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“Ethnicizing” the EU's Involvement in Post-conflict Societies: The Case of Ontological Insecurity in Republika Srpska

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ABSTRACT

The main aim of this paper is to contribute to the literature on ontological security by empirically investigating how the European Union (EU), which is perceived as one of the most important actors that provides means and/or grounds for overcoming antagonisms through transformation of the ‘Self-Other’ dialectics, fails to become an agent of peace. Drawing on the case of Republika Srpska (RS), a political entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), we aim to understand how the EU’s post-conflict stabilization efforts, which, among others, presuppose the de-intensification of the antagonistic identity narratives, become entrapped in ethnopolitical narratives, and even ‘ethnicized’ by the ethnopolitical elite in RS. To answer these questions, we analyzed news articles at two critical junctures, namely the negotiations on the Stabilisation and Association Agreement (2005–2007) and the Butmir Process (2009), two of the most important EU-driven initiatives in post-conflict BiH. We find that those initiatives, which promised to make BiH more functional and stable, challenged the existing ethnopolitical narratives in BiH, particularly on the side of the ethnopolitical elite in RS.

Keywords: Ontological security, Republika Srpska, ethnicization, Butmir process, European Union.

AB’nin Çatışma Sonrası Toplumlardaki Müdahalesinin “Etnikleştirilmesi”: Sırp Cumhuriyeti’nde Ontolojik Güvensizlik Örneği

ÖZET

Bu makalenin temel amacı, Biz-Öteki’ diyalektiğinin dönüştürülmesi yoluyla düşmanlıkların üstesinden gelmek için araç ve/veya zemin sağlayan en önemli aktörlerden biri olarak algılanan Avrupa Birliği’nin (AB) nasıl bir barış aracı haline gelemediğini ampirik olarak araştırarak ontolojik güvenlik literatürüne katkıda bulunmaktadır. Bosna-Hersek’teki (BH) siyasi bir oluşum olan Sırp Cumhuriyeti (SC) davasından yola çıkarak, AB’nin çatışma sonrası istikrar çabalarının, diğerlerinin yanı sıra, düşman kimlik anlatılarının yoğunlaşmamasını öngören, etnopolitik anlatılara nasıl sürüklendiğini ve hatta SC’deki etnopolitik seçkinler tarafından nasıl ‘etnik hale getirildiğini’ anlamayı amaçlıyoruz. Bu soruları yanıtlamak için, çatışma sonrası BH’de AB güdümlü girişimlerden en önemli ikisi olan İstikrar ve Ortaklık Anlaşması müzakereleri (2005-2007) ve Butmir Süreci (2009) olmak üzere, iki kritik kavşakta yer alan haber makalelerini analiz ettik. BH’yi daha işlevsel ve istikrarlı hale getirme sözü veren bu girişimlerin, özellikle SC’deki etnopolitik seçkinler tarafında BH’deki mevcut etnopolitik anlatılara meydan okuduğunu görüyoruz.

Anahtar Kelimeler: ontolojik güvenlik, Sırp Cumhuriyeti, etnikleştirme, Butmir süreci, Avrupa Birliği.

Introduction*

Ethnic conflicts, which cause multiple forms of violence, often perpetuate security concerns long after large-scale armed violence ceases. An important part of such security concerns in post-conflict societies is the 'need' for preserving distinct (ethnic) identities.¹ Such concerns inform well the ontological security theory (OST), which highlights how both individuals and groups seek the stability and continuity of their self-narratives.² One of the (un)intended outcomes of seeking stability and continuity of one's own self-narrative in post-conflict societies is continuing to imagine the Other, often in an antagonistic manner. This in turn limits (peace) efforts of actors that aim to bring the collectives previously involved in armed conflict closer to each other in post-conflict societies.³ One of the most important actors involved in such post-conflict stabilization efforts on the European periphery is the European Union (EU). The latter, by offering the prospect of European integration, is often understood as providing the means and/or grounds for overcoming antagonisms through the transformation of narrowly-defined identities (ethnic, religious, cultural etc.) and thereby transcending the primordial "Self-Other" dialectics.⁴

However, this is not always the case. The majority of ethnic conflicts are 'trapped' in narratives and (mis)conceptions of Self and the Other, and one of the reasons for this is because they are premised on ontological asymmetry.⁵ This means that "ethnic conflicts usually occur between ontologically more secure majority collectives and less secure minority ethnic groups",⁶ demonstrating the political, economic, and social asymmetry between them. Yet, there are cases where ethnic conflict is not premised on ontological asymmetry *per se* but is still discursively constructed by the political elite as such, for the purpose of managing ontological insecurity. An example of this is, as we argue in this paper, Republika Srpska (RS), a Bosnian Serb-dominated political entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), where the political elite managed to construct the sense of ontological asymmetry between RS and (Federation of) BiH amidst the EU's involvement in this country, even though both entities (i.e.,

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- 1 Bahar Rumelili and Ayşe Betül Çelik, "Ontological Insecurity in Asymmetric Conflicts: Reflections on Agonistic Peace in Turkey's Kurdish Issue", *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 48, No 4, 2017, p. 279-296.
- 2 Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1991; Catarina Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism: Self, Identity, and the Search for Ontological Security", *Political Psychology*, Vol. 25, No 5, 2004, p. 741-767; Bahar Rumelili, "Identity and Desecuritisation: the Pitfalls of Conflating Ontological and Physical Security", *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 18, No 1, 2013, p. 52-74; Jelena Subotić, "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change", *Foreign Policy Analysis*, Vol. 12, No 4, 2015, p. 610-627; Filip Ejduš, "Critical Situations, Fundamental Questions and Ontological Insecurity in World Politics", *Journal of International Relations and Development*, Vol. 21, No 1, 2017, p. 883-908.
- 3 Rok Zupančič et al., "Ethnic Distancing Through Aesthetics in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Appraising the Limits of Art as a Peacebuilding Tool with a Socio-psychological Experiment", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, Vol. 21, No 1, 2021, p. 101-123.
- 4 Rok Zupančič et al., "The European Union's (In)ability to Address Troubled Past(s): Voices from Eight European Countries", *Annals for Istrian and Mediterranean Studies*, Vol. 31, No 4, 2021, p. 547-560.
- 5 Rumelili and Çelik, "Ontological Insecurity".
- 6 Ibid.

RS and Federation of BiH) are equal under the BiH constitution. In other words, the EU’s involvement in BiH that aims at de-intensifying the antagonisms among the peoples of BiH was ‘ethnicized’ and framed within the Bosnian Serb political elite discourse as serving the Bosniak majority (50.1%), thus generating ontological asymmetry between the Bosnian Serbs (30.8%) and Bosniaks. This is epitomized in secessionist impulses by Milorad Dodik, the most prominent Bosnian Serb political figure who has held various political functions since 2006. This article thus contributes to the literature on ontological (in)security and conflict resolution,⁷ by furthering, in an empirical manner, the research agenda on how actors involved in post-conflict environments can construct an ontological asymmetry between themselves and other ethnic groups, and even fuel secessionism as the only possible means to attain ontological security.

The EU’s involvement in post-conflict BiH serves as a noteworthy case to demonstrate the above-outlined dynamics. Since 2005, when BiH started negotiations with the EU on signing the Stabilization and Association Agreement (SAA), the secessionist impulses by the political elites in RS started to trouble the socio-political environment of BiH.⁸ The SAA, which marks an important step for the country toward full EU membership, somehow managed to generate the sense of ontological insecurity on part of RS and further burdened the already challenging ethnic identity narratives in BiH. Soon after BiH signed the SAA (2007), the EU engaged in another initiative, namely the Butmir Process (2009), which aimed to push for constitutional reforms in BiH. Yet again, the Butmir Process, which aimed at making BiH more ‘functional’ and ‘stable’ as a state, only consolidated the ethnopolitical identity narrative in RS. This was further reinforced during the 2015–2016 campaign for the unconstitutional referendum on the ‘Day of RS’⁹ and Milorad Dodik’s decision to unilaterally withdraw RS from central (BiH’s) institutions in 2021, contributing to one of the biggest political crises since the end of the Bosnian war.¹⁰

In all those cases, the EU failed to stem the escalating ethnopolitical rhetoric in RS, thus proving itself incapable of functioning as an agent of peace in BiH.¹¹ The EU’s efforts to push for constitutional reforms that would develop the political capabilities of BiH as a state failed to de-intensify the antagonisms between the peoples of BiH. The SAA and the Butmir Process, which entailed cutting back certain political powers of RS (as well as those of the Federation of BiH) to the advantage of BiH as a state, challenged the existing narratives and Self-Other dialectics in RS. Both EU-driven reform initiatives in turn generated ontological insecurity on part of the ethnopolitical elites in RS, who saw

7 Bahar Rumelili, “Ontological (In)security and Peace Anxieties: a Framework for Conflict Resolution”, Bahar Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties*, Abingdon, Routledge, 2015, p. 10-29; Christopher S. Browning and Pertti Joenniemi, “Ontological Security, Self-articulation and the Securitization of Identity”, *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 52, No 1, 2017, p. 31–47.

8 Rafael Biermann, “Coercive Europeanization: the EU’s Struggle to Contain Secessionism in the Balkans”, *European Security*, Vol. 23, No 4, 2014, p. 484–508; Aleksandra Zdeb, “Prud and Butmir Processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Intra-ethnic Competition from the Perspective of Game Theory”, *Ethnopolitics*, Vol. 16, No 4, 2017, p. 369–387.

9 The Day of RS is a national holiday in RS, which was proclaimed unconstitutional by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina in 2016. The holiday is celebrated on 9 January, on the same day when the constitutional Assembly of the Bosnian Serb people in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992 issued the Declaration of the proclamation of the Republic of Serbian people of Bosnia and Herzegovina, with the main goal of seceding from BiH.

10 Aleksandar Brezar, “Is Bosnia’s Milorad Dodik Using Genocide Denial for Political Ends?” *Euronews*, 28 July 2021, <https://www.euronews.com/2021/07/28/is-bosnia-s-milorad-dodik-using-genocide-denial-for-political-ends> (Accessed 20 January 2022).

11 Stefanie Kappler and Oliver Richmond, “Peacebuilding and Culture in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Resistance or Emancipation?”, *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 42, No 3, 2011, p. 261–278.

a political gain (i.e., maintaining the *status quo*) in framing the EU's agency in BiH as serving the Bosniak cause. Thereby, the SAA and the Butmir Process accelerated the return to conflict identity narratives that persist until today.

In order to demonstrate how the EU's efforts were framed as serving the Bosnian Serb cause, and thus discursively became part and parcel of an ontological asymmetry between the Bosnian Serbs and Bosniaks in Bosnian Serb ethno-political narratives, we analyzed news articles published in media outlets of RS covering the SAA (2005–2007) and Butmir Process (2009–2010) at these two critical junctures. We scrutinized four media outlets in RS, namely: Radio Television RS (RTRS), Radio Television Bijeljina (RTV BN), Glas Srpske and Nezavisne novine, which are among the most widely read media outlets in RS.¹² The analysis of news articles covered: i) 1,769 units in the period between 2005 and 2007; ii) 1,267 units in the period between 2009 and 2010. However, we have only analyzed those news articles that directly mentioned the SAA and Butmir Process (SAA – 3.4% (N=60); Butmir Process – 2.7% (N=34)). By doing this, we offer a detailed empirical analysis of the two most important EU-driven initiatives in post-conflict BiH which allow us to understand the specific construction of (dominant) narratives that served as means to reinstate the ontological security of RS.

The paper is divided as follows. The first section outlines the literature on ontological security and conflict resolution by highlighting the role of ontological asymmetry in ethnic conflicts. The second section briefly introduces the EU involvement in post-conflict BiH with an emphasis on RS from an ontological security perspective. The empirical part is based on an analysis of media articles covering negotiations to sign the SAA and the Butmir Process, highlighting the dominant narratives that generate ontological asymmetry between Bosniak and Bosnian Serb collectives in Bosnian Serb narratives, and in turn prevent the de-intensification of antagonisms between them. The conclusion unravels the theoretical and policy implications of this study, and outlines avenues for future research.

Ontological (In)security, Conflict Resolution and Ontological Asymmetry

Although the theory of ontological security (OST) originated in the field of psychology¹³ and later moved to sociology,¹⁴ its application to the field of International Relations is rather recent. What OST offers in theoretical terms is the introduction of the concept of basic trust that is based on 'hope' and 'courage to be', with the aim of understanding the relationship between security and (self-)identity.¹⁵ Thus, while OST is focused on security of Self (being), other security concepts build on the logic of security as survival (physical security). At its most basic, we could say that OST is defined as "the security of existence, a sense of courage and trust in the world as it is through the basic trust in own biographical continuity".¹⁶ Ontological security is positive security, which agents strive for, because it is

12 Borislav Vukojević, "Mediji u Republici Srpskoj: publike i sadržaji u kontekstu teorije koristi i zadovoljstva", *Časopis za komunikaciju i medije*, Vol. 34, No 10, 2015, p. 29–52; "Gledanost TV stanica u BiH tokom cijelog dana u julu 2018", RTVFBiH, 2018, http://www.rtvfbih.ba/loc/template.wbsp?wbf_id=94

13 Ronald D. Laing, *Self and Others*, London, Penguin Books, 1971; Erik H. Erikson, *Identity: Youth and Crisis*, New York, WW Norton & Company, 1968.

14 Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 1984; Anthony Giddens, *The Consequences of Modernity*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1990; Giddens, *Modernity*.

15 Giddens, *Modernity*.

16 Kinnvall, "Globalization and Religious Nationalism".

first and foremost a sense of security that derives from being aware of who we were in the past, who we are now, and who we would like to be in the future. This security is attained and maintained through the routinization of everyday life, to which actors’ resort, to manage their fundamental anxieties¹⁷. If such routinization that manages fundamental anxieties is ruptured, ontological insecurity occurs. It occurs because it generates existential anxieties that in turn force individuals (and societies) to again expose themselves to the existential questions that were bracketed away.

In essence, one could argue that OST is premised on the idea that security derives from the maintenance of narratives and practices, no matter how antagonistic they are. But when they are antagonistic, they tend to more inherently suppress existential anxieties by “establishing definite objects of fear, producing systems of meaning that clearly differentiate friends from enemies”.¹⁸ This premise has enabled scholars, such as Bar-Tal¹⁹ and Rumelili,²⁰ to link OST with the literature on conflict resolution, via the claim that individuals and societies – through time – develop some forms of attachment to conflict-supporting narratives. When such conflict-supporting or antagonistic identity narratives are undermined, they tend to generate ontological insecurity. Furthermore, as Rumelili and Çelik²¹ and Loizides²² showed, when ontological insecurity occurs, it opens up space for political actors to shape identity narratives according to their political interests. Such shaping is possible because the general state of uncertainty that derives from ontological insecurity “increases the attractiveness of the ideas, identities, and practices associated with conflict”.²³

However, the above-mentioned process of re-instating ontological security varies in different ‘types of post-conflict societies’.²⁴ This is important because not all collectives are equally capable of narrating a stable conception of Self due to their asymmetrical position within the socio-institutional framework of the state in which they exist.²⁵ Such a context is particularly relevant for ethnic conflicts, where certain identity narratives tend to be unrecognised during the processes that aim at de-intensifying the antagonisms between different collectives.²⁶ And because of this, the collectives that tend to be in a minority position often find themselves in a state of ontological insecurity, while the collectives that are in a majority position can more easily maintain a stable state of ontological security.²⁷ This in turn affects the process of managing ontological (in)security at both ends. According to Rumelili and Çelik²⁸ the minority collectives, while *per se* more vulnerable to spoilers of different processes/initiatives aimed at de-intensifying the antagonisms between the different collectives, are also “freer in their

17 Giddens, *Modernity*.

18 Rumelili, “Ontological (In)security”.

19 Daniel Bar-Tal, *Intractable Conflicts: Socio-Psychological Foundations and Dynamics*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2013.

20 Rumelili, “Ontological (In)security”.

21 Rumelili and Çelik, “Ontological Insecurity in Asymmetric Conflicts”.

22 Neophytos P. Loizides, “Ontological Security and Ethnic Adaptation in Cyprus”, Bahar Rumelili (ed.), *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security: Peace Anxieties*, New York, Routledge, 2015, p. 71-95.

23 Rumelili and Çelik, »Ontological Insecurity in Asymmetric Conflicts”.

24 John D. Brewer, “Sociology and Peacebuilding”, Roger MacGinty (ed.), *Routledge Handbook of Peacebuilding*, London, Routledge, 2013, p. 159-170.

25 Arnault Morisson and Eva Panetti, “Institutional Entrepreneurs and Socio-institutional Changes in Medellín, Colombia”, *Regional Studies, Regional Science*, Vol. 7, No 1, 2020, p. 35–51.

26 Rumelili and Çelik, “Ontological Insecurity in Asymmetric Conflicts”.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

pursuit of change”. Majority collectives, on the other hand, are usually unwilling to pursue changes that would allow minority collectives to attain ontological security, and thus they limit the potential success of processes directed toward de-intensifying the antagonisms. In ontologically asymmetric conflicts, one collective usually enters such process in a (general) state of ontological insecurity, and the other in a state of ontological security. The challenges posed by this situation were also highlighted by Rumelili and Çelik²⁹ who argued that “any dialogue in an ontologically asymmetrical conflict is difficult to conclude because intervention should be tailored for ontologically secure and insecure collectives separately”.

Such challenges can also be observed in the case of the EU’s involvement in post-conflict BiH. Because the EU’s interventions to *stabilise* the country and make it ‘functional’ moved post-conflict BiH away from the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), which *de facto* safeguards the political capabilities of RS, they could be framed by the ethnopolitical elite in RS as serving the Bosniak cause (i.e., functional and stable BiH as a unitary state, which the majority of Bosniaks subscribe to), and as constructing an ontological asymmetry between the Bosnian Serbs and Bosniaks in Bosnian Serb narratives. Hence, those interventions functioned as spoilers to efforts to de-intensify the antagonisms between the different collectives, and accelerated the return to conflict identity narratives. If the EU’s involvement was to be successful, then “all parties would need to experience some degree of ontological insecurity” in order to be ready for change.³⁰ In the case of the EU’s involvement in BiH, the perception – which was successfully constructed by the ethnopolitical elite in RS – was that those interventions from abroad only consolidate the ontological security for the Bosniak collective and their ethnopolitical elite, while generating ontological insecurity for the Bosnian Serb collective.

Understanding How the EU’s Involvement Became a Source of Ontological Insecurity in RS

The starting point for discussion on how the EU’s involvement came to be understood as a source of ontological (in)security should be the conceptualisation of the EU’s actorness in post-conflict environments. In this regard, the article draws on the “holistic understanding of the EU’s varied involvement in conflict management”³¹, meaning that we take into account how the EU’s involvement in post-conflict environments is not only related to the EU’s internal institutional capacities (e.g. offering EU membership prospects, financial assistance, security instruments, etc.), but also with the external constraints that are both structural and agency-related.³² In the case of the EU’s involvement in post-conflict BiH, where the focus is RS, the structural limitations on the EU’s involvement are constituted by the nature of the political capabilities of BiH as a state, and those of RS as a subnational entity with a high degree of internal autonomy. These create legal and practical restrictions on the EU’s direct engagement with RS, as it is a part of BiH and it is addressed within the BiH framework.³³ In a similar vein, the agency-related limitations on the EU’s involvement lie in the domestic ethnopo-

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Gergana Noutcheva, “Contested Statehood and EU Actorness in Kosovo, Abkhazia and Western Sahara”, *Geopolitics*, Vol. 2, No 2, 2020, p. 449–471.

32 Rok Zupančič et al., “The European Union Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo: An Effective Conflict Prevention and Peace-Building Mission?”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, Vol. 20, No 6, 2018, p. 599–617.

33 Noutcheva, “Contested Statehood and EU Actorness”.

litical elite in RS, which oppose EU action and condition internal discussions about responses to concrete EU-driven initiatives.³⁴

The EU’s involvement in BiH started immediately after the latest Bosnian war, when the EU was assigned the leading role for the civil implementation of the Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA).³⁵ This was further epitomized via the demand of the Council of the EU that the High Representative – an institution with the final authority in BiH – ‘should come from the EU’.³⁶ However, the EU’s involvement was limited, as the EU had “not expected this amount of obstruction after Dayton” and the EU’s leverage in RS was minimal.³⁷ The EU’s minimal leverage in RS changed once Milorad Dodik was elected RS Prime Minister in early 1998. Dodik instantly moved his office from Pale (the war-time capital of the Bosnian Serbs near Sarajevo) farther away into the RS “heartland” of Banja Luka, froze the assets of the Pale leadership, and signposted his eagerness to comply with the DPA.³⁸ While the Serbian Democratic Party (Srpska demokratska stranka – SDS) still won the elections in 1998, in the following years RS saw the emergence of two camps – one continued to reject the Bosnian state and the other accepted the post-Dayton reality.³⁹

However, as Biermann⁴⁰ observed, the power struggles in RS declined in the period between 1998 and 2005, which Greenwood and Hartog⁴¹ characterized as a ‘seismic shift’ within RS. This in turn led to the possibility of introducing the Defence Reform,⁴² often considered as one of the most successful examples of post-war legislation in BiH.⁴³ The positive outcome of the international community’s efforts in pushing for the Defence Reform corresponds with the March 2000 decision of the EU to monitor the BiH preparedness to start the SAA. By September 2002, BiH complied with all the requests the EU needed to start the SAA negotiations with the Union, but they officially started to negotiate in 2005. The SAA negotiations are understood as the first point of rupture, primarily because they opened a window of opportunity for the EU to start advocating for more transformative issues, which were directly aimed at decreasing ethnic entrenchments set in stone by the DPA. One of the indicators for that can also be found in the 2005 Progress Report on BiH.⁴⁴ The latter framed DPA as

34 Ibid.

35 The General Framework Agreement for Peace in Bosnia and Herzegovina, also known as Dayton Peace Agreement (DPA), is the peace agreement reached in November 1995. The DPA aimed to place the collectives in a position of ontological security by creating two highly autonomous entities, but ended up consolidating mono-ethnic political frameworks and in turn preventing meaningful transformation of the ethnic conflict in post-conflict BiH.

36 Ivo H. Daalder, *Getting to Dayton: The Making of America’s Bosnia Policy*, Washington D.C., Brookings Institution Press, 2020.

37 Biermann, “Coercive Europeanization”.

38 Danijela Majstorović, “Comments on Gerald Toal’s “Republica Srpska Will Have a Referendum: the Rhetorical Politics of Milorad Dodi”, *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity*, Vol. 41, No 1, 2013, p. 209–213.

39 Thorsten Gromes, *Common Democracy, Divided Society: The Impossibility to Implement a Peace Strategy for Bosnia and Herzegovina* (HSFK Report no. 9), Frankfurt: Hessische Stiftung Friedens-und Konfliktforschung, 2008.

40 Biermann, “Coercive Europeanization”.

41 David Greenwood and Merijn Hartog, *The Western Balkan Candidates for NATO Membership and Partnership*, Groningen, Centre for European Security Studies, 2005.

42 In 2003, BiH embarked on a defence system reform, prompted by calls from the international community (particularly OHR). Within two years (2005), BiH managed to unify its previously ethnically-divided forces (Bosniak-Croat Army of the Federation of BiH and Bosnian Serb Army of Republika Srpska) into the joint Armed Forces of Bosnia and Herzegovina.

43 Gulnur Aybet and Florian Bieber, “From Dayton to Brussels: the Impact of EU and NATO Conditionality on State Building in Bosnia and Herzegovina”, *Europe-Asia studies*, Vol. 63, No 10, 2011, p. 1911–1937.

44 Commission of the European Union, *Bosnia and Herzegovina 2005 Progress Report*, Brussels, COM, 2005, 561 final.

“too complex and fiscally unsustainable”, and advocated for a “more functional state”. Here, it has to be mentioned that an important factor that facilitated the above-mentioned window of opportunity was the end of Tuđman’s and Milošević’s rule, respectively in Croatia in 1999 and Serbia in 2000. This killed off hopes that the two patrons would continue to sponsor secessionist forces in BiH, and both Croatia and Serbia became eager to start their own EU accession processes.⁴⁵

As is evident, the EU’s proposals directly targeted BiH’s socio-institutional framework, which is maintained and perpetuated by the domestic political elites in RS – non-negotiability on the DPA and *status quo* in this regard. Namely, any attempts at creating a more functional state *de facto* meant the transfer of competences from the subnational level to the national level, which is symbolized in Sarajevo as the country’s capital. Noutcheva⁴⁶ noted that such a call implied cutting back the authority of RS while empowering the Bosniaks. The tensions between the ethnopolitical elites in BiH became manifest in April 2006, when negotiations on a package of constitutional reforms (the so-called April Package) failed. According to Muehlmann⁴⁷ and Juncos,⁴⁸ the Office of High Representative (OHR) was extremely impatient with the Bosnian Serbs during these negotiations, trying to force the SDS to drop to its knees, while the EU did not openly oppose the OHR’s coercive actions. This led Muehlmann⁴⁹ to conclude that both the EU and the OHR had ‘failed’: “neither the stick of the OHR through Bonn powers, nor the carrot of EU accession can drive top-down reforms which do not have a basis of support within Bosnian society”.

Following May 2006, in the aftermath of Montenegro’s independence referendum, Dodik’s ethnopolitical rhetoric started dominating the socio-institutional framework of BiH (and RS). Dodik took advantage of the occasion of the Montenegro Referendum to make the first of a series of public comments discussing the possibility of RS holding a referendum on seceding from BiH.⁵⁰ This in turn started to affect public opinion in RS. In 2006, the majority of Bosnian Serbs (62%), indicated that they would favour the independence of RS if Kosovo declared independence.⁵¹ The 2006 elections were shaped by an extremely negative and almost a single-issue campaign, on the question of the constitutional system of BiH.⁵² Furthermore, only two of the 36 parties registered for the elections (the Social Democratic Party and People’s Party Work for Prosperity) had civic platforms, and more than 70% of reports on the campaign in the newspapers were based either on ethnic or nationalistic rhetoric.⁵³

The so-called April Package failed to be implemented in 2006, and the fierce campaign preceding it, which was grounded in the question of the constitutional system, led to the Prud negotiations initiated by Sulejman Tihić (a Bosniak), Dragan Čović (a Bosnian Croat) and Milorad Dodik in De-

45 Biermann, “Coercive Europeanization”.

46 Gergana Noutcheva, *European Foreign Policy and the Challenges of Balkan Accession*, London, Routledge, 2012.

47 Thomas Muehlmann, “Police Restructuring in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Problems of Internationally-led Security Sector Reform”, *Journal of Intervention and Statebuilding*, Vol. 2, No 1, 2008, p. 1–22.

48 Ana E. Juncos, *EU Foreign and Security Policy in Bosnia: the Politics of Coherence and Effectiveness*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013.

49 Muehlmann, “Police restructuring in Bosnia-Herzegovina”.

50 Adis Maksić, *Referendum Discourse in Republic of Srpska Politics 2006–2008: An Analysis of its Emergence and Performative Structure*, M.A. Thesis, Alexandria, VA, Faculty of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute, 2009.

51 Biermann, “Coercive Europeanization”.

52 Zdeb, “Prud and Butmir Processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina”.

53 Ibid.

cember 2008. These negotiations also failed on 21 February 2009, when Dodik gave an ultimatum to Tihčić and Čović that the status of RS should be guaranteed, ethnic voting should be preserved, and entities should have the right to secede.⁵⁴ Such events called for a ‘much more assertive EU policy’, which gained in visibility during the so-called Butmir process, seen as the second point of rupture, as it was the last genuine attempt by the EU to introduce reforms that would de-intensify the antagonisms between the collectives. But, as the Butmir talks coincided with the general elections in 2010, an ongoing crisis in the ethnically divided city of Mostar, and the constant tensions between the OHR and the RS leadership, these talks also failed.⁵⁵ Bieber⁵⁶ argued that the EU failed because it was ill prepared, suggested ‘quick solutions’ to the parties, and in return had little to offer in exchange for reform. Accordingly, in 2010, only 13% of Bosnian Serbs identified very or extremely strongly with BiH, while the majority identified more with RS and Serbia – 62% and 68% of respondents, respectively.⁵⁷

In this context, the following section employs analysis of news articles covering the two points of rupture (i.e., the SAA negotiations and Butmir process). This allows us to understand the specific construction of the (dominant) narratives about the EU’s involvement that generated ontological asymmetry in the Bosnian Serb narratives, and in turn prevented the de-intensification of antagonisms between the Bosniak and Bosnian Serb collectives. Taking into account those narratives, constructing ontological asymmetry provides a better explanation of the recent trajectory of the EU’s involvement in BiH, as it reflects on why it did not reach its objectives, and even prevented the EU from being seen as an actor for peace.

“Bosniak Lobbyists Have Been Exploiting European Integration to Centralise BiH”: An Analysis of SAA Negotiations (2005–2007)

Analysis of the SAA negotiations shows that, contrary to expectations, the idea of SAA being an important step on the country’s path toward full EU membership,⁵⁸ did not develop in RS. Dodik’s ruling (ethno-)political Alliance of Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) used the SAA negotiations first and foremost to consolidate its own position in RS vis-à-vis the strongest opposition party, the SDS. While Dodik in this period did not give any signal of potential compromise, or adoption of the necessary reforms, the second largest (ethno-)political party in RS, the SDS, signalled the opposite by projecting the idea that “the RS is prepared for a compromise, but the EU must show a greater level of understanding for the interests of Serbs in BiH”.⁵⁹ In this context, Dodik exploited the international community in general and the EU in particular, to reach its political objectives. For example, he began to emphasize that he “has information that SDS is in talks with the international community about entering the coalition”, with which “the party wants to capitalise on the external influences with the aim of breaking the unity of the SNSD”.⁶⁰

54 Ibid.

55 Matthew Parish, *A Free City in the Balkans: Reconstructing a Divided Society in Bosnia*, New York, I.B. Rauris, 2010.

56 Florian Bieber, *Constitutional Reform in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Preparing for EU Accession*, Brussels, European Policy Centre, 2010.

57 Biermann, “Coercive Europeanization”.

58 Frank Schimmelfennig and Ulrich Sedelmeier, “The Europeanization of Eastern Europe: the External Incentives Model Revisited”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 27, No 6, 2019, p. 814–833.

59 “Još jedna godina izazova”, *Glas Srpske*, 8 March 2006.

60 “Lažne priče Brisela pale u vodu”, *Nezavisne novine*, 22 October 2007.

But Dodik's SNSD did not use the international community/EU only to consolidate its internal political legitimacy in RS,⁶¹ but also to further antagonise the 'Other' (the Bosniaks as a nation and the Bosniak political elites). Petar Kunić, a former member of the RS parliament and Minister of Public Administration, has for example argued that the "centralisation of BiH is a Bosniak idea" and that "Bosniak lobbyists have been exploiting European integration since the Bosnian war in order to centralise the country".⁶² Such arguments became more visible after October 2006, when Dodik said that "the SAA is not respected because decisions about reforms are made by foreigners", and that they "are not sheep led by certain international officials who – for the benefit of their own careers – told them what was good and what was not".⁶³

When in early 2007 it became clear that BiH would still not be able to sign the SAA due to the failure to implement the police reform, the (ethno-)political elite in RS pushed the securitizing language even further by stating that "the EU's decision not to sign the SAA is a result of Sarajevo's charlatan policy of unconstitutional centralisation of BiH",⁶⁴ and that "if anyone wants to abolish the RS, we will have the answer".⁶⁵ By doing that, Dodik linked the SAA negotiations and the much-needed police reform not only with the narrative of the "EU's agenda on BiH being decided by the Bosniaks", but also with the idea that the EU's agency directly contributed to the "abolishment" of RS. By doing this, Dodik – for the first time – openly advocated for the referendum on the RS's independence as an extraordinary measure⁶⁶ – a political move violating the BiH Constitution. When the Mostar declaration,⁶⁷ which "honoured the commitments for implementation of the police reform with aim to initial and sign the SAA",⁶⁸ was signed on 29 October 2007, Nebojša Radmanović, the Bosnian Serb representative in the BiH presidency and member of Dodik's SNSD, argued that "now, when the SAA is going to be signed, it would be logical to abolish the Office of the High Commissioner".⁶⁹ Furthermore, he argued that "if that will not happen, it will only confirm the thesis that there are a certain number of people in Europe who do not want BiH in the EU".⁷⁰ Dodik, on the contrary, used different tactics and promoted the idea that "by signing the SAA, he managed to consolidate the status of the RS as a permanent category and equal partner".⁷¹ In other words, he followed the political strategy of maintaining the *status quo* of RS by signing the non-binding Mostar declaration, which sufficed for the EU to conclude the SAA with BiH.

61 "Dejton ostaje, Srpska ostaje", *Glas Srpske*, 5-6 February 2005.

62 "Dosta je pritisaka", *Glas Srpske*, 1 February 2006.

63 "Formiranje vlasti, pa promjena Ustava", *Nezavisne novine*, 23 October 2006.

64 "Konfederalno uređenje budućnost BiH", *Glas Srpske*, 22 February 2007.

65 "Dodik nudi izlaz iz krize", *Nezavisne novine*, 21 November 2007.

66 "OHR protiv novih pregorova", *RTRS*, 12 April 2007.

67 The Mostar declaration is a one-page document signed on 29 October 2007, which sufficed for the EU to conclude the SAA with BiH. In essence, the Mostar declaration "honoured the commitments for implementation of the police reform with aim to initial and sign the SAA" by all representatives of the constituent peoples in BiH, stating that the "signatories agree to undertake all necessary activities for implementation of the police reform in accordance with the principles of the EU" (OHR, 2007, p. 1).

68 OHR, "Declaration on Honouring the Commitments for Implementation of the Police Reform with Aim to Initial and Sign the Stabilisation and Association Agreement", 29 October 2007, <http://www.ohr.int/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/Mostar-Declaration.pdf> (Accessed 15 January 2022).

69 "Svoju sudbinu moramo uzeti u svoje ruke", *Glas Srpske*, 6-9 January 2007.

70 Ibid.

71 "Srpska na evropskom kursu", *Glas Srpske*, 1 February 2007.

Here, we can observe that the dominant narrative of the ethnopolitical elite in RS attempted to portray the SAA negotiations as a means to make BiH stable and functional, which allegedly only served the Bosniak collective and Bosniak political elite. In line with this, the political elite in RS has managed to construct an ontological asymmetry between the Bosnian Serbs and Bosniaks in the dominant narrative of the ethnopolitical elites in RS, arguing that the “wants and needs of Bosnian Serbs” were oppressed during this process. Dodik thus managed to ‘ethnicise’ the SAA negotiations, and in turn provided a context in which the ontological security of the ethnopolitical elites in RS, and RS as such, could be pursued. One of the core political strategies during the SAA negotiations, as the analysis has shown, was to present secession as the only way to attain ontological security amidst the (existential) uncertainties that the SAA negotiations carried for the socio-institutional framework of BiH (and RS).

“The EU Favours One Collective at the Expense of the Other Two”: An Analysis of the Butmir Process (2009)

The Butmir Process, a *de facto* continuation of the Prud Agreement’s reform efforts in BiH, stemming from the SAA and EU membership conditionality, could be understood as the last genuine EU-driven initiative to make BiH more functional. The latter was to be achieved through a constitutional reform, which was from the beginning subjected to the (ethno-)political rhetoric of antagonising the ‘Other’ (Bosniaks) in RS. For example, even before the start of official meetings, Dodik argued that the “Butmir processes are a permanent effort of Bosniak politicians to create an unstable political situation”.⁷² In a similar vein, Nebojša Radmanović, a member of Dodik’s SNSD, insisted that “Bosniaks are creating a political crisis in order to change the Constitution of BiH”.⁷³ Dodik went even further by emphasizing that “if the RS were to accept the Butmir proposal, the survival of the Serbs in this region would be in great danger for the next twenty years”.⁷⁴

In such a context, both the (ethno-political) SNSD and SDS started projecting the signals that “legal violence of the international community is behind the imposition of constitutional reform”,⁷⁵ which is “rigged to favour one of the peoples at the expense of the other two”,⁷⁶ and that accepting the Butmir package would “cause great damage to the position of Bosnian Serbs in the future”.⁷⁷ In this narrative, the EU was bracketed under the umbrella term of ‘international community’ and ‘foreigners’,⁷⁸ and the EU intervention was framed as harmful not only for the political capabilities of RS, but also for the Bosnian Serbs as an ethnic group. Similar arguments were made, for example, by the Veterans Organisations of RS, which stated that “pressures of the foreign diplomats on RS ahead of the Butmir talks are in the service of creating a unitary BiH”,⁷⁹ and by other RS politicians, such as

72 “Zalaganje za Dejton nije anditejtonsko”, *Glas Srpske*, 17 June 2009.

73 “Radmanović: Problem je neostvarivanje Ustava”, *RTRS*, 9 October 2009.

74 “Redukcija Ustava BiH ugrozila bi opstanak Srba”, *Glas Srpske*, 28-29 November 2009.

75 “Zvaničnici RS sa ekspertskim timovima SAD i EU”, *RTRS*, 13 October 2009.

76 “Ukidanje entitetskog glasanja ne dolazi u obzir”, *Glas Srpske*, 10 September 2009.

77 “Kuzmanović započeo konsultacije uoči sastanka na Butmiru”, *RTRS*, 6 October 2009.

78 Here it should be emphasized that the Butmir Process was directly sponsored by the EU (Carl Bildt as its representative during the Swedish presidency of the Council of the EU) and the US, who were attempting to bring back together the representatives of the three constituent peoples in order to continue with the needed reforms.

79 “BORS: Srpska ne smije biti oštećena”, *RTRS*, 7 October 2009.

Milanko Mihajlica, the leader of the Serb Radical Party, who stated that Dodik “should abandon the costly talks for the sake of those who gave their lives for the RS”.⁸⁰

Even though the Butmir Process ultimately failed, the idea of organizing an unconstitutional referendum on the independence of RS as an extraordinary measure by the (ethno-)political elite became ingrained in the official talks on constitutional reform. In February 2009, Dodik conditioned the continuation of the talks on the recognition of RS’s right to self-determination. He stated that he would be inclined toward reforming the constitution – that was the main goal of the Butmir Process – but it should “include a provision that the entities have the right to self-determination and secession”.⁸¹ Furthermore, Dodik also demanded that “this right should be exercised by a referendum three years after the adoption of the new constitution”.⁸² This argument was further supported by Dragan Jerinić, a columnist on *Nezavisne Novine*, who stated that “due to the inability of the Sarajevo political elite to truly accept the current state structure, the idea of the referendum as the last protective mechanism in preserving equality within BiH is entirely realistic, justified, and desirable.”⁸³

The case study of the Butmir Process shows how the dominant narrative of the ethnopolitical elite in RS, which was developed during the SAA negotiations, remained intact. Again, the ethnopolitical elite in RS in general and Milorad Dodik in particular portrayed the EU interventions as means that served the goals of the Bosniak collective. Similar to the case of the SAA negotiations, Dodik framed the Butmir Process as something that would harm the position of the Bosnian Serb collective, thus functioning as a source of ontological insecurity. Again, Dodik promoted the idea of secession as a legitimate political strategy for attaining ontological security in RS, amidst the ontological asymmetry vis-à-vis the Bosniak collective and ethnopolitical elite.

Conclusion

Our analysis was motivated by the empirical observation that the EU interventions failed to curb the sharp ethnopolitical rhetoric in RS, rendering the EU incapable of functioning as an agent for peace in BiH. The starting point of our analysis was that the EU’s efforts to push for constitutional reforms that would develop the political capabilities of BiH as a state, failed to de-intensify the antagonistic identity narratives of the collectives in BiH. The promise of making BiH more ‘functional’ and ‘stable’ via SAA and the Butmir Process entailed cutting back certain political powers of RS (and of the Federation of BiH). This challenged the existing narratives and Self-Other dialectics in RS. The EU-driven reform initiatives in turn generated ontological insecurity on the part of the ethnopolitical elites in RS, who saw political gain in framing the EU’s agency in BiH as serving the Bosniak cause. Deriving from this, the primary research goal of this paper was to examine why the EU failed to become an agent for peace in BiH, and how it is possible that the EU’s efforts were framed as serving the Bosnian cause, thus discursively becoming part and parcel of an ontological asymmetry between the Bosnian Serbs and Bosniaks in Bosnian Serb ethnopolitical narratives.

80 “Prudski sporazum krupan promašaj”, *Nezavisne Novine*, 15 April 2009.

81 “Dodik: Teritorija RS ne smije biti upitna”, *Nezavisne novine*, 22 February 2009.

82 Ibid.

83 “Sjeti se Hayoza”, *Nezavisne novine*, 21 October 2009.

We analysed news articles at two points of rupture, namely the SAA negotiations and Butmir Process. The two cases examined show that the ethnopolitical elite in RS have instrumentalized the activities of the EU, in order to further antagonize the ‘Other’ (Bosniak collective) and solidify the (Bosnian Serb) Self. This was done by arguing that reform efforts promoted by the EU have not only been in line with the Bosniak agenda, but would also ‘endanger’ the position of both the Bosnian Serb collective and RS in BiH. In order to prevent this, the ethnopolitical elite in RS advocated for secession as an extraordinary measure, namely the unconstitutional referendum on the independence of RS. In both cases, the ethnopolitical elite led by Milorad Dodik projected the idea that the “wants and needs” of the Bosnian Serb collective have been oppressed, thus managing to construct ontological asymmetry between the Bosnian Serbs and Bosniaks in Bosnian Serb narratives, by framing the EU’s involvement as serving the Bosniak cause.

This case study of RS shows that the EU’s efforts to de-intensify the antagonistic identities in BiH failed, as the political elites in RS ‘framed’ the EU as generating ontological insecurity on the part of the Bosnian Serb identity narratives. The ethnopolitical elite in RS in general and Milorad Dodik in particular imagined RS solely along ethnic lines, meaning that they denied the possibility of creating non-antagonist alternative narratives within the collectives in BiH. Finally, the article has also empirically contributed to the theoretical assumption that in ethnic conflicts, which are based on ontological asymmetry, all collectives need to experience some degree of ontological insecurity, in order to facilitate the needed change. Based on this, an important part of understanding why the EU failed to be an agent for peace in BiH lies in the idea that the EU failed to offer an involvement that would be tailored for both the ‘ontologically secure Bosniak collective and ontologically insecure Bosnian Serb collective’.

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