

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Object-cause of desire and ontological security: evidence from Serbia's opposition to Kosovo's membership in UNESCO

Marina Vulović<sup>1</sup>  and Filip Ejduš<sup>2</sup> 

<sup>1</sup>German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP), 10719 Berlin, Germany and <sup>2</sup>Faculty of Political Science, University of Belgrade, 11000 Belgrade, Serbia

**Corresponding author:** Marina Vulović; Email: [marina.vulovic@swp-berlin.org](mailto:marina.vulovic@swp-berlin.org)

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## Abstract

The traditional Laing–Giddens paradigm views ontological insecurity as an unusual mental state triggered by critical situations and characterized by feelings of anxiety, disorientation and paralysis. However, theories inspired by Lacan suggest a different perspective, stating that ontological insecurity is not an exception but rather a regular state of mind. Similarly, ontological security is a fantasy stemming from the desire to fill the primordial lack, thus fuelling agency. While these Lacanian interpretations have introduced a fresh viewpoint into Ontological Security Studies (OSS), they have not fully incorporated one of the key concepts from Lacanian psychoanalysis – the object-cause of desire (French: *objet petit a*) – into international relations theory. In this article, we present a framework of how to conceptualize and empirically study the objects-cause of desire in world politics. Our arguments are exemplified in a case study of Serbia's resistance to Kosovo's UNESCO membership in 2015.

**Keywords:** Ontological security; Lacan; object-cause of desire; fantasies; Serbia; Kosovo

## Introduction

According to the standard view in Ontological Security Studies (OSS), a rapidly expanding research field in international relations (IR), states and other actors in world politics strive to maintain a coherent sense of self. Furthermore, they occasionally prioritize this preservation of self-identity over other significant objectives, such as material interests or physical security. In this context, extreme situations may arise in which states and other actors, unable to ward off existential anxiety, become ontologically insecure. This can lead to a loss of agency, or erratic and seemingly irrational behaviour. From this theoretical perspective, ontological security appears to be a regular state of mind, while ontological insecurity is the exception.

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The Lacanian perspective challenges this view by arguing that ontological security is not a regular state of mind but rather a fantasy. This fantasy is driven by an unfulfilled desire to compensate for a primordial lack.<sup>1</sup> While Lacan-inspired works on ontological security in IR have enriched OSS, they have yet to translate one of the central Lacanian concepts into the field of OSS, which is the object-cause of desire (fr. *objet petit a*). The main idea behind this concept is that desire is not simply directed towards certain objects, but caused by them, and this nuance is missing from theoretical discussions. This valuable perspective enables us to problematize the relations between desiring subjects and the object-cause of desire to illuminate why certain discourses have such a strong grip on political subjects in IR, and thus on domestic and foreign policy decisions. Coupled with desire is fantasy, which supports reality and governs political decision-making. Fantasies always have a beatific and a horrific side. The beatific side projects the utopian future that ensues if our desires are fulfilled. The horrific side helps us understand why we cannot fulfil our desires and dwells on the dire consequences of this frustration. Usually, a radical Other steals our enjoyment and prevents us from fully constituting our identity and fulfilling our fantasies.

We demonstrate the theoretical relevance of studying objects-cause of desire in world politics with a case study on Serbia's actions to prevent Kosovo from joining UNESCO. In this empirical study, we build on Lene Hansen's methodological model<sup>2</sup> of post-structuralist discourse analysis to include underlying affective mechanisms<sup>3</sup> that structure all discourses. We do this by investigating how Kosovo serves as the object-cause of desire in the Serbian nationalist discourse, supported by fantasies of Kosovo belonging to Serbia, determined to return it to Serbia's sovereign control, and how Serbian elites experienced partial enjoyment from Kosovo's failed attempt to join UNESCO in 2015.

The rest of the article is structured as follows. Firstly, we provide a brief literature review of OSS and of IR scholarship from a Lacanian perspective. Next, we present our theoretical argument and main concepts, followed by brief methodological remarks. The empirical section then examines Kosovo's unsuccessful attempt to join UNESCO in 2015 as a struggle between Kosovo and Serbia to achieve a sense of identity closure. Finally, we summarize the article's main contributions and suggest avenues for future research.

### Ontological security studies: a turn to Lacan

Ontological security is a concept coined by psychiatrist Ronald D. Laing to denote the existential trust of subjects in the continuity of their relationships with significant others.<sup>4</sup> Sociologist Anthony Giddens later defined ontological security 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'.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Vieira 2018; Eberle 2019; Kinnvall 2019.

<sup>2</sup>Hansen 2006.

<sup>3</sup>Clément and Sangar 2018; Hutchison 2019; Hutchison and Bleiker 2014.

<sup>4</sup>Laing 1990 [1960].

<sup>5</sup>Giddens 1991, 92.

Giddens was particularly interested in how critical situations during high modernity undermine people's ontological security. This interest in ontological security was applied elsewhere, including in the study of media and communication,<sup>6</sup> homeownership,<sup>7</sup> workplace privacy,<sup>8</sup> racism,<sup>9</sup> urban reconstruction<sup>10</sup> and many other domains.

The concept of ontological security entered the lexicon of IR in the context of the debate on the widening of the concept of security in the 1990s. For Jef Huysmans, in contrast to daily security, or 'security as survival', which is fuelled by fear, ontological security is a 'security of being' and accompanied by anxiety over internal dangers.<sup>11</sup> McSweeney challenged societal security, a concept developed by the Copenhagen School to denote security of collective identity, as socio-logically untenable due to its reification of identity.<sup>12</sup> Instead, he proposed that ontological security denotes confidence in one's own capacity to manage relations with others. He conceptualized ontological security as 'security of social relationship, a sense of being safely in cognitive control of the interaction context'.<sup>13</sup> In the early 2000s, ontological security was further theorized, laying the ground for what came to be OSS as a new research agenda in critical security studies.<sup>14</sup>

The first generation of OSS scholarship in IR mostly drew upon the understanding developed by Laing and Giddens. From such a perspective, ontological insecurity is a state of anxiety stemming from the inability of the Self to achieve biographical continuity in the face of critical situations.<sup>15</sup> For Jennifer Mitzen, ontological security stems from routinized relationships with significant others. Breaking free from those routines, even if they are violent, generates ontological insecurity and a paralyzing loss of capacity for agency.<sup>16</sup> While Brent Steele finds the source of ontological insecurity in the internal dialectics of the Self rather than in the routinized relationships with others, for him, too, ontological security is a drive for biographical continuity. It is challenged by critical and unpredictable situations that question actors' sense of self-identity.<sup>17</sup> Finally, an important concept for the Laing–Giddens paradigm is anxiety. In contrast to fear, which always involves particular objects and is oriented externally, anxiety is 'essentially fear which lost its object' and is oriented internally.<sup>18</sup> From this perspective, anxiety is something which paralyzes and therefore needs to be managed and suppressed.

In contrast to these works, a different approach to IR theory<sup>19</sup> and in particular to ontological security has developed by building on the works of

<sup>6</sup>Silverstone 1993; Cohen and Metzger 1998.

<sup>7</sup>Dupuis and Thorns 1998; Padgett 2007.

<sup>8</sup>Brown 2000.

<sup>9</sup>Noble 2005.

<sup>10</sup>Hawkins and Maurer 2011; Grenville 2015.

<sup>11</sup>Huysmans 1998, 242.

<sup>12</sup>McSweeney 1996.

<sup>13</sup>McSweeney 1999, 154.

<sup>14</sup>Peoples and Vaughan Williams 2021, 66–80.

<sup>15</sup>Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Lupovici 2012; Subotić 2016; Ejdus 2018.

<sup>16</sup>Mitzen 2006.

<sup>17</sup>Steele 2008; see also Ejdus 2018.

<sup>18</sup>Giddens 1991, 44; see also Rumelili 2015, 2.

<sup>19</sup>Epstein 2011; Epstein 2018; Solomon 2015.

Jacques Lacan.<sup>20</sup> While other psychological approaches in the conventional constructivist IR, including the Laing–Giddens paradigm in OSS, adopt a Cartesian notion of the Self as a unified and coherent subject, the Lacan-inspired works construe the Self as fragmentary, incomplete and always in the making through desire-driven discourses.<sup>21</sup>

Hence, the Laing–Giddens paradigm normalizes the search for a stable identity and could serve as an apology for conservative or nationalist projects. By contrast, the Lacanian perspective critiques them as fantasies.

Such a standpoint is rooted in psychoanalysis, and hence focuses on unconscious processes.<sup>22</sup> As Rogers and Zevnik point out, the focus on unconsciousness brings to the fore uncertainty and irrationality, which the field of politics is very much uncomfortable with given its orientation towards stability and certitudes.<sup>23</sup> Seen through this lens, ontological security is not something which can be achieved but a mere fantasy about the unified Self. The root of this fantasy is a lack which stems from the split occurring in the so-called mirror stage, when an infant recognizes itself as separate from the caregiver.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, the subject incessantly continues to fantasize about the lost wholeness and coherence of the Self. As Eberle points out, fantasies turn the ontological lack into an empirical one, objects of desire whose recapturing promise the restoration of wholeness.<sup>25</sup>

From the Lacanian perspective, anxiety is always present and impossible to eradicate. Moreover, anxiety, generated by the impossibility to fill the ontological lack, feeds fantasies and creates agency. The drive for ontological security (via an ever present sense of insecurity) is therefore not paralyzing, but on the contrary, keeps us ‘going on’ as the ‘engine of our life’.<sup>26</sup> However, as the ontological lack can never be filled, social agents craft narratives about why this is so, who or what is to be blamed and find new empirical objects of desire. In contrast to the Laing–Giddens paradigm of ontological security which construes anxiety as a ‘temporally limited condition’, for the Lacanian works, anxiety is an ever-present generator of agency.<sup>27</sup>

The Lacan-inspired works have offered a strong alternative to the Laing–Giddens paradigm of ontological security. Instead of conceptualizing ontological security as a ‘security-as-being’ they see it as a ‘security-as-becoming’, an anxiety-driven fantasy about the unified Self which is inherently unattainable. These works are important because they conceptualize ontological *insecurity* as inherent in the human condition instead of treating it as an extraordinary, exceptional and debilitating state that affects certain subjects in certain situations and can be more or less effectively ameliorated. They have also empirically enriched OSS in its

<sup>20</sup>Kinnvall 2012; Kinnvall 2018; Kinnvall 2019; Eberle 2019; Hagström 2021; Vieira 2018; Eberle and Daniel 2022; Cash 2020; Bilgic and Pilcher 2023; Browning and Joenniemi 2017.

<sup>21</sup>Solomon 2015, 19–20.

<sup>22</sup>Cash 2020.

<sup>23</sup>Rogers and Zevnik 2017, 583.

<sup>24</sup>Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020, 245.

<sup>25</sup>Eberle 2019.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 345.

<sup>27</sup>Krickel-Choi 2022b, 1.

investigations of various phenomena including religion and nationalism,<sup>28</sup> populism,<sup>29</sup> great power status,<sup>30</sup> post-colonial insecurities,<sup>31</sup> hybrid warfare,<sup>32</sup> etc.

Interestingly, however, despite their useful introduction of the notions of ontological lack, fantasy and fluid, fractured and incomplete Self, the theorization of one of *the* central Lacanian concepts – object-cause of desire – remains in these works rather thin. To begin with, these works do not theoretically translate the Lacanian concept of *objets petit a* into OSS, even though they sporadically deal with the empirical aspect of the concept. Secondly, they do not clarify where agency (through desire) stems from: fantasies or objects-cause of desire. This might seem like a minor remark, but it can reframe our understanding of desire and thus agency in Lacanian-inspired IR scholarship. Finally, these works have usually overlooked methodological questions, especially how to methodologically operationalize theoretical concepts such as *objets petit a*.<sup>33</sup>

### Theoretical approach and methodology

Even though previous scholarship has discussed the ‘object of desire’, which constitutes the first step towards elaborating how specific material or symbolic<sup>34</sup> objects can function as the incarnation of lack, the existing Lacanian scholarship in IR falls short of problematizing where the agency in this constellation originates. This is an important debate because contrary to Eberle claiming that fantasy ‘produces’<sup>35</sup> desire, from the Lacanian point of view, it is the *objet petit a*, the attainment of which is supported by a fantasmatic narrative, that does so. It *causes* our desire to recapture a lost enjoyment and create a coherent sense of Self. Desire is thus understood as relational, in the same way that subjectivity in post-structuralist scholarship is understood as relational.<sup>36</sup> In other words, states do not just decide to desire a random object, but the very position of that object at the centre of the symbolic framework of that state’s self-understanding causes us to desire it. This is a dialectical understanding of agency in IR, in which we can recognize a push-and-pull dynamic between the agent and the object.

At the same time, we build on Eberle’s work and expand the discussion of ‘objects of desire’ to not only include their empirical dimension that is covered by his work, but also their ontological dimension and how they relate to the constitutive lack. In addition to these theoretical contributions, we also develop a framework of how to methodologically capture the ontological insecurity dynamics.

The aim of this section is therefore to translate the object-cause of desire into an IR idiom and to develop the methodology for the empirical study of this

<sup>28</sup>Kinnvall 2004; Kinnvall 2006.

<sup>29</sup>Kinnvall 2018; Browning 2019.

<sup>30</sup>Hagström 2021.

<sup>31</sup>Vieira 2018.

<sup>32</sup>Eberle and Daniel 2022; Bilgic and Pilcher 2023.

<sup>33</sup>For exceptions, see Eberle (2019) and Solomon (2015, 53–62).

<sup>34</sup>The use of the word ‘symbolic’ in this context does not relate to the Lacanian order of the Symbolic, which would encompass all signifying practices. Rather, it relates to the ideational dimensions of empirically articulated ‘objects’, as opposed to their material dimension.

<sup>35</sup>Eberle 2019, 248.

<sup>36</sup>Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Hansen 2006.

phenomenon in world politics. The theoretical argument will proceed in the following order. We first discuss ontological and empirical aspects of objects-cause of desire in international politics. Then we further unpack and classify the empirical objects-cause of desire and provide examples from world politics. In the next step, we further develop the concept of fantasies in IR and discuss their Janus-faced co-constitution through beatific and horrific narratives. Finally, we unpack the notion of jouissance and its connection to the processes of securitization and desecuritization in world politics.

### **Objet Petit a in world politics**

Objects-cause of desire<sup>37</sup> encapsulate social fullness or the fullness of the subject, but are simultaneously impossible to attain or re-capture, which produces anxiety.<sup>38</sup> They always have an ontological and an empirical dimension. The ontological dimension refers to the ontological lack and the split subject in Lacan.<sup>39</sup> This is so because only as long as there is an ontological lack can we be constituted as desiring (willing and acting) subjects. In other words, only as long as there is something that is missing that we yearn for, can we keep desiring (acting); otherwise, there would be no point in living. As an ontological category, the *objet petit a* can be understood as an empty container at the centre of our subjectivity that encapsulates lack as such. This is supported by the fact that at the centre of the so-called Borromean knot, which illustrates the structure of the human psyche in Lacan, lies the *objet petit a*.<sup>40</sup> The Borromean knot visualizes the three orders of the psyche – the Imaginary (the order of images and fantasy), the Symbolic (the order of language/symbols) and the Real (the order of the unrepresentable and unknowable outside language) – all of which overlap at the centre, where the object-cause of desire is located. Earlier Lacanian theory discussed sublimation as a process that elevates specific objects of desire to the status of ‘the Thing’ – the forbidden object of desire. However, ‘the Thing’ disappears in later Lacanian theory and is substituted with the *objet petit a*,<sup>41</sup> that now causes desire and is never attainable, because the lack is an absolute condition. The fact that the *objet petit a* as the lack is unattainable means that it is part of the Real order, but at the same time it seeps into the Symbolic order because specific signifiers come to represent that lack, and into the Imaginary order, because attaining the object-cause of desire is possible only at the level of fantasy. This will be further problematized below.

Empirically speaking, however, the *objet petit a* is the *name* we give to the lack, i.e. a specific signifier that comes to represent social fullness. It is the same concept, but has two dimensions: the ontological (emptiness) and the empirical (content). In his Lacanian-inspired analysis, Eberle has already elaborated on the empirical side of the ‘object of desire’,<sup>42</sup> while Kinnvall discusses imagined/imaginary objects such

<sup>37</sup>For a distinction between Lacan’s ‘objet petit a’ and Freud’s ‘lost object’, Klein’s ‘partial object’ and Winnicott’s ‘transitional object’, see Kirshner (2005).

<sup>38</sup>Evans 1996.

<sup>39</sup>Lacan 2006, 715–16.

<sup>40</sup>Thurston 2017.

<sup>41</sup>Evans 1996, 208.

<sup>42</sup>Eberle 2019.

as ‘nation’ or ‘religion’ as signifiers anchoring a sense of Self in states and communities.<sup>43</sup> However, they do not explicitly link the *objet petit a* to its ontological dimension, and it is sometimes unclear whether the empirical object or the imagined fantasy is the driver behind certain actions. We argue that the lack (the ontological dimension of *objet petit a*) is encapsulated by a concrete signifier that incarnates a promise of closure, thus making us want it. Hence, it is the *objet petit a* that sets our desire in motion, not the other way around.

Not every aspiration a state might have qualifies to be treated as *objet petit a*. It is never a random object that sets our desires in motion, but one that has a special symbolic meaning in the vocabulary of a subject’s self-understanding. Desire is therefore dialectical. For example, increasing agricultural production by two per cent does not guarantee the restoration and completion of one’s identity. On the other hand, recognition of one’s status as a great power, or control over sacred territory, can. The *objet petit a* would constitute (a) a goal that trumps all other goals, while other desires might be sacrificed for the fulfilment of the ultimate one, and (b) a goal whose attainment is crucial for the completion of the state’s identity. The object cause of desire always promises identity closure. However, specific signifiers can only seemingly fill our primordial lack. Once we (re-)capture them, they might momentarily arrest the play of desire before we notice that our fulfilment is an illusion and are forced to seek out new contents to fill the void. In Lacanian theory, the *objet petit a* ‘is both the void, the gap, and whatever object momentarily comes to fill that gap in our symbolic reality’,<sup>44</sup> for instance fulfilment, knowledge, possessions or love.<sup>45</sup> All of these signifiers might promise to make us feel whole and we weave our fantasies around them.

In world politics, these empirical signifiers can refer to either material or symbolic objects of desire. Material objects-cause of desire refer to specific objects such as artefacts (e.g. Ark of the Covenant), national art (e.g. Beijing’s longing for artefacts from Taipei’s National Palace Museum), weapons (e.g. nuclear weapons), territories (e.g. Judea and Samaria) and so forth. The empirical signifiers of the objects-cause of desire can also be symbolic, including status (e.g. great powerness), myths (e.g. golden age, classless society, the American dream, etc.) or principles of international society (e.g. sovereignty, self-determination, etc.).<sup>46</sup> Crucially, what we emphasize here is that the symbolic and material signifiers of *objet petit a* are not mutually exclusive. For instance, a country seeking the status of a great power (symbolic signifier) usually also wants to invest in nuclear weapons (material signifier). At the same time, the empirical dimension of the object-cause of desire can move from the material to the symbolic and vice versa, if the circumstances allow it. This is, for instance, the case with Kosovo, which for a very long time was a material object-cause of desire for Serbia, that over time turned into an increasingly symbolic one.<sup>47</sup> Finally, both the material and symbolic signifiers are often mixed to

<sup>43</sup>Kinnvall 2019.

<sup>44</sup>Homer 2005, 88.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 87.

<sup>46</sup>For Lacanian renderings of sovereignty in world politics as a fantasy of unimpeded agency which can never be entirely fulfilled, see Epstein (2018); Kinnvall and Svensson (2018); Burgess (2017).

<sup>47</sup>Ejdus and Subotić 2014.

different degrees in state policies aimed at reaching more abstract goals of power, security or peace that are omnipresent but never fully achievable.

Every empirical iteration of the object-cause of desire in world politics is supported by fantasies. If *objet petit a* causes desire, fantasy sustains it. At the level of fantasy, recapturing the *objet petit a* is entirely possible. Hence, fantasy sustains our belief that we can ultimately fill the void. But its aim is not to enact the *fulfilment* of desire, but to tell us *how* to desire<sup>48</sup> and we can conceive of it as a basic structuring principle that enables our identification with the outside world (reality) through offering simplified narratives about the Self and the Other.<sup>49</sup> Fantasy also protects the subject from ‘the (im)possibility of the traumatic encounter with the Real by masking or obfuscating the site of the lack in the symbolic order’.<sup>50</sup> In simpler terms, if the subject acknowledged that the constitutive lack is ever-present and never to be filled, it would constitute a traumatic experience. This is why the subject always seeks to cover over the lack in the Real by inventing signifiers (in the Symbolic order) that stand in place for that lack and weaves its fantasies (in the Imaginary order) around it, that support the idea that recapturing the *objet petit a* and ultimately eliminating the lack is possible. The *objet petit a* is thus a ‘stand-in for the unity [of the Self] we would wish to achieve’,<sup>51</sup> a promise that would constitute the beatific side of fantasy, while the horrific side acts as a negative driving force and a warning about what would happen if we failed to keep pursuing our drive for self-fulfilment. Without fantasy, the subject would not be able to mobilize itself in pursuit of recapturing the *objet petit a*.

World politics are shot through with fantasies of ontological security. For example, great power ambitions can be seen as yet another fantasy which aims to deal with the primordial lack that can never be fully overcome.<sup>52</sup> Russia’s hysterical longing to repair its great power status, following the end of the Cold War is but one example.<sup>53</sup> As the West declines in its relative power vis-à-vis the rest, the psycho-political potency of the populists’ favourite call to ‘make (fill-in-the-blanks) great again’ can be read as an ontological security-driven fantasy about biographical continuity of the great-power Self. States also have fantasies of belonging. One case in point is the fantasy of becoming Western across the post-communist world. However, the Westernization process does not seem to end with NATO and EU membership, and the struggle for recognition continues unabated with shifting Others to blame for the frustrating feelings of incomplete transformation.<sup>54</sup> In post-colonial states too, the lack is expressed in the ever-present desire to emulate but also resist the West.<sup>55</sup> The fantasy of becoming the West, seemingly perpetually thwarted by the hierarchies in world politics, breeds a sense of purpose but also an uneasy stigma.

<sup>48</sup>Glynos 2001, 200.

<sup>49</sup>Daly 1999.

<sup>50</sup>Neill 2011, 66.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>Hagström 2021.

<sup>53</sup>Neumann 2015.

<sup>54</sup>Krastev and Holmes 2020.

<sup>55</sup>Vieira 2018.

All fantasies have their beatific and horrific dimension. The beatific dimension of fantasy ‘promises a harmonious resolution of social antagonism, a covering over of lack’,<sup>56</sup> a recapturing of the object-cause of desire. The beatific side is always accompanied by a horrific dimension that foretells disaster if the obstacle proves impossible to overcome.<sup>57</sup> In an IR context too, both material and symbolic iterations of the object-cause of desire are supported by beatific and horrific fantasies about its possible attainment. If the *objet petit a* in a historical discourse of a socialist country is the achievement of a utopian vision of true communism (beatific fantasy), then its flipside is a dystopian vision of the collapse of society driven by domestic or international foes and forces of capitalism (horrific fantasy). If the *objet petit a* is ‘regaining’ Kosovo through preserving the cultural heritage there as Serbian, as we discuss later in this article, then the flipside of this beatific fantasy is national disintegration and loss of a Serb identity in Kosovo. Fantasies are hence always Janus-faced, composed of both narratives of attainment and loss.

The horrific dimension of fantasy works through the construction of the Other who is to blame for our inability to achieve our fantasy and recapture our object-cause of desire. In Lacanian theory, Žižek would term this as ‘theft of enjoyment’ typical of racist discourses.<sup>58</sup> By constituting the Other as a thief of our enjoyment, fantasy sustains our faith in the idea that recapturing our lost enjoyment is possible.<sup>59</sup> In this way, enjoyment is ‘kept at a “healthy” distance’, neither too close to appear as an imminent possibility nor too far to appear as unattainable. We also experience enjoyment (or *jouissance* in Lacan’s vocabulary) in the very circling around the ultimately unreachable *objet petit a*, an action that we experience as a form of pleasurable suffering.<sup>60</sup> Thus, the *objet petit a* only ‘operates as an object of desire [...] insofar as it is posited as lacking/stolen’.<sup>61</sup> The failure to fully constitute our identity (which never stops re-emerging) is masked by attributing this failure to the actions of a specific Other.<sup>62</sup>

In world politics, actors such as states may have a sense of attaining the empirical signifier of the *objet petit a*. Their enjoyment will only be temporary, because the continued persistence of the fundamentally unfillable ontological lack will require new empirical objects-cause of desire. During this temporary experience of enjoyment, one can expect the process of desecuritization to transpire, as was the case in the immediate aftermath of the Cold War.<sup>63</sup> However, as enjoyment can only be temporary, the invention of new empirical objects-cause of desire will automatically bring about not only beatific but also horrific fantasies, followed by a new process of securitisation and the construction of threatening Others who are stealing our newly wanted enjoyment. To continue with the previously used example, following a brief spell of the early Cold War period that seemed to usher in the new world order without enemies, the logic of securitisation in the

<sup>56</sup>Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras 2006, 152.

<sup>57</sup>Glynos and Howarth 2007, 147.

<sup>58</sup>Žižek 1993.

<sup>59</sup>Stavrakakis and Chrysoloras 2006, 152.

<sup>60</sup>Glynos 2001, 201–2.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., 153.

<sup>62</sup>Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008, 263.

<sup>63</sup>Hansen 2012.

West returned soon thereafter, but now directed towards a new set of Others such as Islamic terrorism.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, as the ontological lack was not filled by the defeat of Al Qaeda, it was soon replaced by ISIS as the new empirical signifier that drives fantasies of security. As Charlotte Heath-Kelly points out, Lacanian psychoanalysis provides an account of this 'profound aversion to resolution within security imaginaries'.<sup>65</sup>

Seen from this perspective, ontological insecurity in IR is a regular state of affairs generated by the individual or collective inability of subjects to realize their fantasies about a complete sense of Self. Their beatific dimension is the prospect of enjoyment, while their horrific dimension is the curse that they are always thwarted by the Others who continuously steal the enjoyment from us and who are to blame for our inability to satisfy our desires. The ontological inability to fulfil the desires and externalize the blame onto the Others who steal our enjoyment perpetuates the politics of enmity and the inherently insurmountable securitisation practices. From such a standpoint, ontological security seeking is always a phantasmagorical act of balancing the appeal of fulfilment and the horrors of frustration.

Finally, an important theoretical question that arises here is whose fantasies we are discussing. In the remainder of this article, we will treat the nation-state as the fantasizing subject. Previous scholarship on ontological security has provided numerous arguments supporting the concept of 'scaling up', which we may not need to reiterate.<sup>66</sup> However, it is useful to briefly explain the purpose of scaling up the Lacanian move that we propose in this paper. Certainly, fantasies are part of the human psyche and embodied experiences, which nation-states, unlike individuals, do not possess in the same way.<sup>67</sup> Nation-states do not pass through the mirror stage nor do they have the primordial lack, but the people who constitute them do, and these people project their own needs and affects onto the collective entity with which they identify. Affective investment in an *objet petit a* can be a collective endeavour, shared across a group of people. In fact, discourse theory has already elaborated on the constitution of collectives through their investment in unifying signifiers (*objets petit a*).<sup>68</sup> Some fantasies are shared by most or all members of a political community, thus becoming inextricably linked to its collective identity (e.g. myths), and its representatives act as if the nation-state was a person.<sup>69</sup> Another reason for scaling up the analysis from subjects to states is the Lacanian understanding of desire as relational. Since it is caused by the *objet petit a*, the question is not 'what do I want?', but 'what do others want from me?'<sup>70</sup> Consequently, agency is 'externalized' from individual people and, in this sense, states can also be lacking and yearning to overcome their void by inventing labels for how to achieve this. Most recent scholarship has also problematized state personhood as collectives of people that are not reducible to their individual

<sup>64</sup>Campbell 1998.

<sup>65</sup>Heath-Kelly 2018, 92.

<sup>66</sup>Steele 2019, 324; see also Ejodus and Rečević 2021.

<sup>67</sup>Krickel-Choi 2022c.

<sup>68</sup>Stavrakakis 2007.

<sup>69</sup>Ejodus 2020.

<sup>70</sup>Žižek 2017.

components by utilizing psychoanalytic theory.<sup>71</sup> Drawing from arguments in favour of treating states as persons, we make the case for states as fantasizing persons.

In the remainder of this article, we will use these crucial concepts to analyse Serbia's longing for all things Kosovo. We will focus on how Serbia uses its policies of cultural heritage protection in Kosovo to perpetuate its fantasy of restoring its complete sense of Self, an act that will always remain elusive. The fantasy of 'restoring Kosovo' through the act of 'preserving' the cultural heritage there as 'Serbian' functions because its horrific side is incarnated in the Albanian Other who attempts to steal our enjoyment and prevent us from fully constituting our identity. Fantasies should be analysed in order to understand the deeper, affective structures that govern political practices. If *objets petit a* can be conceptualized as objects of anxiety,<sup>72</sup> then Kosovo in Serbian political discourse can be understood as a prime example of such an object.<sup>73</sup>

### **Methodological remarks**

Before we move on to the empirical analysis, a few remarks on the methodology are in order. The secondary aim of this article is to operationalize 'the object cause of desire', 'fantasy' and 'theft of enjoyment' as analytical categories integrated into Lene Hansen's post-structuralist discourse analysis. In order to identify object-cause of desire, we rely on the concept of 'empty signifier' utilized by Ernesto Laclau, which refers to the presence of an absence in discourse.<sup>74</sup> Parallels between the concepts of *objet petit a* and empty signifiers have already been drawn and elaborated on by previous scholarship, since Laclau himself was inspired by Lacan's writing.<sup>75</sup> Namely, if full closure of identity is impossible, if the Real is not representable, if lack is constitutive of our social reality, it still does not mean that we will not attempt to positivize the void. Politics is about attempting to suture our fragmented social reality with signifiers promising some kind of closure, because without those attempts, there would be no meaning. Such signifiers encapsulate an underlying *absence* from the discourse (i.e. the void/lack that needs to be filled). Laclau explains this in the following way: 'In a situation of radical disorder, "order" is present as that which is absent; it becomes an empty signifier, as the signifier of this absence'.<sup>76</sup>

Following this logic, *objets petit a* can be identified by paying attention to the dialectic between emptiness and fullness in a given discourse. Emptiness (absence) is the ontological dimension of *objets petit a* we have mentioned above, while fullness (presence) is the empirical dimension, embodied by specific signifiers promising to fill the void which can be identified within discourse. *Objets petit a* might not be explicitly mentioned – 'order' might not be explicitly named for it to be identified as an empty signifier in a general state of 'disorder' – but they may be

<sup>71</sup>Naude 2022; see also Krickel-Choi 2022a.

<sup>72</sup>Evans 1996.

<sup>73</sup>Ejodus 2020.

<sup>74</sup>Laclau 1996.

<sup>75</sup>Stavrakakis 2007; Stavrakakis 2017.

<sup>76</sup>Laclau 1996, 44.

implied if the researcher pays attention to what is missing from the discourse that promises to restore the fragmented sense of Self into a unified whole. As mentioned, *objets petit a* are always about identity closure and can be identified if the greater context and hierarchy of a state's goals towards achieving a unified sense of Self are investigated.

When it comes to fantasies, we analyse them as affective mechanisms, practices and narratives that 'grip' the subjects, compelling them to choose one course of action over another.<sup>77</sup> This is in line with previous works on fantasies in OSS.<sup>78</sup> Fantasmatic logics possess a dual structure: a beatific side, which refers to an 'idealized scenario promising an imaginary fullness or wholeness',<sup>79</sup> at the centre of which lies the *objet petit a*, and a horrific side, which portends disaster if a particular course of action is not undertaken.<sup>80</sup> Thus, fantasies always involve an obstacle that prevents us from realizing our fantasmatic desire. This obstacle is often externalized into an Other who steals our enjoyment and prevents us from achieving fulfilment. As an analytical category, 'theft of enjoyment' can be understood as an affective mechanism that structures the perception of the Other in relation to oneself, as someone who prevents 'us' from fully constituting our identity and 'enjoying' our chosen course of action. The researcher's task, then, is to uncover these mechanisms and structuring principles in the empirical data. Both beatific and horrific fantasies can be identified in the stories that the Self and the Other tell, which are projected towards the future as idealized scenarios, and in how previous experiences or perceived injustices colour the way subjects see themselves in relation to the world.

Since we introduce the object-cause of desire as an analytical tool to understand why certain fantasies, such as Serbia's attachment to Kosovo, persist despite material losses, we need to problematize the implied causality in the object-cause of desire. As we are relying on a Lacanian framework, we do not understand causality in a positivist sense. As already outlined in the theoretical section, the object-cause of desire is an empty form that can be filled with specific contents (i.e. signifiers). The analyst's task is to decipher which signifiers embody the void in a state's self-discourse. In other words, while we recognize that the same mechanisms underpin states' agency, they always adopt different contents depending on the case study. The Lacanian analysis of state behaviour should not be viewed as a theoretical explanation pointing to unconscious factors that can be juxtaposed and empirically tested against other rival explanations of state behaviour. Instead, it should be seen as a complementary interpretation that illuminates previously overlooked unconscious processes that are omnipresent.

We incorporate the categories of *objet petit a*, beatific/horrific fantasies and theft of enjoyment into Lene Hansen's post-structuralist discourse analysis,<sup>81</sup> a framework we aim to enhance with a focus on affectivity and the underlying mechanisms of fantasy that structure all discourses.<sup>82</sup> Our goal is not just to concentrate on the 'surface'

<sup>77</sup>Glynos and Howarth 2007.

<sup>78</sup>See Eberle 2019.

<sup>79</sup>Glynos 2008, 283.

<sup>80</sup>Glynos and Howarth 2007.

<sup>81</sup>Hansen 2006.

<sup>82</sup>Glynos and Howarth 2007.

of discourses but to delve deeper. Unlike other methodological approaches dealing with emotions in IR,<sup>83</sup> we are not primarily interested in how specific emotions (such as love, hate, fear, etc.) are articulated in discourse, or how certain expressions make us 'feel'. Instead, we are attempting to methodologically operationalize underlying affective mechanisms that are sometimes not articulated in specific emotional signifiers. For instance, fantasy can be identified based on a broader narrative structure that supports decision-making in international politics, which can be deciphered by examining a range of utterances, not just single 'emotive' words.

This study builds upon Hansen's framework because it already provides us with specific tools to transition from surface to deep-structure analysis. For instance, Hansen's methodological insights on the Self and the Other (linking and differentiation processes) lend themselves readily to discussions of 'theft of enjoyment'. Her problematization of spatial, temporal and ethical identity offers insights into how state identity narratives are articulated and which objects-cause of desire seem to be driving actions towards constituting that identity as a whole. Essentially, we have adapted Hansen's framework to incorporate the affective categories we identified above, as no other methodological framework suited for the study of IR had previously operationalized the three categories of analysis we introduced.

We integrated our analytical categories into Hansen's framework to lend our analysis more procedural and structural rigor, which is evident in our coding scheme below. Following Hansen's advice, we employ her intertextual Model 1+, which encompasses official discourses and wider policy debates. In this case, the debates include actors such as the Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) and government. In terms of the number of 'Selves', we study only one, that is, the Serbian Self, as both its government and national church (re-)produce the same hegemonic discourses on Kosovo.<sup>84</sup> We recognize that by choosing the Model 1+ we direct our attention away from opposing and marginal discourses. However, it should be noted that this is an analytical not an ontological choice, and that it does not imply a monolithic and static understanding of identity discourse.

While we recognize the importance of a dialogical approach, space constraints in this study did not permit us to juxtapose the Serbian Self with the Kosovo-Albanian Self and their respective desires and fantasies. However, we do focus on differentiation and linking processes<sup>85</sup> when exploring how the Self is constructed in relation to the Other, for instance, 'truthful' vs. 'liars'; 'honorable' vs. 'cunning/cowardly'; 'peaceful' vs. 'destructive'. Lastly, our focus narrows to a single event, Kosovo's unsuccessful bid to join UNESCO, from the announcement of its intention to join in July 2015, to the failure and immediate aftermath of the bid in mid-November 2015. Therefore, the 'basic discourse' that underpins this debate<sup>86</sup> is the idea that the cultural heritage in Kosovo is fundamentally Serbian and is at risk of being 'stolen', appropriated or 'erased' by Kosovo Albanians.

Our analysis is based on official statements and speeches by the Serbian Government and the SOC, produced from July to November 2015 in relation to

<sup>83</sup>Koschut 2018; see also other contributions in Clément and Sangar 2018.

<sup>84</sup>Hansen 2006, 11.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 37–38.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 46.

Kosovo's UNESCO bid. We have collected our material from RTS (Radio-televizija Srbije), the Serbian public broadcaster, which is one of the main news outlets close to the government and also among the most widely read and watched. We also used the official bid website, which was produced by the government in cooperation with the SOC.<sup>87</sup> Additionally, we examined the hashtag #nokosovounesco as it appeared in connection with the Government's official social media accounts. The final corpus consists of 251 news articles from the RTS website, gathered by searching with the keyword 'Unesk\*', 22 manually transcribed evening news items from the public broadcaster's programme, Dnevnik 2, 14 tweets by the President of Serbia and text from the website.

We coded our corpus using Atlas.ti, applying the following coding scheme: 'Self' (sub-codes by actors such as 'government' or 'church'); 'Self-adjective' (descriptions of how the Self is articulated, with sub-codes by description, e.g., 'honorable', 'righteous'); 'Temporal identity'; 'Spatial identity'; 'Ethical identity'; 'Other' (sub-codes by actors such as 'Kosovo Albanian' or 'the West'); 'Other-adjective' (descriptions of how the Other is articulated, with sub-codes by description, e.g. 'destructive,' 'thieves', 'liars'). Additionally, we coded for 'Reference' (sub-codes referring to past events or established discourses, such as '2004 riots', or 'Kosovo as foundational'); 'Beatific fantasy' (sub-codes such as 'Return of Kosovo', 'Serbia as the winner in international relations'); 'Horrorific fantasy' (sub-codes such as 'national destruction/disintegration', 'Albanization', 'civil war'). Lastly, we coded for 'Theft of enjoyment' and 'Theft/erasure of identity', referring to instances in which Kosovo's bid is articulated as a way of stealing or erasing Serbian identity and undermining Serbia's efforts to preserve the heritage as Serbian. We identified the object-cause of desire by paying attention to the entire discourse, what absences (lacks) in identity perceptions were present and by considering the historical context of Serbia's identity-based foreign policy. This coding scheme can be applied or adapted to other case studies in world politics. The analysis that we present in the rest of the article yielded 471 quotations and 121 individual codes.

## Evidence from Serbia's opposition to Kosovo's bid to join UNESCO

### *Kosovo as Serbia's object-cause of desire*

Serbia's obsession with Kosovo is a textbook example of *objet petit a* in IR. According to the Serbian nationalist narrative, the territory of Kosovo is considered the cradle of Serbian statehood and spirituality. It was here that the Serbian army confronted the advancing Ottomans in 1389. Legend has it that on the eve of this battle, Prince Lazar, the leader of the Serbs, was visited in his dream by an angel. This angel offered him a choice between a heavenly kingdom and an earthly one. Lazar, it is said, chose the former. Consequently, he was defeated in the battle, losing not only his life but also his country, which subsequently fell into the hands of the Ottomans. This battle is etched into the collective memory as marking the beginning of five centuries of Turkish domination. In the late 19th century, the founders of the Serbian nation harnessed this legend to justify their fight for

<sup>87</sup>See [www.nokosovounesco.com](http://www.nokosovounesco.com).

independence from 'the sick man of Europe' in the 19th century, and subsequently, the territorial acquisition of Kosovo from the disintegrating Ottoman Empire, which ultimately took place in 1912.

Since the 19th century, Kosovo has been the key object-cause of desire of the Serbian national project. It is seen as not just a territory dotted with churches and monasteries, symbolizing the Serbian Holy Land, but also as a place rich in history that tells the foundational story about the origins, rise, decline and restoration of the Serbian nation. The national mobilization over Kosovo, which began in the late 19th century, was framed as a narrative about 'the missing piece' that would complete the national identity once the territory was 'liberated'. Similarly, over the past two decades, due to Serbia's loss of control over Kosovo, it has embodied the 'lost enjoyment' of the Serbian national community, the revival of which promises to fill a deep-seated void. While the territory itself did change hands, from a Lacanian perspective at least, Kosovo became a symbol of completion for Serbia. It represents a wholeness that can never truly be achieved and that was never genuinely present to begin with – due to the intrinsic absence at the heart of any subjectivity.

This yearning for Kosovo has deep historical roots, stretching back to medieval times and politically rekindled in the 19th century. The recollections of the 1389 Battle of Kosovo, and the myths surrounding it, played a crucial role in Serbian nation-building during the first half of the 19th century. These memories were transformed into a territorial myth and a national obsession to reclaim the region of Kosovo, which had been part of the Serbian medieval states, especially after the 1878 Congress of Berlin. At this Congress, the great powers granted Serbia full independence from the Ottoman Empire but also permitted the Austro-Hungarian Empire to occupy Bosnia and Herzegovina. At that time, Bosnia and Herzegovina was another province of the Ottoman Empire, home to many Serbs and the primary object of desire for the early 19th-century nation builders in Serbia. At the time, Serbia had many aspirations, but only the unification of Serbs or independence from the Ottoman Empire qualified to be treated as the object-cause of desire, or signifiers that represent the fullness of the state subject. Once this region became a sphere of interest for the Habsburg Empire and therefore remained inaccessible for the emerging Serbian state, Serbia's expansionist ambitions shifted southeast to include the territory of Kosovo. Remembered as the location of the legendary battle, home to a significant Serbian Orthodox population and speckled with hundreds of medieval monasteries, churches and graves, this territory was seamlessly integrated into the central narratives about Serbian national identity.

Serbian forces eventually 'liberated' the territory of Kosovo during the 1912 First Balkan War and annexed it to the Kingdom of Serbia. However, the mobilization potential of Kosovo diminished soon after, as Yugoslav nation-building, particularly following World War Two, necessitated new myths and narratives that were not exclusively tied to any of the preceding entities. This trend began to reverse in the 1980s when nationalist sentiments surged throughout the country. Serbs increasingly argued that the 1974 Constitution of Yugoslavia facilitated the Albanization of the province of Kosovo, posing a risk of eventual secession. The anxiety surrounding the potential loss of Kosovo, considered a vital part of the

national spirit, slowly resurfaced, first on the fringes and then gradually permeating mainstream political discourse in Serbia.<sup>88</sup>

The narrative was reignited once more in the late 1980s for nationalist mobilization in Serbia, as the crumbling Yugoslav federation began losing its internal coherence and allure. Following the disintegration of Yugoslavia in the early 1990s, Kosovo remained within the country as an autonomous province of Serbia. In reaction to secessionist movements, Serbia initiated a campaign of repression against Kosovo Albanians, culminating in a civil war in 1998 and NATO intervention in March 1999. The war concluded with the withdrawal of Serbian and Yugoslav forces from Kosovo in June 1999, while the province was transferred to international control with KFOR (the NATO-led Kosovo Force) assuming military administration and UNMIK (UN Mission in Kosovo) taking responsibility for civilian affairs. In the nationalist narrative, empirical control over Kosovo was lost, but the legal claim remained, enshrined in the Serbian constitution and United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244. This fostered a desire to retain Kosovo within Serbia, thereby upholding a certain biographical dignity, coherence and continuity. Consequently, the empirical loss of Kosovo sparked existential anxieties and horrific fantasies about national disintegration. However, it also amplified the allure of Kosovo as Serbia's object-cause of desire and instilled a sense of purpose in Serbian foreign policy.<sup>89</sup>

When an agreed status solution was not reached during the UN-mediated efforts (2006–2007), Kosovo issued a Unilateral Declaration of Independence (UDI) on 17 February 2008. Serbia promptly rejected this move as a violation of its territorial integrity and a challenge to its national dignity and identity. In Serbia, the UDI and subsequent international recognition of Kosovo's independence were perceived as a theft of territory, property, history and identity. The Serbian official discourse routinely referred to the new Kosovo as a 'fake state', with references to theft and forgery being omnipresent. Consequently, an avalanche of existential anxieties and horrific fantasies about threatening Others and the potential disintegration of the nation overwhelmed Serbia's public discourse.<sup>90</sup>

In 2011, the normalization dialogue began between Belgrade and Pristina, this time facilitated by the EU. Since then, the two sides have concluded several agreements covering a wide array of issues, such as mutual recognition of diplomas, customs stamps, integrated border/boundary management, regional representation, etc. The most significant agreement was the First Agreement on Principles Governing the Normalization of Relations, also known as the Brussels Agreement, in April 2013.<sup>91</sup> Serbian leaders presented the agreement as a diplomatic victory that would yield substantial benefits for the Kosovo Serbs, without recognizing Kosovo's independence. Thus, even though the agreement reduced Belgrade's physical control over Kosovo, the underlying fantasies driving the policies remained unchanged.<sup>92</sup>

When Belgrade began to reduce its institutional presence in Kosovo, Serbia's fixation with Kosovo shifted from the material to the symbolic realm. Representatives

<sup>88</sup>Dragović-Soso 2002.

<sup>89</sup>Ker-Lindsay 2012; Ejodus 2020.

<sup>90</sup>Šram 2009; Ejodus 2018.

<sup>91</sup>RTV 2013.

<sup>92</sup>See also Subotić 2016.

of the SOC and conservative politicians alike assert that Kosovo is Serbia's Jerusalem. Consequently, they argue, Serbs must display the same patience and perseverance exhibited by the Jews, who waited for 2000 years before returning to their holy land.<sup>93</sup> Narratives portraying Kosovo as the Serbian Jerusalem, alongside calls like 'Next year in Prizren' (a city in Kosovo which was particularly important for Serbian medieval history), have transformed into symbolic representations of the object-cause of desire. In other words, the yearning for Kosovo does not entail an ambition to recapture the territory but rather to go on with a certain narrative of the Self.<sup>94</sup>

While some progress has been made in implementing the agreements, many of them remain unfulfilled. Moreover, from 2015, the dialogue stalled as both sides resorted to unilateral actions and antagonizing rhetoric. In 2023, it appears that the two sides have reached agreements in Brussels and Ohrid on a series of steps towards further normalization, although the actual implementation remains uncertain, especially following the outbreak of violence in September 2023. One major point of contention that has and will likely continue to hinder progress is Kosovo's ambition to join international organizations, including the UN and its specialized agencies such as UNESCO.

In sum, over the past two decades, Kosovo has transformed from a practical policy problem into a national *objet petit a* whose attraction stems from its unattainability. Hence, it transformed from a predominantly material to a mostly symbolic object-cause of desire. However, as stated in the theoretical section, the material and the symbolic are not mutually exclusive and can co-exist and contextually gain or lose prominence. Hence, during the brief period of discussions about a potential land swap between Serbian President Vučić and Kosovar President Thaçi in 2018, the symbolic claims over Kosovo evolved into material ones.<sup>95</sup> Finally, even if in the long course of history Serbia would somehow manage to 'return' Kosovo, new objects-cause of desire would emerge as ways of triggering the agency of the Serbian nation-state. However, this is not a foreseeable development as the nationalist script on Kosovo is still the most powerful master narrative in Serbian politics with no signs of weakening.

### ***Cultural heritage as a signifier for Serbia's object-cause of desire***

Since the war's end in 1999, cultural heritage has been a pressing issue in the relationship between Belgrade and Pristina, the capital of Kosovo. From the Serbian perspective, the monasteries and churches of the SOC in Kosovo are significant not only as places of worship for local Orthodox Serbs but also as they provide a tangible connection to the nation's medieval past, thereby reinforcing the Serbian historical claim to the territory. Conversely, the Kosovar view of the Serbian Orthodox heritage is markedly different. From the prevailing ethno-nationalist perspective, this heritage on Kosovar soil is a hindrance to Kosovo-Albanian ethnic sovereignty. Such sentiment has driven instances of attacks, vandalism and

<sup>93</sup>Ejdus and Subotić 2014.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid.

<sup>95</sup>Vulović 2022.

destruction of churches, monasteries, graves and other sacred sites associated with the Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo. This hostility reached a peak during the widespread violence against Kosovo Serbs in March 2004, which resulted in the burning of at least 27 SOCs and 550 homes, and the displacement of approximately 4,100 Serbs and Roma.<sup>96</sup>

From a less ingrained cosmopolitan perspective, which the international community has incorporated into the Kosovar state-building project, the cultural heritage of the SOC in Kosovo should be accepted as part of Kosovo's multicultural heritage. In essence, both Belgrade and Pristina assert claims to the cultural heritage, not solely for pragmatic reasons, but also to satisfy self-identity needs and aspirations for completeness. Consequently, cultural heritage has become both a symbolic and tangible signifier for the empirical iteration of the object-cause of desire, fuelling both horrific and beatific, fantasies-driven actions on both sides of the conflict.

After two years of unsuccessful negotiations under the auspices of the UN in Vienna, the Special Envoy of the Secretary-General of the UN for Kosovo, former Finnish President Martti Ahtisaari, presented The Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement in 2007, commonly known as the Ahtisaari Plan. Serbia rejected the plan as it envisioned supervised independence for Kosovo, crossing Serbia's 'red line'. However, Pristina accepted it, and the Western international community endorsed it as a blueprint for Kosovo's state-building. The plan acknowledged the importance of cultural heritage and its Annex Five stated that 'Kosovo shall recognize the Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo, including monasteries, churches, and other sites used for religious purposes, as an integral part of the Serbian Orthodox Church seated in Belgrade'.<sup>97</sup> Subsequently, the Implementation and Monitoring Council was established, and the authorities in Kosovo passed several related laws.

The application of Pristina to join UNESCO in early 2015 sparked narratives that Kosovo authorities are stealing Serbia's cultural heritage.<sup>98</sup> In October, Serbia's President Nikolić expressed his strong opposition to the admission of Kosovo to UNESCO 'because the Serbian heritage is an inalienable part of the being of the Serbian people, part of its history, and its spiritual axis'.<sup>99</sup> In these narratives, as in so many times before, longing for Kosovo was presented as being deeply ingrained in the Serbian national consciousness. In the words of Milovan Drecun, the Chair of the Parliamentary Committee on Kosovo, 'as long as there are Serbs wherever they are born, who keep Kosovo and Metohija in their heart, it will be ours, Serbian'.<sup>100</sup> Moreover, the longing for Kosovo in general and the national struggle against its admission to UNESCO in particular were construed as the very preconditions for Serbian national identity. A case in point is the statement made by Branimir Stojanović, a Kosovo Serb leader. He was shocked by what he called 'unpatriotic' statements made by the president of the Serbian Academy of

<sup>96</sup>HRW 2004.

<sup>97</sup>UN Security Council 2007, Annex 5, Article 1.

<sup>98</sup>Surlić 2017, 112.

<sup>99</sup>RTS 2015k.

<sup>100</sup>RTS 2015z.

Sciences and Arts, who suggested that Kosovo was a lost cause. Stojanović warned that: 'For all Serbs, wherever they live, Kosovo and Metohija is an irreplaceable cohesive factor and a national symbol, and history has taught us that without it, the Serbian people today probably would not exist'.<sup>101</sup>

The UNESCO membership application reactivated the tropes described above in Serbia, heightening a sense of ontological insecurity. Contrary to the expectations of traditional ontological security scholars, the threat of Kosovo's admission to UNESCO did not paralyze Serbian decision-makers. Instead, it underpinned a sense of purposeful action among them. This suggests that the political activation of longing for the unattainable, or *objet petit a*, can drive foreign policy. If such objects were attainable, desire for them would cease, thus removing the foundation for subjectivity and action. In fact, the *objet petit a* only motivates policy choices while remaining unattainable. This is true of Kosovo in Serbian political discourse, consistently depicted as lost, yet needed to be regained, but impossible to recapture. This paradox fuels Serbia's anxiety. As an object of desire forever out of reach, Kosovo maintains its status as Serbia's ultimate problem and, paradoxically, as Serbia's ultimate solution.

### **Beatific and horrific fantasies**

Serbia's longing for Kosovo gives rise to beatific and horrific fantasies. The beatific fantasy envisions Kosovo's reunion with Serbia, anchored by assertions of Serbian cultural heritage there. This fantasy conveys hopes for Serbia's 'comeback' to Kosovo, especially by war-displaced Serbs and Serbian security forces post-UN Resolution 1244, which left NATO as the main post-war security guarantor. It also implies a return of Kosovo to Serbian jurisdiction, something that was lost with the said Resolution. In contrast, the horrific fantasy portrays national breakdown and devastation: Serbia's fragmentation and a diluted Serbian identity if opposition against Kosovo's UNESCO membership fails. Such bleak prospects include potential Serbian civil unrest, humanitarian crises, exodus of Serbs from Kosovo upon its UNESCO accession, the 'Albanization' of Serbian heritage in Kosovo and the creation of a Kosovan identity at the expense of the Serbian one. Historical events, like the March 2004 riots that damaged Serbian heritage, shape these narratives. We analyse this through referentiality and intertextuality, and focus first on the beatific and then on the horrific fantasies.

It is no secret that Serbia considers Kosovo as part of its territory, as is enshrined in the Serbian Constitution.<sup>102</sup> This includes the cultural heritage located in Kosovo, such as the four monumental sites of the SOC – the medieval monasteries of Dečani and Gračanica, the Church of the Virgin of Ljeviš and the Patriarchate of Peć – all UNESCO World Heritage Sites under the designation of 'Cultural Heritage of Serbia'. These sites are often referred to as the origins of Serbian medieval statehood that connect Serbia and its people to the civilizational currents of the world, especially Europe. This is evident in several statements made by the Serbian Government, for instance by Foreign Minister Ivica Dačić, when he addressed

<sup>101</sup>RTS 2015t.

<sup>102</sup>National Assembly of the Republic of Serbia 2006.

UNESCO a few days before the General Conference vote on Kosovo's membership in November 2015. He was 'concerned about the cultural and historical heritage in Kosovo, which is a pillar of our national, cultural, and spiritual identity and part of the precious historical and civilizational heritage of modern Europe and the world'.<sup>103</sup> Even though Serbia claims Kosovo as part of itself (symbolically), an integral piece of this fantasy is a longing for the physical return to Kosovo. A few days before the General Conference vote in UNESCO, the head of the SOC, Patriarch Irinej, claimed that people should raise their voice in defence of Kosovo, adding that Serbia must do everything in its power to 'return Kosovo by hook or by crook' should Kosovo force its hand by joining UNESCO.<sup>104</sup> At the same time, the return to Kosovo for the Serbian Government also implies a return of a handful of Serbian security forces to protect the Serbian cultural heritage there if Kosovo joined, as explained by Nikolić: 'I agree that Albanians should protect what Albanians have built and join UNESCO to protect their heritage, while Serbs should protect what is Serbian', pointing out that the Resolution 1244 enables the return of a number of Serbian soldiers and police officers to Kosovo.<sup>105</sup> In practice, such a return of forces would be impossible, since much has changed since the Resolution was adopted: Kosovo now even has its own special security forces, such as the Regional Operational Support Unit (ROSU).

The horrific side of this fantasy is a narrative of destruction and loss of identity. When it comes to the destruction of the Serbian cultural identity in Kosovo, the discourse analysis reveals a ritualized repetition of the numbers of destroyed heritage sites, churches, property and people who died or who were injured. Most references are to the 2004 riots, when Albanian rioters destroyed numerous churches and Serb property in Kosovo. Serbia's Foreign Minister has ritually repeated these figures whenever addressing the UN<sup>106</sup> or UNESCO,<sup>107</sup> claiming that since 1999, Albanians have attacked 236 and destroyed 174 religious and heritage sites. What is the purpose of this ritualized repetition? As mentioned, *enjoyment* is also experienced as suffering, so we argue that through this reliving of the 2004 events, the Serbian political community experiences pleasurable suffering. Painful memories bind the political community more tightly together, through shared trauma. The fantasy of destruction, as a way of making sense of this painful loss, also acts as a reminder of why the Albanian Other should be feared and not trusted.

To counter Kosovo's application, President of Serbia Tomislav Nikolić launched an intensive public diplomacy campaign called The Truth: NoKosovoUNESCO. The campaign had two dimensions. The first was the effort to influence other states through regular diplomatic channels, while the second was launched through traditional and social media. A special video called 'Truth' was made in English and translated into Spanish and Arabic. The video was shown to diplomats, posted on YouTube, and broadcasted on Russia Today with hundreds of million viewers worldwide. The same campaign was also launched through Twitter, while a

<sup>103</sup>RTS 2015c.

<sup>104</sup>RTS 2015j; 'Dnevnik 2' 2015, November 2, min. 03:07.

<sup>105</sup>RTS 2015m.

<sup>106</sup>RTS 2015b.

<sup>107</sup>RTS 2015c.

dedicated website was created with all the supporting material.<sup>108</sup> The video and website express both the beatific and the horrific aspects of fantasies about Kosovo. The beatific aspect is visible in the replication of age-old narratives about a centuries-long legacy in ‘the cradle of our culture and spirituality’ and ‘the very essence of Serbian spiritual, cultural identity’ (website) and ‘the Serbian Jerusalem...of essential importance for the spiritual and cultural identity of the Serbian People’ (video). On the other hand, the horrific aspect is expressed in the stories about attacks against Kosovo Serbs, their churches and their monasteries by the Albanians. While the video zooms in on the March 2004 violence and the destruction and desecration of Serbian cultural heritage, the website complements this with stories of persecution and destruction all the way back to the Ottoman period and ‘marauding tribes from the Albanian highlands’.

The fantasy of destruction is closely connected to the narrative of ‘Albanization’. This narrative has deep roots in the Serbian nationalist discourse and vilifies Albanians as uncivilized people who have attempted to erase Serbs from Kosovo throughout history and have engaged in campaigns of ethnic cleansing against the Serbs by means of overpopulation or inciting conflict.<sup>109</sup> The narrative re-emerged in the 2015 UNESCO debate, when the Serbian Ambassador to UNESCO, Darko Tanasković, claimed that Kosovo’s membership could have long-term consequences:

In the long run, given that our cultural heritage in Kosovo is in a hostile environment, it would certainly be exposed to various types of pressure – we can even say attacks and appropriations – which would go from physical endangerment, to what is much worse, namely Albanianization and the attempt to force our cultural heritage in Kosovo into one artificial, synthetic, non-existent cultural identity of Kosovo.<sup>110</sup>

Similarly, when Nikolić campaigned against Kosovo’s bid in his visit to the Vatican and Italy, he reiterated that Kosovo ‘does not attempt to protect Serbian heritage’, but ‘present the cultural and religious heritage [of Serbia] as Kosovan’ and part of ‘Albanian cultural heritage’.<sup>111</sup> Similar concerns were expressed by Bishop Teodosije of Raška-Prizren.<sup>112</sup>

Should Kosovo be accepted into UNESCO, the fantasy of national disintegration implies a narrative of a potential Serb exodus and even civil war. President Nikolić stated that there would be civil war if Serbia recognized Kosovo’s independence, claiming that the ‘connection of Serbs with Kosovo and Metohija is fateful [foundational]’.<sup>113</sup> At the same time, the SOC has pleaded with ‘all Orthodox people and all those who care about law and justice in the world to oppose the membership of the so-called state of Kosovo in UNESCO, which would be equal to a humanitarian catastrophe’.<sup>114</sup> On 20 October 2015, the church, the Serbian Academy of Sciences

<sup>108</sup>See [www.nokosovounesco.com](http://www.nokosovounesco.com).

<sup>109</sup>Guzina 2003.

<sup>110</sup>‘Dnevnik 2’ 2015, October 12, min 04:13.

<sup>111</sup>RTS 2015n.

<sup>112</sup>RTS 2015v.

<sup>113</sup>RTS 2015m.

<sup>114</sup>RTS 2015q.

and Arts and the government agreed on a joint strategy regarding Kosovo's UNESCO bid, concluding that 'any hijacking of [Serbian] heritage would unequivocally jeopardize the survival of [...] the Serbian population that still lives in the area [of Kosovo and Metohija]'.<sup>115</sup>

In summary, fantasies can reconcile deeply contradictory narratives or facts, rendering decisions driven by the potential attainment of the *objet petit a* reasonable. Thus, it is plausible that Serbia perceived the NoKosovoUnesco campaign as a sensible means of opposing Kosovo's UNESCO membership. This perspective may seem contradictory given the promises of enhanced protection for Serbian cultural heritage if Kosovo were to join, yet it remains understandable in this context.

### **Theft of enjoyment: the many faces of the Albanian other**

We have observed that an unfulfilled beatific fantasy, or an unfulfilled attainment of the *objet petit a*, is externalized and inscribed onto an Other that hinders us from fully constituting our identity, often manifesting as a 'theft of enjoyment'. In this discourse, the Other that obstructs Serbia's goals is represented by the Albanian Other. If Serbia derives enjoyment from preserving its cultural heritage in Kosovo, then the Albanian Other undermines this enjoyment with their bid to join UNESCO and stake a claim on the same heritage as Kosovan. For instance, President Nikolić stated that 'Serbia is the only country in Europe from which they attempt to steal not only its territory but also its cultural heritage'.<sup>116</sup> The 'theft' extends to identity, since the Albanian Other is accused of wanting to appropriate, steal or erase – Albanize – Serbian identity in Kosovo, a region that Serbia claims is foundational,<sup>117</sup> its cradle and its grave.<sup>118</sup> Nikolić claimed that Kosovo's attempt to join UNESCO is 'the final act of destruction and erasure of the existence of Serbia in Kosovo and Metohija, which must be prevented at all cost', since it is 'neither moral nor just'.<sup>119</sup> In that sense, the Albanian is articulated as the radical Other in Serbian nationalist discourses, sustained by fantasies of Serb superiority, in which Albanians are constructed as inferior, primitive or undeserving.<sup>120</sup>

In order to constitute Kosovo Albanians as the radical Other during the UNESCO debate in 2015, a number of adjectives are used. Members of the Serbian government have very frequently alluded to Albanians as destructive, evident during the 2004 riots when they destroyed several churches or plundered religious artefacts from them.<sup>121</sup> This is the most prevalent designation describing Albanians, coded 111 times in our material. Albanians are also described as hypocrites (31 times) when referring to their intention to protect the cultural heritage located in Kosovo in a better and more efficient way through officially joining UNESCO and making use of its protection mechanisms.<sup>122</sup> The hypocrisy is

<sup>115</sup>RTS 2015s.

<sup>116</sup>'Dnevnik 2' 2015, October 16, min. 01:35.

<sup>117</sup>RTS 2015p; RTS 2015j.

<sup>118</sup>'Dnevnik 2' 2015, October 18, min. 05:44

<sup>119</sup>'Dnevnik 2' 2015, September 29, min. 05:00.

<sup>120</sup>Salecl 1994.

<sup>121</sup>RTS 2015b; RTS 2015y; RTS 2015p.

<sup>122</sup>RTS 2015w.

made evident through frequent references to both the 2004 riots and the destruction of cultural and religious heritage during and immediately after the Kosovo war of 1998–1999.<sup>123</sup> To this end, Foreign Minister Dačić compared the destruction of Serbian cultural heritage in Kosovo to the activities of ISIS: ‘Four of our shrines in Kosovo and Metohija have been declared world cultural heritage [...] sites in danger. And who is endangering them? It would be like someone nominating the Islamic State for membership in UNESCO. What is the difference?’<sup>124</sup>

Other related designations used by the government and church to describe Albanians include liars (29 times) who attempt to change historical facts on the ground,<sup>125</sup> violent<sup>126</sup> (19 times), insulting or uncivilized<sup>127</sup> (13 times). Opposed to those designations are self-descriptions of Serbs as ‘honorable’, ‘just’, ‘moral’ and ‘truthful’.<sup>128</sup> Many significations of the Self and Other involve an ethical construction of identity. Kosovo Albanians are constructed as not having the moral authority to take care of Serbian cultural heritage, since they have destroyed it in the past.<sup>129</sup> What is also considered unethical is the attempt to ‘steal’ the heritage instead of engaging in ‘civilized’ discussions within the Brussels dialogue, as the Serbian government has often suggested during this debate.<sup>130</sup>

Finally, a dominant signification relates to Kosovo not having proper statehood in the international arena, or being a ‘quasi-state’.<sup>131</sup> These designations of quasi-statehood are related to spatial constructions of identity, since Serbia still considers Kosovo as part of its territory, with Albanian representatives having no legal claims to Kosovo’s statehood internationally. Through claiming the medieval cultural heritage located in Kosovo as Serbian, the Serbs often referred to themselves as a ‘civilizational’ people (27 codes), whose cultural contribution to world heritage is significant and valuable.<sup>132</sup> They presented Kosovo Albanians as not having their own culture and needing to ‘steal’ Serbian heritage in order to claim some kind of historical presence in these lands.<sup>133</sup> Through these juxtapositions, the Serb identity is constituted relationally through processes of linking and differentiation with the Albanian Other.

As the pinnacle of this debate, the successful attempt of Serbia to prevent Kosovo from joining UNESCO can be understood as an experience of partial enjoyment, in which the theft of identity was prevented. On 11 November 2015, 92 members of the General Assembly of State Parties to the World Heritage Convention voted not to grant Kosovo membership, three votes short of the two-third majority needed for the positive decision. Serbia hailed this as a big diplomatic victory. But the triumph was only temporary, as the Serbian Government immediately announced

<sup>123</sup>RTS 2015o; RTS 2015c.

<sup>124</sup>RTS 2015e.

<sup>125</sup>RTS 2015d.

<sup>126</sup>RTS 2015r.

<sup>127</sup>RTS 2015d.

<sup>128</sup>‘Dnevnik 2’ 2015, November 9, min. 02:53; RTS 2015h; RTS 2015w.

<sup>129</sup>‘Dnevnik 2’ 2015, October 11; RTS 2015w.

<sup>130</sup>RTS 2015g; RTS 2015c.

<sup>131</sup>RTS 2015a; RTS 2015u.

<sup>132</sup>RTS 2015j.

<sup>133</sup>RTS 2015i; RTS 2015m.

new challenges coming its way.<sup>134</sup> A few days after the UNESCO vote, the Kosovo Constitutional Court issued a verdict that resulted in the suspension of the 2015 Agreement on the Establishment of an Association/Community of Serb Municipalities, which was negotiated in the Brussels dialogue.<sup>135</sup> This thwarted the ambition of Belgrade to ensure some level of autonomy for the Kosovo Serbs, and generated a new sense of frustration. This demonstrates that even if one aspect of an empirical object of desire is attained (preventing Kosovo from joining UNESCO, ‘preserving’ the cultural heritage as Serbian), the constitutive lack is ultimately not filled and new diplomatic battles are initiated to achieve identity closure.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have enriched the Lacanian approach to ontological security in IR by developing new ideas on how to conceptualize and study objects-cause of desire in world politics. Specifically, we posited that it is the objects that cause desire, not fantasies, and discussed their ontological and empirical aspects, symbolic and material signifiers and the horrific and beatific fantasies that support desires of attaining them. We also explored the concepts of enjoyment and theft of enjoyment, all within the context of world politics. Empirically, we utilized post-structural discourse analysis to demonstrate our theoretical arguments through the case study of Serbia’s resistance to Kosovo’s unsuccessful bid to join UNESCO in 2015. Our theoretical insights contribute to the growing field of OSS and the wider scholarship on psychoanalysis in IR and diplomatic studies. Additionally, our empirical findings cast a different light on the challenges of normalizing relations between Belgrade and Pristina, as well as other protracted conflicts.

Overall, we find that the heightened sense of ontological insecurity we describe in the article did not paralyze Serbia, but generated agency instead. If desire is never satisfied and subjects in IR are ‘split’ or ‘lacking’, then their attempts to mend the lack through pursuing objects-cause of desire supported by fantasies of attainment will continually re-emerge. In this context, attaining consolidated statehood for Kosovo or re-gaining Kosovo for Serbia should be understood as processes, not as final destinations. This argument can be extended to any state, as even the most ‘consolidated’ states can experience processes of ‘deconsolidation’. Any state’s attempt to extend its political reach in the international arena or re-evaluate its own identity narratives due to a destabilizing event can be seen as an effort to mend a constitutive lack that will continually reappear. Any sense of stable identity is only contingently grounded.

As a next step, the same analytical attention should be given to the case of Kosovo, its own *objet petit a*, and the underlying fantasies that sustain Kosovo’s desire. In Kosovo’s political discourse, the epitome of the *objet petit a* is ‘consolidated statehood’ – the idea that once Kosovo is recognized by all countries worldwide, it will achieve a full constitution of identity. Similarly to Serbia, achieving full identity closure is never possible, as there will always be a constitutive lack. If

<sup>134</sup>RTS 2015x.

<sup>135</sup>RTS 2015f.

'consolidated statehood' is ever achieved on the international stage, that is, if Kosovo is recognized as a state by all UN countries, new thieves of enjoyment would appear and new objects would emerge as causes of desire.

The Serb community in northern Kosovo has shown a lack of willingness to integrate into Kosovo's state structures, which could be seen as one obstacle on Kosovo's path to full identity consolidation. Serbia, with its campaign to de-recognize Kosovo, and the Serb community in the north, could be viewed as Kosovo's 'thieves of enjoyment'. In the current state of affairs, joining UNESCO would represent a step towards Kosovo finally 'feeling whole' and would constitute an experience of partial enjoyment. Scapegoating is also present in this discourse, with Serbia articulated as the Other that prevents Kosovo from achieving its goals, such as in its bid to join UNESCO in 2015. While there are other examples of this logic, we have focused on the 2015 bid as a site of struggle with both international and domestic impacts.

These insights carry important implications for both theory and policy. Theoretically, our paper expands the Lacanian concept of *objet petit a* to OSS. Examining objects-cause of desire and beatific/horrific fantasies can help us understand the persistence of protracted conflicts and the intransigence of states and other groups involved in long-term mutual securitization processes. In terms of policy, unless Serbia's affective attachment to Kosovo is seriously reconsidered in efforts to find a lasting solution to the Kosovo–Serbia dispute, resolution of the conflict remains unlikely. For Serbia, choices aimed at 'preserving' Kosovo as Serbian are very logical because, at the level of fantasy, this option helps to mitigate fears of 'national disintegration'. The same applies to other fantasmatic conflicts around the globe. Fantasies serve as ontological needs for individuals and collectives alike, but they can be brought to the surface, scrutinized and eventually replaced with other, hopefully less destructive fantasies.

Future research should aim to identify other *objets petit a* in world politics. These can be tangible, material possessions like parts of national territories, but they can also be intangible and symbolic in values such as status, myths or principles of international society, as suggested previously. Fantasies pervade world politics, and no state – weak or strong, small or large – is immune to them. By highlighting the fantasies that underpin certain policies or behaviours, our aim is not to pathologize them, but to bring them to light, foster critical discussion and treat them as a regular yet often overlooked feature of international politics. A potential question for further research could be to understand how fantasies emerge, consolidate and dissolve. Historical investigation into the dissolution or replacement of unproductive fantasies with more productive ones – processes that have ultimately led to pacification, desecuritization and the building of security communities – could provide important insights into how to overcome the fantasmatic conflicts of today or tomorrow.

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