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IARO 2006-2007
Tajikistan, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan

Policing the Post-Soviet Frontier: Militaries and Paramilitaries after the fall of Communism

Exiting Anarchy: Militia Politics and State Reconstruction in Georgia and Tajikistan

Topic of Research:

As the USSR broke apart in 1991, eight independent countries emerged in the Caucasus and Central Asia. Three of these successor states immediately experienced a civil war. The wars ended in calcified cease-fires without resolving any of the fundamental issues that ignited the conflict in the first place. Criminal kingpins and warlords commanding private armies emerged as the powerbrokers in the chaotic aftermath of the civil war, and the new presidents were forced to incorporate many armed factions into the ruling coalition. The fragile regimes then faced a dire situation: multiple possible challengers, corrupt and fragmented armed forces, the countryside awash with small arms, virtually ungovernable mountainous terrain well-suited to guerilla warfare, rampant urban unemployment, and tens of thousands of aggrieved refugees. Renewed war seemed likely.

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Yet despite the structural factors that seemed to work in favor of prolonged conflict, the post-communist wars ended quickly and decisively. During the 1990s the postwar presidents of Tajikistan, Georgia, and Azerbaijan successfully disarmed their paramilitary rivals, and today preside over modern-looking security forces. My research aims to explain this unusual trend towards decisive civil war settlement and state centralization in the wake of mass violence and state failure. I am particularly interested in the process by which paramilitary armies were either disarmed or co-opted by the post-Socialist regimes, a topic that has been neglected in the case studies on civil war settlement in this region.

Relevance and Contribution to the Field:

While demobilization and disarmament are a phase of virtually every civil war settlement, they are rarely analyzed in detail, even in the best case studies. True to form, what little has been written on the civil war settlements in Georgia and Tajikistan has tended to focus on the formal negotiations that ended the war, not the parallel processes of disarmament and regime consolidation. Yet when civil wars are fought by coalitions of independently organized and self-financing militia units, it is not obvious that these groups should lay down their guns simply because of a negotiated elite settlement. Chronicling the process by which the paramilitary field commanders and the militias were either co-opted or dismembered is the primary empirical contribution of this work.

Research Methodology

There was great variation in the treatment of paramilitary fighters after the post-Soviet wars. Some were forced to retreat to rural strongholds, or reinvent themselves in the criminal underworld. Many others, however, were accommodated by the new regimes and folded into the institutions of the state, filling the ranks of new police forces and army units. A critical component of my research involves mapping the costs and benefits of incorporating armed civil war factions into state security services during postwar demobilization and disarmament. Much of my time in each country was spent investigating the particulars of the arrangements by which wartime paramilitary combatants were demobilized, and the parallel process of recruiting new police and military forces.

My initial research proposal was to systematically collect data on security forces of three post-Socialist countries through use of surveys. Georgia, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan were selected as research sites for the 2006-2007 academic year because those were the countries where I had acquired pre-fieldwork government permissions to conduct surveys of armed forces and Ministry of Interior personnel. Georgia and Tajikistan fell victim to civil wars in the early 1990s, and the third case (Kyrgyzstan) should have ideally served as control case, allowing investigation into the security structures that might have evolved "naturally," without a civil war.

Events conspired to make these surveys impossible in all three countries. Political instability in Kyrgyzstan, a police scandal in Georgia that reshuffled Ministry portfolios, and the general tightening of the state in Tajikistan made the survey implementation impossible. Anticipating this possibility, however, I used my time in all three countries to conduct as many interviews as possible. I initially approached elites, journalists, foreign embassy analysts, and other experts that were present in the 1990s, and gathered Russian language data sources in all three states to triangulate my intuitions. But once

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it became obvious that a survey would be impossible in these states, I adjusted my research strategy to maximize the potential of interviewing a representative sample of former militia members on my own. (I also modified my research plan to spend more time in Tajikistan and less time in Kyrgyzstan, reflecting unexpected research opportunities in Tajikistan (below) and unexpected political instability.)

I spent the bulk of my time in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan in the capital cities of Tbilisi. Because many of the "losers" of the Tajiki civil war no longer reside in the capital of Dushanbe, gathering a representative sample of former combatants required spending significant time in rural areas. I spent two months in the Darvaz district of the eastern autonomous oblast (Gorno-Badakhshan), which was an opposition-zone that served as a vital border crossing between Afghanistan and Tajikistan during the civil war. Because Darvaz is it is a Tajiki-speaking linguistic island in a sea of Shugni-speakers in Gorno-Badakhshan, there has been relatively little out-migration from the region. This made it an ideal site for extended research.

Aided by small teams of Georgian and Tajik research assistants, I identified and interviewed many dozens of demobilized soldiers that served in the civil wars. Initial contacts were made through networks of former street-level combatants that are now working as police officers, construction workers, machinists, taxi drivers, or in other blue-collar occupations. A few initial contacts quite unexpectedly cascaded, and often I found myself meeting with groups of men at a time. I gathered the life histories of these men, recording information about how they were recruited in the early 1990s, where and how their wartime units operated, and why some of them joined the state security services and others did not. Stumbling accidentally on this goldmine of narratives was obviously not anticipated in the initial work plan, but has probably been more fruitful than any other part of my research. Despite the fact that respondents were not chosen randomly, I have no reason to believe that their narratives are not representative of the experiences of militia members generally. These interviews constitute the first written record of the tactics and strategies that were used to demobilize and disarm these individuals.

Summary of Research Findings

Bad Neighbors, Bad Neighborhoods: The View From Above

It is fairly well established that Russia, as the dominant regional power, secured the quick and lasting resolution of these wars through military interventions, which were retroactively legitimized by the United Nations. In the Caucasus, Russian forces continue to support the rights of secessionists in "frozen conflicts." In Central Asia, Russia tended to give support to regimes that could act as a bulwark against potential Islamic insurgents. It is also well known that the Russian government intermittently provides critical support to regimes against their domestic challengers, so long as those agents had proven that they could serve as agents of Russian interests. Russia has also used its position as a third-party negotiator to permanently situate itself in the internal politics of the war-torn states.

One might say that Russia was an unusually effective third-party peacemaker because it was an unusually effective imperialist, dictating terms across its southern border. Geographic proximity, a long history of in the region, a clear stake in certain outcomes, as well as low costs of power projection. Russia has a long-term, vital interest in securing their Eurasian frontier, and Russian policymakers agreed substantially on the

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metric that would be used to measure success and failure. Fostering democracy was also not one of Moscow's policy priorities in the early 1990s. Russians believed -- not unreasonably -- that the triumph of democratic forces would probably mean the emergence of nationalist, populist, or Islamic governments, hostile to Russian interests. Local actors took advantage of this bias, finding that so long as they coordinated their policies to be responsive to Russian prerogatives, they would have a free reign to govern their new state in whatever manner they wished. The ability of their powerful northern neighbor to make long-term, credible commitments to support autocracy in the newly independent states made them a valuable ally to the post-Soviet regimes at various stages of the consolidation process.

Yet focusing exclusively on the geostrategic situation of the post-Soviet republics, and the particular characteristics of the Russian intervention, can only offer a partial explanation for the quick and decisive end to these civil wars. After all, without the expectation that pre-positioned Russian military forces would take sides in the internal power struggles in the NIS, the conflicts might never have spiraled to serious armed conflict in the first place. Many scholars have noted that minority groups in the Caucasus agitated with the expectation that they could draw Russian forces in to protect them if they could push the violence past a certain point. The Leninobodi and Kulobi militias of the Popular Front in Tajikistan, similarly, intuitively understood that Moscow would "not let them lose." If the Russian role can be both stabilizing and destabilizing in this part of the world in the early 1990s, it is incumbent on scholars to look closer at strategic actions on the ground.

Arresting State Failure: The View From Below

Rather than think in broad comparative terms about why negotiations succeeded or failed, a "bottom up" approach focuses on the dilemmas of putting the state back together, as it was understood by participants at the time. It is easy to forget that an armed group removing the president from power triggered the worst periods of violence in both Georgia and Tajikistan. The most likely scenario for renewed civil war in the mid-1990s was the same sort of paramilitary-backed coup, bringing radicals to power, and the resumption of large-scale violence against civilians. The tactics and strategies that were used by Shevardnadze (in Georgia) and Rakhmonov (in Tajikistan) consolidate power and build stable coalitions are thus difficult to separate from reconciliation and peacemaking.

Most conflict resolution experts observing the post-Communist civil wars in the 1990s agreed that there were three prerequisites to arrest the downward spiral into state failure. First, the militias that had seized the capital needed to be disarmed. These groups were composed of criminals and financed by racketeering; until they were driven into exile, order could not emerge. Second, the regime had to institutionalize democratic norms among the citizenry and monopolize control of the armed forces. These two goals would work hand-in-hand to protect the new president from a coup. Third, the states' territorial integrity had to be restored, with the pockets of rural resistance being re-incorporated into state structures through negotiated compromise, ideally with the UN acting as a mediator. Virtually all foreign-donor-funded conflict resolution projects throughout the 1990s were filtered through this framework.

Influential Tajiks and Georgians agreed with the foreign observers on the nature of the fundamental barriers to restoring civic order and ending the civil war (militias, coup-

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proofing, and rural hold-outs). In defiance of outsiders' expectations, however, locals managed to find alternative solutions that have proven quite durable. Rather than the state disarming the militias, militia members re-invented themselves as valuable assets for the regime, in exchange for shares of black market goods and services. Both presidents realized that if they moved quickly to monopolize power, it would be threatening to their armed constituencies and likely trigger a coup. Instead, the presidents worked to build a coalition of warlords who stood to gain more from the status quo than from any potential replacement. Warlords were given lucrative positions inside state bureaucracies, while the ministries were slowly configured to make everyone dependent on the president. (And of course everyone, at every stage, was careful to pay lip service to the vague ideals of "democratization" as often as possible). Finally, while incorporating the hinterlands into the organs of the state was obviously a long-term project, most of the states were willing to settle for simply neutralizing the rural holdouts as threats to the regime. Negotiated settlements, when they occurred at all, served mostly to legitimize and formalize the military victory of one side or another. In the end, order emerged through a process that bore only a superficial resemblance to the idealized outcomes imagined by outsiders.

Space concerns prevent a detailed discussion of how all three processes played out in both cases, but I will provide a brief outline of the elements that were common to both states' experiences.

Militia Politics

The first-order problem for state re-consolidation was the large numbers of heavily armed men roaming the streets of the capital. These men claimed to be patriots and war heroes, and having "bled for their nation" in the militarized fronts of the civil war, they now demanded recognition and special privileges as patriots. Also, the risk of dying in the civil war had deterred many youth from joining; now that the worst phases of the violence had passed, many young men came to realize that joining a militia offered excitement, social recognition, and opportunities for easy money.

Without a police force or army capable of arresting individuals for carrying weapons, these well-armed groups realized that the wealth of the city was theirs for the taking. These men justified their continued mobilization by noting that "peace" was very fragile, likely just a temporary ceasefire, and that the next phase of the civil war could erupt at any time. In the mean time, these men set up armed checkpoints inside the capital city, and engaged in extortion and violent intimidation of wealthy minority groups. Rape, murder, and theft became commonplace. Many citizens responded by closing their businesses, staying indoors, or fleeing the capital all together.

The emerging strongmen (e.g., party lieutenants, field commanders, and mafia captains that could act as military power-brokers) realized that since they were all essentially living off the spoils of racketing, their lot would be collectively improved if they could limit new entrants into the game, and draw-in their own memberships. Having lived through the corruption of the late Soviet period, these men also understood that the best opportunities for extortion, smuggling, and racketeering would always come from being inside the new government, rather than operating exclusively in the shadow economy. The mafias and private militias thus began to compete directly against each other for lucrative positions within the regime. In a very real sense, then, the state never "disarmed" the wartime militias at all – some of the militias were incorporated into state

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apparatuses, and "became" the state. The most powerful and wily militia captains found their way into various state ministries, and the unsuccessful militias were driven from the public sphere.

The UN-monitored demobilizations that followed the official negotiated peace settlement in Tajikistan can also be productively be usefully analyzed through this sort of rent-seeking bargaining framework. The most influential and politically savvy opposition militias were "demobilized" by being incorporated into the border guards, where units had substantial autonomy and could skim substantial rents from the Afghan heroin trade. The late-moving opposition militias were stripped of all influence and forced to join the army, where the lucrative positions at the top of the hierarchy were already filled with representatives of the president's inner circle.

Presidential Coup-Proofing

Both Shevardnadze and Rakhmanov came into office with the explicit blessing of paramilitary armies. In the opening years of both administrations, the real power lay with the victorious militia leaders who had taken positions in the police and the army. The president was meant to be their puppet – constitutionally "above" them in the hierarchy in principle, but clearly understood to be a disposable figurehead in practice. These warlords were well positioned to carry out a palace coup against the president if he stepped out of line.

The incorporation of militias and warlords into the state created a serious crisis of governance. Paramilitary captains found that they could turn their official positions into instant wealth through the use of roadblocks, artificial bottlenecks, and other crude mechanisms of economic extortion. The large number of armed groups in different ministries created huge transaction costs for even simple activities (e.g., moving through the city, importing fuel, transporting flour for bread, opening a business, etc.). The most obvious solution to this problem was some sort of monopoly on the use of force, or at least an explicit hierarchy between the decentralized armed groups with the president at the top of the pyramid. With the police and military fragmented, however, any efforts by the president to seize control of security ministries would be a threat to militia strongmen, probably triggering the president's removal. The president had to proceed more subtly, turning the warlords against each other and strengthening his position at their expense. This was easier said than done, however, since the warlords understood that the president's authority would increase directly at their expense.

Rather than centralize control over the tools of violence directly, the president learned to use his power of appointments to make himself useful – and eventually indispensable – to a to a wide range of powerful men. Their self-interest protected his position. It was relatively easy to use warlords' greed and fear to convince these men to eliminate one another – so long as the president could credibly commit to redistributing the disposed warlord's wealth and power to benefit those that had taken risks to remove their rivals. Over time, both presidents learned that if they could organize a coalition of warlords that were trusted to defend him from retaliation, he could weaken and then dismiss that coalition's enemies one at a time. If the disposed warlord tried to organize resistance against the president, other influential men would rise to the president's defense, intimidating or killing their adversary. As the weaker warlords capitulated to presidential authority, the president began to create a coalition of armed men with a shared interest in keeping him in power. Many of these men were still not loyal to the president in any

meaningful way, and most of them would probably have liked to see him replaced. But there was sufficient uncertainty about who exactly would replace the president (and what their position would be in the new government) that most people were willing to opt for the relative safety of the current regime.

While these divide-and-rule politics created a stable and dependent power pyramid, they were also a recipe for gridlock, graft, and corruption at all levels of government. In particular, the Ministry of the Interior in both states acquired notoriety as an unaccountable and Byzantine favor economy, engaged in racketeering at almost every level of society. This normalized corruption was partially because of the Soviet legacy of top-heavy bureaucratic control, partially because of low state capacity after the civil war, but it was also at least partially a result of strategic design. The president bought-off his enemies and signaled his loyalty to friends by allowing them to generate private revenue streams from the provision of public goods. This was the price of relative order and security in the capital city.

As the armed actors capable of disrupting the status quo were either bought off by the government or driven out of the political arena, it became harder and harder to imagine a radical change in the status quo. The longer the president successfully avoided a coup, the more the order-providing arrangements described above began to appear permanent. By the time things were permanent, the president had learned to use his pivotal position to circumvent any real checks on his authority: He could appoint or dismiss individuals with little threat to his person. Having secured himself from below, the only real threat to the president came from outside – the risk of an organized military force storming the capital city and overturning the urban coalition.

Territorial Reincorporation and Formal Peacemaking

The risk of a rural insurgency somehow succeeding against the urban coalition that had consolidated power in the capital was acute in Georgia and Tajikistan. While the processes described above were playing themselves out, the writ of the state did not run more than a few kilometers outside the capital city. The mountainous terrain and the porous borders between the newly independent states provided many hiding places for determined rebels. Huge swaths of the state territory were under the control of de-facto secessionist warlords. How could the civil war end without disarming and incorporating these territorial hold-outs?

The first thing to note is that nearly half of the population of Georgia and Tajikistan reside in the capital city and its sprawling outskirts. Financial and human capital was concentrated in the cities, and the nature of the planned economies inherited from the Soviet Union meant that most of the bottlenecks could be manipulated from capital. This makes consolidation of power in the capital much more significant than observers from large and populous countries tend to appreciate. Second, the government could not realistically re-incorporate these territories by force. In addition to the costs of conducting counterinsurgency operations in difficult terrain (in Tajikistan) and the impossible challenge of directly confronting Russian divisions (in Georgia), there was also the fear of alienating European and American observers. A face-saving standoff allowed these regimes to trade internal sovereignty for stability. The third thing to keep in mind is that the territorially based warlords were not individually threatening to the regime. Even if there was not much economic activity in outlying villages, warlords found that they could secure a decent living from skimming the profits from their

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autonomous fiefdoms. If the territory was located on an interstate border or smuggling route, armed thugs could become very wealthy men in a few short years. So while these warlords were not paying taxes to the state, they were also satisfied with the status quo, and unlikely to participate in revolutionary activities to remove the government from power.

With these three factors in mind, it's possible to understand why an armed standoff could be a pareto-efficient outcome for quite some time. The country's population and economic resources were safe in the capital, and the scattered violence that continued along the internal fault lines was mostly an embarrassing nuisance to the postwar government. The regime lacked the power to reincorporate the territories, but neither fear nor greed compelled them to incorporate the territories quickly. These wars "ended" without anything resembling real territorial reintegration. The government compromised on its sovereignty in exchange for relative stability.

Even today, there are some stubborn territorial holdouts, especially visible in Georgia. These "shadow states" share a few characteristics. First, the plurality of the population in each of these territories is an ethnic minority, not from the population that the state claimed to represent. The populations in these secessionist states are placated with the status quo, but fear cultural assimilation in the wake of a peace process. Second, as a small ethnic minority, the secessionists are not militarily strong enough to hope to capture the capital, and could not rule with any legitimacy if they did. This means that the status quo is not directly threatening to the regime. Third, these shadow states are protected by implicit or explicit threats of foreign military intervention, which means that the government can offer positive inducements to incorporate them, but not negative inducements (e.g., promises but not threats). Fourth and finally, the territories that have survived all share a land border with another state. Smuggling and migrant labor opportunities outstrip the potential benefits of participation in the economic opportunities provided by the new state (especially as a minority). Public utilities – especially electricity – can come from the neighbor, rather than the state capital.

Obviously, these independent statelets can only survive so long as a foreign power is willing to pay large costs to keep them from being incorporated. But this sort of support is a relatively low-cost strategy for Russia to gain leverage over the postwar governments, since it can implicitly threaten to re-start their neighbor's civil war at any time.

Suggests for Future Research

My research has yielded a counterintuitive finding. Personalistic, autocratic rule seems to be a path to state reconsolidation in the aftermath of certain kinds of civil wars. Western observers tend to be critical of the emergence of a strong presidents whose favor is indispensable to the functioning of the state, or of sprawling bureaucracies based on extorting patronage. But these sorts of institutional forms seem to have been quite effective at diffusing conflict between armed groups. Understanding that the sprawling corruption of the latter Shevardnadze era or Rakhmon's personality cult in Tajikistan are indirect effects of a strategy that was used to neuter violent and criminal militias grants scholars powerful insight into why certain kinds of corruption are sustainable. It is likely that both of these states were, to some extent, corrupt by design as a strategy of buying off armed challengers.

Finding a similar process in two states is hardly cause for generalization, however. This finding obviously begs the question of scope conditions: Under what conditions should we expect autocratic rule aid in militia disarmament and promote political stability? I did not examine any cases of consolidation failure on this research trip, and an obvious extension of this research agenda is to carefully examine of persistent state failure (Afghanistan, Somalia, Chechnya) to see whether these tactics were attempted, and, if so, why they failed. Ultimately, however, the most persuasive way to demonstrate whether the autocratic path to postwar stability is a particularly post-Soviet phenomenon or a more universal law is through careful cross-national comparisons across a large number of cases. There would require cross-national, cross-sectional data on states' consolidation experiences, but it would allow researchers to situate the narratives of Georgia and Tajikistan in the universe of non-Soviet cases.

I hope that my research also illuminates the possibility of focusing on politics between militia groups, rather than between the binary categories of "rebels" and "incumbents." The latter approach has been used in many influential analytic efforts to understand civil war settlement, but it tends to import assumptions from interstate bargaining models that do not necessarily apply in a sub-state context. In Georgia and Tajikistan, small militia formations were the dominant form of military power. Working towards a monopoly on the use of force required the president to bring individual field commanders into his coalition, and the militia leaders used the threat of violence to lobby the president for inclusion in the most lucrative organs of the state. Thinking about how militias bargain with each other in the shadow of an extremely weak state apparatus brings the narrative of civil war termination back down to the realm of individual actions. The decision to continue using violent tactics long after the civil wars were militarily settled is impossible to understand without understanding that "the incumbents" are a coalition, and "rebels" can be convinced (or coerced) into switching sides. Under these conditions, the identities of stable "incumbent" and "rebel" actors are analytically fuzzy, empirically difficult to observe or code ex-ante, and probably obscure at least as much as they reveal.

Recommendations for Policy Community

There is a set of arguments that are in circulation about what needs to occur in order to consolidate weak states. These arguments tend to revolve around the experiences of a single case (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Kosovo, etc.), but in recent years there has been a trend to generalize more broadly about how to help weak states recover from civil war. The content of these debates varies, but the arguments tend to be based on assumptions about the institutionalization and legitimacy of formal structures, and making those formal structures transparent and accountable to voting citizenry.

My work demonstrates that at least in Georgia and Tajikistan, an effective monopoly of violence emerged based on personalist rule and informal patronage structures, rather than through legitimate or well-functioning governance. I believe that the risk of civil war decreased in these states not only despite but because the states were becoming more personalist, corrupt, and autocratic. I believe that integrating militias into the state structures was the most effective way of buying off the armed factions that could have kept the country in a prolonged state of anarchy. This implies an uncomfortable tradeoff between different normative goals in an intervention (democracy and order), and even between short-term stability and long-term stability.

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More broadly, there is an uncomfortable empirical fact that Western conflict resolution specialists have not fully confronted: Russia is an unusually effective third-party peacekeeper within its sphere of influence. This seems to have a lot to do with the fact that Russians neither expect nor desire democracy in the states that they "help out" of civil war. Indeed, it seems to be the very ability of the Russians to credibly commit to support dictators over the long-term that makes them such valueable allies at various stages of the process. US and Western interventions have a long-term normative goal of fostering democracy and building democratic institutions, which virtually guarantees that they will be undermined by rent-seeking elites trying to push out their opponents. With vital interests at stake, Russia was able to engage in strictly outcome-based interventions: judging the success or failure of their military exercise in terms that do not reference minority rights, democratization, equitable development, or the host of other secondary policy goals that that tend to be tacked onto distant humanitarian intervention.

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