

Traditional versus Societal Security and the Role of Securitization

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Zlatko Isakovic, *Identity and Security in Former Yugoslavia*. Aldershot: Ashgate 2000. 326 pp., ISBN 0754615030, 79.95 USD (hardcover).

Hans J. Giessmann and Gustav E. Gustenau (eds.), *Security Handbook 2001: Security and Military in Central and Eastern Europe*. Baden Baden: Nomos, 2001. 476 pp., ISBN 3-7890-7128-5, 35 Euros (paperback).

Security Handbook 2001 is the first English language edition of the *Security Handbook* biannual series, published by the Institute for Peace Research and Security Policy (IFSH) at the University of Hamburg. Because it is now being published in English, it is expected that the series will reach a wider audience than the first two editions. There are grounds for optimism: the *Handbook* is not only useful because of its regional scope (it covers Eastern and Central Europe), but also because it is comprehensive and user-friendly. As such it finds a niche in a world dominated by the more established compendiums of its kind, such as the *Yearbook on World Armaments and Disarmament* of the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Jane's publications (*The Sentinel*, *Defence Weekly*, *The Balkans: Security Assessment*, *Balkans Newsletter*, *Intelligence Review*), and *The Military Balance* of the London-based International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS).

The *Handbook* deals with twenty-one countries, each covered by one chapter (with the exception of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, which are grouped under the label "Baltic States"). The chapters are synoptic, each containing sections on armed forces, security policy, defence doctrine, and arms production, which facilitates quick cross-national overview. And given the lack of reliable information for some countries (e.g. Serbian losses in the war against NATO), there is a surprisingly high level of consistency in terms of the sorts of data collected. In some chapters, the usual sources such as government documents have been supplemented by interviews with the officials, officers, and representatives of various international organisations. Also included is a chapter of organisation charts explaining the state's military structures (three in the case

of Bosnia)—something that can be alluring only to defence ministry executives. As for the other artwork, the next edition should consider somewhat jazzier cartographic presentations; the reader clearly deserves more on a country map than just the name and location of the capital and neighbouring countries. For example, the location of military bases and strategic industries would be useful.

Nevertheless, the handbook is a repository of all kinds of information. First and foremost, military aficionados will find answers to questions like, “What is the most formidable fighting force in the Caucasus? Who, outside NATO, has been working on rapid reaction forces (RRF)? Where is Albania’s navy? Who modernizes the armies of Eastern Europe? What governments engage in weapon proliferation?” Beyond simple bean counting, like number of troops and equipment, the *Handbook* also covers political developments in the region. Interethnic relations, regional cooperation (especially attempts to create joint [peacekeeping] brigades), civil-military relations and security sector reform are aptly assessed. Particularly useful is a systematic evaluation of the perceptions of the NATO intervention in Kosovo: each chapter contains a section dealing with government and public reactions to the crisis.

The *Handbook* can be situated on particular intellectual turf. All contributors to the volume realise that intra-state conflict (on p. 190 called “sub-conventional”) is the prevalent form of conflict today. Evident in the ‘Threat Perceptions and Conflicts’ section is the implication that states with significant (mainly ethnic, religious, and regional; maybe also class and class-related?) cleavages are more likely to pose a threat to the regional order than homogenous states.

This issue is picked up by Isakovic’s *Security and Identity in Former Yugoslavia*. The book employs the concept of societal security to describe and explain the socio-political problems and choices in the former Yugoslavia. The main idea behind this concept is that the state is not the single referent object of security. The Copenhagen School, named after the Copenhagen Peace Research Institute (COPRI) where Isakovic himself spent some time, proposes that social (ethnic, religious etc.) groups be considered as equally important and distinctive consumers of security. “[S]ocietal security concerns the ability of the society to persist in its essential character under changing conditions and possible or actual threats...Societal security is about situations when societies perceive a threat in identity terms” (Wæver et al., 1993: 23).

Isakovic follows the Copenhagen School framework only to a limited extent. He opts for the state as the main object of security, but following Buzan (1991: 65), he distinguishes between the idea of the state, its physical base, and its institutional representation (pp. 241-244). For this reason, the book looks at the five Yugoslav successors, each covered by a chapter. Isakovic repeatedly makes it clear that these states cannot be considered as unitary actors. More important, Isakovic is concerned with how societal security discourse relates to real-world power relations. Indeed, power looms large in Isakovic’s work (see Isakovic, 2000).

The book is heavily indebted to an earlier work on the subject of security and identity in the former Yugoslavia by Håkan Wiberg, another important Copenhagen scholar. Wiberg noted that the majorities in the Yugoslav successor states have seen most of the respective minorities as a threatening 'other' and vice versa (Wiberg, 1993). Isakovic's contribution is to examine this phenomenon in a book-length study and propose some solutions. Of course, this is not to say that *Security and Identity* does not contain original theoretical and conceptual discussions. For one, the bits on Fromm's notion of aggression and Freud's meditations on group narcissism, as applied to the problems of ethno-national polarization in the former Yugoslavia, are novel and interesting (p. 64, 68, 83, fn. 40, 109, 223, 257)

Wherein lie identity threats according to Isakovic? The former Yugoslavia and its successor states, with the notable exception of Slovenia, are characterised by the weak idea of the state and its institutional representation, which means that they are doomed to exist in a "condition of effective civil war (Buzan, cited on p. 246)." For example, Macedonia's societal security is threatened from all directions and at all levels: "The Bulgarians are the main identity threat from the point of view of language, Serbs from a religious point of view, Albanians from the point of view of statehood, and Greeks concerning the name of its nation, its language and the state. (p. 220)." This means that Macedonia's "identity and state seemed better protected within the Second Yugoslavia than after the separation" (p. 218). The author does not stop at assessing identity threats of "constitutional" Yugoslav nations; Hungarians, Kosovars and other former Yugoslav Albanians, Goranci, Bunjevci, etc. are examined as well. Some are missing (Jews) and some are mislabelled ("Gypsies"). As for the Yugoslav supranational identity, Isakovic is categorical, stating that "most self-declared Yugoslavs were from ethnically mixed families rather than 'ideological' Yugoslavs (p. 130, also see: 91, 238)." The author reaches important if perhaps tautological observations. Societal security is always relational and threats exist in a "security complex." For instance, Bosniak concerns over language feed on Bosnian Serb worries over statehood. And the roles can be exchanged. Security, therefore, exists either "for all, or for nobody (p. 271)."

Isakovic's argument appears valid, if long-winded at times. But the book is more than clear about the main source of security threats. Heterogeneity itself is not problematic. Instead, it is the power-hungry politicians and regime intellectuals who manage to polarize societies – chiefly through propaganda – along exclusivist lines (pp. 65-7, 258). Other factors, such as per capita income or prior history (especially mythology) can explain why some societies are more prone to polarization than others. Identity and, in extension, threats to societal security are largely defined by the government (pp. 72-3) and sometimes the threat is the government itself. "[B]y suppressing their religions by various means and in that way interfering with their ability to reproduce themselves," the Communists were the common societal security threat to all of Yugoslavia's societies (p. 176). The culprit, therefore, is the government. At this point, Isakovic refers to David Campbell, one of the leading postmodernist IR scholars:

“foreign policy [is] a process in which difference is ascribed to foreigners in order to keep up a domestic identity...It is not important whether an identity politics is a matter of domestic or foreign policy as in this case they are inseparable. States support their own identities by regarding everything foreign as threats and dangers (p. 241).” The state, as a social construct, cannot exist without the distinction of the self (domestic identity) and the other (foreign and, here, social security policy). With this conclusion, Isakovic seems to have answered most of the tough questions proposed in the introduction (pp. 6-13).

In the end, Isakovic, too, believes that homogenous states are more stable than heterogeneous ones: “The concurrence of the imaginary “we” with territorial borders is a condition for the functioning of democracy and political community (p. 129; for more, see Buzan, cited on p. 259 and esp. Isakovic, 2000).” Perhaps for this reason, he thinks that, had the Yugoslav civil wars been more decisive (meaning had the state borders been matched with the ethnic borders), identity threats would have not come to the fore (p. 256). But Isakovic sees the full political risk of such thinking, and for this reason he underscores: “Redrawing the maps has not and probably will not improve security in the region [...]” (p. 275).

In the concluding chapter, the author straddles the worlds of scholarship and policy by offering a number of policy recommendations. First come the usual suspects: economic development and the rule of law. But then come “unconventional” proposals: 1) minorities should give up the right to self-determination; 2) the majorities should respect minority right as much as possible; and 3) multiple and especially transnational loyalties should be promoted.

Security and Identity contains some shortcomings. First, the author has a tendency to break with his analysis and become polemical. How else is one to explain lengthy critiques of the Tudjman regime, Germany’s Croatia recognition policy, Dayton Bosnia, all of which hardly advance the book’s mission? Most remarkable in this sense is Isakovic’s implicit, but unambiguous, denunciation of the Montenegrin independence movement (p. 120, 124, 146, 158-9, 170-1, 190)

Second, Isakovic is a bit hazy on his methodology. He promises “a complex methodology” (p. 13), but offers little more than process-tracing. Here too, the chapters are synoptic: ethnogenesis and common myths; state traditions; religious affiliation; and language and culture. (Clearly, Isakovic chooses to define society in terms of ethnic identity, and that he does following A.D. Smith. This comes in contrast to a more general definition of society suggested in Wæver et al. [1993: 23] who follow Anthony Giddens.) The conflict of what may be called “ethnic realities” is acknowledged (p. 50) and tackled well. Nevertheless, Isakovic missed a great opportunity. Above all, it is surprising that Isakovic seems unaware of “alternative” methodology, namely discourse analysis, as proposed by the Copenhagen School itself (Buzan et al., 1998). “Securitization” – a new and important English language term coming from Denmark – is generally dropped from Isakovic’s analysis of societal security. Only once does Isakovic look at it, and that time at its very definition:

securitization can be seen as “the move that takes politics beyond the established rules of the game and frames the issue either as a special kind of politics or as above politics (Buzan et. al. [1998: 23], cited on p. 258).” What does this mean in practice?

The Serbian leadership declares that Serbs are threatened by separatism in a part of the state in which they live. They also declare that all Serbs will suffer if they do not continue to live all in one state. The Serbs buy it. Because they have come to see separatism as an existential, societal threat, the Serbs consent to the application of extraordinary measures to cope with this threat. As a political issue, separatism goes beyond routine (i.e. parliamentary) politics. The issue thus becomes securitized, which allows the Serbian leadership to do things that under “normal” political circumstances would be extremely difficult, like declaring the state of high alert, suspending civil and political rights, engaging the separatist militarily, directly or through a proxy, and printing more money and/or introducing new taxes and fees in order to finance the war.

The scenario outlined here is obviously not hypothetical; in fact, it demonstrates that securitization has been and continues to be a regular feature of the political and social world in the former Yugoslavia. But to be sure, securitization is by no means an exclusively Serbian phenomenon. For example, to interpret another situation by the securitization approach, substitute Serbs for Macedonia’s Albanians and instead of separatism use Macedonia’s (imperfect) independent statehood. Another example of securitization is Slovenia’s declaration of war on illegal migration on 19 January 2001, which can be read on the website of the Public Relations and Media Office of the Government of the Republic of Slovenia (see bibliography). The point is that societal threats are not objectively given but socially constructed by government and/or the elite.

Securitization can best be examined by looking at language as the first tool of threat construction. For this reason, and precisely because Isakovic sees propaganda as the main mechanism of securitization, the reader is entitled to far more than a resigned assertion that “there have indeed been great methodological difficulties” (p. 259). Isakovic’s critical analysis would have been better informed had he made use of the methodological recommendations outlined in Buzan et al. (1998: chapter eight). The infamous “Memorandum” of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences would be a good place to start. The role of research on securitization is extremely important; its purpose is to expose the sources of the alleged societal security threats and uncover the abuse of propaganda. Here is a quick illustration following the scenario discussed above. When Dobrica Cosic, then an important social and cultural mandarin, said that Serbs were “surrounded by hatred, which made [...] peace more tormenting than war” (p. 201), he effectively securitized the neighbouring ethnic groups. There was little political debate on the issue; the Serbian leadership as well as the majority of the opposition, for whatever reasons, accepted this discourse on “Serbophobia” as a *sine qua non*. Most Serbs bought it. Those who tried to raise questions were called “un-Serbian” or even traitors (remember “Tudjman’s” or

“Alija’s Serbs”?). Indeed, there was to be no dissent on the matters of societal security. And in the end, war did become preferable to peace.

Lastly, a warning sign about the Copenhagen School: its teachings have been severely questioned. The arguments of Buzan, Wæver and others have been called slippery, contradictory and otherwise untenable by many (for overviews, see Buzan and Wæver [1997], Madsen [2000]). Isakovic could have better warned the reader about the controversies inherent in his theoretical approach (p. 2, 5). In the end, for example, it remains unclear how to analytically distinguish between real and perceived threats (p. 186, 189).

The two books are to be recommended in their respective categories. As a solid reference work, *Security Handbook* greatly contributes to traditional security studies. *Security and Identity*, as one of the first extensive interpretations of Balkans security from a non-military perspective, does the same towards a more critical European and international security studies agenda.

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