Institutions & Organized Violence in Post-Socialist Societies

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Introduction

The breakdown of the socialist systems in 1989/1991 has been accompanied by sustained and organized violence between groups or between groups and the state. Major conflict broke out in Yugoslavia, Chechnya, Azerbaijan and Georgia; besides, there are smaller and localised conflicts with a high potential for escalation, most recently, in Macedonia.

The research industry on internal, ethno-political violence is one of the most productive in social sciences with regards to its outputs; it is, however, not always especially effective. Despite an impressive amount of scholarly papers on the causes of organized violence in post-socialist societies, we feel that we still lack convincing empirical work and sound theoretical framework that grasp the nature of these conflicts.

There might be a number of reasons for this, the first being the objective lack of data. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought also an end to the systematical collection of important economic and socio-political data; the newly independent states often lacked the capacity for statistical work, and many war-torn sub national units (for example Chechnya, Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh or Kosovo) simply became statistically no-go areas. Quantitative studies were under these conditions hard to do.

A second reason is a serious methodological problem: On the one hand, regional studies are often quite detached from mainstream social sciences. Many case studies contain valuable information about regional peculiarities, but their research design does not reflect the current theoretical debates. On the other hand, social science main stream theory is often not easily applicable to specific conflicts, whose dynamics might be driven by peculiar, specific, historically grown factors.

The objective of this article is to propose a methodological approach for the study of organized violence in post-social societies that is both theoretically informed and able to grasp some of the post-soviet peculiarities. This paper does not intend to present more than preliminary results from work in progress. In our examples, we focus on successor states of the Soviet Union.

The remaining of this paper is organized in four short sections: The first section compares the evidence of internal, organized violence in Eastern Europe with the global trend. A second section briefly discusses recent findings on the causes of internal violence and links these findings to the East European experience. The third section sketches our theoretical approach. In the last section, we give four short examples that aim to demonstrate the heuristic value of our approach.

Post-Socialist Societies and the rest of the World

There seem to be four major trends in organized violence since the end of World War II:[1]

1) The magnitude of interstate warfare decreases since the mid-80ies.
2) Since the end of WW II, the magnitude of internal wars (political and/or ethnical defined) has been steadily growing.
3) Only after 1993 (with a two years time lag after the end of the Soviet Union) the trend is reversed and internal conflicts decrease in magnitude.
4) Internal conflicts tend to become longer and harder to settle since the mid-80ies.

The end of the cold war seems thus to have produced mix results. Most regions are more stable now than before; interstate warfare is decreasing. The turbulences of the end of the Soviet Bloc are today partly contained. However, internal conflicts, once escalated, tend to become much harder to settle.

Eastern Europe does not contradict these trends. They are, however, accentuated. The rise in internal, ethnically defined conflict after 1991 is extremely sharp, especially given the fact that for five decades there was virtually no organized violence within the socialist bloc.

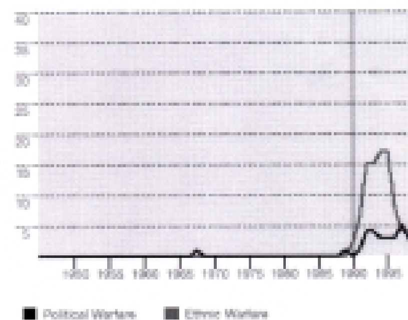

Figure 2: Violent Societal Conflict in the Socialist Bloc and Successor States[2]

There are at last two implications from these insights: First, Eastern Europe is in comparison with other regions statistically not unique, but merely accentuates the trends. Therefore we can assume (and try to test) that the factors that cause internal conflict globally might at least partly also apply to Eastern Europe.

Second, the trend within the region shows indeed a very sharp increase that needs explanation.

We suggest therefore that the general trend may be explained with general applicable (and observable) causes, while the regional peculiarity may be explained by specific factors.

Social Sciences and Internal Violence

Recent studies on causes and dynamics of internal conflict have made, in our opinion, valuable contributions in three fields.

Quantitative probabilistic studies

Firstly, there is significant progress in quantitative probabilistic studies. For more than five decades, social science has tried to identify the causes for war by systematically collecting data on war.[3] A recent project of the Development Economic Research Group (DECRG) of the World Bank now seeks to bundle these efforts.[4] In a series of widely discussed quantitative and qualitative papers, the scholars involved in this project try to identify those factors that increase the risk for internal war.[5] Based on a large cross country study, the scholars identify six factors that increase the probability for internal war.[6]

Risk Factors for Internal War

1) A low income and falling growth rates.
2) The structure of income also affects the risk. The more a country is dependent on primary commodity export such as oil or gas, the higher the risk.
3) Ethnic composition matters: However, it is not ethnic fragmentation that matters per se, but the size of the groups within a polity. The risk is highest when the major group consists of 45–90% of the population and has thus the potential for ethnic dominance.
4) Terrain: Rough mountainous terrain and forest cover gives an advantage to rebel organization and thus seems to increase the risk of war.
5) Conflict breeds conflict. The probability of renewed conflict after a settlement is app. 50%.
6) Finally, bad neighborhoods affect the risk for war. Spillovers from warring neighbor countries affect a country's probability for peace.

Incentives and Rational Choice

Secondly, game theoretical models and subsequent qualitative studies have lead to a more sophisticated understanding of how conflict risks actually turn into organized violence. Statistically measured probabilities tell us something about risks; they don't tell anything about casual links. For organized violence to emerge, it takes certain social situations in which actors think that the relative costs of violence are smaller than the relative costs of non-violence. Otherwise actors would not engage in the organisation of violence – an activity that takes strategic planning and investment.

In other words, the organization of violence depends on the incentive and opportunity structure in which actors are locked. Risk factors are likely to "go active" and to affect a polity's stability when a sudden shift of the incentive and opportunity structure occurs. Such a shift may be caused by many factors. One of the most important factors affecting the incentive structure of entrepreneurs of violence, however, is, generally speaking, diminishing state capacity. The weaker the state is the greater the incentive to challenge the incumbent leaders: Thus, it is most often not the angry and the poor that rebel in the first place, but rather the political challenger that seeks to exploit the opportunity.

The factors and dynamics that cause war out-break are often very different from the factors and dynamics that determine the duration of organized violence

Thirdly, and probably most important, many qualitative studies have convincingly demonstrated that the factors that cause conflict are qualitatively different from those factors that affect the duration of conflict.

Sustained violence changes its own rationales: The causes of conflict may or may not have a political dimension (such as the fight for independence or justice). However, when organized violence becomes sustained, the economic dimension becomes more and more important. Organized violence needs continuous investment in arms, recruitment, logistics, infrastructure and PR. Entrepreneurs of violence thus need to engage in an economy of war in order to create the revenues needed for the organization of violence. In time, the economic rational may become more important than the political aim, and entrepreneurs of violence may be more interested in sustaining their economic activities than in obtaining the original political aim or even in winning the war. Once a conflict has reached this stage and becomes a "market of violence"[7], it may be very difficult to find a political solution – precisely because the dynamic of the conflict has shifted from the political to the economic. At the time of writing this paper, NATO and EU are experiencing these difficulties in Macedonia.

The above-discussed factors provide a powerful explanation for the emergence of internal violence in Eastern Europe after 1989 / 1991. An analysis more sophisticated than what we can deliver in this short paper would show that in most East European hot spots, the above-mentioned risk factors were in place. In addition, the total state failure in 1989 / 1991 provided an abrupt shift in the opportunity structure in the successor polities of the Soviet and Yugoslav state. It was the state collapse that has pushed the societies of these two regions in a state of fear and uncertainty and opened up windows of opportunity for political entrepreneurs. It is exactly through this window that ethnic entrepreneurs enter the political scene. State weakness, or state collapse, as it has occurred in the Former Soviet Union in Former Yugoslavia, de-blocks access to resources and power: Established institutions that have regulated access to and distribution of resources crumble or collapse, and new ones have yet to be designed. Elites thus inevitably engage in a competition, which is no longer framed by existing, accepted institutions. A key resource in power struggles can be ethnicity. Political entrepreneurs thus often turn into ethnic entrepreneurs – they appeal to real or perceived threats and injustices in order to mobilise support, and this increases the risk for conflicts.

These elements give us by and large quite a powerful tool for the explanation of internal conflicts in the former socialist bloc.

However, there remain two puzzles. Not all that can explode has exploded – some potential conflicts have been successfully defused. In other words: Similar conditions do not always and not automatically translate into violent conflicts. Rapid institutional change, as occurring in Former Yugoslavia and the Former Soviet Union, can obviously lead to new institutional arrangements on new, mostly smaller scales; and these new institutional arrangements may provide stability in inter-group relations and border management. For example, the autonomous Republic of Dagestan in the Caucasus has managed to keep ethnopolitical stability, in spite of the fact that all risk factors are "red". The same is true for the republics of Karachaevo-Cherkssija and Kabardino-Balkarija, where the tensions between the titular groups have been defused for the time being. Adzharia, an autonomous Republic within Georgia, has not followed the examples of the secessionist South Ossetia and Abkhazia but has stayed within a nationalising Georgia.

Similar cases of non-conflict can be found in the Balkans. Armed conflicts have not spread beyond the boundaries of Former Yugoslavia, despite the fact that neighbouring states have suffered from sanctions and massive refugee flows. And even within the Yugoslav borders, large-scale violence did – for now – not diffuse to Macedonia and Montenegro. Both former Yugoslav Republics have managed so far to keep the delicate ethnic balance, despite the massive influx of Albanian refugees from Kosovo and the continuous threat of a possible Serbian conflict export. Why and how is this so?

And the second puzzle refers to the great variance of duration and intensity of hot conflicts: Some conflicts end rather quickly; others tend to become endemic, with both sides making no efforts either to win or to stop the war. What causes the great differences here?

Institutions and Internal Violence

In order to deal with these questions, we propose an institutional approach. To link the institutional arrangements of a society with the potential for organised violence or sustainable non-violent stability is, as far as we are aware of, a relatively new approach – at least for the post-socialist space.

Institutions are, according to the classical definition of Douglass North, "the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, are the humanely devised constraints that shape human interaction"[8]. Institutions are trained patterns of human interaction, which are codified in contracts and rules, or which root in shared norms, values, and codes of behaviour. Because institutions are trained, repeated and „sticky" patterns of interaction, they stabilize social expectations and help reducing transaction costs. The institutional arrangement of a society produces incentive structures for actors, defines the windows of opportunity for political entrepreneurs and establishes the constraints in which actors are locked. Focusing on institutions allows us to catch the opportunity structures of actors, and their access to resources.

Functions of Institutions:

- Institutions are accepted, trained and sometimes enforced patterns of interaction, which can frame conflicts. Conflict potentials can thus be defused. The breakdown of such a framework may enable the risk factors to „go active".
- The institutional framework provides the incentive structure for local actors and thus determines their strategic action. Institutions can thus not only diffuse violence, but they can also produce violence, if the incentive structure is "badly" designed.
- Institutions have distributional effects. They determine the access to resources crucial for organizing violence and determine the relative position of actors.

Challenging widespread state-centric approaches, we argue that the institutional framework consists not only of the institutional legacy of the "official" state institutions of the socialist systems. Equally important are unofficial institutions, such as the "shadow" institutions that have emerged as a response to the organisational deficits of socialism, and those locally rooted norms and conventions that have survived in niches not occupied by the socialist state. Official and unofficial institutions form together a hybrid, eclectic, locally distinct framework, which structures actors incentives, opportunities and constraints.

"Official" institutions

Under the term official institutions we understand the legacy of the soviet state. Soviet ethno-federalism has left behind territories, equipped with titular nations, territorial bureaucracies, territorial media, proto-democratic institutions, such as parliaments (soviets), and a territorial elite that was ready to take over this legacy. In the case of Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union, these borders thus formed a template for status conflicts. Other residues of empire are not territorial, but functional. These include military organizations, economic networks of supply and production, networks of party or business nomenclature or parts of bureaucracies that have survived the collapse. Some of them have adapted to post-imperial circumstances. They became the new locus of power and formed the functional backbone of the newly assembled polities.

"Unofficial" institutions

By "unofficial" institutions we mean such institutions that were not part of the soviet design, but which have emerged as a reaction to the organisational deficits of the system, or have survived the Soviet homogenisation.

These unofficial institutions went largely undetected by political science and "sovietology", which focused mainly

on "official" state institutions, but they proved to have a significant impact on the way polities reassembled after the implosion of the central state.

In this category belong the endemic black market economies and the widespread corruption, both of which are common features of post-socialist societies. Another widespread unofficial institution of socialist systems, which have retained their importance and functionality beyond the collapse, are the networks of patronage. In areas, where the state lacked the resources to penetrate the periphery with bureaucratic institutions, it had to rely on personal networks for governance and control. After the collapse of the central state, networks of patronage became in many places the most cohesive institutional structure, substituting state tasks and concentrating political power and economic resources.

In wide parts of the Caucasus and Central Asia, specific forms of local regulation of justice, solidarity and conflict regulation exist, which do not depend on a modern state bureaucracy, even though they might depend in their functionality to regulate conflict on the monopoly of violence of the state. Codified traditional value systems (e.g. *adat* - the "law of the mountains" in many remote parts of the Caucasus) existed together with the Soviet, and later, Russian legal systems. The re-emergence of *shariat-courts*[9] is another example. In this context also the „council of elders", which is still highly respected in North Caucasian societies, or the *ulemma* in Central Asia can be mentioned.

Detecting and describing such local institutions is crucial for our understanding of post-socialist spaces – from the Balkans to Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Turkish provinces of China. It is precisely this hybrid, eclectic combination of official and unofficial institutions that forms the institutional framework, which governs post-socialist, and in fact most political spaces after modernity. Today it is obvious that socialist self-perception and western analysis both dramatically underestimated the residual power of "the local". A better understanding of this simultaneous functioning of different codes and value systems is by no means only of "folkloristic" value, but helps understanding the capacity of a society for dealing with conflicts and state-building.

Institutions in Action Snapshots from the Caucasus

The scope of this article does not permit to elaborate on the proposed approach. Instead, we will present in lieu of conclusion four snap-shots from conflicts in post-socialist societies. Every snapshot is intended to highlight a significant aspect of organized violence in post-socialist societies, or, in other words, to explain a seemingly paradox development.

We think of our approach as of a camera lens. The snapshots should thus reveal the heuristic power of the institutional approach.

Snapshot 1: Market of Violence in Chechnya

Prolonged violence paves the ground for the emergence of "markets of violence". Under the term "markets of violence" we understand a situation, in which violence is economically profitable for the few successful entrepreneurs of violence. Thus, whatever the core of the conflict was, there is a strong rationale for the warlords to stabilize the status quo. If government officials receive a share of the revenues of the market of violence (or are themselves embarking on warlord politics), they might also become interested in prolonging this violence. In such cases sustaining violence becomes a rational objective of all actors. This view contradicts commonly held assumptions of prolonged conflicts as an unintended and anarchical outcome, and it also contradicts the official discourse of governments and rebels.

The "market of violence"-metaphor adequately describes the situation in Chechnya. Between 1996 and 1999, the Chechen rebels were left in a state of quasi-independence. Instead of reconstructing the state, however, the strongest warlords engaged in a competition, which further weakend the remaining state structures. In order to finance their efforts, they engaged in an economy of war, creating revenues from illicit oil trade, hostage taking, drug and weapon trading and collecting money from the Diaspora and from other ideologically motivated donor organisations. The Russian invasion in 1999 did not alter this war economy, not least because the Russian army is not able to end this war militarily, but clearly obstructs any political solution. Furthermore, there is enough evidence that the Russian army is participating in the war economy, for example in the illicit oil business or in weapon trading. As a result, there is a military stalemate and a sustained low intensity war, from which key players on both sides profit.

Snapshot 2: The impact of the Soviet Ethno-Federalism

A striking observation applying to the whole Caucasus region is the fact that virtually all hot conflicts broke out in and around administrative sub-units (of pseudo-state character), such as Chechnya, South-Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh or Abkhasia. These used to be so-called "Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republics" (ASSR) and were entitled with significant pseudo-state-institutions, such as a constitution, regional media, border, a flag, institutions of higher education and some informal quotas which favoured members of the titular nation. In most of these polities ethnic entrepreneurs succeeded in taking over the governing institutions of the sub-state-apparatus. Subsequently, these entrepreneurs managed to organize their support within the framework of these "kidnapped" institutions. This contradicts the common assumption that conflict broke out because of old aspirations of ethnically defined we-groups for independence. In areas of compact ethnic settlement, but without the framing of the soviet administrative division, no hot conflicts have broken out (e. g. Armenians in Dzhavakheti/Georgia, Uzbeks in West-Tajikistan).

This snapshot allows two important conclusions: Firstly, it was not the “awakening nations” fighting for independence that have caused conflicts, but rather ethnical elites taking advantage of the opportunity. Secondly, the existing quasi-state institutions were crucial for the success of this endeavour, because they considerably lowered the price for organising support.

Snapshot 3: Small scale conflicts and governance by networks of patronage

In many of the successor polities of the former Soviet Union, we find relatively stable regimes, although these newly independent states are extremely weak and often engage in sustained low-level conflict. We argue that this combination of weak states, conflict and relatively stable elites is not a paradox, but rather a result of a rational strategy of the elites.

Elites of newly independent (quasi-)states often find that the best way to govern is based on highly institutionalised networks of patronage.

In order to stabilize these networks of patronage, the patrons of the networks have to satisfy the needs of their clientele. Not surprisingly, patrons in such weak “network states” usually control access to resources such as oil, gas or cotton. In order to secure his position, the patron must furthermore prevent potential challengers from access to resources. Independent economic activities are not encouraged, and patrons typically try to hinder independent activities outside of the network.

Therefore, patrons will minimize public goods such as safety, protection, economic opportunities or legal protection; instead they will try to privatise these goods and to make them available only within the network. One means of achieving this is by keeping the state weak; another means is to tolerate or even promote low-level conflict, even within the own state, since this increases insecurity and thus maximizes the dependency of political actors (and the population) on the patron’s good will. State weakness may thus be even a rational choice of leaders, who base their rule on networks of patronage. Governance through networks in weak states may thus stabilize the regime, but it may also increase the risk of conflict.

Snapshot 4: Ethnopolitical stability without the state

The last snapshot shows the tiny Republic of Dagestan, one of the ethnically most diverse regions in the world, neighboring war torn Chechnya. Dagestan, however, has been blessed by a remarkable ethnopolitical stability, although the state is extremely weak. We argue that this can be explained by “traditional” local institutions. As mentioned above, a colourful patchwork of “traditional” institutions, dealing with conflict and negotiating justice and access to resources, had survived socialist homogenisation. Such an institution is the *dzhamaata*[10] in Dagestan. *Dzhamaata* can be described as a complex system of numerous independent, but interrelated political formations of self-government with uniform norms. These units of self-government are based on the principle of neighbourhood, which, in the multi-ethnic patchwork of Dagestan, is distinct from clan-networks defined by descent. The *dzhamaata* adapted to the legal environment by changing in size and by cooperating with other institutions. It thus retained its significance as a political unit governing interethnic reciprocal exchange throughout the changes of statehood, and has thus helped to preserve ethnopolitical stability without a state.

Work in progress…

In this paper we intended to propose a theoretical approach, designed to grasp the conditions for the organisation of organized (internal) violence in post-socialist societies. To give an idea of the heuristic value of our approach, we have presented four examples of how the institutional framework of a society influences actor’s incentives with regard to the organisation of violence. This paper is not more than a report from work in progress. A collection of case studies form the Caucasus and the Balkan will be published later this year (Koehler, Jan and Zürcher, Christoph, 2001, Potentials of (Dis)order. Explaining Violence in the Caucasus and in the Balkan. Manchester: Manchester UP).

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[1] For a good overview, see for example Gurr, Ted R., Marshall, Monty G., Khosla, Deepa, 2000, Peace and Conflict 2001. A Global Survey of Armed Conflicts, Self-Determination Movements, and Democracy (Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland, College Park).

[2] Adapted from Gurr, Ted R., Marshall, Monty G., Khosla, Deepa, 2000, Peace and Conflict 2001. A Global Survey of Armed Conflicts, Self-Determination Movements, and Democracy (Center for International Development and Conflict Management, University of Maryland, College Park).

[3] Prominent projects are, among others, the Correlates of War Project (cf. Singer, J. D., Small, M., 1994, Correlates of War Project: International and Civil War Data, 1816–1992.

Ann Arbor, MI: ICPRS); the State Failure Project (cf. Gurr, Ted R., with Harff, Barbara and Marshall, Monty G, 1997, Codebook: Internal Wars and Failures of Governance, 1954 – 1996. State Failure Task Force. http://www.bsos.umd.edu/cidcm/stfail/index.htm, 12.3.2001); the Polity Data (cf. Jaggers, Keith, Gurr, Ted R., 1995, Tracking Democracy´s Third Wave with Polity III Data. In: Journal of Peace Research, vol. 31, No. 4, 1995: 469–482); the Minorities at Risk (cf. Gurr, Robert T., 1993, Minorities at Risk: Wash. DC: USIP).

[4] The Economics of Political and Common Violence. The World Bank: Development Economic Research Group DECRG. (Vgl. http://www.worldbank.org/research/conflict/index.htm).

[5] The key paper is Collier, Paul, Hoeffler, Anke, 2001, Greed and Grievance in Civil War (January 4, 2001) *http://www.worldbank.org/research/conflict/papers/greedandgrievance.htm* (25.05.2001).

[6] see Collier, Paul, Hoeffler, Anke, 2001, Greed and Grievance in Civil War (January 4, 2001) http://www.worldbank.org/research/conflict/papers/greedandgrievance.htm (25.05.2001)

[7] A term coined by Georg Elwert. See Elwert, Georg, 1997, Gewaltmärkte. Beobachtungen zur Zweckrationalität der Gewalt. In: Trotha, Trutz von (ed.), 1997, Soziologie der Gewalt, Sonderheft 37 der Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie, Westdeutscher Verlag: 86–101.

[8] North, Douglass C., 1990, Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.: 6.

[9] Islamic law interpreted according to the Islamic law-schools, sharia was strongly repressed in the Soviet Union, whereas adat – the localised customary law never ceased to have a considerable influence.

[10] ”Dzhamaat” is an Arabian word, signifying ”society”, a distinct organised collectivity of people.