the pursuit of ontological security in world politics is inherently unstable, contingent on the effectiveness of cathartic mechanisms in sustaining new objects-cause of desire. By deepening our understanding of how desire operates in international relations, we can better grasp the affective underpinnings of state behavior, particularly in contested territorial and cultural disputes. Ultimately, our study reinforces the view that ontological security is not a static condition to be maintained but a dynamic and precarious process, shaped by ever-changing fantasmatic narratives and affective investments.

Finally, this research could expand in various directions. Theoretically, future studies could deepen the understanding of catharsis by drawing on other psychoanalytic frameworks, such as Freudian psychoanalysis. Potentially fruitful cross-fertilisation can transpire in a conversation with the growing body of research on emotions in IR.[126] Empirically, catharsis could be explored in different political or historical contexts, or even comparatively, to assess whether metaphoric deferrals of desire are generally more successful or easier to achieve than metonymic ones. This may be due to the fact that, in metaphoric deferrals, the existing object-cause of desire does not need to be split; rather, desire can shift entirely to a different phenomenon.

Additionally, as our study analyses only the transformation of Serbia's object-cause of desire, this could create the misconception that Serbia is unique or even abnormal in being driven by nationalist fantasies, which is certainly not the case. All polities have objects that serve as causes of desire,

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[126]For an overview of this literature, see Simon Koschut, 'Emotions and international relations', *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of International Studies* (2022), available at: {https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190846626.013.693}.

but they remain fantasies, and this also applies to Kosovo's own objects-cause of desire, a topic that future research could explore. In recent years, a potential shift can be noticed in Pristina's policy discourse from a fixation on the international recognition as Kosovo's *objet petit a*, to 'recapturing' North Kosovo, i.e. extending and solidifying Kosovo's sovereignty over this contested region.

Another exciting avenue for future research could involve a multidisciplinary study using carbon dating to determine whether the remnants in and around Lake Gazivode actually date to the period of Helen of Anjou. Additionally, archival and ethnographic research could further investigate the conditions under which these remnants were submerged in the 1970s and explore potential measures for their preservation.

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