HISTORICAL MEMORY AND IDENTITY IN RUSSIA'S POLITICS OF SECURITY

by Tanya Narozhna

Introduction

Russia's involvement in the Syrian civil war and coalition with Iran and Hezbollah; increasingly aggressive stance towards the former Soviet republics intended to subvert their sovereignty and underrate their image as independent states in the eyes of the global community; its declared commitments to 'defend' Russian-speakers in Poland, the Baltic states and elsewhere, as well as threats to Denmark should the country join NATO's ballistic missile defense system appear either as elements of an elaborate security strategy, or as highly irrational moves of the state-gone-mad. The fact that these moves take place in the face of increasing Western sanctions over Russia's annexation of Crimea and involvement in the conflict in Donbass and their detrimental effects on the country's economy and international image speak to the need for a better understanding of Russia's politics of security. I contend that such understanding can be gained if one views Russia's security policies through the lens of ontological security.

This paper critically examines the concept of ontological security in IR and security studies (SS) literature. In the context of the limited discussion in IR/SS the individual-as-actor version of ontological security has been pitched against state-as-actor adaptation with exclusive focus on external referentiality (i.e., relations with others). I call for the need to reconceptualize ontological security by recognizing the role of internal referentiality, or what Giddens called the biographical narrative in shaping individual and collective self-identity. Internal referentiality is primarily intro- and retrospective, directed at the reflexive control of self-identity over a long period of time.

I put this reconceptualized concept of ontological security to empirical test by examining the interplay between Russia's politics of security and its politics of historical memory. I argue that Russia's security policies rest on a particular understanding of collective self shaped by state-driven biographical narrative. The politics of historical memory plays a key role in developing the biographical narrative. This politics relies on a matrix of security logics, discourses and practices designed to protect Russia as a distinct political self. As a result of the memory politics, Russian monarchism and Stalinism emerged as the bedrock of self-identity that guides its security policies and underpins a particular vision of Russian world, i.e., *Russki mir*. I conclude by considering implications of Russia's reconstituted identity and security agenda for regional and global security.

1. Conceptualizing ontological security: referential logics and referent objects

Ontological security is the security of the self, or security of identity. Unlike traditional understandings of security as survival, ontological security underscores security as being. It emphasizes the importance of a coherent sense of self-identity and reality by enabling actors to orient themselves cognitively and emotionally in the world. By the early 1990s the concept of ontological security has been well developed in sociology, most notably through the work of Anthony Giddens (1991). Drawing on existential phenomenology and Wittgensteinian philosophy, Giddens elaborated an account of ontological security premised on the idea that reflexive awareness characterizes all human action and that reflexivity is conditioned by practical consciousness, i.e., the type of consciousness that 'can not be "held in mind"' (36), but nonetheless 'brackets out' existential questions about ourselves, others and the world in general (37). For human agents to be able to 'go on' in

the world (35), it is crucial that the answers to existential questions about existence itself, time, space, continuity and identity - the questions that constitute different aspects of ontological security - should be taken for granted. As Giddens (1991, 47) put it, 'To be ontologically secure is to possess ... 'answers' to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses.' In the absence of such answers, 'chaos lurks' (36) - it is replete with risks, threats and dangers that can easily overpower individuals with deep existential anxieties. The key function of ontological security is therefore to sustain routine social activities and relationships while shielding the existential parameters of those activities from questioning and to 'bracket' overwhelming and threatening existential anxieties about the chaotic reality. In other words, faith in the continuity of social routines, especially stable relations with others, provides a foundation of ontological security, making the world knowable for individuals and allowing them to 'go on' with their day-to-day life.

Importantly, Giddens's framework emphasizes the continuity of self-identity across time and space as the central element of ontological security that 'presupposes [its] other elements', such as the stable sense of reality and others (54). For Giddens, self-identity is inherently reflexive in that it is not an attribute that persists on its own but rather refers to *the self as reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*' (53, emphasis in the original). Biographical narrative is one of the 'stories' about one's selfhood that has to be continuously developed to write in the events in the external social environment without undermining the 'story' itself. In Giddens's words, 'Each of us not only 'has', but *lives* a biography reflexively organised in terms of flows of social and psychological information about possible ways of life' (14, emphasis in the

original). A relatively stable sense of self-identity, in other words, is not determined by the actions of others but is anchored first and foremost in a continuous biographical narrative that 'has to be routinely created and sustained in the reflexive activities of the individual' (52). Giddens explains that ontologically insecure individuals fail to sustain an ongoing biographical narrative and confidence in their self-integrity (53-4). As a result, these individuals are exceedingly vulnerable to existential anxieties.

Giddens's primary concern was with the processes of self-identity development in the context of late modernity characterized by a high degree of uncertainty. His conceptualization centered on the *individual* aspirations for ontological security and emphasized the importance of trust in both the reliability of routines and the continuity of the biographical narrative for the constitution of self-identity. That is, both routines and biographical narratives are essential to one's self-identity and ontological security. 15 years after the publication of Giddens's *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Jennifer Mitzen (2006) astutely noted that ontological security-seeking characterizes not only individual but also state behavior. More specifically, Mitzen scaled up Giddens's concept from individuals to the states to demonstrate that ontological security sheds new light on the existence of seemingly irrational 'intractable conflicts' and 'enduring rivalries' in international relations (343), and on the role of state identity in sustaining protracted conflicts. Two points are crucially important in Mitzen's investigation of the security dilemma in IR: one, ontological security in world politics is developed and sustained through routinized relations among states, both amicable and antagonistic; and two, states seek ontological security even when such aspirations are in a self-defeating relationship with their physical security, and they do so without compromising their rational agency.

That is, considering that the stability of state identity is contingent on the persistence of routinized relations with other states, states have a rational interest in perpetuating conflictual relations with other states because such relations stabilize state identity and fulfill state needs for ontological security. In Mitzen's words, 'States in routinized competition ... prefer conflict to cooperation, because only through conflict do they know who they are' (361).

Mitzen's account is inherently structuralist in that it locates the source of state identity and, by extension, of international conflicts in the routinized relations among states. As Mitzen puts it herself, 'state identities ... are constituted and sustained by social relationships, rather than being intrinsic properties of the states themselves' (354). State identities, therefore, develop as the structuring effects of the international system. They have to be socially recognized and not just internally perceived. In case of a divergence between social recognition and internal perception, states will choose socially recognized identities (359). This framework emphasizes continuity of state identity and stability of inter-state relations, and relies on external referential logic (i.e., relations among states) in explaining state ontological security-seeking behavior. Thus, stability and continuity underwrite ontological security seeking for states.

To be fair, Mitzen acknowledges the variation in the ways states adhere to their routines. Following Giddens, Mitzen distinguishes between rigid and reflexive adherence - each type contingent on the degree of basic trust which is influenced by the nature of social relations in the early stages of life. Actors with healthy basic trust develop a critical cognitive distance towards routines and tolerance of some uncertainty, both of which are indicators of a reflexive mode of attachment. Under the reflexive mode, routines are

treated only as means towards the achievement of goals (350). Alternatively, actors with low basic trust who had traumatic experiences at the formative stage (in the case of states, this could mean major wars) are prone towards a rigid mode of attachment, meaning that they 'fetishize' the routines (Rossdale 2015, 374), i.e., treat them as ends in themselves rather than as means to realizing some goals. Any disruptions in routines are perceived as deeply threatening to the cognitive and affective boundaries of the self, triggering intense anxiety and insecurity. Even though Mitzen notes that a reflexive mode of adherence to routines suggests capacity for rational learning and change, her account, as will be discussed in more detail later, over-emphasizes continuity and underrates internal referentiality, i.e., the role of a biographical narrative in the processes of state identity formation.

Mitzen's adaptation of ontological security in world politics at first attracted only a modest attention among IR/SS scholars, although this has been changing recently.[1] The principal disagreements in the debates about the relevance of ontological security in IR concern the referent object of ontological security (individual vs. the state) and the related question of referential logic (internal vs. external). The first disagreement relates to the issue of scaling the concept up from individuals to the states, leading to a highly contentious issue of state personhood. As mentioned above, Giddens's sociological account of ontological security centered on individual personhood in the context of late modernity. Mitzen acknowledges that states are not persons, but offers a four-fold justification for extrapolating the concept to and treating states 'as if' they are persons: 1) contending theorists, i.e., IR realists, already do so; 2) scaling up is theoretically useful in that it helps to analyze state behavior in IR; 3) ontological security seeking by the states

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[1] 2016 ISA annual convention featured at least 4 panels on ontological security.

reflects ontological security needs of the societies they embody; and 4) scaling up provides sociological insight into macro-level patterns.

A number of IR and security studies scholars followed Mitzen's suit and applied ontological security to states. Steele (2005), for example, employed the concept of ontological security in his study of Britain's foreign policy decisions during the American Civil War. He argues that Britain's neutrality can be best explained in terms of ontological security-seeking behavior geared towards sustaining a stable sense of self-identity. In his analysis, Steele contends that states as social actors are capable of reflexively monitoring their behavior and feeling shame when their behavior is incongruent with their sense of self-identity (527). Lupovici (2012) analyzed Israel's response to the Second Intifada (2000-2005) within the framework of ontological security, arguing that the Second Intifada represented a threat to Israel's multiple identities, i.e., Jewish identity, democratic identity, and its identity as a security-seeking state. The protection of each of these identities required different and clashing measures, effectively pushing Israel into the state of ontological dissonance. Both authors clearly treated the state as a referent object of ontological security

Others, however, have been more critical about extrapolating this concept from individual to state level, pointing to the problems related to anthropomorphizing the state and treating it as a unitary actor. One of the limitations of state-centric conceptualization of ontological security is that it builds on the assumption about cognitive stability of societies and internal cohesion of national identities (Mitzen 2005, 352). As various scholars (Malksoo 2015, Krolikowski 2008) demonstrated, homogenization of national identities is typically achieved through 'willful exclusions and untruthful enforcements'

(Malksoo 2015, 5), erasing or leaving various 'strangers' out (Huysmans, 1998 quoted in Malksoo 2015, 4). For example, Kinnvall (2004) analyzed the role of religious and national identities in re-affirming individual sense of self-identity through ontological security-seeking in the context of globalization. For Kinnvall, increase in ontological insecurity fuels 'attempt[s] to *securitize subjectivity,* which means an intensified search for *one* stable identity (regardless of its actual existence)' (749, emphasis in the original). Securitization of subjectivity inevitably entails antagonistic juxtaposition between an essentialized self and 'stranger-other' (749). Nationalism and religion are potent identity signifiers that can be mobilized in the process of the securitization of subjectivity. This process is necessarily exclusionary and unequal. As Kinnvall (763) notes, 'The more inclusionary [nationalist and religious] beliefs are, the more exclusionary they tend to be for individuals or groups not included in the definition of these beliefs.' These inclusions and exclusions place *individuals* and *groups* into various structures of domination and marginalization, perpetuating power inequalities between and within societies. Thus, ontological security should be studied at the individual and group levels. Similarly, in her study of Chinese nationalism, Krolikowski (2008) maintains that ultimately it is the individuals, not states, who experience ontological security. Many of these scholars accepted the heuristic value of ontological security in IR, but insisted on the need to retain analytical focus on the individuals embedded within overlapping structures of power as the referent object of ontological security in IR.

A related criticism is that rescaling ontological security reifies not only society, but also the state and misleadingly represents the state as the only author of ontological security. It zooms in on the social relations and practices among states but loses focus of

the complex processes below the state in shaping ontological security within collective self. Borrowing from Cynthia Weber (2014, 86), it draws the line of treating social practices seriously under the state.

Last but not least, Mitzen's framework implies a fixed type of adherence to routines, i.e., a given state adheres either rigidly or reflexively to its routines but is highly unlikely to move from rigid to reflexive adherence or vice versa. In reality, however, the dichotomy between rigid and reflexive adherence to routines by the states is either less pronounced and self-evident because actual state behavior hardly ever fits squarely into one type or another, or the type of adherence is not fixed and in different temporal contexts the same state may shift between rigid and reflexive adherence (see Krolikowski 2008). Moreover, if the type of adherence to routines is fixed, then identity, which according to Mitzen is the result of routinized interactions, becomes static. In reality identities are fluid and open-ended, subject to various degrees of continuity and change.

The second disagreement in the debates about ontological security in IR has to do with the referential logic (internal or external) in the development of self-identity. External referentiality anchors the meaning of self primarily, if not exclusively in external criteria, i.e., external world and the existence of others. Under internal referential logic, external criteria remain relevant, but only marginally. In contrast, internal referentiality is intro- and retrospective, directed at the reflexive control of self-identity over a long period of time. Internal referentiality foregrounds the relationship one has with oneself and highlights how this relationship shapes reflexively organized self-identity. As mentioned earlier, internal referentiality gives rise to what Giddens (1991, 5) called a 'reflexive project of the self, which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet

continuously revised, biographical narratives,..'. The importance which Giddens accords to the biographical narrative means that while the outside world and the existence of others are important in the formation of self-identity, a stable sense of self-identity does not derive from them.

In Mitzen's adaptation of ontological security external referentiality, or routinized interactions with other states, underwrites the constitution and development of state identities. This is made possible by assuming the existence of a cognitively stable society, characterized by a distinct and coherent collective identity, and by collapsing society into the state (Mizten, 352). This account produces a highly problematic essentialist understandings of both self and other as already existing and different (Kinnvall, 753). That the biographical narrative may play a role in the development of state identity from the 'inside' is openly rejected (Mitzen 355). Williams (2008) disagrees pointing to the internal dimension of identity development. Following Giddens (1991) and Beck (1999), he reminds us that late modernity is replete with traumatic disruptions and devoid of certainty, stability, controllability and security. One of the defining features of late modernity is reflexivity. This period 'is dubbed 'reflexive' because it is an era when society begins to confront primarily itself rather than external others' (Williams 2008, 60). Developing a relationship with oneself through time requires a narrative - a continuing biographical story. In other words, coherent self-identity rests on an ongoing narrative that shapes reflexively mobilized *long duree* trajectory of the self from the past, through the present and into the future.

The biographical narrative is never complete but 'can deal with life as it unfolds over time' (Ringmar quoted in Berenskoetter 2014, 269). The ability to sustain one's

'story' relies heavily on historical memory. As Berenskoetter (270) observes, "history' makes up a substantial part of a biographical narrative.' Through 'chosen' traumas and glories, archaeological 'evidence', myths and symbols (Kinnvall, 755-6), selective and creative functions of memories enable the collective self to keep orientation in time by 'providing a sense of where 'we' come from and what 'we' have been through' (Berenskoetter 270). Remembering plays a key role not only in sustaining coherent self-identity but also in the constitution of self as an agent. As Kratochwil (2006, 8) observed, 'it is through historical reflection that we become aware of the 'dialectic of choice' in which from the present the past is recollected and joined with the future by means of a political 'project'.' Understanding memory as part of a political project has two-fold implications. One the one hand, it acknowledges the importance of mnemohistory, i.e., history as it is remembered, in that the 'present is "haunted" by the past and the past is modeled, invented, reinvented, and reconstructed by the present' (Assmann quoted in Tamm 2013, 464). Furthermore, it suggests that the possibility of re-imagining the past and re-writing the biographical story in accordance with the political imperatives of the day is always there. On the other hand, it also leaves open the possibility of securitizing national remembering, inadvertently leading to confrontations on the basis of different memories and, counter-intuitively, increasing ontological insecurity (Malksoo 2015).

Recognizing the importance of a biographical narrative loosens the structuralism in Mitzen's adaptation because it demonstrates that a stable sense of self-identity is not simply the structuring effect of the relations among states, but directs analytical attention to the processes inside the state (Krolikowski 2008). That is, understanding collective selves in terms of an open-ended narrative with political effects that determine the

boundaries of subjectivity highlights endogenous dynamic in the formation of collective identity. This does not mean that collective identity is wholly self-organized, i.e., internally generated and upheld. I argue that the concept of ontological security should be reconceptualized in two ways. First, it has to be expanded to integrate both external and internal referentiality, since they are mutually implicated in one another and play an important role in the development of self-identity. External referentiality underscores the exogenous politics of othering whereby the image of the self is made intelligible through the understanding of others, internal referentiality focuses on the self-organized dimension of identity development and the politics of memory. The two are intertwined in a dynamic synergism demonstrating that the character of self-other interactions is never separate from one's biographical narrative.

The question, however, remains what the referent object of the ontological security is. Who determines which 'story' one writes about self and shapes self-other interactions? Here, I argue that states may appear as the exclusive authors of ontological security, but this appearance is misleading. I take my queue from two of Giddens's observations: first, that at any point more than one 'story' about self exists; and second, that even though late modernity is highly institutionalized, 'yet the transmutations introduced by modern institutions interlace in a direct way with individual life' (1). Rather than seeking to determine whether the individual or the state should be an exclusive referent object of ontological security, I contend that both are important for understanding ontological security in world politics. Analytical focus on the individual allows one to explore in a nuanced way how the boundaries of subjectivity are continuously redrawn in specific contexts. At the same time, states are more than mere

legal-institutional structures, they are 'self-conscious' (Malksoo 2) 'reflexively monitored' (Giddens 15) entities, constituted 'through a narrative designating an experienced space (giving meaning to the past) intertwined with an envisioned space (giving meaning to the future) and delineated through horizons of experience and of possibility' (Berenskoetter 264). Therefore, the notion of ontological security should be rethought in terms of interlaced individual and national ontological security circles with shifting boundaries. The proposed conceptualization accords no ontological primacy either to the individual or the state, but acknowledges multiple linkages and overlaps, sometimes substantial, between individual and collective sense of self and, by extension, individual and collective ontological security without blending them or collapsing individual self-identity into the collective one. This conceptualization is predicated on a non-essentialist, dynamic and process-based ontology of self as existentially contingent, unstable and incomplete in term of its biography, faced not only with uncertain future but also with unpredictable past (Rossdale, 376).

In the next part, I put this reconceptualized notion of ontological security to empirical test. I contend that Russia's relatively reflexive adherence to routines in international relations in the realm of security in the 1990s and early 2000s has shifted towards a more rigid type in recent years. This change can not be adequately understood without accounting for complex connections between Russia's politics of historical memory at the core of its biographical narrative and its security policies (interactions with others). While demonstrating the existence of contending 'stories' in Russian society, I argue that one in particular, based on the glorification of Stalinism and monarchism, both of which fuel nationalistic perceptions of Russian exceptionalism, became dominant

in recent years. The crystallization of the biographical narrative around the themes of Stalinism, monarchism and exceptionalism affected the degree of basic trust towards the others. The case of Russia demonstrates that the degree societal deliberation and contestation in sustaining/revising the biographical narrative influences the extent of basic trust and shapes the mode of state adherence to routines. Analytical attention to societal processes explains why a given state oscillates between reflexive and rigid adherence to routines in its relations with others.

The authorship of the prevalent biographical narrative is linked as much to the conservative circles in Russian society, as it is to the state. In that sense, the 'story' can be considered co-authored. Also, while there appears to be a substantial degree of overlap between collective and individual identity based on the current biographical narrative, the 'story' itself is not permanently fixed or uncontested. In fact, it is in dissonance with alternative biographical narratives prevalent in the liberal and so-called new monarchist circles in Russian society.

2. *Memory politics and securitization of collective remembering in Russia*

Mobilizing and regulating historical memory for political purposes is not unique to Russia. The importance of national remembering in bolstering a clear sense of collective self has been recognized in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the Soviet Union. As the former Soviet satellites endeavored to safeguard their newly acquired sovereignty, they embarked on the task of ordering political life by creating new stable political communities with secure boundaries and identities, and of developing self-narratives that provided a sense of rupture with and closure to the communist past.

Effectively, they elevated the protection of national memories and identities to the level of security. In the process, East European countries made extensive use of collective remembering as an effective political instrument in mitigating the anxieties of a highly traumatic transition from communism. 'Chosen' glories and tragedies, wrapped in nationalist and religious discourses, provided 'comforting stories in times of increased ontological insecurity and existential anxiety' (Kinnvall, 755). Recognition of the atrocities committed by repressive communist regimes and rejection of the communist past - a process known as decommunization - was intended not only to 'right past wrongs' and reconnect with the newly discovered pre-Soviet past as a kind of a 'golden age' (often highly idealized or even fictitious), but also, importantly, as the means of affirming their European identity (Malksoo 6-7). Thus, new political subjectivities, boundaries and differences were produced, connections between identity and security forged, and the surging significance of historical memory affirmed in practical politics. This tendency was mirrored in social sciences: the emergence and expansion of memory studies and increasing academic interest in mnemohistory (Tamm 2013) - a trend so robust that Rosenfeld (2009) called it memory 'industry' - focused analytical attention on history as remembering/forgetting.

In the post-Soviet Russia the search for self-identity and ontological security was significantly delayed and much more challenging than in East European countries. For the latter, communism was exogenous evil, forcefully imposed from outside. Therefore, the responsibility for communist crimes could be relegated to the external other. Liberation from communism was written into the collective biographical narrative as a glorious experience to be celebrated and remembered (Lipman, 2009). As a 'chosen'

glory, this experience provided an anchor that stabilized a new collective self-identity. In the case of Russia, however, communist rule was a home-grown phenomenon, for which the responsibility could not have been easily assigned to anyone other than self. Even though the discourse of Perestroika was filled with references to history, such as 'the choice of historic path', 'historic alternative', 'historic mission', 'historic dead-end' and the use of the words 'empire' and 'totalitarianism' was expanded to include references to the USSR, the actual recognition of crimes under communist regime, such as Holodomor, or state-organized mass starvation of peasants, ethnic cleansing, forced deportations and the like, was feared to weaken Russia's international positions, cause a deep rift in Russian society, and potentially lead to civil war inside the country (Miller 2011). These fears were subsequently instrumentalized to set the limits to the public discussions about the communist past (Lipman 2009, 3).

Consequently, a sense of *liberation* from communism was short-lived in Russia and too fragile to become the foundation for a new self-identity: it did not gain substantial traction in Russian society and subsequently was significantly eroded by the destabilizing social and economic effects of Western-inspired neoliberal reforms. With the transitional economic, political, and social 'shocks' intensifying, society's euphoria over the fall of communism soon dissipated. The challenge of daily survival under the conditions of profound uncertainty and deep disillusionment with the liberal-democratic reforms prompted romanticization of the Soviet past on the part of the vulnerable and marginalized population. In 1992, public and media reactions to the sensational 'trial of the communist party of the Soviet Union' revealed deeply conflicting attitudes towards the communist past.

The so-called 'trial' entailed the deliberations and rulings of the Constitutional Court of the Russian Federation regarding the constitutionality of three Presidential decrees signed by Yeltsin in 1991. The decrees concerned the suspension of the communist party of the Russian Federation (CPRF) and the communist party of the Soviet Union (CPSU), the confiscation of their property, as well as unconstitutional character of their activities. The Court produced a vague verdict presenting it as a 'political and strategic compromise' (Zhukov, 1996). It confirmed the constitutionality of the ban on the CPSU - which, by then, ceased to exist - and recognized the responsibility of the central committee of the CPSU for the crimes of Stalinism. However, the Court also made an important proviso that its verdict did not apply either to local party organizations, which did not participate in these crimes, or to the CPRF, which was established only in 1990. On the one hand, the Court's decision left the party in limbo, like an 'unburied ghost' (Zhukov, 1996). On the other, it created conditions for the subsequent legalization of the CPRF. In 1993, the extraordinary party congress founded CPRF as the successor of the CPSU. Today, this is the second largest party in Russia.

Political discourse in the second half of 1990s remained attuned to the ambiguous societal attitudes. President Yeltsin was consistent in his anti-communist rhetoric without attempting to cement it as the only legitimate position with respect to the communist past. Other political leaders, however, made few references to history. As Miller (2011) observed, 'In the second half of the 1990s, the authorities ceased to exploit history actively for political purposes, leaving it mainly to historians.' The latter produced volumes of new and quality research about the communist period without much success in attracting media or public attention to their findings (ibid.). Hundreds of memorials

and museums commemorating the victims of the Soviet regime were constructed but they did not become a new defining feature of the collective identity. The state was generally disinclined to introduce or support ritualistic observances of anti-communist anniversaries and commemorations of victims that would remind of and sustain the trauma of the Soviet past.

At the societal level, then, the opposing public reactions to the communist past demonstrated deep-seated disagreements over the general content and specific parameters of the biographical narrative in Russia. These disagreements were indicative of the fundamental cleavage in the collective sense of self-identity, the coherence and stability of which were disrupted by the dramatic fall of communism and collapse of the Soviet Union. On the one hand, these divisions and public discussions about different lineages and present self-understandings exposed the struggles inherent in the attempts to reinvent and rewrite the story of the collective self; to get hold of the past, both cognitively and emotionally, in view of the present ontological security needs and possible visions of the future. In Giddens's language, these debates demonstrated the ability of Russian society to *live* its collective biography reflexively. On the other hand, when continuing biographic narrative at the core of stable self-identity is disrupted or reaches an impasse, in time this gives rise to existential anxiety, i.e., a feeling of 'being engulfed, crushed or overwhelmed by externally impinging events' (Giddens, 53), excessive and paralyzing preoccupation with potential risks, and a failure to sustain one's own self-integrity (54). Unlike fear, which is usually linked to specific external objects or risks, anxiety expresses internally perceived dangers, is 'free-floating' and 'diffuse', and can be triggered in any situations against any objects. In Giddens's words, anxiety 'is essentially fear which has

lost its object' (44). If left unchecked, rising existential anxiety jeopardizes self-identity, generating repression (44) and leading to various phobic behaviors (Giddens, 45).

Ambiguity and confusion surrounding the fall of communism, indicative of ontological insecurity and existential anxiety, persists in Russian society today and is reflected in the public attitudes towards the new statutory holidays, such as the independence day celebrated on June 12, renamed into Russia's Day first unofficially in Yeltsin's address to the nation in 1998 and then officially in 2002. In 2015, 77% of the respondent could not remember what kind of holiday is celebrated on June 12 and 11% saw it as a 'tragic date' because it led to the collapse of the Soviet Union (Den Rossii 2015).

With little to no consensus on the ontological contours of the collective self - post-communist, post-imperial, or nationalist - the politics of memory was mobilized in Russia during Putin's presidency in order to provide a 'protective cocoon' (Giddens 1991, 40) against growing existential anxiety in society by re-affirming fractured self-identity through references to familiar ideas. Its key goal was to formulate a patriotic identity rooted either in the pre-Soviet past, in which case it would be defined by Orthodox religion and monarchism, or communist past, in which case identity would be determined by communist ideology. Typically, in the periods of ontological insecurity nationalism and religion emerge as potent identity signifiers that can restore a sense of stability and security (Kinnvall 2004). Yet, Russia's multi-ethnic and multi-religious composition required that the precarious terrain of identity politics had to be navigated carefully so as to avoid causing major alienations and exclusions on the basis of ethnicity and/or religion.

Putin's solution was simple: instead of drawing the ideological lineage of collective self to a particular period in Russian history, Putin adopted what appeared to be a conciliatory and all-inclusive approach. This was clearly demonstrated in the process of adopting official state symbols (Miller 2011). In 2000, in order to obtain legislative approval of the Federal Constitutional Law on Russia's tricolor flag, reminiscent of its monarchic past, especially the reign of Peter the Great, Putin made a provisional alliance with liberal democratic forces. That same year, he sided with the communists to adopt a slightly modified Soviet anthem as the 'new' state anthem of the Russian Federation, effectively ignoring the criticisms of the liberals, including such high-profile figures as Yeltsin, Nemtsov and Yavlinski. Putin's intention may have been to achieve integrative synthesis of different heritages that would reconcile monarchism and Stalinism. Instead, this approach produced a highly volatile and 'antithetical construction, sustained primarily by silencing the problems and responsibilities' (Miller 2011).

The politicization of legitimate public remembrance proceeded through state-led construction of the 'patriotic history'. The two pillars of the new memory infrastructure were the school curricula and the mass media. In 2003, during his meeting with professional historians, Putin commented on the plan of the Ministry of Education to ban the history textbook by Igor Dolutski, which contained negative commentaries about Russia's current political regime. More specifically, the textbook included two criticisms: one, by Burtin in which he compared Putin's election to a coup with the resulting personification of power in the form of authoritarian dictatorship; and another one by Yavlinski about the establishment of the police state in Russia (newsru.com, 2003). He noted that a negative/critical approach to history is useful for the task of dismantling the

old state but that the building of a new state required a more positive version of history. 'Modern school and university textbooks should not become a platform for political and ideological struggle. These textbooks should present the facts of history, they should develop a sense of pride in our history and country,' Putin said (Ibid.). He also alluded that the mass media are responsible for popularizing the new historical discourse. Unlike the 1990s, when history was left to historians, collective remembering was now deemed an important political instrument in the construction of a new political order. As such, it had to come under direct state control.

The 'patriotic history' textbook edited by Filippov and Danilov was published in 2007 with the circulation of 250,000 copies (in comparison, the circulation numbers for other textbooks ranged between 5,000 and 15,000) (Miller 2009, 14). The textbook justified, among other things, Stalin's terror by the need to modernize the country and retain control over the country without which the USSR should not have achieved victory in World War II, known in Russia as the Great Patriotic War; minimized the scope of Soviet repressions; denied the fact of organized mass starvation in the rural areas; and rejected the applicability of the concept of totalitarianism to the Soviet Union (Miller 2011).

Around the same time, Moscow began to promote actively monarchist ideas. In 2008 Putin's second presidential term was to expire. The restoration of monarchy could aid in affirming the sacredness of Presidential power in accordance with the 'unique Russian tradition', allowing Putin to stay in power even if it violated the Constitution. As Aleksandr Dugin, a geopolitician with close ties to Kremlin, put it, 'Orthodox monarchy is not simply a historical and political tradition, but an expression of the historical

mission of the Russian people and the state' (Kotsubinski 2013). Vladimir Zhirinovski, the leader of liberal-democratic party in Russia, concurred, saying 'The Russian state can develop and reach its power only within the framework of monarchy... [Due to] our territory, the environment, climate, the state can function effectively only within the monarchic, authoritarian regime' (ibid.). Within the monarchist discourse, a strong authoritarian ruler was presented as a bulwark against disorder inside the country and a necessary condition for the restoration of Russia's top-tier status in world politics. Support for the monarchist ideas has been steadily increasing in Russian society. In 2006, 25% supported restoration of monarchy in Russia; their number increased to 39% (ibid.)

By the end of the first decade of the 2000s, when Russian society grew acutely aware of the lack of prospects for the future and Putin's popularity was plummeting, Russia's political establishment undertook concerted efforts not only to politicize, but also to securitize historical memory. In this process, the key emphasis was on the protection of 'unique Russian traditions' by means of repressive legislative acts. Given their role in organizing and guiding social life by blending cognitive and moral elements, traditions were explicitly recognized as essential for articulating ontological parameters of collective self-identity. Effectively, that, which should remain in the realm of public deliberation, i.e., history, identity and traditions, became a matter of national survival and were placed under repressive state control.

In particular, the myth of Stalin, which drew a conjectural link between Stalin's leadership, Soviet victory in WWII, immense sacrifice of human life to achieve victory and the super-power status of the Soviet Union in world politics, was actively promoted by Kremlin administration to prop up Putin's unstable and corrupt regime. In 2009,

Sergey Shoygu, the then-Minister of Emergency Situations, voiced an idea that the individuals who make 'incorrect' remarks and statements about the history of and Soviet role in the WWII, i.e., mass rapes committed by the Soviet soldiers during WWII, responsibility of Stalin's Soviet Union for the war, rehabilitation of Nazism, or any comparisons between Stalinism and Nazism, should be prosecuted. That same year, a Presidential decree established the Commission to Counter the Attempts to Falsify History to the Detriment of Russia's Interests. This was followed by a directive signed by Valery Tishkov from the Russian Academy of Science to the presidents of the universities and directors of research institutes to compile a list of publications containing historical falsifications, including information about the authors and organizations behind these publications (Miller 2009, 16). Subsequently, State Duma, a federal legislative body, enacted a series of memory laws that criminalized 'incorrect' remembrance of WWII. In 2015, Irina Yarovaya, a member of State Duma, took these initiative further by declaring that studying foreign languages is a threat to Russian traditions.

The above initiatives provoked a backlash on the part of both the progressive segments of society and professional historians, such as Andrey Zubov, who insisted that Soviet repressions should be condemned, rather than justified. Yet, their opposition was not potent enough to dismantle the framing of certain ways of remembering and, by extension, of identities associated with those ways of remembering as a threat. Effectively, securitization of collective remembering, traditions and identity by means of repressive memory politics severely limited public debate, mobilized nationalist forces and to some extent eroded self-reflexivity of Russian society about its own past. In the context where the ruling regime could offer no attractive vision of the future, the return to

archaic traditions, i.e., imperial/monarchist and Soviet, both of which conjure up links between national greatness and authoritarianism, emerged as a crucial ontological reference point sustaining nationalistic sense of exceptionalism among the conservative segments of Russian society.

In this context, Russian memory laws can be seen as emergency measures that suspend normal politics and are indicative of the securitization of identity, which in turn produces 'the risk of getting stuck in old and counterproductive roles in international politics' (Malksoo 2015, 5) - the issue discussed in more detail in the last section. Before turning to the discussion of security, however, it is important to acknowledge that the state-driven biographical narrative is not uncontested and that self-reflexivity in Russian society, while significantly curtailed, has not been erased. The liberal circles of intellectuals, journalists and bloggers are traditionally in opposition to the regime and its anti-Western, anti-democratic biographic narrative. Active protests on the streets of Moscow between 2011 and 2013 with anti-Putin slogans 'For fair elections', dubbed by English language media The Snow Revolution and perceived in the West as the Russian Spring, demonstrated broader discontent with authoritarian tendencies inside Russia. Similarly, the Monarchist party of Russia, representing the so-called 'new' monarchists challenges Moscow's version of monarchism based on authoritarian orthodox fundamentalism in favor of a limited constitutional monarchy with responsible government and parliament (Kotsubinski 2013). These contestations and alternative self-understandings that exist in Russian society reveal the contingency, instability, and incompleteness of state-driven biographical narrative, and leave open the possibilities for

revising its terms and parameters. After all, as Giddens (1991, 12) put it, the process of discovering one's self 'is one of active intervention and transformation.'

3. *Ontological conception of self in Russia's security policies*

In the preceding section I argued that following Soviet collapse, Russian society had to grapple not only with the social, political and economic crisis, but also with the ontological security crisis. Large-scale social dislocation and economic marginalization, amplified by fundamental political transformations of the transitional period had detrimental effects on individual and collective sense of self-identity. They generated widespread cognitive and emotional disorientation and gave rise to intense existential anxiety. In its turn, anxiety generated repression in the form of increasingly restrictive memory politics. The latter was mobilized by the state under Putin's presidency in order to re-affirm a sense of collective self-identity and bolster increasingly corrupt, authoritarian and declining in popularity Putin's regime. The process of reinventing collective self was internally referential, and the state - in tandem with the conservative circles in Russian society - played a central role in writing what became a prevalent, albeit contested biographical narrative.

Even though a stable sense of self-identity does not derive from the existence and/or actions of others but is formed through internally referential biographical narrative, 'basic trust links self-identity in a fateful way to the appraisals of others' (Giddens 1991, 38). That is, self-identity shaped by a biographical narrative is projected onto the others and determines the degree of trust towards, as well as the character of one's relations with the others. Sociological surveys demonstrate low basic trust inside

Russian society. In 2012, the sociological surveys showed that 72% of Russians did not trust other people (Gudkov 2012, 14)[2]. Xenophobia, directed primarily against migrant workers and people from the North Caucasus, has been on the rise inside the country and the number of respondents who believed that violent ethnic conflict was very likely or likely in Russia has been steadily growing from 49% in 2002 to 62% in 2013 (Dubin 2014, 9). Low basic trust in the form of hostility is also registered in the societal attitudes towards external others. In 2013, 51% of Russians believed there existed an external military threat to Russia, 78% thought Russia had external enemies, with Georgia, the US and the Baltic states toping the list of countries perceived by Russians to be most hostile. After 2014, Ukraine and the European Union were the new additions to the list (Dubin 2014, 12). These negative societal attitudes and perceptions provide an important insight into the ontological parameters of individual and collective self-identity. Molded by internal state-driven dynamics, this self-identity was further sustained by the routinization of antagonistic relations with the West.

Indeed, Russia's foreign and security policies have been shaped by explicit ontological conceptions of self. In the 1990s, when ontological security seeking occurred through public debates and was marked by a fair degree of self-reflexivity, Russia's foreign and security policies demonstrated reflexive adherence to international routines. Guided by dialogue and European choice and geared towards the integration of Russia into the Euro-Atlantic community, these policies placed emphasis on the partnership and cooperation with the West in general, and the US, in particular. The relationship with Russia was also a policy priority for Clinton administration. The initial reluctance to

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[2] The highest level of trust was registered in Norway at 81%, followed by Sweden 74%, and New Zealand at 69%. The average indicator for the countries participating in the survey was 42%. Only 5 countries registered the level of trust lower that in Russia.

consider NATO expansion and the proposed 'middle course' through the development of the Partnership for Peace program were informed, in part, by the concerns about Russian reaction and potential mobilization of nationalist forces NATO expansion could trigger in Russia (Fierke 2007, 72). This type of foreign and security policies continued during the early days of Putin's presidency: the efforts to maintain dialogue and friendly relations with the US were particularly pronounced after the events of 9/11, when Russia supported the US in the Global War on Terror.

The tightening of the biographical narrative around the themes of Stalinism and monarchism bracketed questions not only about the self-identity, but also about the others as well as the world around them, shaping societal perceptions of reality in accordance with the nationalistic state-led biographical narrative. This narrative has played an influential role in reformatting Russia's relations with various others - be they internal others who do not subscribe to the dominant narrative, or external others. Following the protests of 2011-13, internal others have been designated as the 'fifth column', 'national traitors', 'enemies of the people', or 'Western spies'. External others have been firmly identified with the West, in general, and the US, in particular. Radical turn towards confrontation with the West took place in the early 2014 and was triggered by Ukraine's Revolution of Dignity. This new antagonistic course stemmed directly from the logic, discourses and practices of Putin's regime and its state-driven biographical narrative whereby confrontation with the West became the principal pre-condition for continued existence of current political establishment (Bayev 2014, 73; Trenin 2015, 3). However, Russia's intention to change its security policies can be traced back to the years that coincided with the mobilization of memory politics inside the country.

The period between 2003 and 2007 was marked by a series of 'disappointments' in Russia's foreign and security politics, i.e., the Baltic states' accession to NATO and the EU, American military presence in Georgia and Central Asia, US involvement in the Transnistrian conflict (Trenin 2015). In 2007, speaking at the Munich Security Conference, Putin criticized US global supremacy and NATO eastward expansion, reminding his audience that Russia has capabilities to neutralize NATO's anti-missile defense shield. Described by some commentators as a 'breeze of Cold War' (Rolofs), Putin's inflammatory speech indicated a shift of Russia's goals in foreign and security policies - from integration with the West to the charting of an independent course of actions based on national interests - and signaled the ambitions of Russia, emboldened by global energy boom, to play a more robust role in world politics.

Conceptually, the justification for the new direction of Russia's foreign and security policy was framed in terms of 'full sovereignty'. The meaning of 'full sovereignty' is two-fold: first, it requires the elimination of all external influences on Russia's domestic politics and mobilization of Russian society around a single biographical narrative; and second, it calls for the promotion of Russia's regional and global interests within the framework of *Russki mir*, or Russian world. The geopolitical construct of *Russki mir* is founded on the idea of Russia as the core of a distinct civilization, i.e., a unique historical, cultural, spiritual and political space, and a supranational community that identifies itself with traditional Russian values. The protection of Russia's unique identity in a dramatically changing globalized world is the key goal of country's revised security strategy. As Putin reflected at Valdai discussion club in 2013, 'Our progress is not possible without the spiritual, cultural and national

identity - without it we can neither resist the external and internal challenges, nor succeed in global competition' (Zasedanie, 2013). Accordingly, aspiration for 'full sovereignty' expresses open rejection of Western liberal-democratic values, and elevates the protection of unique Russian identity and traditions to the status of a paramount ontological security goal to be implemented through national foreign and security policies. Only a year later, the merging of self-identity and national security within the theoretical framework of *Russki mir* was put to practice in Ukraine where the annexation of Crimea and support, including military, for separatist forces in Donbass region was driven by the imperative to protect *Russki mir* from the encroachments of the West. Russia's aggressive moves towards Ukraine boosted Putin's personal popularity to an unprecedented 87% and consolidated Russian society around state-driven biographical narrative.

Conclusion

The optics of ontological security sheds light on the important dynamic in world politics. It illuminates a complex interplay between Russia's politics of historical memory and security policies. More specifically, it shows that at the heart of Russia's increasingly assertive foreign and security policies is a particular ontological conception of self sustained through state-driven biographical narrative that builds on the glorification of Stalinist and monarchist traditions. In constructing *Russki mir* Russia attempts to achieve ontological security by quelling existential anxiety in Russian society caused by the botched transition from communism, on the one hand, and by overhauling the unipolar world order and regaining a super-power status lost with the Soviet collapse, on the other.

In other words, Russian state and society are currently in the process of actively redeveloping collective self-identity and assertive foreign and security policies are a direct consequence of this process. The lens of ontological security reveals the synergism of internal and external dynamics in fuelling and sustaining Russia's shift to the routinization of antagonistic security relations. Once such routinization is achieved, the logic of ontological security-seeking indicates that Russia may have a vested interest in perpetuating conflict with the West, in other words, adhere rigidly to dilemmatic conflict because the ongoing rivalry and conflict with the West will provide Russian state and society with ontological security. Needless to say, this will have a destabilizing effect on regional and global stability. *Russki mir* is an ambiguous construct, applicable in situations and places that have dubious cultural links to Russia. The use of *Russki mir* rhetoric to justify Russia's military involvement in Syria to domestic audiences is illustrative of its malleability. As long as 'protecting' and 'expanding' *Russki mir* has a consolidating effect on Russian society and increases Putin's domestic popularity, we are likely to witness Russian involvement in more conflicts like the ones in Donbass, Eastern Ukraine and Syria. The framework of ontological security also suggests that enduring rivalries may change. Such change requires that both inter-state routines and internal biographical narratives must be attended to achieve it.

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