

## Ontological Security and Public (Mis)Recognition of International Crises: Uncertainty, Political Imagining, and the Self

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*Public narratives of unexpected international events frequently help (re)imagine uncertainty as something familiar or predictable. This process underlies social and political responses and is deeply significant in relation to identity and boundary security. I propose to read early perceptions of international crises through a reformulation of ontological security principles that find motivation for behavior in self-identity needs. Political imagining is shown to seek continuous self-concepts and to routinize new encounters within familiar and self-affirming frames. This article suggests a new approach to ontological continuity: instead of an unchanging narrative, its security may rest in a continuously positive version of the self, with narratives of others balancing and securing the relationship. In the second half of the article, I draw on interviews about the “Arab Spring” to show how illusions of recognizing unexpected events and the political imagining this produces can be motivated by self-concepts in need of security.*

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A number of political crises in the last decades felt unexpected to the public and commanded widespread media and social attention. The events of 9/11, the “Arab Spring,” the spread of the Islamic State, and the current Ukrainian crisis are only a few of the major events that recently fell under global scrutiny. Such disturbances are typically followed by a rush to establish a narrative, a memory full of social and political signals. There was a significant, and prompt, journey in the West from the chaos of 9/11 to the established “global terrorist” (see Zalman & Clarke, 2009) and from the first protests to the Arab Spring. Yet this journey is present but unnoticed in the Western suspicion and alienation of Muslims (Pew Center, 2006) or when Western media speculated if the 2012–14 protests in Russia, Thailand, Turkey, and Ukraine were replicating the Arab Spring. This article looks at how the general public interprets unexpected events as familiar or predictable, and the security this provides for societal self-concepts.

It took over three years from the first protests in Tunisia for *The Guardian* to write: “The supposed pan-Arab battle for freedom and democracy, as it was wishfully interpreted in the West, mutated into a string of separately defined conflicts involving violent coup and counter-coup in Egypt, national fracturing in Libya, harsh repression in Bahrain and catastrophic civil war in Syria” (Tisdall, 2014). Yet in late 2011, the initial hopeful narrative seemed to be true with strong public sympathy towards protesters (GlobeScan, 2011), a wide array of supportive political statements, and with

generally favorable Western media coverage (Chernobrov, 2014). The uncertain and unexpected suddenly seemed familiar beyond questioning: Oppression sparks revolution, and “we” as democracies have inspired “them.”

International relations (IR) scholarship tends to address uncertainty at the level of state and decision-making and overlook how it is dealt with socially. General agreement on the attraction of balance, routine, or other established, stable, and “certain” conditions over uncertainty pervades rationalist, cognitive, and constructivist approaches (see Rathbun, 2007). Uncertainty is associated with destabilization as, among other things, it may hamper calculation and increase risk, jeopardize perceived or actual security, or signal indeterminacy and lack of meaning. As the result, agents seek to escape uncertainty, for example by creating predictable routines (Mitzen, 2006a) and cognitive consistency (Jervis, 1976). The challenge of uncertainty in the interpretation of politics by society, or the general public as opposed to state or elites, is, however, no less destabilizing for collective identities than it is for an individual agent or state. As societies are largely bound together by inner imagining developed through interaction with others (Anderson, 1983), then uncertainty of a new event presents a crisis: Inability to imagine others triggers inability to imagine and maintain self.

This article proposes to read societal, or public, imagining of unexpected crises as (mis)recognition dictated by a societal need for ontological security. I mean (mis)recognition as an illusion of recognizing an unexpected event, which in gaining familiar contours becomes less troublesome.<sup>1</sup> Ontological security suggests that agents seek a coherent self-narrative—“biographical continuity”—for their identity to be stable (Giddens, 1991), leading states to adjust behavior to maintain “consistent self-concepts” (Steele, 2008, p. 3) or stimulating communities to construct “secure” identities and repel outsiders (Kinnvall, 2004). IR readings of ontological security have mainly focused on state actions underwritten by identity needs (Browning 2015; Mitzen, 2006a, 2006b; Steele, 2005, 2008; Zarakol, 2010), while the societal need for ontological security, although not excluded, remains undertheorized. Yet it can offer new perspectives on the societal understanding of political situations that besides securitizing identities (Kinnvall, 2004) lead to narcissistic and self-affirming accounts of a crisis. Fear and danger are central to theories of identity construction (Campbell, 1998; Connolly, 1991; Todorov, 1984), with self often seen as an “orderly inside” (Mälksoo, 2010, p. 17) and the other as a threat container. This article highlights the threat in the uncertainty of defining a boundary rather than in its external objects: Certainty of a boundary leaves self unquestioned. Ontological accounts of identity help place insecurity within the self and tie identity construction to inner anxieties awoken by the crisis. A psychosocial reading of ontological security in this article also offers a new reading of ontological continuity that allows narrative dynamism as long as the self-concept behind the narrative of others remains positive.

The aim of this article is thus twofold. First, I suggest that ontological security is not about state per se but about society and its need for a *stable and continuous* self-concept when faced with a crisis. Self-identity becomes securitized socially as the public is driven by inner identity needs to (mis)recognize uncertain or unexpected situations in the language of familiarity, resemblance to past experiences and anticipation. Second, the article theorizes early public reactions to international crises as a political situation that stimulates *narcissistic* narratives. The (un)conscious presence of a virtuous, as well as a stable and continuous self in portraying the other is observed in original interview material that shows Russian and British public (mis)recognition of the Arab Spring. The interviews were conducted with students of various disciplines in Russia and the United Kingdom in 2012–13. My reading of the

<sup>1</sup> The essence of (mis)recognition is in the moment of “recognizing” and the security this gives to the subject. (Mis)recognition is not about *in/accuracy* but about possible dynamism: As discussed later in the article, subjects may shift the content of the narrative, while retaining its recognizing function. Although over time these narratives are in fact dynamic (and cannot possibly all be precise), the security of the self is in the constructed sense of their finality and precision at any given moment. The security then rests not in the other (in which case it would have been a matter of *in/accuracy*), but in the self (self “knows,” “recognizes,” “controls” the other).

material focused on the presence of the speakers' own identity and self-concepts in narrating the other, displayed through language, evoked memories, and frames.

### Ontological Security, Identity, and Routinized Relationships

Ontological security has been increasingly applied to state politics in the last decade with a particular focus on continuity and routine. I will first review these concepts and show their applicability to the ontology of collective, as well as state identities. I will then compare ontological security to psychosocial approaches to anxiety and uncertainty to reveal significant similarities in how the desirability of a coherent self can be understood.

#### *Ontological Security, Routine, and Trust*

"Ontological security" was coined by Laing (1960) to suggest "a continuous person" that enjoys stable and whole existence in reality, as opposed to anxiety and loss of meaning that could threaten everyday experiences and self's integrity. Giddens (1991) pays particular attention to the importance of a continuous narrative, or "sense of self," which can be found in self's ability to "keep a particular narrative going" (p. 54). This ability provides "biographical continuity" that underlies the stability of self's existence and confidence of its social interactions: An ontologically secure self can feel whole and act as it "brackets out questions about ourselves, others and the object-world which have to be taken for granted in order to keep on with everyday activity" (p. 37). In other words, the self constructs its understanding of itself and its surroundings and acts within these coordinates, gaining power, predictability, and creating common sense in the system, as long as these coordinates remain unchallenged. The world of the self is impregnated with meaning which becomes real—it is, as Kinnvall (2004) draws the comparison, its "home" in which one can rely on connections between material objects and their meanings as permanent and continuous (p. 747; Dupuis & Thorns, 1998).

It is this permanence and continuity of meaning that stimulate the creation of what Giddens, following Erikson (1950), calls "basic trust"—a "cocoon" of relationships which filter out questions to the self. A self seeks stability of meaning and behavior and avoids uncertainty at all costs: "Deep uncertainty renders the actor's identity insecure. Individuals are therefore motivated to create cognitive and behavioral certainty, which they do by establishing routines" (Mitzen, 2006a, p. 342). A certain similarity can be seen here with Jervis' argument on misperception through "cognitive consistency" (Jervis, 1976); only here anxiety avoidance at the disintegration of one's self is more central. Routine is a highly irreflexive state as it prohibits self-examination: the self's desire for rigidity, for justified existence that has no historical contingency, is at its core. Ideology can be viewed as an example of such routine as it guarantees comfortable and continuous existence by explaining reality in convenient ways, although the subject may be rationally aware of it being a distortion of reality (Žižek, 1989).

In an international context this means that actors prefer relationships they have practiced and recognize, even if attachment to these relationships maintains conflict or reproduces other harmful, but recognizable and certain, situations (Mitzen, 2006a; Steele, 2008). For example, the inner complexity of the recent Ukrainian crisis is overshadowed by a more knowable routine of Cold War politics, although acting on this routine may be an unnecessary escalation. The Ukrainian crisis becomes conflated with interceptions of Russian military aircraft close to NATO territories (Cowell, 2015), suspected sighting of a Russian submarine near Swedish shores (Marszal, 2014), rhetoric of "threat to the Baltics" and responsive creation of rapid-reaction force (Borger, 2015), NATO drill in the Baltics (BBC, 2015), Russia's pulling out of the CFE Treaty, debates on arms supplies typical of proxy wars, and other, all too familiar, signifiers of Cold War times. The familiarity of the threat for all sides is

both attractive and dangerous: It creates an illusion of predictability but prevents seeing other dimensions of the problem and leads to a known and well-rehearsed routine of policy escalation and popular suspicion. This is the point of departure between ontological security and security as physical survival. In search for continuity and routine, states may “pursue social actions to serve self-identity needs, even when these actions compromise their physical existence” (Steele, 2008, p. 2).

Ontological security can override rationality in both states’ attachment to identity-significant routines and in commonplace perception when societies label, construct, and experience reality. The illusion of *knowing* the other enables the self to act within its continuous narrative. For example, the English riots of 2011 were initially (mis)recognized as a criminal outburst—a media simplification that made sense of the unexpected by conveniently leaving self’s own attitudes and policies unquestioned (Murer, 2015). Wide societal association of unemployment with migration, or violence with ethnic and religious groups, can similarly misplace the irritating object, leading the public to overestimate migrants’ presence (Ipsos Mori, 2014). Critical of how conflict between groups is typically explained as hatred of difference, Figlio (2012) attributes the comfort of hating difference to defense against self-examination. Self-imagining aims to portray self as rigid and existent throughout time and expel any deficiencies onto others. Assuming the other’s difference as impassable and permanent makes the self feel stable (Murer, 2010), although this can lead to further alienation and hostility. In search of ontological security, a self escapes into growing nationalism or religious radicalization (Kinnvall, 2004) and reinforces social (Krolikowski, 2008) or state (Mitzen, 2006a; Steele, 2008) identity through routine.

Giddens’ original argument is intrinsically connected to the identity-destabilizing effect of globalization, which Kinnvall (2004) reaffirms as loss of the sense of “home” among the growing interdependence, unemployment, economic instability, and forced migration. Agreeing with the nature of instability (identity blurring or loss of known behavioral coordinates), I suggest a more prevalent need for continuity. The desire for continuity and routine of predictable relationships, and the behavioral or perceptual adjustments that create this routine with suitably imagined others, pervade everyday societal imagining of politics. The other’s presence as an alternative to self and the uncertainty of unexpected events interrogate the self and its identity boundaries, and it responds with ontological securitization.

### *Identity and Continuous Narratives*

Identity is central to ontological security as it denotes the security of the subjective self as opposed to the physical body. Indeed, some ontological security studies equate identity with self (Mitzen, 2006a, p. 342), while others assume the parallel. Social psychology speaks of identity as a profound need to belong and gain acceptance into groups (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2000; Steger & Kashdan, 2009). Maslow (1943) names belonging among key human needs: Interestingly, it is the first mental need as those preceding it are physical. Belonging to an identity—a collective self based on imagining and performance—satisfies the needs for power and security (Millar, 2006), self-validation and recognition (Cockshaw & Sochet, 2010; Honneth, 1995), and social interaction (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). It also provides meaning and confidence: “knowing that you are a Catholic, or a Communist, or a Scotsman, or a longshoreman allows your own existence to be recognized, it tells you that you are . . . not in danger of being swallowed up by the void” (Todorov, 2003, p. 165). This suggests that the International is judged by *identities* and *from the position of identities*: In perception of any political event, there are multiple “Je Suis” when self becomes migrant or local, Muslim or Christian, liberal or conservative, Roma or French. Effectively, this establishes the coordinates within which it becomes possible to maintain continuity and routines.

As it provides meaningful existence, identity contains a narrative and is inseparable from it: Belonging involves constructing a “narrative about the self” (Hall, 1992, p. 227). Rather like the view on states as narrated selves when state agents create a self via narrative and then seek to realize it

through policies (Steele, 2010, p. 3), societies too create their identity boundaries and selves through narratives. Turning state or society into a self is the culmination of the “imprecise process of imagination” (Campbell, 1998, p. 91). Although potentially imprecise, narratives about the self define the “spatio-temporal parameters from and towards which they [individuals] can act as a community” (Berenskoetter, 2014, p. 270), making the self seem and feel itself real. Continuity of the narrative secures identity existence: Volkan (1988) speaks of large group identities as subjective experiences of sameness and belonging held together by performance and transmission of shared histories. He theorizes identity as multilayered, and this is a point that finds agreement among most critical theorists (Fierke, 2001). Performance, or demonstrating “signals of belonging” that form the boundary (Barth, 1998), becomes central as the totality of the group is invisible to every single member at any one time, making identities held together by inner imagining (Anderson, 1983).

Such ontology of the self necessitates the creation of founding narratives, such as “usable pasts” (Anderson, 1983) and “chosen” traumas or glories (Volkan, 1988), the flattening of inner complexity, and the expulsion of nonperforming members. If scrutinized, any seemingly homogeneous collective identity disintegrates into diversity as self can only be described through the focus on its outside (Dalal, 2009). This is particularly visible in more temporal and fluid unities: For example, protesters in Egypt in 2011 and 2013, Russia in 2011, or Ukraine in 2013–14 were incredibly diverse within but quickly attained elements of unifying performance by creating shared symbolic spaces (Tahrir Square, Maidan), wearing symbolic cloth (white ribbons in Russia or helmets in Ukraine), and formulating common slogans. Visible shared behaviors created a sense of unity, a signal of belonging in the presence of major inner diversity. A self needs inner coherence for stability, and significant parts of the self-narrative direct self-imagining and performance without focusing on the actual other.

The uncertainty of new events necessitates repetition of one’s identity “signal” and performance. What and whom the event contains is the Unknown—that which exists *neither in, nor outside* self’s identity boundary. Hence public perception of international crises that happens in a collective identity context is a challenge of both relating to the actual event and affirming the self’s coherent and continuous *inner* narrative. A narrated self can cope with this: Narratives can ensure stable self-identity by bridging change and a continuous autobiography (Subotić, 2015, p. 7). My claim is that a self is stimulated from within to (mis)recognize new events as conforming and validating its narrative, even if this necessitates a distortion of reality (an imprecise narrative). Collective identities securitize their self-concepts in narratives about unexpected others.

### *Psychosocially Secure Identities: Uncertainty and (Mis)Recognition*

While the theory of ontological security originates in psychiatry and sociology, the application of the concept in political studies often takes it away from its roots. Of course, neither Laing nor Giddens are focused primarily on states in the context of international relations. However, there may be more room for psychological undercurrents in the making of decisions or perceptions which IR scholars find as (constructed) political “realities.” Reading political perception psychosocially can advance our understanding of the intersubjective context and inner significance of images that a collective self holds of surrounding others.

When a disturbance happens, continuity and routine of the self and its relationships is troubled. Uncertainty presents a condition of the self rather than of an external subject. The self is unsure what to expect of the new: the exact boundary and inclusion or exclusion of the newcomer are not clear. Acknowledging unknown would suggest impotence of self in controlling its circumstances, threatening its survival and presenting what Giddens (1991) calls “existential anxiety.” Self’s stability (security) and agency then become dependent on its ability to know or create an illusion of recognition, which political studies have theorized as routine (Kinnvall 2004; Mitzen, 2006a). Importantly, this is a defensive and not necessarily conscious response of a self.



The uncertainty of not knowing does not catch self in a completely uninformed void. Klein suggests that perception of new events and others is based on relating them to one's past hating and loving experiences. Resemblance of strangers and newcomers to these memories creates expectations of a similar experience in future interactions (Klein, 1960, p. 6–9). As a self views itself as whole and potent (able to fully control and manipulate its surroundings), the discomfort of a more complex reality is attributed to the unknown outside—the vaguely felt stranger. Following Klein, Fornari (1966, p. 161) suggests that a self feels the stranger as a “bad presence” and attempts to eliminate it. On the other hand, the stranger's presence is desirable as the self can *imagine* the stranger as need be for the self's own purposes. Hence, both Fornari (1966) and Volkan (1988) view stranger anxiety as a precursor to an enemy-other. The latter acts as a reservoir for any traits the self needs it to contain in order to affirm a continuous and positive self. Construction of others can then be seen to contain an ontological need for a secure self-concept.

(Mis)recognizing uncertainty also means that it is given a *name* that may be imprecise but recognizable. A key ontological security argument that agents prefer routine despite unnecessary escalation or harm can be further explained through the relation between anxiety and phobia. Naming an experience of anxiety has a binding effect on frustration (Bion, 1962): For example, labeling general fear into a particular phobia binds “a more generalised anxiety to a specific situation that can then be controlled to some extent” (Emanuel, 2000, p. 20). An abstract fear of death, for example, can be objectified through enemy construction (Huysmans, 1998; Krolkowski, 2008, p. 124). Similarly to its own need to belong, *the self needs others to belong as well* as only then can the self act, respond, and manipulate them. Even if inaccurate, the name attaches familiar meaning to an object or relationship that returns the situation to a recognizable (routinized) state.

Hence, we can observe generalizations of the other and impositions of familiar, yet hardly questioned, collective identities on individual acts or complicatedly diverse groups of people. Attacks on mosques in France after Charlie Hebdo shooting and the later criticized<sup>2</sup> societal expectation for European Muslims to condemn the shooting extrapolated the disturbing act into an identity trait of familiar religious and ethnic communities. Likewise, Western European and American media and the wide public initially saw Tunisian, Egyptian, or Libyan protesters, diverse as they were in their political preferences and particular reasons for taking to the streets, as uniformly prodemocratic and undoubtedly pro-Western forces. Only later would the Arab Spring become seen as diverse “springs” with diverse outcomes. In both cases, the self needed the other to belong, to have a recognizable boundary, regardless of whether it would point to a frightening other (Islamism and terrorism) or present a self-affirming imitation.

A double-sided conclusion can be drawn from this. A self *is* its narrated biography, and a rupture to its coherence makes it ontologically insecure. This means that (mis)recognition of uncertain situations is part of self's security. At the same time, a self is inescapably *present in any other* as it is impossible to recognize the other outside the memories that a self possesses. The other cannot exist outside the subjective self and the latter's self-concept. A self is involved in its perception of new events and others and biased in favor of maintaining biographical continuity, coherent identity, and performative belonging.

### A Positive Self in New Encounters

I have so far focused on the self's attraction to continuity and routine as stimulating (mis)recognition, while the emotional significance of self/other categories has been only briefly mentioned. This

<sup>2</sup> For example, compare the discussions in *The Huffington Post* (Kuruville & Blumberg, 2015) and *Vox* (2015).

section presents perception of new encounters as a project of preserving a *positive*, as well as an ontologically continuous self, and judging the other based on its rejection or acceptance of the self ideal.

*(Mis)Recognition and Narcissistic Consistency*

In his account of the first meeting of the Spanish with the American Indians, Todorov (1984, p. 76) notes that imagining the stranger as inferior or wrong is a spontaneous reaction. Although Todorov's conclusion is based on a particular encounter, prompt evaluative interpretation of others and self's assumption of itself as a positive anchoring point have clear ontological roots. The self's wholeness and ability to perceive the present is inseparable from the association of self with "good forces" (Klein, 1960), formulated and affirmed throughout its previous continuous biography. Collectives exist with a positive view of themselves and their behaviors (Hafer, Olson, & Peterson, 2008, p. 29), leading them to defend this conception when faced with alternative practices. Protecting, cherishing, and leaving self unquestioned becomes the essence of self's existence (Klein, 1935/1986). Failure to do so coincides with ontological insecurity, narrative rupture, and Giddens' "existential anxiety."

This does not suggest that all identities are in a perpetual narcissistic state: Narcissism is a defensive mechanism. Most identities, however, do form around self-boosting traits, with only few communities founded on trauma, such as post-Holocaust Jewish identity (LaCapra, 2001, p. 81). However, even then a self can make itself positive through narratives of (un)deservingness or victimization. A new encounter or an unexpected event can push self into a position of narcissism, with narcissism being a celebration of self in response to anxiety (Horney, 1951). The self is responding to the anxieties of self-examination, disruption of the continuous narrative, and the other's foreign practice. Narcissism is a "normal" defensive process that keeps the group together: it provides feelings of identity, validation, and superiority while compensating for inner divisions and self-alienation (Horney, 1951, pp. 21–23). Narcissism becomes *the only way for a self-flattening category to survive*, and as shown earlier, a collective identity would have already flattened some of its inner complexity to exist.

It is then unsurprising that faced with the uncertainty of new events, a self attempts to represent and remember them in a way that would leave positive self-conceptions unchallenged or affirmed. Importantly, this is not only a deliberate, politically advanced narrative, but an appealing illusion that a popular self wishes to believe. Examples of both can be found in historical interidentity encounters. Said (1979) argues that instead of describing the Easterner, Orientalism elaborated a vision of the West and worked out the identity of the Westerner. This is a position supported by Barkawi (2009) when he notes that Westerners defined and empowered themselves against an inferior, Orientalized other. Agius (2013) observes a recent construction of "progressive Danish identity under threat from unmodern others" in Danish media and public reactions to the cartoon crisis. But perhaps a most striking example of ontologically securitized and narcissistic political imagining can be found in the Italian perception of Ethiopians after a most unexpected major defeat at Adwa in 1896:

Since racism did not permit Westerners to acknowledge that black men could vanquish whites, Europeans suddenly discovered that Ethiopians were Caucasians darkened by exposure to the equatorial sun. Whereas previously Ethiopians shared sloth, ignorance, and degradation with their African brothers, they suddenly became energetic, enlightened, and progressive. . . . The Ethiopian army, hitherto composed of a cowardly rabble, was suddenly pictured as a magnificent force of heroic marksmen. (Marcus, 1994, pp. 100–101)

The revised narrative restored a continuous positive self which had been disrupted: A modern strong self could not lose to an inferior opponent and survive but could remain modern if losing to an equal. Such an adjustment, even if it presents Orwell's oblivious "we've always been at war with

Eastasia,” can in fact be successfully accepted as individuals and groups can repopulate their memories to conform to the narrative (see Pennington & Hastie, 1986) or revise meanings retroactively (Žižek, 1989, p. 59).

Self-investment and self-projection into the other’s image at the emotional level opens an interesting way of (re-)reading ontological security in IR. This article suggests that ontological security is not only about continuity of narrative elements as “staying the same.” It permits narrative *dynamism* as long as evaluative continuity in the relationship—a positive self—is preserved. Reacting to uncertainty, a self may choose some familiar frames over others, and its others would not look the same; but what is routinized and provides security is a position in their relationship which confirms the “good self.” It is a narcissistic consistency which is tied to identity survival and for which others can be manipulated depending on how they reflect back on the self’s narrative.

### *Listening to the Other: Recognition or Rejection*

Uncertainty can be both a threat and a chance: It can cause a crisis in the self’s ontological narrative or become imagined in ways that reaffirm it. There is no fixed determinacy in the new other being a negative opposition to a good self: Todorov’s conclusion does not always have to be so. Initial Western public sympathy with Arab Spring rebels and Maidan protesters is evidence of that. (Mis)recognizing new events and others in positive or negative language of “knowing” them is not as much caused by objective traits such as difference, but by the ways in which the other is seen to relate (or react) to one’s identity-founding narrative, or self-ideal.

In the macroweb of self’s relations with multiple others, the latter are as challenging as they are needed for identity construction. Not to dissolve or lose meaning, groups employ narratives of difference or similarity from others “to positively differentiate. . . , providing a valued source of group distinctiveness for social identities” (Spears & Leach, 2008, p. 95). The French sociologist Bourdieu similarly speaks of the purpose of distinction as “distinguishing [self] from all others” (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 49), making attributes of difference serve the *purpose* rather than present the *cause* of self-other separation. Bourdieu points to the importance of exclusivity and symbolic rarity for the enjoyment and pleasure of possessing the trait: a self wishes not only to be positive, but to inspire *imitation* while remaining *unreachable*.

Imitation would signal recognition—it is the Hegelian *desire for the other’s desire for oneself*: “the value that I am or that I represent’ [should] be the value desired by the other: I want him to ‘recognize’ my value as his value” (Kojève, 1969, p. 7). The absence of such desire or the other’s open defiance would mean rejection of the self’s continuous narrative. Identities seek external recognition and validation (see Bourdieu, 1986; Millar, 2006; Volkan, 1988) and watch the other for signs of imitation. Lacan suggests that if the self’s boundary collapses, the self is negated: “What happens to me has nothing to do with what I am” (Lacan, 2006, p. 93). This is a highly traumatic position of helplessness and being stripped of previously claimed achievement in the face of a rejecting other. What the self wishes to see is the other in this position, possibly formulated like this: “What happens to me [the other] has everything to do with what I am *not*. Everything about you [the self] is worthwhile.”

Relating the other’s visible behavior to the self-ideal can be seen to direct public imagining in cases of political (mis)recognition, for example in what came to be noticed by the West in Egypt after Muslim Brotherhood came to power. The 2012 draft of the new Egyptian Constitution received wide Western criticism. It was reported to provide “inadequate protections for minorities and personal freedoms” (Bradley, 2012), particularly for women. Quoting statistics of 83% of Egyptian women being sexually harassed during their lifetime, *The Guardian* (Kingsley, 2013) built an unsettling picture of women’s abuse in post-Arab-Spring Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood further rejected the draft UN declaration on ending violence against women as “intellectual and cultural invasion of Muslim countries” (Kingsley, 2013). The Western claim of distinction in gender equality, women’s rights’



progress, and personal freedoms was affirmed by pointing at the other's deficiencies. In doing so Western media ruled out doubt in the self's continuously positive narrative as it appeared at least temporarily pure of its own instances of rights abuse.

Only a year and a half earlier, in both Egypt and Libya, the Arab Spring seemed bound to imitate the Western democratic ideal. After the prohibiting image of an oppressive, violent, irrational, and obsolete Arab other under Gaddafi, the protesters seemed dearly familiar as they voiced opposition, used social networks, and spoke a familiar language of "freedom" and "democracy." (Mis)recognizing them as pro-Western followers went beyond mere placement in a familiar routine of democracy-oppression struggle to explain sudden violence. It constructed their seeming imitation of the Western self-concept and turned the other usable to reaffirm a virtuous self.

## Ontological Security and (Mis)Recognition of the Arab Spring

### *Method*

A focus on self-concepts in perception can help understand public interpretation of international crises in new ways. In this section, I illustrate how self-concepts are securitized in public accounts of the uncertain. I draw on some of the responses from 51 semistructured interviews with students of diverse fields conducted in Russia and the United Kingdom about their understanding of Arab Spring events. Participants were invited to speak in length about what they thought about the uprisings and then Gaddafi or Assad. When conducting the interviews, I was looking for elements of self-presence, or relation of the other to self, in the way participants spoke about the crisis. Interviewees discussed unraveling events: Russian interviews in September 2012 focused on Libya, while U.K. participants a year later mainly discussed Syria, although both groups saw these events as one Arab Spring. The choice of Russia and the United Kingdom, while providing a useful contrast of both political and media systems, allowed a rather unified sense of identity as participants inside each pool shared common cultural and national background and were primarily exposed to one pool of media. This choice was also guided by considerations for effective linguistic, cultural, and contextual interpretation. Although meant as an indication rather than a detailed account of the study, the interview material used in this section can illustrate the importance of self-concepts in judging the other and in constructing the certainty of a boundary.

My reading of interview material is influenced by Sara Ahmed's (2004) notion of "sticky words" that create associations and transmit emotion. For Ahmed, boundaries and identities are created at the moment of speaking and are the effect of "intensifications of feeling." Speakers are reacting to particular elements and histories: "what attaches us, what *connects us* to this other or that other is also what we find most touching; it is that which makes us feel" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 28). The self is central in the experience of comfort; however, discomfort which in reality exists *in* interaction, gets attributed ("stuck") to the other and is (mis)taken for the other's nature. This way self's own histories, self-concepts, and familiar frames (which make self "feel" in interaction) (un)consciously help (mis)recognize the foreigner, while uncomfortable traits are pressed onto the other.

### *British Interviews: Democracy and Imitation*

The Egyptian, Libyan, and Syrian uprisings were initially met with considerable sympathy in the British media. They were widely described as "people standing up and giving voice to hopes for more open and democratic societies" (for example, BBC, 2011). Later, when Islamists took hold in post-Gaddafi Libya and won Egyptian elections, BBC Head of news Helen Boaden admitted "over-excited" coverage of the Arab Spring (*The Telegraph*, 2014). But at the time, the rhetoric of "chance,"

“hope,” and “democracy” dominated public discussion in commentaries to online news as the uprisings unraveled (see BBC Live Reports, 2011a, 2011b). By the end of 2011, 67% of Britons (and only 31% of Russians) viewed the Arab Spring “mostly positive” (GlobeScan, 2011).

Interviews displayed similar language. The main descriptions included dictator, oppression, democracy, murder, hope, and protest. These emerged as the main frames which structured meaning and memory of events (Entman, 1993). These frames could be seen from the textual analysis of interview transcripts and were also present in over two-thirds of responses when, during the interview, each participant was asked to give five to seven keywords to describe the events within 10 seconds, eliminating time to rationalize for the interviewer’s perceived opinion. The uprisings were typically interpreted within a democracy/oppression frame, with protesters desiring Western qualities and Gaddafi and Assad hampering the popular wave of democratization. This interpretation explained unexpected violence in familiar ways, while the continuous Western self-narrative of modernity and democracy was reinforced by the now recognizable encounter. Consider these responses (all come from different participants):

“I can’t imagine there being a leader like him [Assad] in the U.K. for example, because... [laughs] I think because we think we are *above*... we never stoop *as low* as to violence or to enforcing... [pause] effectively *enslaving* one’s people.”

“They [protesters] were seeing everything in other parts of the world... And the *dictators*, obviously, didn’t want any part of that... It kind of surprises me... why not just say: ‘Let’s do a vote’? Why don’t they do the same thing *we do*? You know, they think that we dislike them because they are Middle Eastern, or whatever—you know, it’s because they do things like this. It’s because they act so *barbaric* in their transition of powers, I mean there should be a *democratic* transition of powers.”

The self’s repulsion with an authoritarian system in the second response could easily be explained as caused by difference (“they are unlike us”). However, I approach it as a narrative of self-defense as the self is visibly rejected in the other’s practices. It is clear that from the interviewee’s perspective, the other (authoritarian system) does not desire the self, but it is the self who possesses the ideal. To cope with rejection that is fraught with self-doubt, the other becomes symbolically prohibited as “barbaric.”

Although some interviewees noted the persistence of problems such as violence after the uprisings succeeded in Egypt and Libya, these tended to be dismissed as a “transitional period” with little doubt in the democratizing purpose of the unrest. I suspect that democratization (imitation of the self) was anticipated as well as self-pleasing: Several years earlier, 60% of Britons believed that democracy could work well in Muslim countries (Pew Center, 2006).

It is worth noting how in many interviews, the individual “I” turned into a plural “we,” most often then clarified as “the West.” Interviewees were discussing what they saw as rather flattened collective identities of protesters/rebels and the regimes from a no less collective position of a homogeneously democratic identity. Opposing the “Rest” empowered a “West” with blurred inner diversity:

“I think *we are* [pause] that we have a *duty* to protect the people. We have the resources and the political sway to make changes that other nations do not necessarily have. So I think that we are *obligated* to help.”

This is a position of agency and self-validation that has situated events bearing uncertainty into a familiar routine of a West-Rest relationship. However, it was not only the general attitude to the uprisings that showed signs of (mis)recognition. Ontological securitization and affirmation of a positive

Western/British identity were equally present in smaller, more nuanced elements of uncertainty. The self was constantly informing the other as the known, established coordinate:

“If it was the Assad regime [using chemical weapons], it wouldn’t give us an idea about whether or not Assad knew. It could well be that some military commander had access to chemical weapons and thought it’s a good idea. I don’t imagine like there’s a *normal* chain of command there as you’d have in like *West*.”

Negative attitudes to protesters/rebels were expressed only in three interviews (out of 23) in the U.K. session when participants suspected the Syrian opposition of terrorist links or suggested that rebels could have used chemical weapons to urge the West into action. However, evaluations were no less certain: As an interviewee observed, “some of the rebels were Al-Qaeda, weren’t they?” This view would become more prominent later as subsequent polls would suggest a negative turn in British perception of the Arab Spring (YouGov, 2014). This alternative frame, however, was no less familiar and “recognizing”: Democracy/oppression frames were replaced with West/terrorism confrontation, altering the nature of the object behind the boundary but keeping the boundary certain.

#### *Russian Interviews: Stability and Rejection*

A very different portrait of the Arab Spring emerged in interviews with Russian participants, although self’s presence in the other and ontological securitization could also be seen. The most common descriptions included (in)stability, West, and American influence. Interviewees conveyed the impression that stability was what “really mattered.” Indeed, a later poll revealed that 71% of Russians prioritized stability over democratic principles (WCIOM, 2014). Stability as social order and lack of political chaos has also been the major self-defining element of the Russian national narrative in the 2000s.

The Libyan uprising stood out in both media and interviews as the major Arab Spring event, particularly following NATO airstrikes which married the protester to the West. Russia had previously abstained in the vote for UNSC Resolution 1973 which allowed “all necessary measures to protect civilians. . .while excluding a foreign occupation source” (UNSC, 2011), but soon accused the West of exceeding the mandate. Following these events, interviewees generally described the Arab Spring as a negative development that destabilized countries:

“It is a region which *destabilized*. It used to be *stable*, but with a big potential for instability, which has now *turned wild*” ;

“And now there is destruction everywhere, people dying every day. . .this is just devastating. So, a lot of other innocent people in other beautiful places can die, because *someone* [accusing gesture at an imagined protesting ‘other’] is discontent with their authorities.”

Again, I believe this narrative contains more than just evaluation based on difference. The protesting other was seen as rejecting the self’s ideal of stability, thus questioning the value of its self-concept. Like the earlier example of prohibiting the rejecting other as “barbaric,” the protester was reimagined and stripped of agency:

“They [Libyan rebels] probably simply thought that revolution would bring better life. They *heard* democracy is good. They could *be told* the same about feudalism, or

whatever... they *were told* Gaddafi was a very bad person, and wanted to oust him. And in Syria it's the same";  
 "People in the Arab countries are much more easily motivated, even short-tempered [*than us*]."

Losing power of an agent, the protester was turned into an object of manipulation in the hands of a more significant, Western other. This displaced discomfort: "They" reject "us" not because they reject stability, but because they are made to do so by a stronger other. For the interviewees, there seemed to be one undivided Libyan-Syrian and American-European other. Contrast with the latter has long been a recognizable, routine position in the self's biography:

"Conditions in Libya were *stable* and Gaddafi did many good things... Something is wrong about it, it was a conflict *created from outside*. I think *the USA* made a wrong decision here..."

"I would say that this [uprising] is a trivial fight on the part of *the US* to enlarge its influence. The U.S. is using various means not to let us gain what Russia used to have and, roughly speaking, make those it doesn't like its *colonies*."

Similar to British participants, interviewees populated uncertainty in nuance with familiar knowledge:

"What impressed me [about Gaddafi] was that he always stayed a Colonel. As he was Colonel during the war, he stayed Colonel until his death. Not Marshal, not Generalissimo like *Brezhnev*";

"The conflict ended when all big cities were taken by the rebels, and I think it was in October when Gaddafi was captured and officially *shot under a tree* or something."

The first quote clearly judges Gaddafi against Soviet leaders' tradition of self-promotion to highest military ranks. "Shot under a tree" in the second is a common way of describing unfair deaths with no trial in the Russian civil war of 1917–22 that conveys sympathy to the victim. These are, in Ahmed's words, "effects of histories that have stayed open" (Ahmed, 2004, p. 59) and remained unmourned, repressed, or undiscussed. They point at (mis)recognition as more than mere consistency of familiar frames: Both responses contain inner dynamics of the speaker's identity. The subject purifies by attaching "open histories" to external objects: it denounces and gets rid of past problematic behaviors by seeing the rebel/Western other "shoot" Gaddafi. The "modern" self is repaired as it has made progress and defines itself against the past.

Gaddafi did not always appear positive as there was variation in Russian interviews too. However, the tendency to self-populate uncertainty could still be observed in the few dissenting voices:

"It [Gaddafi's rule] reminds me of the situation with *Russian corrupt authorities*... the whole *Putin-and-stability thing* which I also do not quite believe. If everything was stable in Libya... why was there a queue to see Gaddafi's dead body?"

For this interviewee, the Libyan uprising is about corruption, and this vision is inherently linked to the interviewee's domestic political stances (and is therefore about the self). The quote is unusual for it seems to challenge self as well as the other. However, experiencing identity as subjective imagining, members may have different notions of the same self. The interviewee defined herself as "young opposition supporter" and was signaling and securitizing a different position (while the stability narrative is associated with Putin's politics).

We can draw two conclusions from these fragments. First, however (in)deliberate the media narrative, interviewees focused their reading on elements in the other that touched, imitated, or rejected their histories, and these histories filled in any uncertain gaps in the other. This point can challenge the tendency to explain public perception of politics as news effect (Ladd & Lenz, 2009) or cognitive simplification (Berinsky & Kinder, 2006) as particular narratives may be accepted, rejected, or given new meaning depending on their interference with the self-concept and its security. Second, unexpected events were generally depicted in familiar language, and this language avoided questioning today's self, unless to show self's progress. The positive and stable self-concept existed *through* (mis)recognitions, like the "normal" "West" in British responses or the stable self temporarily pure of its inner problems in the eyes of Russian participants.

### Conclusion

IR scholarship tends to operate with a rather unquestioned assumption that perception describes the object. Understanding political representations, conflict, and responses to events becomes almost exclusively focused on falsity or trueness of images held by the sides, with an expectation that a knowingly false image—an incorrect description—would not hold and can be avoided. This approach informed the problematic "hearts and minds" strategy in setting up pro-Western media in Iraq and Afghanistan (U.S. Congress, 2004) and underlies explanations of decision-making "errors" as being misinformed. At the societal level, inaccurate representations of the other are often treated as stereotype and simplification (Berinsky & Mendelberg, 2005) or prejudice (Bar-Tal & Teichman, 2005). Political imagining behind hostility, conflict, or social tension is all too often problematized at the level of accuracy.

Reading societal reactions to uncertainty through ontological security reveals a very different picture. This article has argued that in representations a self does not seek accuracy: On the contrary, self-love "lives in a world of phantasy, which contact with reality can only contaminate" (Figlio, 2012, p. 11). Instead of accuracy, a self becomes motivated by anxiety avoidance: It understands uncertainty as self-doubt. Ontological security shows how one is anxious to preserve a stable identity and transform uncertainty and discontinuity into a recognized routine, even if the latter contradicts rationality or escalates the crisis.

However, ontological security in IR should allow for identity security to be about society as well as about the state. The same inner motivations lead societies to (mis)recognize the unexpected as anticipated and familiar, to self-populate the other, spilling into supportive or devaluing narratives about major international crises. (Mis)recognition enables agents to (re)act as the event becomes explainable, recognizable, and more controllable. Since it only employs self-memories, it binds self and other together so that an identity can only survive by avoiding questioning self-worth. There may be more reasons for why public imagining of international crises and Arab Spring in particular takes certain forms. However, an ontologically secure narrative about the other that fulfils self's identity needs may be particularly powerful.

Finally, I have argued that ontological security for the societal self-concepts means, above all else, preserving a positive version of the self: Here is where self's most valued continuity lies. The need for positive as well as continuous self-concepts in a crisis may be applied most widely. An interdisciplinary reading of ontological security can help reevaluate nationalist narratives and radicalization that glorify self-worth, postconflict social hostility, demonization as a defence of a rejected self, and representations of migrants and broadly viewed international encounters. A "drawing self" is constantly present behind its portraits of others, and understanding its motivation, security, and interest in political imagining should be an inherent part of a comprehensive analysis of the relationship.



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