Distinguishing Ontological Security from Security of Identity: The Case of Russian "Relokanty" in Tbilisi in the Aftermath of the 2022 Russian Invasion of Ukraine

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Abstract. This article seeks to contribute to the burgeoning debate on ontological security (OS) in International Relations (IR), and sides with that part of OS scholarship that emphasizes the distinction between "security of identity" and "security of the self". We empirically show the need for separating these two concepts by discussing the case of Russian *relokanty* in Tbilisi in aftermath of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Also due to the history of conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi, Russian *relokanty* in Georgia have found themselves in a strongly pro-Ukraine environment, and have thus faced various shaming attempts by some locals. This, combined with the existential crisis they already felt due to their country's invasion of Ukraine, has ignited personal reflections regarding their sense of self and their identity. We thus conducted fifty semi-structured interviews with Russian *relokanty* in Georgia, and methodologically traced ontological insecurity as manifested by its "symptoms" of anxiety and feeling of limbo. We highlight the difference between the security of identity and security of the self by: (1) discussing how a majority of respondents displayed symptoms of ontological insecurity, but only a minority of them also experienced an identity crisis; (2) and showing how those respondents who did shift identity as a result of an identity crisis, ultimately failed to re-establish security of the self.

Keywords: Russia, Georgia, Ontological Security, Identity, Anxiety.

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Introduction

The growing body of research on ontological security (OS), meant as the ability of a social actor "to uphold a stable view of its environment and thereby 'go on' with everyday life" (Browning and Joenniemi 2017, 31), has yielded valuable insights into the actions and behaviours of individuals, groups, and states within the realm of international relations (IR). However, despite the diverse and rich scholarship, there persists a prevalent ambiguity regarding the significance and interrelation of the fundamental principles of "self" and "identity", especially due to the prevalently "state-centric" approach employed by a large part of IR scholars. We contend that concentrating on this differentiation will not only help address criticisms of OS scholarship, but also provide a better understanding of how individuals seek to mitigate their existential anxiety in traumatising and conflicting situations.

Therefore, we contribute to the existing literature that emphasises the significance of maintaining analytical distinctions between these two concepts and, particularly, characterises identity security as an aspect of OS, by analysing the case study of the Russian *relokanty*[1] community in Georgia after the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine. Opting for Georgia as their destination was a controversial choice for Russians, considering the history of conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi over South Ossetia and Abkhazia, as well as the Kremlin's military support to the two separatist republics since the early 90s.

Indeed, many Georgians harbour resentment towards Russia, and it is not surprising that Russian *relokanty* in Georgia found themselves immersed in a politically and emotionally pro-Ukraine environment. In this context, they faced numerous instances of Russophobia, expressed through hateful graffiti, verbal harassment, and ethnic discrimination.

These shaming attempts by Georgians, combined with the fact that many Russian *relokanty* were already dealing with deep shame over their country's invasion of Ukraine, became a catalyst for personal reflections and debates within the Russian community in Tbilisi regarding their sense of self and their identity.

By employing discourse analysis (DA) of fifty semi-structured interviews with "first-wave" Russians living in Georgia, mostly in Tbilisi, we highlight the difference between OS, meant as security of the self in the body, and identity security. We also analyse the connection between OS and identity shift as a (failed) mechanism to re-establish OS. Finally, we

[1] The Russian word "relokanty" was adopted by Russian émigré community itself to identify their status.

aim to contribute to the methodology used for OS studies by empirically pinning down potential symptoms of ontological insecurity in individuals.

Following this introduction, the rest of this paper is organised as follows. The first section introduces the concept of OS and discusses the challenges in the existing literature, particularly the lack of a distinct differentiation between self and identity. The second section provides the reader with a brief historical context of Russian-Georgian relations in the aftermath of the collapse of the Soviet Union. The third section discusses the data and methodology employed for this research. Finally, the fourth section presents the empirical results.

Ontological security vs identity security

In recent years, the concept of OS has gained prominence in academic discussions on security, and some suggest that it has become a distinct area of focus in critical security studies (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2021). Often referred to as "security of the self", OS blends insights from existentialist philosophy, psychoanalysis, and critical security studies, operating at the intersection of identity and emotions within the framework of securitisation theory (Krickel-Choi 2024). It can be defined as the desire of an individual or any social actor to have a "sense of order and continuity in events" (Giddens 1991, 243).

This concept, initially developed by Scottish psychiatrist Ronald D. Laing in the 1950s, was subsequently introduced to the field of social sciences in the 1990s by English sociologist Anthony Giddens. Laing and Giddens are united by a fundamental belief in the ontology of the individual self, recognising its inherent entanglement with social connections (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2021). They both contend that, in their quest for OS, it is crucial for individuals to uphold a coherent self-narrative, even though it can prove to be delicate and susceptible to occasional disruption. Consequently, Laing and Giddens emphasise the pivotal role of relegating profound anxieties about existence to the background, in favour of actively engaging in daily routines and nurturing a fundamental sense of trust. Thus, most of the literature assumes that social actors prioritise stability and avoid change due to the anxiety it generates and, as a result, they tend to maintain established behaviours, routines, and identities to preserve a stable self-concept (Browning and Joenniemi 2017).

Given the increasing relevance of OS in conceptualising responses to the challenges of an uncertain world order marked by trauma, ethnic conflict, internal threats, migration, and discourses of terror (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018), scholarship on OS has significantly advanced our under-

standing of how individuals (Kinnvall 2004; Krolikowski 2008; Browning 2018), groups (Kay 2012, Rumelili and Çelik 2017, Della Sala 2020), and nations (Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Subotić 2016; Zarakol 2017; Ejdus 2020) engage within the domain of international politics. Especially because of OS's capacity to provide alternative insights into the underlying factors that contribute to security dilemmas in world politics (Browning and Joenniemi 2017), the literature has also managed to cover a diverse range of theoretical and empirical issues, such as conflicts (Mitzen 2006; Rumelili 2014; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018), foreign policy (Subotić 2016; Mitzen and Larson 2017; Narozhna 2018), migration (Huysmans 2000; Mitzen 2018; Gellwitzki and Houde 2023), nationalism (Kinnvall 2004; Krolikowski 2008; Lupovici 2012), and many more.

However, the field of OS scholarship has not been without its fair share of criticisms (Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi 2020). One of the primary concerns is that, while Giddens aimed to extend Laing's concepts and ideas from the individual to the broader context of modern societies, a significant branch of OS scholarship has, in a similar manner, adapted the Laing-Giddens paradigm by enlarging the notion of OS from the individual level to that of the state (Peoples and Vaughan-Williams 2021). This approach was justified by these authors on the premise that most models of IR are typically rooted in individual human needs and then extended to encompass the collective entity (Steele 2008).

The state-centric approach in the literature has in turn given rise to another significant concern. Within discussions about IR, the concept of OS has frequently been conflated with that of identity, resulting in an oversimplified interpretation that reduces the pursuit of OS to a mere preoccupation with preserving one's identity (Browning and Joenniemi 2017; Krickel-Choi 2024). Innes and Steele (2014) assert that traumas or substantial ontological crises arise when external events challenge the state's internal or external identity, disrupting the orderly incorporation of these events within the OS narrative. Also in their empirical analyses, well established IR accounts of OS have often blurred the distinction between the self and identity (Browning and Joenniemi 2017).

As an example, in her 2006 work titled "Globalization and Religious Nationalism in India: The Search for Ontological Security," Catarina Kinnvall examines the identities of Sikhs and Hindus in the context of globalising trends. Kinnvall's empirical approach, based on interviews conducted between 1996 and 2002, utilises the OS framework to demonstrate how Sikh and Hindu nationalist individuals in India have endeavoured to offer a sense of OS in response to globalisation by presenting ideas related to a sense of belonging or home. Thus, as illustrated in Gustafsson's work (2014), which examines the role of collective memory and historical repre-

sentations in shaping Sino-Japanese relations, OS is at times narrowly perceived as nothing more than "identity security."

Nevertheless, according to Flockhart (2016), OS can serve as a tool to emphasise the analytical distinction between "self" and "identity." She suggests that being ontologically secure does not necessarily imply possessing a stable identity. Although it is true that these two concepts develop through social interaction (Millward and Kelly 2003), "it is only the self that needs to maintain continuity while identity takes on a changeable quality" (Krickel-Choi 2022, 9). These claims also respond to a primary criticism of OS scholarship, as pointed out by Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi (2020). This criticism centres on the excessive emphasis placed on the relationship between OS and continuity, again with a predominant focus on how states and other entities strive to safeguard their identity (Browning and Joenniemi 2017).

The concept of "anxiety", particularly in the context of traumatic or conflict-ridden situations, comes to our aid in helping us better understand the difference between "self" and "identity", as well as their interaction throughout those moments characterised by moments of radical change. Despite its prominence in contemporary society, anxiety remains somewhat overlooked within the realm of IR (Rumelili 2022). In line with ideas found in existentialist and psychoanalytic theories, OS scholarship refers to anxiety as an inner sense of discomfort triggered by uncertainty, potential outcomes, and alterations (Rumelili 2022). The overarching anxiety experienced by all social actors serves as a driving force, compelling them to protect and strengthen their sense of self (Steele 2008). At the same time, Krickel-Choi (2022) argues that threats to an actor's identity may trigger varying degrees of anxiety, depending on whether the threat is related to their core self or a less fundamental aspect. Anxiety encompasses a wide array of emotions, including guilt, shame, and inferiority. Steele (2008), for example, explores how individuals engage in self-reflection and often experience shame when their behaviour deviates from their self-image.

Importantly for our case study, individuals' sense of shame and anxiety can influence their OS, regardless of their sense of identity. Of course, identity-related issues can also instigate ontological insecurity, given that one's identity is a substantial component of their self. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that an eventual transformation of an individual's identity, while significant, may not necessarily ameliorate their sense of ontological security. For example, even before encountering a traumatic situation or engaging in a conflict-ridden interaction that challenges their identity, the individual may have already diminished the significance of identity in shaping their sense of self. Hence, solely re-elaborating one's identity may be insufficient to re-establish OS.

To substantiate these assertions, we turn our attention to the experiences of Russian *relokanty* in Georgia. Triggered by the shock and collective shame they felt for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, some Russian *relokanty* started feeling a deep sense of anxiety[2], a feeling often associated with ontological insecurity in the OS scholarship. This is particularly true for Russian *relokanty* in Tbilisi, who additionally faced shaming attempts by Georgians, including Russophobic graffiti and verbal harassment. For the same reasons, some of them also underwent a transformative process of identity[3]. But then to what extent did this process of identity transformation help, at least after the initial existential crisis, reestablish their secure sense of self? In practical terms, after the shock of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the shaming attempts by Georgians put into question both their identity and their sense of self, did new identities help Russian *relokanty* in Tbilisi ameliorate their sense of ontological security?

This examination enriches the empirics of the existing literature that distinguishes between "security of the self" and "security of identity". It also contributes to the methodology of the scholarship on OS by tracing ontological insecurity through its possible discursive symptoms. Finally, by shifting the perspective from the state level to the individual or community level, it addresses some of the noteworthy gaps in the literature on OS and helps better understand the relation between security of the self and changes in identity.

Situating the case

To fully comprehend the case, we need to briefly contextualise Russian-Georgian relations and tensions with reference to their near past. Georgia obtained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, but this period was also characterised by separatist demands by the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and eventually conflict. Indeed, the 1991 Georgian-Ossetian clashes resulted in around 1'000 casualties and South Ossetia's de facto independence (Zürcher 2007). And Georgia's attempt to restore its sovereignty in Abkhazia by military means in 1992 resulted in a two-year war, which lead to up to 20'000 casualties, 200'000-250'000 Georgian internally displaced people (IDPs), and Abkhazian de facto independence (Shesterinina 2021).

[2] Miriam Jordan. 2022. "I Don't Want to Be Called Russian Anymore': Anxious Soviet Diaspora Rethinks Identity". New York Times, 4 March 2022. Soviet Bloc Immigrants Rethink Their Identity Amid Russia-Ukraine War – The New York Times (nytimes.com). https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/04/us/immigrant-identity-russia-ukraine.html. Accessed on November 3, 2023.
[3] Ibid.

While these two conflicts saw Ossetians and Abkhazians as the main separatist actors, Russia aided both ethnic groups (Suleimanov 2013; Kaufman 2001). However, Georgians blamed mostly Russia, arguing that it was Moscow that manoeuvred Ossetians and Abkhazians into separatism through divide-and-conquer tactics (Jones 2013; Chervonnaya 1994). Indeed, many Georgians today talk about "Russia's occupation of Georgia"[4].

During the Georgian presidency of Mikhail Saakashvili, tensions between Georgia and Russia began increasing again. On the 7th of August 2008, the Georgian army began military operations against South Ossetia. However, Russia came to South Ossetia's defence, and then invaded Georgia proper. A ceasefire was finally negotiated on the 12th of August 2008. The war resulted in around 850 casualties and 35,000 permanently displaced people, mostly Georgians (Souleimanov 2013; Gerrits & Bader 2016; Gurashi & Gabelia 2017).

Importantly for our case, Georgian-Russian tensions spiked again in June 2019, when member of the Russian Duma, Sergey Gavrilov, made a speech in Russian from the parliamentary speaker's chair of Georgia, to address an international gathering of the Inter-Parliamentary Assembly on Orthodoxy. Many Georgians were angry at the fact that the Russian language had been used from the parliamentary speaker's chair. Thousands of Georgians began vehemently protesting and chanting anti-Russia slogans in the streets of Tbilisi[5]. Some Russians we interviewed mention this incident as the first real spike in Russophobia.

The situation worsened again in February 2022, when Russia invaded Ukraine. Most Georgians enthusiastically showed support to Ukraine, as the war reminded them of Russia's "occupation of Georgia". Walls in Tbilisi began being drawn with anti-Putin, anti-Russia, and anti-Russian graffities. Moreover, the Ukrainian flag was hung or painted all around the capital. Inevitably, Russophobia also spiked.

Counterintuitively, thousands of mostly anti-war liberal Russians fled Russia to Georgia[6], where they did not find a welcoming environment[7]. In

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[4] Figari Barberis, Cesare. 2022. "'We Have the Enemy at Home': How Georgian Leadership Avoided Russian-Georgian Clashes (So Far)". *Civil War Paths*, October 26, 2022. https://www.civilwarpaths.org/georgia-russia/. Accessed on April 09, 2024.

[5] Giorgi Lomsadze. 2019. "Violent Crackdown Throws Georgian Ruling Party's Survival into Question". *Eurasianet,* June 19, 2019. https://eurasianet.org/violent-crackdown-throws-georgian-ruling-partys-survival-into-question. Accessed on August 13, 2023.

[6] Providing an exact estimate of how many Russians fled to Georgia and stayed there is difficult, but possibly more than 100'000 Russians now live in the country: Kakachia, Kornely & Kandelak, Salome. 2022 "The Russian Migration to Georgia: Threats or Opportunities?". *PONARS Eurasaria,* December 19, 2022. Kornely Kakachia – PONARS Eurasia. Accessed on August 13, 2023.

[7] Gabritchidze, Nini. 2022. "Georgia Struggles to Cope with Another Wave of Russian Emigres." *Eurasianet*, October 4, 2022. https://eurasianet.org/georgia-struggles-to-cope-with-another-wave-of-russian-emigres. Accessed on August 13, 2023.

addition to the Russophobic graffiti, we were told by interviewees of verbal and/or gendered harassment, banking discrimination, being fired from the workplace, and being refused to be served in commercial activities because of their nationality. In certain cases, banks or even co-working places asked Russians to sign a document where they acknowledged Russia's occupation of Georgia, and professed themselves against the war and against Russian president Vladimir Putin. Overall, the emotional environment and instances of harassment were conducive to stimulating shame in the Russian *relokanty*, who were pushed to carry the collective guilt of Russia's invasion of Ukraine and occupation of Georgia.

Whether or not the cause was the shame-inducing atmosphere of Tbilisi, some Russian *relokanty* indeed started feeling shame for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. As described by our interviewees, some of them attached shame to their identity as Russians, and began questioning and/or going through a process of identity transformation. They also expressed feelings of anxiety and a sense of limbo, which are typical of ontological insecurity.

Hence, the presence of both identity insecurity and symptoms of ontological insecurity makes the case interesting to analyse within the framework of the OS studies that distinguish between security of identity and security of the self. It allows us to analyse how the two concepts interrelate, but are empirically distinguishable. Moreover, it also contributes to the theory of OS by discussing if and how identity transformations can reestablish a secure self. Therefore, we analyse whether the Russian respondents who showed symptoms of ontological insecurity, were indeed able to re-establish a secure self through an identity transformation.

Data and methodology

For this research, we conducted 50 semi-structured in-depth interviews with Russians who either relocated to Georgia after Russia's invasion of Ukraine but before the general mobilisation of September 2022 – so-called "first wave Russians" – or where already in Georgia when the war started. Therefore, we excluded so-called "second-wave Russians", namely those who moved to Georgia from Russia after the September 2022 mobilisation. This choice was made because the latter group may include people who left Russia simply to avoid being drafted, not for moral-existential considerations. Hence, we found first wave Russians, who arguably moved for more moral-existential reasons, to be more fit for this type of research on OS. Indeed, even Russian *relokanty* in Tbilisi started distinguishing the two groups, with first wave Russians considering themselves more morally-principled and self-reflective than second wave Russians.

Most of our respondents were relatively young, falling in the 23-37 age category, and relatively well-educated. In terms of gender, the sample was quite balanced as it includes 23 men and 27 women. As mentioned earlier, most of the respondents were living in Tbilisi, where the majority of anti-Russia/Russians graffiti are located and where the pro-Ukraine/anti-Russia emotional environment is strongest. Hence, the capital was the best suited location where to conduct most of our research on OS, as Russians arguably would have felt more anxiety and shame.

For sampling, we adopted the snowball sampling technique, as stratified random sampling was simply not possible given the context. We used a number of different channels for finding people, including social media like Instagram and LinkedIn, writing on Russian Telegram groups, word of mouth, and personal contacts of acquaintances of ours.

The interviews were conducted either in Russian or in English, depending also on the preference of the interviewee. Most interviews were done in-person in Tbilisi café, but a few were also done online. Most people were interviewed alone, but three married couples preferred being interviewed together.

Fieldwork was conducted in three separate times, with each time having its own peculiar emotional environment, which partly influenced the responses we received. In particular, 12 interviews were conducted between May and early June 2022, 28 interviews between late August and early September 2022, and 10 interviews in March 2023. The sample is by no means representative of the population of Russian *relokanty* in Tbilisi, but aims at analysing a phenomenon taking place within a sample of that population.

Empirically, we looked at potential "symptoms" of ontological insecurity. In particular, we tried to retrospectively think of how OS could manifest itself symptomatically in the interviews we conducted. Specifically, we considered potential symptoms of ontological insecurity:

1) **Anxiety**. As discussed in the theory, anxiety has been associated with ontological insecurity by scholars. In our interviews, this feeling was often expressed explicitly. But it could also be conveyed implicitly through expressions like "a feeling of constant tremble" or through the description of psychologically tense moments like "I found myself in the middle of Freedom Square crying. Why can't I have a normal life, what do they know about my suffering?".
2) **Feeling of limbo**. This feeling has been addressed less by OS scholars, but it a useful concept. Indeed, it conveys the idea of an interruption of continuity, and the absence of a new direction or reference point in the future to start a new process of continuity creation. In our interviews, this feeling was expressed explicitly relatively less often than anxiety.

But it could also be conveyed implicitly through expressions like "I am not welcome in Russia, but I am not welcome here either" or through the description of psychologically tense moments like "How am I supposed to explain to my children that they are outcasts?!".

These symptoms are not mutually exclusive, and they may very well correlate with each other. Importantly, they do not necessarily pertain to identity, which is at the basis of our distinction between security of the self and security of identity. While questioning oneself can lead to re-imagining one's identity, the two phenomena are kept analytically distinct. Moreover, we did not include "shame" as a symptom, as we view this emotion more as a "mechanism" for crises of identity and of the self, not per se as a symptom of the latter. Finally, we discussed them as "potential" symptoms as, for example, anxiety can be caused or related to a variety of personal issues, some of which may have nothing to do with Russia's invasion of Ukraine and/or the shaming attempt by Georgians. Hence, it is important to situate these symptoms within the stories being told by the respondents.

Far from being all-encompassing and conclusive, we believe that this effort at empirically pinning down symptoms of ontological insecurity can help better structure further research on the topic, and eventually further develop the theoretical scholarship on OS.

Empirics

We start the analysis by empirically tracing in our interviews the symptoms of ontological insecurity we had selected – anxiety and feeling of limbo. This is done, first, to demonstrate that indeed some respondents arguably did suffer from ontological insecurity, and, second, to show how this symptom-tracing process can be conducted in practice. In light of this, we then discuss if identity transformation of the respondents was at least partly capable of restoring their security of the self.

Feeling of limbo

First of all, we noticed the feeling of limbo symptom in respondents who mentioned finding themselves in a state of shock and disbelief when, on the morning of the 24th of February, they heard the news that war had started. While a few interviewees said they had expected Russia to invade Ukraine, the majority were caught off guard, and had difficulties coming to terms with their new reality. The general mood can be synthesised in

the words of one respondent "Lucky those who are still sleeping, as they still have not woken up to this horrific news". The event of war indeed generated a feeling of limbo for many respondents. It was an interruption of the normalcy and sense of continuity of their lives, and opened up many unknown future scenarios for them. It placed them in an imagined limbo space where continuity with the past had been cut, but the future was too murky and difficult to imagine. The sense of shock and interruption with the past can, for example, be clearly noticed in the words of one respondent who mentioned how "The day the war started I was in utter disbelief. I felt powerless, I felt that the Russia I had known was gone, finished".

We noticed the feeling of limbo symptom also when respondents discussed the uncertainty of mobility, and hence of their future. In particular, the impossibility of moving to Europe after the European Union (EU) countries strongly restricted travel possibilities to Russians solely based on their citizenship. This caused stress to many respondents as they had always seen the EU as the liberal and democratic alternative to illiberal and autocratic Russia. However, that Europe they craved for now discriminated them based on their citizenship. This was also an interruption of their sense of reality, as their idealised democratic and liberal EU had turned its back on them. It also placed them in a situation of great uncertainty. For example, one respondent mentioned how "The recent announcements by European leaders on freedom of movement had a psychological impact on me. I was already continuously thinking about how people hate me, and now these European leaders throw alcohol on the fire". Indeed, many respondents mentioned how they felt unwelcome in Russia, but were unable to claim a new home, as they are unwelcome also in Georgia and in Europe. They are "outcasts". In the words of one mother, "These visa restrictions outrage me. I cannot go back to Russia, but I cannot go to Europe either. How will explain to my kids that they are 'outcasts'? That Europeans are discriminating against them just because of their citizenship?".

Moreover, uncertainty and the feeling to limbo was also due to the policies of the Georgian authorities, who very rarely grant residence permits to Russians. A visa is not required for Russians to enter the country, but they can stay only up to one continuous year. After that, if they want to stay another year, they need to exit and re-enter the country. However, Georgian authorities can arbitrarily reject their re-entry into the country, even if they have all their belongings in Georgia and are paying rent there. They have no guarantees that they come back to Georgia. They need to exit having in mind an emergency plan B, in case they are refused re-entry. The apparent arbitrariness of this (rare) event produced anxiety, but also a feeling of limbo. For example, one respondent mentioned "Ah, and

the biggest discrimination is this: the (Georgian) migration regulation. We are always considered 'tourists' here! We can only stay 1 year. They don't allow us to register as residents because we are a threat to their national security. This is a huge problem for us (Russians)".

In essence, we noticed how many respondents felt they were "stuck" or "frozen". They had lost their old home (Russia), but were uncapable of finding a new place to call home (Georgia or the EU). They were unwelcome in Russia, but also unwelcome in Georgia and the EU. We can analytically understand these states of being as "feeling of limbo", a symptom of ontological insecurity.

Anxiety

First of all, we noticed the anxiety symptom when respondents, who were already in Tbilisi or arrived very early, discussed the difficulties and fear they felt the first three-four weeks after the start of the war. Indeed, there is consensus among our interviewees that the first three-four weeks in Georgia were by far the worst in terms of Russophobia and the emotional impact of it. The first Russophobic graffities were drawn, open discrimination against Russians commenced, and Georgians on social media began writing hateful content against Russians. Not surprisingly, most respondents those days preferred staying at home and never speaking Russian, as even speaking one's native language caused anxiety. In the words of one respondent: "Many Georgians, hearing me speak in Russian on the streets, came to me and asked me where I was from, and if I knew that Russia occupies Abkhazia and South Ossetia... So, especially at the beginning of the war, I started going to Russian-speaking cafés. Even now, I want to be able to speak my language in peace". Another respondent mentioned how "Georgians did not want to speak Russian with me, which is OK. But I was also afraid of speaking Russian! My uncle told me to stay at home and not exit it for two weeks, and so I did". So overall, we noticed the anxiety symptom, linked to speaking Russian, in many respondents in the first three-four weeks in Georgia.

Moreover, we noticed the anxiety symptom also in some respondents when discussing the Russophobic graffiti in the streets of Tbilisi. These graffiti ranged from the more general "Fuck Putin" or "Fuck Russia" to the more personal "No Russian is welcome, good or bad", "Fuck Russians" and "Ruzzkis go home!".[8] About half of our respondents mentioned being

[8] The "z" being used on purpose as a reminder of the "Z" used by the Russian army during its invasion of Ukraine.

emotionally affected by these messages, especially the more personal ones, as they made them feel unwelcome, and at times even anxious. For example, one respondent expressed mentioned: “The fact is that you always see them. You go to work, go back home, and you see them. I was afraid”. Another respondent similarly said: “I understand them (Georgians), but in the end it’s a constant reminder that you are not welcome, that they don’t like you, and you will never be allowed to feel safe. We are not welcome in Russia because we are considered traitors there, but these graffiti remind us that we are not welcome here either”. Finally, one respondent also had an emotional outburst due to these hateful graffiti. In her words, “After some time, the negativity of these graffiti started accumulating... So three weeks ago, I found myself crying loudly in the middle of Liberty Square. Why can I not a normal life? What do they know about my suffering?”.

So overall, we noticed both feeling of limbo and anxiety symptoms in a majority of our respondents, which we consider to be potential symptoms of ontological insecurity. Of course, the two symptoms are not mutually exclusive, and often co-occurred. What is analytically relevant to notice here is that these symptoms all pertained to the shock of war and the difficulties faced during relocation, which generated an interruption of their normalcy and sense of continuity of their lives. They do not, however, necessarily relate to an identity crisis. Clearly, identity is connected with our respondents’ experience of shock and the problems faced in Georgia, but their identity is for the most part not in crisis. Yet, our respondents discursively displayed symptoms of ontological insecurity. This highlights empirically how the concepts of security of identity and security are and should be kept distinct.

Identity shift and ontological security

As mentioned earlier, while a majority of our respondents showed at least some symptoms of ontological insecurity, only some of them showed signs of identity insecurity, and went through a process of identity transformation. But to what extent did this process of identity shift help, at least after the initial existential crisis, re-establish their secure sense of self? To find an answer to this question, we now focus on an exemplary sub-sample of five respondents, who showed both symptoms of ontological insecurity and went through a process of identity transformation.

For example, one respondent, who showed various forms of the anxiety symptom, started by thanking us for the interview, as it would have functioned as his “absolution” for the crimes of Russia. Indeed, he mentioned feeling great shame for Russia’s invasion of Ukraine. However, he

also said: "I feel emotionally detached from Russia. Russians are no longer my people". As a sign of this, he mentioned: "I refuse to speak Russian, even with Russian people. It's an orkish language". So, essentially, he stopped identifying as Russian and feeling a connection to Russia. But this identity transformation runs in contrast with feeling the need for absolution for "Russia's crimes". Either we need to question the truthfulness of his claim of "not identifying anymore as Russian", or the process of identity transformation was not able to solve his feeling of ontological insecurity. While the symptoms of ontological insecurity were also linked to his previous identity as Russian, they ultimately went deeper than that. Indeed, the new "non-Russian identity" was not able to stop him from the need of an "absolution" in the form of an interview with us, nor was it able to resolve his anxieties.

Another respondent demonstrated symptoms of ontological insecurity when discussing uncertainty of mobility, in particular how she would never go back to Russia, but was still stuck in a limbo as Europe and the US were inaccessible to her. She also discussed her identity shift with us. For example, she said: "I have a Russian passport and Russian surname, but I want to change my passport, and maybe I will even change my surname. Maybe into an American sounding one". Moreover, she also stressed that the graffiti like "Fuck Russians" did not bother her, because she "did not feel a connection with Russia anymore", and she now identified as a "human being, not as Russian". Nonetheless, paradoxically, she kept feeling responsibility for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Hence, again, either we question the truthfulness of her claim of "identifying as a human being, not Russian", or her identity shift failed to resolve her existential crisis. While her symptoms of ontological insecurity, in particular the feeling of limbo, were linked to her previous identity as Russian, they ultimately went deeper than that. Indeed, the rejection of that identity and her new identification were not able to restore her secure sense of self.

One couple discussed all their problems in terms of relocation, and showed various symptoms of ontological insecurity. In particular, the feeling of limbo for the uncertain mobility, the anxiety of speaking in Russian, and the anxiety of having "outcast" children. They also went through a process of identity transformation, as the husband mentioned "I don't feel personally attacked by these graffiti, because I don't feel 'Russkiy' anymore. I feel like 'a citizen of the Russian Federation'", and then the wife also mentioned "I also don't feel 'Russkiy' anymore, but a 'citizen of the Russian Federation'"[9]. However, even if they now identified only as "citizens of the

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[9] Here it is necessary to make a fundamental premise for understanding the answers of our interviewees. In the Russian language, the word "Russian" can be translated in different ways

Russian Federation", they kept feeling shame for Russia's war in Ukraine, and showed all of the symptoms of ontological insecurity discussed above. Their detachment from Russianness as an ethnicity and process of identity transformation had been incapable of restoring their secure sense of self.

Finally, one respondent showed many anxiety symptoms, in particular when discussing the fear of speaking Russian in public and the shock of war. When discussing hateful graffiti, he said: "They actually make me laugh, I don't take it personally. I don't even know what it means to be Russian anymore. I associate Russian history with Stalin's purges, as even some members of my family were deported and killed. I now feel more 'an inhabitant of the Karelian Republic' than 'Russian'". Nonetheless, he also mentioned feeling shame for Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and thus did volunteering work to help Ukrainians. Hence, yet again, we have a case of identity transformation that was not able to restore a secure sense of self in the respondent. The previous identity of the respondent was linked with the existential crisis caused by the war, but ultimately this existential crisis went deeper than identity. The shift in identity ultimately failed to resolve the existential crisis, it failed to restore ontological security.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine and the decision to relocate, choosing Georgia as their destination was a controversial choice for Russians, considering the history of conflict between Moscow and Tbilisi over South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Indeed, many *relokanty* faced shaming attempts by Georgians, which, combined with the existential crisis they felt for their country's invasion of Ukraine, became a catalyst for personal reflections regarding their sense of self and their identity. This co-occurrence of reflections about the sense of self and identity can be analysed within the OS scholarship, in particular that relating to IR, that emphasizes the analytical distinctions between ontological security and identity security at a theoretical level.

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and each of these terms has its own facet, depending on the multi-ethnic nature of the Russian state. We have the word "Rossiyanin", which is used to indicated a citizen of the Russian Federation and holder of Russian citizenship. The corresponding adjective is Rossiyskiy, which denotes that something belongs to or was made in Russia. Finally, we have Russkiy, which is instead related to the concept of Russian ethnicity and thus extendable also to countries with considerable Russian minorities within their borders, such as, for example, Ukraine. The creation and the preservation of the so-called Russkiy Mir (the Russian world) has been one of the cornerstones of Putin's foreign policy and main motivations for the launch of the war in Ukraine. This is why some respondents answered that they consider themselves "Russians not by choice", "Russians for documents" or simply "Rossiyanin", and not Russkiy.

Going beyond theory, with this research on Russian *relokanty* in Tbilisi, we highlighted the difference between the two concepts also at an empirical level. We were able to do so first by pinning down "symptoms" of ontological security, expressed as "anxiety" and "feeling of limbo", from our sample of fifty respondents; and then by emphasising how these symptoms were mostly related to the shock of war and the problems faced during relocation, but were for the most part not related to insecurity of identity. Indeed, a majority of our Russian *relokanty* respondents showed symptoms of ontological insecurity, but only a minority of them expressed going through an identity crisis.

Moreover, we made an effort to contribute to the methodology of OS, especially at a non-state level, through this symptoms-tracing method. Indeed, arguing that an individual, let alone a state, suffers from ontological insecurity is a tricky and difficult task. Therefore, we proposed and applied a method that identifies what, according to the theory, can be considered symptoms of ontological insecurity. In particular, we looked for expressions of anxiety and feeling of limbo. We then looked for explicit and implicit discursive traces of these symptoms in our interviews. Looking specifically for symptoms of ontological insecurity, instead of broadly claiming the presence of ontological insecurity, can help better structure methodologically the empirical research on OS.

Finally, we made an effort to contribute to the theory of OS by discussing how identity shifts may not be able to restore ontological security. We demonstrated this empirically, through a sub-sample of five respondents, by showing how symptoms of ontological insecurity can co-occur with identity transformations, but this identity shift is ultimately incapable of restoring security of the self. Indeed, those respondents who did go through an identity transformation, usually detaching themselves from their previous Russian identity and re-inventing a new identity, were ultimately not able to solve their ontological insecurity expressed through symptoms of anxiety and feeling of limbo. Admittedly, the previous Russian identities of the respondents were linked with the existential crisis caused by the war and the difficulties of relocation, but ultimately this existential crisis went deeper than identity. In conclusion, although they may interrelate, this also highlights the need to distinguish ontological security from security of identity.

Overall, while our study primarily examines the analytical distinction between self and identity at the individual level, our aspiration is to stimulate scholars to explore broader implications of this distinction and its relevance in addressing ontological (in)security concerns among various social actors.

Critiques of OS scholarship have emerged due to its disproportionate emphasis on continuity, often overlooking or dismissing change. Notably,

this critique targets the prevalent state-centric approach in the literature, which prioritizes maintaining a stable identity over time. While our work encourages scholars to embrace the examination of change, it does not seek to invalidate the state-centric perspective on OS. Instead, we claim that a deeper focus on understanding the impact of pivotal moments and events, on both individuals and states' sense of self, would benefit the scholarship on OS. Our study shows how, at the individual level, identity constitutes just one facet of the complete self. And there is no reason why this perspective cannot be extended also to the state level.

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