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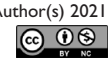
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Reputation crisis management and the state: Theorising containment as diplomatic mode

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Abstract

This article theorises containment as a diplomatic response mode for states when faced with potentially harmful attacks on their international identity and reputation. Despite widespread agreement in International Relations (IR) scholarship that identities matter in the context of state security, studies of crisis management have paid little attention to ontological security crises. Scholarly literature on public diplomacy has concerned itself mainly with proactive nation branding and reputation building; work on stigma management has privileged the study of how 'transgressive' states respond to identity attacks by recognising, rejecting or countering criticism. Our contribution is two-fold. First, we make the case that states do not perform as uniform entities when faced with ontological security crises – government representatives, bureaucratic officials and diplomats have varying roles and action repertoires available to them. Second, we argue that containment is a key but undertheorised part of the diplomatic toolkit in crisis management. Unpacking containment as a crisis management response mode, we combine insights from IR scholarship on emotions and diplomacy with insights on therapeutic practices from social psychology. We substantiate our argument with a case study of how Norwegian government representatives, bureaucratic officials and diplomats responded to escalating international criticism against Norway's Child Welfare Services following a wave of transnational protests in 2016. A key finding is that whereas

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the dominant response mode of government ministers and bureaucratic officials was to reject the criticism, diplomats mainly worked to contain the situation, trying to prevent it from escalating further and resulting in long-term damage to bilateral relations.

Keywords
Diplomacy, crisis management, statehood, ontological security, emotions, containment

Introduction

Modern states seek territorial and economic survival, but they also care about safeguarding their carefully crafted international identities. Two and a half decades after 'the constructivist turn' hit International Relations (IR) scholarship, this is hardly a novel or controversial claim. However, despite widespread agreement that identities matter also in the context of state security, the literature on statehood and crisis management has remained curiously centred on material threats to states' territory, infrastructure, representatives and citizens. While studies have noted how the (mis)management of foreign policy crises may impact on a state's reputation and standing, internationally and at home, ontological insecurity has typically been dealt with analytically as a second-order effect rather than a first-order object of analysis. Often drawing on Mercer (1996), recent contributions have discussed how the quest for status and prestige impacts the power-political repertoire and decision-making of individual states and their leaders (e.g. Wohlforth et al., 2017; Renshon et al., 2018; Wu and Wolford, 2018). Typically, however, studies have treated concerns about status loss and reputational damage either as constitutive of state action, or as a possible effect of poor crisis management. Meanwhile, literature on public diplomacy has highlighted national identity as a driver of foreign policy, but focused more on proactive nation branding than on safeguarding existing identities and self-representations (Cross and Melissen, 2013; Leonard et al., 2002), although some studies have noted how public diplomacy increasingly plays out as a 'negotiation of understanding with foreign publics' (Lindholm and Olsson, 2011: 255), and may also involve efforts to restore a tarnished image (Gilboa, 2008: 66). Lastly, IR scholarship on stigma management has theorised how states respond to accusations and shaming in the international domain, but the literature canon has mainly focused on government-level responses by 'transgressive' states to stigmatisation imposed on them by 'non-transgressive' groups (Adler-Nissen, 2014). To our knowledge, there is little work to date examining – and differentiating between – how the broader apparatuses of states who self-identify as 'rule followers' manage attacks on their international identity and reputation (but see Rumelili and Towns, 2017).

This article makes the case for a more fine-tuned theorisation of state responses to crises, one that accounts for ontological security concerns and the varying roles and action repertoires available to government representatives, bureaucratic officials and diplomats when faced with an attack on their state's identity. At a time when (mis)information travels fast, ontological security attacks have the potential to cause long-lasting damage not only to a state's international reputation and standing, but also to its economy, security and bilateral relations with other states. This makes it pertinent to study how different actors representing the state process and respond to ontological security

threats when they first emerge. What response options are available in the toolbox when these actors are faced with potentially harmful attacks on their states' identities and reputation? How do they work to minimise harm?

We begin by putting to work the concepts of statehood, ontological security and crisis management to examine how states offer multifaceted responses to attacks on their international identities and reputation. In her influential article on stigma management in the international domain, Adler-Nissen (2014) argued that when states become subject to shaming in the international public sphere their governments are faced with choosing between publicly *recognising, rejecting* or *countering* the critique. This is a productive typology, which we here suggest expanding in two important respects. First, we make the case that different categories of state representatives – governments, bureaucratic officials and diplomats – assume different roles and have different response options when faced with attacks on their state's international identity and reputation. While governments and bureaucratic officials tend to employ all response types, the diplomatic apparatus often does not possess the authority or room for manoeuvre to choose their own response – they need to await instructions from home. Second, we suggest that a fourth response type – *containment* – should be added to the typology, to capture the nature of diplomatic legwork that plays out in ontological security crisis management. Appearing both alone and in combination with other response types, containment may be used by the entire state apparatus but is a key response mode for diplomats when seeking to keep communication channels open and prevent a crisis from escalating. While many IR scholars will be familiar with discussions of containment as a US foreign policy strategy during the Cold War (Holmes, 2018; Steele, 2019), we add here a psychoanalytical understanding of the concept to capture the activity of managing a crisis through the acknowledgement of difference, expressing empathy with divergent points of views, and the facilitation of dialogue and knowledge exchange (Bion, 1963). Combining insights from the literature on emotions and diplomacy in international politics with insights from social psychology, we observe that a key part of the diplomat's job and skillset is to create a secure space in which the other party can voice concerns and opinions, while simultaneously working to suspend or bracket the urge to articulate one's own intentions, beliefs, opinions and emotions (Holmes, 2018: 87; Wilkinson, 2018). Containment, we argue, is a defining but understudied feature of diplomatic activity, especially when a state is engaged in mediation activities or dealing with an ontological security crisis. In the second part of the article, we present a case study of how Norwegian government representatives, bureaucratic officials and diplomatic staff responded to escalating international criticism against the Norwegian Child Welfare Services ('Barnevernet') following a wave of transnational protests in 2016. We argue that the urgency and intensity of this situation, its emotional nature and the many types and layers of state actors involved makes it well-suited for exploring ideal-typical mechanisms at play in states' management of ontological security crises.

Performing statehood through crises

Following Hay (1999: 318), we start with a broad conception of international crises, as 'temporary . . . deviations from the normal . . . course of events', which are 'generally capable of resolution'. We further agree with Hay that perception is key: There are few

objective criteria to go by as to when a situation or course of events qualifies as a 'crisis' in an analytical sense. The type of state in question, its assessment of the situation at hand, its prior experiences and the actors and audiences involved – all these factors are likely to impact on the type of responses undertaken (Hay, 1999: 318). In this article, we therefore use the involved actors' own categorisation – that is, practical use – as our point of departure. In other words, if state representatives publicly refer to a situation or course of events in crisis terms, then we assume – also in line with securitisation theory – that some kind of crisis response will follow (Buzan et al., 1998). The underlying idea is that representations pave the way for action, shaping actors' room for manoeuvre and making some action paths more possible, likely and legitimate than others (Dunn and Neumann, 2016; Hansen, 2006). Just as the securitisation of policy issues allows a different response mode for states and can add new tools to the foreign policy toolbox, conceptualising a situation or event as a 'crisis' in the public sphere will trigger certain audience expectations about the state's management of and response to that situation. For this reason, crises can also be seen to represent an opportunity for states to 'perform' their statehood; that is, to appear on the international stage as competent crisis managers, capable of protecting, aiding or assisting their interests, structures and citizens. As Neumann and Sending (2021) have argued, different types of crises are likely to trigger different ideal-typical management roles for the state. In Norway's case, for example, the state has typically strived to perform as a 'sovereign' in security crises, a 'do-gooder' in humanitarian crises, and a 'caretaker' in civilian crises. Which role the state assumes in a given situation follows from the nature of the crisis and the audience in question, as well as from the state's perception of its own capacities and room for manoeuvre (Neumann and Sending, 2021; see also Adler-Nissen, 2014: 152; Bauman, 2004).

What forms a crucial part of this picture, but which tends not to be highlighted as a dimension in its own right, is that modern states seek not only to preserve their physical, territorial security, but also their *ontological* security. In short, states become attached to their carefully crafted self-identities in the international arena and are likely to engage in practices and action that they expect will uphold these identities and – by extension – help stabilise and order their relationships with so-called significant others (Huysmans, 1998; Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008; Wendt, 1994). The concept of ontological security itself is commonly attributed to Giddens (1991) who observed how events which challenge an individual's understanding about the meaning of life may pose a threat to that individual's ontological security. As Subotic (2019) has argued, states also seek 'predictability and order' in order to feel secure, and therefore

> crises or 'critical situations' create stress, anxiety, and ontological insecurity. Whether the critical situation truly *is* crisis is beside the point – what is significant is how meaningful it is to the states themselves and what action it produces. Critical situations not only create ruptures in routines; they also lead to the questioning of foundational state narratives on which this identity is built (Subotic, 2019: 27, emphasis added).

The concept of ontological security thus serves to reveal and unpack the processes through which 'crises that garner the attention of states challenge their identity' (Steele, 2008: 3). Seen in connection with the formation of collective identity (Neumann, 1999)

and states' inherent quest for (material and social) status, Norway has, for example, invested much effort, both prior to and after the Second World War, pursuing a foreign policy identity as a 'humanitarian great power' and 'do-gooder' (Wohlforth et al., 2017). In the case study we present below, we observe how the 'do-gooder' identity in particular ties in with Norway's self-conception as a pioneering country with regard to taking care of and protecting children, often alongside the other Scandinavian countries. Norway takes pride in having been the first state to install legislative child protection measurements in 1896 (Andersland, 2014; Dahl, 1992), in being depicted as 'the best country in the world in which to be a child' (Langford et al., 2019: 16), and in having inspired the crafting of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child on the standards and visions of ideal childhoods by emphasising safeguarding and respect for the autonomous and vulnerable child (Holzscheiter, 2010). Norway is also the only Scandinavian country with an autonomous child welfare service (Stang, 2020). Against this backdrop, the international criticism of Norway's Child Welfare Services – an institution historically grounded in humanitarian philanthropy and judicial activism from the late 1800s onwards (Seip, 2010) – can be defined as an ontological security crisis because it challenges and threatens to undermine a fundamental Norwegian self-understanding in the international domain. If we accept the basic premise that states care about their ontological security, to the extent that they may even be willing to uphold destructive relationships or put their physical security at risk to safeguard it (Mitzen, 2006), then it also follows that they will take attacks on this identity very seriously and seek to find appropriate and effective ways to respond to them. In Norway's case, Prime Minister Erna Solberg vowed in her (widely broadcast) New Year's Address in 2019, 'to make Norwegian society second to none when it comes to giving children security and opportunities' (Solberg, 2019). This bold ambition can be contrasted with a statement by Norway's Minister of Children and Families to the Norwegian parliament the following year in which he expressed concern about the ongoing turbulence surrounding Norwegian child protection and welfare cases:

> The Child Welfare Services rely upon society's trust and a good reputation in order to reach children and parents in need of help. A range of demonstrations and media articles have, in addition to the cases which have been argued in the European Court of Human Rights, contributed to creating a one-sided, negative impression of the services . . . I fear that enduring, negative attention could have several unfortunate consequences: For children and families in need of help from the Child Welfare Services, for the Services' reputation, for the population's trust in the Child Welfare Services, for the recruitment of employees – and also lead to further reputation challenges for Norway in the international domain (Ropstad, 2020, our translation to English).

While a state's international identity and reputation may also be at stake in the management of 'traditional' security crises, this will in most cases be a consequence of (imperfect) crisis management rather than constitutive of the crisis itself – it will be a side effect rather than the catalyst. State responses to and management of major crises involving national interests or nationals abroad, whether triggered by a natural disaster, a terrorist attack, a pandemic or something else, are likely to trigger media attention, often also involving debate and critical post-crisis assessments of the state's performance as crisis manager (Græger and Leira, 2019). However, when an ontological

security crisis is the starting point of the analysis, what is contested and under scrutiny from the outset is not the state's ability to manage a particular crisis but its *rightful claim to a certain identity* on the international stage – 'that nation's ideas and ideals' (see Lindholm and Olsson, 2011: 255).

As is the case with most crises, the perception of ontological security crises will also be fundamentally relational, and state responses will involve coping with and trying to keep under control the emotions involved on all sides (Hutchison, 2016). As we show in our case study, this becomes particularly apparent when the inherent emotional aspect of a crisis intersects with the content of the crisis itself and reveals the crisis's connectivity to people's lives and identities. Following Mercer (2014), we do not attempt here to explain the onto-epistemological foundation of emotions but take them as given. While emotions may be hard to systematically trace and analyse through empirical observation, this does not mean that they do not have political power or impact (see Hall, 2015; Holmes, 2018). As Hutchison has observed:

> Emotions cannot be removed from political decision making, because emotions exist at the core of human life. Even if we try to keep our emotions at bay, they have always already shaded our inner-most thoughts and perceptions of the world around us. But these seemingly individual emotions are always already collective and political (Hutchison, 2016: xi–xii).

When faced with fundamental critique of their state's identity and values, governments are likely to feel a need to respond. If we follow Adler-Nissen's (2014) typology, they will find themselves faced with a choice between recognising, rejecting or countering the critique, seeking to avoid or minimise shame, embarrassment and other forms of humiliating emotional experiences (Adler-Nissen, 2014; see also Goffman, 1959; Hansen, 2011). Adler-Nissen has further highlighted how the degree of 'shared social ground' between critics and the criticised, and the latter's available material and social resources, are conditions which affect which response type a state ends up choosing in a given situation. In short, resourceful states will usually be freer to adopt rejection or countering strategies; less resourceful states will have less room for manoeuvre – at least if they are striving for membership in the 'civilized group' (Adler-Nissen, 2014: 154).

Adler-Nissen's typology and framework are well-suited for analysing the overarching dynamics we observed in our study of Norwegian state representatives' management of the escalating international criticism of Norway's Child Welfare Services. However, our case study also brings to the fore two important additional dimensions, and which we wish to draw attention to. The first is that 'the state' does not perform as a uniform actor when responding to ontological security attacks as government representatives, bureaucratic officials and diplomats have varying roles and response modes available to them. The second is that while the responses of government representatives and bureaucratic officials in our study can be largely categorised within Adler-Nissen's typology, statements and actions by diplomats were of a different character. Responding to accusations from states assuming ownership of their citizens' criticism of the Norwegian state, we observed that diplomatic staff spent considerable time and resources trying to prevent the situation from worsening. As a Norwegian diplomat put it in 2018:

> The wave of protests against the Norwegian Child Welfare Services represented a huge challenge and our task was to contain it and to try to extinguish the fire without damaging the good relations we had with the states involved (Interview A, 1 March 2018, our translation to English).

Whereas the scholarly interest in how states practice restraint as part of their foreign policy is now on the rise in IR (see esp. Steele, 2019), less attention has been paid to containment as a response mode for various actors speaking and operating on the state's behalf. While government ministers and bureaucratic officials may navigate between rejection, countering and recognition responses, diplomats will in most cases not be what Hay (1999) has termed 'agents capable of making a response'. Awaiting instructions from home, their default response mode will typically be to monitor developments, collect information, listen to concerns and try to stop the crisis from escalating further. While these could to some extent be seen as activities at the core of traditional diplomacy – 'the application of tact and intelligence' Satow and Roberts, 2009: 3) and 'the mediation of estrangement' (Der Derian, 1987) – we find that containment remains undertheorised as a state-level crisis management response mode. Unlike 'collaborative diplomacy', where antagonistic or friendly states work towards a shared foreign policy goal (Chaban and Elgström, 2020), or 'dialogue-based public diplomacy' where a state seeks to export its own ideas and values 'in a context of listening' (Riordan, 2005: 191), containment diplomacy is about one party listening to and assuming responsibility for the emotional reactions of others. Peace mediation is a case in point (Peck, 2010); diplomatic damage control in response to an ontological security attack another. In such situations, the diplomat's chief priority will not be to acquire status, promote her nation's values or respond to criticism, but to keep 'channels of communication open' (Billow, 2010: 6) and preserve the bilateral relationship in question. To capture these dynamics at play, we need a theoretical lens which allows us to consider both 'the neuro and psychological factors' and the 'routinized behaviours and habits' guiding diplomatic conduct, and the 'emotional contexts' that diplomats often operate in (Steele, 2019: 57).

Containment as diplomatic management tool

Starting from a position in which we take the managing of emotions in professional contexts seriously (Blix and Wettergren, 2018), we situate our understanding of diplomatic containment within a scholarly tradition rooted in the works of psychoanalyst Bion (1961, 1963). While many scholars have highlighted the importance of empathetic listening and dialogue as part of the everyday diplomatic conduct (e.g. Standfield, 2020; Towns, 2020), the process of diplomatic containment that requires hard emotional labour, discipline and self-restraint has often been overlooked (but see McConnell, 2018; Wong, 2016). McConnell (2018: 368) has unpacked the ways in which 'impression management and emotional labor bring to the fore the effect of emotions on how an individual is perceived by others and how that perception is managed'. Our take on containment is rooted in Bion's theorisations of the therapeutic relationship between 'the container' and 'the contained', which was originally modelled on the relationship between mother and infant (Hanni, 2015). In short, an infant

who experiences intolerable emotions will learn to tolerate and cope with these when his mother performs the role of container by holding him and signalling that his emotions are acceptable, a conduct which is based on empathy. Psychotherapists have developed the concept of containment further, to distil what exactly it is that 'the good therapist' does – or has to master – to facilitate client change. Wilkinson (2008) has for example emphasised how containment is rooted in relational responsibility, and the 'container's' ability to respect and welcome difference and role as a guarantor of upholding emotional boundaries (Wilkinson, 2008: 211–212). In IR scholarship, the micro-mechanisms of empathy and its importance for trust, mutual understanding and reconciliation in world politics have been skilfully theorised by Holmes (2018) in his work on face-to-face diplomacy. As Lakoff and Johnson (1999) point out, empathy denotes the attempt and ability to understand and feel how another person may feel. It involves care for the other as well as care for the self (Lakoff and Johnson, 1999: 315). In diplomacy, such an 'ethics of care' could be said to intersect with a diplomatic 'duty of care', which is bound to diplomats' positional power and the state's legal and moral duty to protect nationals even when they are located outside the state's territorial borders (Græger and Leira, 2019; Haugevik, 2018; Melissen and Okano-Hejmans, 2018).

For the therapist, containment rests on a premise of relational responsibility, and a core activity is to create a secure space for the other to explore or give voice to experiences that precipitate a crisis. In such situations, the therapist has to (temporarily) refrain from explicitly expressing overt emotions, opinions or judgements about the other. Diplomats practicing containment have a different role, but they share with therapists this responsibility of 'exercising authority and power, in regard to the group structure, process and culture . . . including boundary functions such as time, place, seating, duration of sessions' (Billow, 2010: 7). Thus, containment entails at least two key functions which are highly relevant in the context of diplomacy. The first is the *boundary function*, which here relates to how diplomats work to create secure institutional spaces for dialogue, seeking for example to move critique from the public sphere to backstage channels. The second is the *emphatic listening function*, or allowing the other party to express emotions without passing judgement. A key to mastering the second dimension is suspension and self-restraint – abilities, which have much in common with the therapeutic – and research – ideal of holding oneself in the background as a situation unfolds (Neumann and Neumann, 2018). In the words of a UN mediator: 'You get into their shoes. You don't have to stay there, but at least you know what it's like. Doing that imposes the discipline of being simultaneously empathetic with contradictory views' (Peck, 2010: 19). Or as a senior diplomat we interviewed for this study put it: 'Diplomats are not value-neutral, but they strive to listen without making judgment even when they do have a specific mandate and interests to pursue' (Interview B, 27.10.2020, our translation to English).

Understood as a crisis management response mode in its own right, appearing prior to, alongside or subsequent to recognition, rejection and countering (Adler-Nissen, 2014), containment provides us with a conceptual tool for understanding how diplomats faced with uncertainty and affective responses from another party respond by securing boundaries and engaging in emphatic listening. Unlike government representatives and bureaucratic officials, when an ontological security crisis emerges, career diplomats will

in most instances – unless they are assigned with a specific task to negotiate and promote particular interests on behalf of the state – not possess the autonomy or room for manoeuvre to make policy choices or adjustments. They are by definition apolitical and detached from policymaking processes. Regardless of their own value systems or emotional reactions to situations arising in the states where they are posted, or at home when assigned to handle a crisis, diplomats must follow instructions from their ministry and political leadership. They must be 'ready to manage whatever comes their way . . . operating under conditions not determined by themselves to advance the interest of the state' (Neumann and Sending, 2021: 6). As our case study illustrates, even in situations where the state's core identity and values are under attack, the diplomat's initial task will likely be to receive, monitor, assess and process the criticism, before reporting back home in order for others to take action.

Following Bengtsson and Hertting (2014), we suggest that the insights we draw here from analysing Norwegian state responses to critique of its child protection and welfare practices are transferrable to other ontological security crises occurring in similar contexts and with similar actor dynamics. The potential for generalisation rests on the premise of certain 'thinly rationalistic social mechanisms' being present in a larger universe of cases (Bengtsson and Hertting, 2014). We postulate that states with similar self-identities to Norway and with a dialogue-based diplomatic culture would follow a similar response pattern if faced with an international attack on their core identity and values. The highly emotional aspects of child and family politics in any country (Stang, 2018) also make insights from our case relevant beyond the Norwegian context. By adding containment as a fourth response type to Adler-Nissen (2014) tripartite schemata – recognition, rejection and countering – and by focusing on three categories of state actors, we explore how state representatives have different response modes and repertoires of action available to them in an ontological security crisis. We traced responses through a systematic reading of media articles published between January 2015 and August 2020,[1] as well as speeches, official documents and informational web pages. We also conducted interviews with five Norwegian diplomats with inside knowledge about the topic.

From internal affair to international conflict zone

Over the course of a few weeks in early 2016, thousands of protesters marched the streets in cities across the world. Eastern and Central Europe was the principal site, but organised protests also took place in major Western capitals like London, Madrid and Washington, DC.[2] Under shared slogans such as 'Norway steals children!', 'Child kidnapping by the Norwegian state!' and 'Stop Barnevernet!', participants protested the practices of the Norwegian Child Welfare Services and its interference in families with immigrant backgrounds. Although the Norwegian Child Welfare Services is an autonomous and decentralised government body in Norway, involving multiple sub-agencies, the target of the transnational protests was for all intents and purposes the Norwegian state and government. The demonstrations were not the first of their kind, nor was it the first time that international media had placed Norway's child protection and welfare practices under scrutiny (see e.g. Associated Press, 2015; *Daily Mail*, 2015; RT – Russia Today, 2015).[3] However, the 2016 protests represented the largest organised effort to

date, and they were subject to massive media attention – extending beyond Norway and the states where protests had taken place. They were preceded, accompanied and followed by campaigns via email and social media conveying the same message (Stang, 2018). As such, and by explicitly addressing the Norwegian system and practices for child protection and welfare more broadly, the 2016 demonstrations can be seen as marking the onset of a critical situation which demanded attention and a different kind of management and response from the Norwegian state. In April 2016, the Norwegian Ministry of Children and Families confirmed that 13 states had recently contacted Norwegian authorities to discuss child welfare cases. The list of states included Brazil, the Czech Republic, Egypt, India, Iran, Latvia, Lithuania, Nigeria, Poland, Romania, Russia, Thailand and Ukraine (*Dagbladet*, 2016c).[4]

Norwegian media took a keen interest in the international protests and underlying criticism, which built on long-standing domestic debates about the organisation, principles, decisions and practices of the Norwegian Child Welfare Services. Most major Norwegian newspapers published stories about the protests, often also summarising the key cases motivating them and including reactions from various Norwegian actors. Many newspapers also published editorials and expert op-eds explaining, supporting, nuancing or dismissing various components of the international criticism. In April 2016, the BBC aired the first of two critical documentaries about Norwegian child protection practices, on both radio and television. The first documentary, titled 'Norway: Parents against the State', presented the cases of three couples living in Norway, who claimed their children had been removed from them following misunderstandings with and misconduct by the Norwegian Child Welfare Services (Whewell, 2016). All three couples had one parent with an immigrant background. One of the couples were also Pentecostals. A feature article on the BBC's website emphasised the former fact, recapping the contents of the documentary as follows:

> Norway is widely regarded as one of the world's most progressive societies, yet it's at the centre of an international storm over its child protection policies. Campaigners say social workers remove children from their parents without justification, permanently erasing family bonds. A number of them are from immigrant backgrounds. Tim Whewell meets desperate parents who say they've lost their children because of misunderstood remarks or 'insufficient eye contact' – and Norwegian professionals who call the child protection agency dysfunctional and dangerous. Is a system designed to put children first now out of control? (BBC, 2016).

In the documentary, two competing representations of 'Norway' were portrayed. The first – put forth by Norwegian government representatives and bureaucratic officials in response to the criticism – was that of a progressive and responsible state, always striving to act with the child's best interests at heart. The competing representation was that of a close-to-authoritarian system, biased and out of control. By suggesting that there was a problematic *pattern* in how the Norwegian Child Welfare Services managed cases involving families where one or both parents had an immigrant background, the documentary gave voice to – and empowered – the criticism from parents and protesters. Like other pieces of international media coverage, the BBC documentary also linked the international criticism to domestic Norwegian debates about the organisation and quality of

the Child Welfare Services, citing Norwegian scholars and experts who themselves had voiced concern about the state of the system (Whewell, 2016).

Many of the transnational protests ended up outside Norwegian embassy buildings. In several of the states where protests were organised, political leaders supported and reinforced the criticism on behalf of nationals whose children had been removed following a decision from one of Norway's County Social Welfare Boards. The fact that government representatives were also involved in many of the cases, both in public and through political and diplomatic channels, effectively made the cases part of Norway's diplomatic relationship with the states in question. An oft-cited example is when, in 2015, the Czech president compared the Norwegian Child Welfare Services to Nazi Germany's Lebensborn programme when commenting on a case where the Services had removed two children from their Czech parents (*VG*, 2015a). In reaction to the same case, Czech authorities also publicly disinvited the Norwegian ambassador from a national holiday celebration at the presidential palace in Prague (*VG*, 2015b). These were political moves and strong diplomatic signalling, which demanded attention, calling for a state-level response from Norway not only to prevent the conflict from escalating further, but also to avoid it causing long-term damage to the bilateral relationship. The ambassador later recalled how the embassy had become 'the first line of attack', and how child welfare cases had impacted on 'all other cases' the embassy was working on (Sletner, 2018). 'It required an enormous amount of resources. For several months, all personnel stationed at the embassy worked at least part-time on this case', she later told Norwegian media (*VG*, 2016a). Child welfare cases with links to Lithuania, Poland and Romania followed a similar pattern, with individual cases spurring media attention, and parents deprived of their children receiving support from transnational networks as well as from government representatives and diplomatic staff in Oslo.

The negative representations and critique of Norwegian child welfare practices, put forth by parents, protest groups, media actors and state representatives over time, stood in sharp contrast to Norway's self-representation and identity as an international rule follower, a robust constitutional democracy and a pioneer of children's rights. This self-identity has regularly been buttressed by international rankings identifying Norway, alongside the other Nordic states, as one of the world's best countries to live in with respect to human development, family policies and the rights of the child (Rumelili and Towns, 2021; see also KidsRights, 2020; Unicef, 2019).While children are considered a resource in all societies, representing revitalisation, opportunity and the future workforce, there exists a range of societal ideals as to what position and status children should have as *subjects* within different states and cultures. In Norway and the other Scandinavian states, the societal ideal has been to put the best interests of the child at the centre of decision-making. Children's rights and childcare are policy areas where Norway and the Nordic states consider themselves to be pioneers, individually and in concert (see Ingebritsen, 2002; Björkdahl, 2007). This is also why the escalating criticism against Norwegian child protection and welfare practices, and the strong emotional reactions reflected in protests, media coverage and statements from state representatives, qualifies as an emergent ontological security crisis for the Norwegian state. In many of the states in question, the child welfare disputes also had a spillover effect on other policy areas, affecting the state of bilateral relationships more broadly. This was for example evident

in the Norwegian government's strategy for cooperation with Poland from 2016, which established that conflicts over child welfare cases had 'created challenges for Norway's reputation and the management of [Polish-Norwegian] bilateral relations' (NMFA – Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016: 19).

Responding to ontological security attacks

Faced with growing international criticism, including from government representatives in allied European states, the Norwegian government could in principle make use of all the strategies identified by Adler-Nissen (2014) for coping with stigmatisation: It could recognise the criticism, it could reject it, or it could try to counter the critics, for example by suggesting that child welfare and protection practices in the other state privileged parents' rights over those of children. Unlike Neumann and Sending's (2021) typology for the management of security, humanitarian or civilian crises, where the state performs the roles of 'sovereign', 'do-gooder' or 'caretaker' to build or sustain certain public identities, the performances spurred by Adler-Nissen's response types follow reactively from direct attacks on state conduct. What was at stake as the protests surrounding the Norwegian Child Welfare Services increased and attracted media attention beyond Norway and the states in question was Norway's rightful claim to its identity and self-representation as a pioneer in child welfare. Rejecting or countering the critique would imply a 'self-righteous' state, either by deeming the criticism incorrect or by assuming the moral high ground. Recognising (parts of) the critique would imply a more 'self-reflexive' state, open to reconsidering or even altering practices.

The government ministry in charge of managing the international criticism levelled against the Norwegian child protection and welfare practices was the Ministry of Children and Equality. This was also consistent with Norway's insistence that the subject matter and cases in question belonged in the domestic rather than foreign policy domain (Haugevik and Neumann, 2020). It follows from this that the key actors in the public debate were the Minister of Children and Equality and one of her state secretaries. While the press office of the Norwegian MFA sometimes provided brief statements to the press, the political leadership in the MFA generally refrained from commenting on the international criticism in public.

Examining speeches and statements given to the media during and in the wake of the 2016 protests, a key finding is that Norwegian government representatives' dominant response mode was to *reject* the criticism against the Norwegian Child Welfare Services. Elements of recognition, containment and countering featured sporadically in statements, but were less consistent. For example, commenting on the demonstrations in February 2016, a State Secretary in the Ministry of Children and Equality assured that the government 'took the criticism seriously' (containment), but suggested that some of the accusations were based on inaccurate information and misunderstandings (rejection) (*VG*, 2016b). On other occasions, the same State Secretary highlighted 'the importance of listening when the Child Welfare Services are being subjected to criticism' (containment), while admitting that the Services did have 'improvement potential', in particular that they should always abide by the principle of using 'the least intrusive' intervention

(recognition) (*VG*, 2016c). However, he once again emphasised 'the importance of correcting inaccurate accusations' (rejection) (*VG*, 2016c).

The combination of listening to concerns (containment), acknowledging improvement potential (recognition) and dismissing inaccurate or erroneous information (rejection) was also reflected in speeches and statements by the Minister of Children and Equality at the time. The 2016 protests intersected with an ongoing domestic debate in Norway about the Child Welfare Services' management of out-of-home placements. In April 2016, the Minister commissioned a review of a larger number of such cases. She told reporters that the Ministry wanted 'to get a picture of how the system works, how the cases involving coercive interventions are managed, and what happens in those cases when things go wrong' (*Dagbladet*, 2016b). Following up on this dialogue-based approach, in October 2016, the Ministry of Children and Families, in collaboration with the MFA, invited all foreign embassies in Oslo to an informational meeting about Norwegian child protection and welfare practices. In her opening remarks, the Minister acknowledged that the Norwegian system was facing some 'challenges when it comes to meeting an increasingly multicultural population' and that there was a 'need for more international cooperation in order to secure the best interests of the child' (recognition) (Horne, 2016). However, she once again rejected some of the key premises for the critique of Norwegian child welfare practices:

> From the international media, you can get the impression that Norway puts more children in alternative care than other countries do, and that families with foreign citizenship or background are particularly targeted. This is not true (Horne, 2016).

Norwegian bureaucratic officials were more inclined than government representatives to combine rejection with *countering* in statements and responses to questions from the media during this time. In mid-April 2016, the press office of the Norwegian Directorate for Children, Youth and Family Affairs (Bufdir) issued the following written statement to a Norwegian newspaper:

> In Norway, we place a fundamental trust in the state and the processes which are designed to ensure private persons' security under the law. This trust is not present to the same extent for example in Eastern European countries (*Dagbladet*, 2016a).

The same day, the Bufdir director had an op-ed published in which several response categories featured but had rejection as the dominant mode. In the opening paragraph, the director observed that some aspects of international criticism were 'worth listening to and learning from' (containment/recognition). Then she moved to problematising the critics' position (countering):

> The Child Welfare Services shall contribute to ensuring safe growing-up conditions for children and youth. In cases where the child risks serious harm by remaining at home, the Child Welfare Services *must* therefore take the necessary steps and deprive parents of custody. This is in Norway considered to be in the child's best interests. Norwegian law prescribes that concerns about the children are given the highest weighting – the child has autonomous rights, which is unusual in many other countries . . . In Norway, beating children is unlawful. In this country,

> parents are every year sentenced to prison for having exerted violence against their children. As a nation, Norway has come a long way when it comes to views on child rearing over the last fifty years. (Trommald, 2016, emph. in original)

The op-ed concluded by rejecting two core premises of the criticism against the Norwegian Child Welfare Services. First, the director emphasised that care orders in Norway are issued by the County Social Welfare Boards. Hence, neither the Norwegian government nor the municipal Child Welfare Services were the correct targets for the critique in question. Second, she put forward statistics showing that parents with immigrant backgrounds were in fact *not* overrepresented in child welfare cases involving a care order (Trommald, 2016).

Whereas Norwegian government representatives and bureaucratic officials used a variety of response modes, with rejection as the most persistent over time, Norwegian diplomats generally refrained from commenting directly on the international criticism against the Child Welfare Services. In 2016, as protests unfolded in a number of capitals around the world, an MFA spokesperson acknowledged that it was particularly challenging for the diplomatic apparatus because the situation was escalating rapidly. Commenting on the diplomatic management of the criticism more broadly, he said:

> Norwegian ambassadors are in continuous dialogue with other states' authorities, both permanent staff and political representatives at the highest level. Embassy staff meet regularly with politicians, journalists, organizations and protesters who are critical of the Norwegian Child Welfare Services. On all these occasions, serious actors are met with respect and goodwill. We are concerned with listening and providing relevant and factual information about the Norwegian Child Welfare Services. Feedback is passed on to the Ministry of Children and Equality, which is the responsible ministry in Norway (Egseth, 2016).

As we can see, the MFA spokesperson was here alluding both to the function of securing boundaries, and to the function of emphatic listening – both key elements in processes of containment. For embassy staff in the capitals where protests against the Norwegian Child Welfare Services occurred, the minimum required task would be to report back home about the events. Some ambassadors also met with protesters outside the embassy, received protest letters and petitions on behalf of the Norwegian government and offered brief, descriptive remarks to the media. What the diplomats did *not* do was to enter into public discussions about individual cases or the quality of the Norwegian child welfare system more broadly. In January 2016, following protests and criticism over a child welfare case involving a Romanian-born parent, a Norwegian diplomat stationed in Bucharest observed:

> There has been considerable interest in the case here, but we have no problem managing that. We do not go into the specific case, because we do not have the details, and that is probably for the best (*VG*, 2016b).

The diplomat stated that a key task for the embassy had been to contact the Romanian foreign ministry, foreign minister and parliament to provide factual information in writing about the organisation of the Norwegian child welfare system, including information

about Norwegian rule of law and the duty of confidentiality with respect to individual cases (*VG*, 2016b).

Similarly, faced with criticism from Czech interest groups, media and government representatives over cases involving Czech parents, the Norwegian ambassador to Prague identified frequent meetings and dialogue as central to the embassy's response. The ambassador said she had been summoned by Czech government representatives on multiple occasions, and had attended meetings with the Czech president, the prime minister, the foreign minister and the president of the Senate (Sletner, 2018). The ambassador formed the impression that the main purpose of these meetings 'was to inform us that the bilateral relationship was in a bad state' as a direct consequence of disputes over child protection cases (Sletner, 2018). Reflecting on her own and the embassy's response, the ambassador emphasised the importance of calming the situation and keeping communication channels open:

> When such [child protection] cases emerge, we cannot wait too long . . . Norwegian authorities must react quickly. We need a more proactive dialogue. [We need to be] willing to meet the other party, say, Czech media, and engage in a dialogue with them. It is useless to reject meetings, then the case just gets worse. One needs to be available (Sletner, 2018).

Towards the end of 2016, the organised mass protests had come to an end, and international media attention had declined. However, the Norwegian state was now faced with emergent critical attention from a new type of international actor taking an interest in Norwegian child protection and welfare practices, namely international institutions. In early 2016, when the wave of organised mass protests began, a group of parliamentarians in the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly called for a review of Norwegian child protection and welfare practices, noting that 'the significant number of cases of removal of children from their families . . . indicates a systemic problem of Norwegian social services that are dealing with the children['s] welfare' (Ardelean et al., 2016). One and a half years later, the resulting report identified Norway as a state 'facing particular issues' in balancing children's right to protection from violence and neglect with their right not to be separated from their family against their own wishes (Council of Europe, 2018: 5). Moreover, towards the end of 2016, the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) in Strasbourg announced that it would hear seven cases concerning Norwegian child welfare decisions. Reacting to this news, an attorney in the Office of the Norwegian Attorney-General observed that the Norwegian child protection and welfare practices had been 'put under scrutiny, to an extent and in a way that calls for attention' (Emberland, 2016). The attorney also noted that the Court's decision came at a time when the Norwegian Child Welfare Services were facing 'considerable – and widely covered in the media – storms from multiple places abroad' (Emberland, 2016).

The critical attention from institutions like the Council of Europe and the ECHR arguably represented a different, more immediate threat to Norway's ontological security than the criticism from parents, protesters, journalists and affected states. Coming from third parties, it was by nature less emotionally charged. Moreover, decisions by the ECHR had the potential to coerce Norway to adapt. Perhaps this was why the Norwegian Minister of Children and Equality assumed an open approach when

Norwegian media asked her to comment on the fact that the ECHR had taken on a record number of cases against the Norwegian state: 'The fact that the ECHR has instigated seven child welfare cases against Norway is a serious matter', she acknowledged (*Dagbladet*, 2016d). In an interview with a Norwegian newspaper, the Minister reflected critically on Norwegian child protection and welfare practices in some of the areas under scrutiny, focusing in particular on procedures enabling parents to be reunited with their children following a care order, and visitation practices when children were placed outside of their home (recognition). She was also open to the possibility that Norway might need change its practices to comply with the European Convention on Human Rights (*Dagbladet*, 2016d). The recognition mode was not consistent over time, however. As Adler-Nissen (2014) also has noted, state responses to stigmatisation and shaming are rarely static. The ways in which they address and try to cope with shaming and stigmatisation may change over time, and domestic debate will often be key to triggering adjustments (Adler-Nissen, 2014: 154). In 2018, a new Minister took over the Children and Equality portfolio, signalling a less compromising approach: 'I will not yield one inch when it comes to Norwegian child welfare. Norway is a pioneer when it comes to protecting children from violence and abuse,' she told a Norwegian newspaper (rejection/countering) (*Aftenposten*, 2018). The minister was speaking at a time when Norway was once again in the international media spotlight, following a second BBC documentary (Whewell, 2018). Since then, new cases have appeared in the media at regular intervals. In 2019, Norway took the unusual step of expelling the Polish consul from Oslo, on the grounds that his activity supporting Polish citizens in child welfare cases was deemed 'incompatible with his role as a diplomat' (*Aftenposten*, 2019). Poland responded by expelling a Norwegian diplomat in return. In a press release, the Polish MFA commented that it had been 'satisfied' with the expelled consul's work, 'especially with regard to his commitment to defending the interests of Polish families' (PMFA – Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2019).

Concluding remarks

This article began with two observations. The first was that the literature on statehood and crisis management has paid limited attention to ontological security crises. The second was that key contributions on how states cope with international stigmatisation and shaming do not sufficiently consider the crisis management roles and response modes available to different state actors when faced with an ontological security attack. Against this backdrop, we proposed, first, to differentiate between the roles played by government representatives, bureaucratic officials and diplomats in the management of ontological security crises and, second, to theorise containment as a response mode for state actors – and especially diplomatic staff – when faced with strong emotional reactions to and criticism of their state's conduct.

Not all international attacks on a state's identity will trigger an ontological security crisis. We have postulated here that the threshold leading to an ontological security crisis will be crossed if the state realises that the critique may dictate long-term changes to identity-constituting practices within the state. In our case study of Norwegian state responses to escalating criticism against the Norwegian Child Welfare Services in 2016,

we found that government representatives, bureaucratic officials and diplomats had a variety of roles and action repertoires available to them. We also found that while government representatives and bureaucratic officials actively responded to the criticism by combining recognition, rejection and countering, it often fell on diplomats to secure boundary functions, keep bilateral communication channels open and listen emphatically to the critics. While such containment also forms part of the diplomatic toolbox when diplomats engage in traditional day-to-day activities, we have focused here on containment as a crisis management tool in situations where the state's identity and values are put under extraordinary pressure in the international domain. Faced with severe criticism of Norwegian child protection and welfare practices, a chief diplomatic priority for the diplomats in question became to diffuse the crisis and prevent it from causing long-term damage to the bilateral relationships in question.

As a relational conduct, containment is premised upon there being *something to contain*, specifically, an emotionally charged attack or reaction threatening to obstruct dialogue and interaction between parties. This way, containment can be seen as one way of meeting forms of emotional diplomacy – including anger, guilt or sympathy (Hall, 2015). For a diplomat dealing with a prospective ontological security crisis, containment seems to serve two key functions: Keeping communication channels open and providing a secure space for dialogue; and recognising and calming the other party's emotions and viewpoints through emphatic listening (Bion, 1961, 1963). Unlike collaborative diplomacy, where the working relationship rests on a shared agreement to collaborate (Chaban and Elgström, 2020), or 'dialogue-based public diplomacy' where the underlying objective is the export of ideas and values (Riordan, 2005: 191), containment diplomacy involves one party taking on the responsibility of containing the other's criticism, thereby seeking to diffuse the critical situation.

The nature of the states involved on both sides is also likely to affect whether containment becomes part of the crisis management response in a given situation. The diplomatic apparatus of a state like Norway, which takes pride in being dialogically oriented and in its international identity as a good mediator, will be more inclined to try and contain the situation when faced with an emotionally charged diplomatic attack or reaction from another state (Interview B, 27.10.20; Neumann, 2013). Moreover, it is likely that international criticism will be perceived as a more urgent threat to a state's international identity and standing if it comes from a state considered to have an equal or higher ranking in the social hierarchy (Adler-Nissen, 2014: 154; Rumelili and Towns, 2017), or from an authoritative third party – such as a recognised international media actor or institutions such as the Council of Europe or European Court of Human Rights. Finally, the prior relationship between two parties will also matter as to how effective containment is as a diplomatic response tool. If two states have an amicable and broad bilateral relationship of mutual benefit, then efforts to contain the situation are likely to be more effective.

If we were to cast our net wider and reflect on the broader area of validity for our findings, then one interesting case study would be the widespread international media portrayal of states like the United States and Sweden as poor crisis managers in the opening phase of the COVID-19 crisis, in sharp contrast with their self-identities as competent and effective providers of societal security. When President Trump

suspended US financial support to the World Health Organization in April 2020, accusing the latter of 'severely mismanaging and covering up the spread of the coronavirus' (BBC, 2020), we may assume that US diplomats had to contend with emotional reactions from representatives of other states, and that containment was an integrated part of their management.

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Notes

1. News articles were identified through broad keyword searches in the Norwegian media archive *Retriever*, followed by manual scanning of headlines and content. Focusing on the three largest Norwegian newspapers by distribution – *Aftenposten, VG* and *Dagbladet* – resulted in around 300 media articles we deemed relevant for our study. All translations from Norwegian to English are our own.
2. According to support groups, demonstrations took place in 63 cities in 20 countries, with more than 60.000 people participating (*Dagbladet*, 2016a).
3. The first major case relating to Norwegian child welfare practices where government representatives of another state were involved publicly dates back to 2012, when bilateral relations between India and Norway turned sour over a case where the Norwegian Child Welfare Services had removed two children from their Indian parents. The case was subject to considerable media attention in both states. The municipal Child Welfare Service in question later complained that it had ended up negotiating directly with the Indian government. The case finally found a solution with assistance from the Norwegian Foreign Minister and the Norwegian Embassy in New Delhi (NRK, 2012).
4. The fact that so many states engage in child welfare cases on foreign territory can also be interpreted against the backdrop of broader discussions about states' 'duty of care' for nationals residing abroad (Græger and Leira, 2019). All states operate on both sides of this conundrum, having to cope both with their own distressed nationals on foreign territory, and with the challenges of other states' nationals on their own territory. In 2009, for example, the Norwegian diplomatic apparatus worked hard to bring home two children who were residing with their father in Morocco against their mother's will, a case which ended up having a long-lasting negative impact on Norwegian–Moroccan relations (Haugevik, 2018).

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