

ETHNIC WAR AS A COMMITMENT PROBLEM*

James D. Fearon
Department of Political Science
Stanford University
Stanford, CA 94305-6044

August 1995

1 Introduction

Increased ethnic violence in Eastern Europe may be the most striking immediate consequence of the end of the Cold War and the break up of the Soviet Union. It is certainly the most lethal and deplorable. The standard explanation for this outcome – found universally in newspapers and widely in the opinions of the experts they cite – is that the new ethnic violence is the product of age-old, primordial ethnic hatreds that were “suppressed” in the communist era. Remove communist domination, the argument goes, and the hate-filled, feuding ethnic groups of Azerbaijan, Yugoslavia, and Georgia immediately have at each other. Thus a New York Times article on the aftermath of the war in Croatia comments that “The graves [in Vukovar] . . . stand as a stark reminder of the bitterness of ethnic hatred, suppressed by decades of communist rule, that have exploded after the collapse of communism across Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.”¹ Even where the outcome has not been violence or massacre but simply increased ethnic strife, as in the Baltic states, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary, the explanation given is basically the same: age-old hatreds, resentments, and feuds that can now be openly expressed.

On slightly closer examination, however, the “age-old hatreds” explanation does not hold up. In the first place, even before Communism really serious ethnic violence or war was exceptional. The historical norm is not continuous, large-scale ethnic violence in these

*Paper presented at the 1994 Annual Meetings of the American Political Science Association, New York, August 30-September 2.

¹John F. Burns, “Yugoslav Town’s Memorial to Hatred: New Strife Deepens Bloody Heritage,” March 4, 1992, A10.

areas but rather long periods when different ethnic groups lived peaceably in the same communities. Second, there is little evidence (I think) that ethnic resentments were seething under the surface of Communism, kept from boiling over only by the diligent application and threat of force. The same Times article provides some fairly representative evidence on this point:

Survivors [of the battle of Vukovar] approached at random said that Vukovar, throughout the Communist years and right up to the fighting, was a place that took little note of the ethnic, religious, and geographic distinctions that were the traditional tinder of Balkan wars.

In so far as there was trouble before the siege, the survivors said, it came from outsiders, or from political extremists who had little following until the Croatian declaration of independence provided a fertile ground for ethnic provocation. “Everything was just fine before, we didn’t care who was a Croat and who was a Serb, then all of a sudden the Devil sent hate,” said Danica Milosavljevic, a 63-year-old Serb.²

In the picture suggested by these interviews, Communist Vukovar was not characterized by seething ethnic hostility waiting to be unleashed. Rather, “little note” was taken of ethnic distinctions, and except for a small number of extremists, the residents “didn’t care who was a Croat and who was a Serb.”³ If age-old hatreds suppressed by Communism explained the surge of ethnic violence, we would expect to find evidence that even under Communism the Croats and Serbs intended each other physical harm. More broadly, it seems fanciful to argue that the Communist apparatus anywhere in Eastern Europe could have prevented interspersed ethnic groups from conducting deadly but low-level warfare against each other if they had really wanted to kill or move other groups off land.

This paper offers of an alternative explanation, and briefly considers evidence from the Yugoslav case to provide a (very partial) empirical evaluation. The alternative explains the surge of ethnic violence as the result of a commitment problem that arises when two political communities find themselves without a third party that can guarantee agreements between them. The problem is that in post-Soviet Eastern Europe, ethnic majorities are unable to commit themselves not to exploit ethnic minorities in a new state. Ethnic minorities, such as

²Burns, “Yugoslav Town’s Memorial to Hatred,” A10.

³This is not an unusual statement – I have seen a great many just like it reported in the Times over the past year. It is also well known that marriage rates between Serbs and Croats were high and increasing in 1980s Yugoslavia, and that surveys indicated a large (and increasing) fraction of the population identifying itself as “Yugoslav” rather than “Serb” or “Croat.” Glenn’s (1992a) account suggests that educated and urban Yugoslavs had fairly little use for strong ethnic identifications on the eve of the war, but that this was less true for some countryside Serbs and Croats.

the Serbs in Croatia, Armenians in Azerbaijan, and possibly Ossetians in Georgia, anticipate that regardless of what the ethnic majority's leaders agree to now, there is no solid guarantee that the leaders will not renege in the future due to the play of majority politics in the new state to come. Given this anticipation, fighting now in hopes of winning secession from a weak, barely formed state may appear the superior alternative. However, the ethnic war that ensues may leave both majority and minority worse off than if the majority could make a credible commitment not to abuse the minority in the new state.

Put differently, I am arguing that ethnic violence might be profitably understood as a species of preventive war, and that the real problem of preventive war is the inability to make commitments in an anarchic environment. For many international relations scholars, it is an article of faith that anarchy and the "security dilemma" that is said to ensue are root causes of international conflict.⁴ Remarkably, however, the field has not identified specific mechanisms by which anarchy produces violence – we lack arguments that directly link the absence of a power that can guarantee agreements to war. Under anarchy, nothing stops states from using force if they wish. But if using force necessarily entails costs, then it is not clear why or how anarchy should prevent states from locating peaceful bargains that would avoid the price of fighting.

This paper offers a specific mechanism explaining how anarchy can make it impossible for states to negotiate an agreement that would avoid the costs of war. Anarchy implies that a rising state is unable to commit itself not to exploit the greater leverage it will have in future bargaining. This prospect of a worse peace in the future can make it reasonable for a declining state to fight now, even though both states would prefer a peaceful (but incredible) bargain in which the rising state agreed to restrain its demands in the future. The mechanism is essentially the same in the case of ethnic violence. Ethnic majorities cannot credibly commit themselves not to exploit the greater bargaining leverage they will have against ethnic minorities once the new state has consolidated. From this perspective, ethnic war does not appear as something entirely distinct from international war.

The paper has three major sections. The first briefly considers a preliminary methodological question: What is the point or value of thinking about ethnic violence from a rationalist perspective? The second section develops a simple game model of the commitment problem faced by ethnic groups in plural societies, showing exactly how the logic sketched above operates. The model also generates a set of hypotheses on when the commitment problem is more or less likely to be resolved (that is, what makes ethnic war more or less likely). The key factors prove to be (1) the size of the expected change in relative military power between groups that would result from formation of a new state; (2) the relative size of the ethnic minority; (3) whether majority and minority groups costs for fighting are low, as may occur if they are more rural than urban and if they are not strongly interdependent

⁴For the arguments that ground the faith see Waltz (1959, 1979) and Jervis (1978).

in the economic terms; and (4) whether institutions can be created that give minority groups political power that is at least proportional to their numbers.⁵

The third section of the paper considers how the 1992 war in Croatia came about, arguing that the commitment problem was a principal cause of the conflict. A few other Eastern European cases and some policy implications are considered in the conclusion.

2 The (ir)rationality of ethnic violence

In late October 1992 some Croatians who had fled towns in Krajina taken by Serb forces returned to their former homes, accompanied by U.N. troops.⁶ Among the many awful things they discovered, they found that Serb gunmen had desecrated the graves of their ancestors. More specifically, Serbs had pulled the covers off tombs, and machine gunned whatever remains lay inside.

On first reading this event seems to beautifully and horribly argue that irrationality is at the root of the Balkan conflict. Surely it must take some very deep and crazy passions to make Serbs enjoy wasting ammunition in order to kill long dead Croats. On a closer reading, however, the event reveals how careful and rational calculation is interwoven with passionate hatred. The Serb gunners chose to assassinate Croat corpses not simply to indulge irrational passions – as an end in itself – but rather as a means towards other goals. In both Serbian and Croatian culture ancestral graves are endowed with great significance. For example, ceremonies are held and offerings made regularly at the graves of important family members. Serb gunners knew this, of course, knew that the Croats knew it, and knew that the Croats knew that they knew it. Desecrating cemeteries is part of a calculated plan by Serb extremists to make ethnic cohabitation impossible by spreading and deepening hatred across groups.⁷

⁵For plural societies, the problem with simple majority rule is that it effectively disenfranchises ethnic minorities – under certain conditions, this “discontinuity” of majority rule gives rise to a commitment problem and consequent warfare.

⁶Stephen Kinzer, “Ousted Croats go to Seized Towns,” New York Times, October 28, 1992, A9.

⁷The more horrible example in the same vein is the Serb policy of systematic rape in the Bosnian war (ref NYT article on war criminal). It should be noted that such measures do more than just make Bosnian Muslims or Croats too angry to live with Serbs in the future. They are also calculated to make it more difficult for less virulently nationalist Serbs to live with Muslims or Croats, due to fear of reprisal or discrimination. Such policies have been almost too successful. According to a Bosnian Serb who is now a refugee in Serbia, “It’s not that I wouldn’t want to go back. ... If things could be the same as they were before I would go back in an instant. But on all sides there’s been too much hatred, too much bloodshed. I’d be afraid of the first Muslim who lived next door” (John Darnton, “Serbs Go to Serbia, But Feel Unwanted,” New York Times, 6 June 1993).

The interesting feature of this example is how rational calculation and irrational (or uncalculated) emotional reactions are bound up together in it. Spending time and effort to desecrate Croat cemeteries makes strategic sense given the knowledge that it can produce a visceral feeling of hatred on the part of Croats. In turn, extremist Serbs count on Croat rationality in predicting how Croats will act given this emotional reaction.

I would argue that such interplays of calculation and emotional reaction are deeply characteristic of matters concerning ethnic conflict. By presenting a strategic analysis of ethnic violence I do not mean to suggest that a complete or satisfactory understanding of the problem can be based solely on rationalist grounds. Rather, the broad claim is that strategic considerations are fundamental in ethnic conflict despite (or maybe because of) the strong passions involved, and that these considerations have been largely neglected. The paper provides a partial analysis of one particular strategic problem that seems closely linked to ethnic war.

The analysis leaves out a range of factors and dynamics that are doubtless important, one of which deserves special mention here. In the theory developed below, I take it as a given that ethnic groups exist, or at least that ethnicity is a focal political cleavage. The paper does not attempt to explain the source or nature of ethnic identifications – why, for example, Serbs and Croats who speak the same language and fought together for a united South Slav nation continue to think of themselves as members of separate national groups. The main questions addressed are why and when ethnic groups fight en masse, rather than why they focus attention and loyalty.

As with the preceding example, a good theoretical explanation for the latter question would probably have to bring in both calculation and emotion. It is obviously important that people can easily come to feel a strong emotional attachment to a group, even a very large one. But ethnic identification has instrumental, calculated aspects as well. For example, if everyone else is making all manner of ethnic distinctions – conditioning behavior in interactions on some label or “tag” that we call ethnic – then it may make very good sense for each individual to make these distinctions as well, so sustaining the practice historically.⁸ Or, as Bates (1983) suggests, ethnic groups are sometimes naturally seen as political coalitions formed and structured to seek material benefits.

To put what few cards I have on the table, I believe that ethnic identifications and ethnic groups are not primordially given, “hard wired” emotional dispositions, but for the most part are created and sustained by institutions in civil society. That is, ethnic attachments and even “ethnicity” itself are products of social and political structures like churches,

⁸For example, if conferring patronage on a member of another ethnic group would lead to recrimination from below and possible punishment from above, then it would make sense to confer patronage along ethnic lines independent of any affective considerations. For a related argument, see Kaneko and Kimura (1992).

schools, clubs, parties, political movements, and sometimes states. Immigrants to the United States quickly shed what were often very intense ethnic attachments and animosities held in their place of origin, unless they enter communities in the U.S. that contain small scale replicas of 'old world' institutions. Social and political institutions that demarcate ethnic groups and foster ethnic attachments have existed for some time in the Balkans, and in varying degrees throughout Eastern Europe.⁹ For the rest of the paper I take these for granted.

3 The commitment problem in plural societies

One of the central puzzles about wars between ethnic groups, and about wars in general, is that they are always costly. Even if one side ends up judging the benefits greater than costs, it has still suffered costs. Moreover, the two sides to a conflict always anticipate that war will entail costs – as argued below, this was certainly the case for Serbs and Croats in Croatia in 1990. The puzzle is that states and ethnic groups are sometimes unable to reach some bargain or deal that would avoid the price of violence. Citing the condition of anarchy or the “security dilemma” is not enough to resolve the puzzle.¹⁰ Even if there is no third party available to guarantee agreements, even if nothing stops them from trying force, and even if technology gives offense an advantage over defense, states or ethnic groups should still have an incentive to avoid the costs of war.

This section develops the argument sketched at the outset, that under some conditions the inability to make credible commitments under anarchy can make it impossible for disputants to locate a bargain that would avoid a costly fight. I consider two simple game models of the commitment problem that ethnic groups can face when they have no third party such as a central government to guarantee agreements between them. Both models have three stages. First, a minority group decides whether to acquiesce in a new state or to try a war of secession; second, if no war occurs some political process selects a set of policies on minority rights and opportunities; and third the minority decides again whether to rebel. The two models differ only in the political process that selects government policies. In the first, simple majority rule is employed; the second allows for political forms that give the minority some political power. The first model is useful for spelling out the core logic of the commitment problem, the second for developing hypotheses on when ethnic war is more or less likely, and for formally considering some simple dynamics of “consociational democracy” (Lijphart 1977).

⁹Suny (1992) and Roeder (1991) discuss the institutional history of ethnic consciousness in the former USSR.

¹⁰For an interesting effort to explain ethnic conflict in Eastern Europe using security dilemma arguments, see Posen (1993).

The Basic Model: Majority Rule. I will consider the relationship between a minority group, labelled m , and a majority group labelled M . To start off, I will suppose that both can be treated as unitary actors – that is, each has leaders that make decisions for the whole group that are binding on them, according to some process that produces transitive preferences over alternatives. Much anecdotal evidence suggests that in the case of ethnic conflict this assumption is violated empirically in ways that are highly significant. As intimated by the quotation given in the introduction, the role of groups of ethnic extremists seems to be very important in many cases, both for their effect on other ethnic groups and perhaps more importantly for their impact on coalition politics within their own group.¹¹ So I make this assumption here acknowledging that it must be considered provisional – it is purely for the sake of a first cut on the problem.

The minority and majority will play a game with two periods. In the first period, the minority chooses whether to acquiesce in plans for a new state, accepting incorporation, or to attack the majority, fomenting ethnic war in hope of winning secession or perhaps incorporation in another state more to its liking.

If the minority chooses to acquiesce, the game proceeds to the second period. This begins with the majority choosing to make a set of political demands on the minority group, demands that may be more or less severe. The package of demands will be represented as a number x that lies between 0 and 1. I think of x as summarizing a whole set of state policies that would bear on the lives of the ethnic minority in the new state – rules on property, how their cases would be handled in the courts, language policies, treatment by the police, access to credit, state jobs, patronage, higher education, and so on. In some cases, a “demand” might be a constitution. Whatever form it takes, the larger the demand x , the more unfavorable it is toward the ethnic minority. For example, an x close to 1 might represent government policies that effectively expropriate the minority. The demand x is presumed to be determined by whatever majority politics prevail in the new state.

In the second period, after the majority political demands have been determined, the minority group again chooses whether to acquiesce or to try fighting against the majority government. Thus, the sequence of actions is

1. Period 1: Minority group chooses whether to fight or acquiesce. “Fight” produces ethnic violence.

¹¹For example, by creating a risk that one will be attacked simply because one is a Serb or Croat, a small number of ethnic extremists may be able to have a big effect on the spread of ethnic identification and distinctions in a society. Also, within their own groups, extremists often expend considerable resources attacking ‘brethren’ who do not pay enough attention to ethnic distinctions. See Glenny (1992, 120) on this process in Krajina, Laitin (1993) on intra-ethnic conflict in Basque country and Ukraine, and Posen (1993, 36) for the role of extremist thugs in Yugoslavia.

2. Period 2: If the minority chose “acquiesce,” the majority group makes a package of demands (or rules) $x \in [0, 1]$.
3. Minority chooses whether to acquiesce or fight, given demands/rules x .

It now remains to specify payoffs. We begin with the groups’ values for the option of conflict. Fighting will be modelled as a gamble that could produce either victory or defeat. For the minority, victory would mean successful independence, control of territory, “cultural autonomy,” or incorporation in some other political entity; defeat would mean forced incorporation in the ethnic majority’s new state. For the ethnic majority, victory means the ability to impose whatever policies it wishes regarding the status of the minority group.

Without losing generality, we can suppose that for both sides the utility of prevailing in a fight is 1, losing worth 0, while the costs of fighting are c_m for the minority group and c_M for the majority.¹² In period 1, let the probability that the minority wins at war be $p_1 > 0$. In period 2, the chance the minority wins in case of a fight will decrease to $p_2 < p_1$. The idea here is that after the new state has had time to consolidate, and after the minority has acquiesced once to its rule, the minority would have less chance of success if it tried to opt out via rebellion. Consolidation allows the new state’s leaders to develop police forces, the army, and an internal security apparatus, all of which make rebellion more difficult in the future. In addition, international support for a succession movement might be more difficult to obtain after the minority has consented once to membership in the state.

Taking these terms together, payoffs for the option of conflict in the first period will be $(p_1 - c_m, 1 - p_1 - c_M)$, where the first component is the minority’s, and the second the majority’s payoff. In the second period a fight yields $(p_2 - c_m, 1 - p_2 - c_M)$.

Peace prevails in the model if the minority enters the new state, and if it subsequently acquiesces to the majority’s political demands x . Let the payoffs for this outcome be x for the majority, and $1 - x$ for the minority; hence, $(1 - x, x)$. This specification implies that we are considering the set of issues on which minority and majority interests are strictly opposed – arrangements the majority likes more, the minority likes less.

With the payoffs and structure of interaction defined, we can proceed to consider what happens in the game under the assumption of forward-looking play. There turn out to be two cases to consider, distinguished by whether the minority’s expected utility for fighting in the first period $(p_1 - c_m)$ is very small or not.

¹²By the nature of utility theory, this formulation means that the cost terms c_m and c_M capture both how much the groups dislike the losses suffered in a fight and how intensely they feel about the issues at stake. For example, if the minority very strongly values independence relative to incorporation, then this implies that c will be close to zero. Thus strongly nationalistic groups will have low c ’s, in this set up.

In the first case, $p_1 - c_m$ is less than zero. Substantively, this means that “opting out” in the first period is so costly, unlikely to succeed, or otherwise unattractive for the minority that it would prefer its least favorite peaceful outcome in the new state ($x = 1$) to a fight. In this case, the minority group will choose to enter quietly into the new regime. After it does so, the majority will choose the policy $x = 1$, which is bad for the minority, but better than fighting in either the first or the second period.¹³ So in this first case, no commitment problem operates and ethnic peace prevails, although at the political expense of the minority.

The second case – $p_1 - c_m > 0$ – is more interesting from a strategic perspective. Here, how the minority chooses in the first period depends on its expectations about what would happen to it under the new regime. We consider first, then, what would happen in the second period if it were reached. In the new state, the minority would reject the demand if it were so large that accepting was worse than fighting, i.e., if $1 - x < p_2 - c_m$. Thus if the majority decides it wants peace, it would do best to choose the largest demand such that the minority will not rebel, $x^* = 1 - p_2 + c_m$. The majority prefers peace if its payoff given this demand, $1 - p_2 + c_m$, is greater than its payoff for the gamble of conflict, $1 - p_2 - c_M$, which is always true. So if period 2 is reached, the majority will demand x and the minority will accept, preferring to cede the demands rather than fight.

Anticipating that it would receive and accept an offer of x^* if it entered the new state, what would the minority want to do in the first period? Acquiescing to the new regime yields $1 - x^* = p_2 - c_m$, while choosing to fight in period 1 is worth $p_1 - c_m$. Since the minority will have a better prospect of winning concessions or independence by fighting in period 1 than period 2 ($p_1 > p_2$), the minority in the model will always choose to fight in the first period rather than enter the new regime.

The rationale behind this choice is straightforward. The minority anticipates that in a new state, it would be subject to the political whims of majority politics. In particular, majority politicians will have incentives to push up demands (i.e., enact policies) to the point that would make the minority almost but not quite willing to try rebellion. Since rebellion later against a consolidated state is less likely to succeed than rebellion now, rebellion now is preferable to the peace the minority would get if it entered the new state.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about this choice is that it produces a result that makes both minority and majority strictly worse off than they ideally could be. Because fighting entails costs for both sides, there are always peaceful resolutions that both sides prefer to the conflict outcome they actually obtain.¹⁴ The reason they cannot reach such

¹³The minority’s utility for the policies $x = 1$ is $1 - x = 0$, which is greater in this case than $p_1 - c_m$ or $p_2 - c_m$.

¹⁴To see this, note that there is always demands x such that $1 - x > p_1 - c_m$ and $x > 1 - p_1 - c_M$. This is the set of x ’s such that $1 - p_1 - c_m < x < 1 - p_1 + c_M$.

outcomes is that the majority cannot commit itself not to exploit the minority's reduced bargaining power after the state has been consolidated. If the majority could somehow commit itself to more moderate or fair policies in the future (specifically, some $x < 1 - p_1 + c_m$), then the minority would prefer acquiescing rather than trying war. But since the parties interact in an anarchic environment where there is no third party available to guarantee commitments, the minority has no reason to trust any pronouncements by majority leaders in period 1 about respect for their rights, property, or lives in period 2.

As argued at greater length in the third section, this dynamic may help explain why, in Vukovar, the Croatian declaration of independence “provided a fertile ground for ethnic provocation.” Before the declaration and under the rules and law of the Yugoslav government, Serb extremists argued that the recently elected leadership in Zagreb was simply a new version of the Fascist Ustasha regime, and would certainly violate the rights of Serbs. Such arguments appear to have had little broad resonance until the Croatian declaration of independence raised the possibility of new terms between Serbs and Croats in Vukovar and elsewhere in Croatia.

To summarize, costly war between ethnic groups can be explained, at least theoretically, as the result of a commitment problem. The problem arises whenever three conditions hold: (1) the groups interact in anarchy, without a third party able to guarantee and enforce agreements between them; (2) one of the groups anticipates that its ability to secede or otherwise withdraw from joint arrangements will decline in the near future; and (3) for this group, fighting in the present is preferable to the worst political outcome it could face if it chose continued interaction (in the model, $p_1 - c_m > 0$). The dilemma is that when these conditions hold a costly fight will occur, even though both groups would be better off if one could commit not to exploit the other after the latter's power declined.

Two final points about the model with majority rule are worth making before we consider alternative political regimes. First, condition (3) suggests a few factors that might distinguish between cases where the commitment problem will and will not cause violence between ethnic groups. Ethnic war is not predicted if the minority group's expected utility for a fight in the first period is very low ($p_1 - c_m < 0$). This could be the case if the group saw very little chance of success in war (p_1 close to zero); if the costs of conflict were perceived as large relative to the political value of independence; or if the most the majority would demand in the new state was not very much, relative to the minority's costs for conflict. Thus the commitment problem is most likely to operate when the minority is not too small, when it has external military support, and when minority and majority groups are strongly nationalistic.¹⁵

¹⁵ “Strongly nationalistic” means that the group perceives the costs of conflict as small relative to the value accorded to political or cultural autonomy. Regarding the balance of power between groups, Van Evera (1993, 11-13) proposes some similar hypotheses about when nationalism will lead to war, although they are

A second point worth developing is that the strategic dynamic formalized by the model seems to be central to a range of political problems beyond ethnic conflict. For example, if the majority and minority groups are relabelled as “rising” and “declining” powers, then we have an explanation for preventive war in international politics. The rising power’s inability to commit itself not to exploit the bargaining advantage it will have in the future leads the declining state to try preventive war, even though this is a bad outcome for both sides.

The standard explanation for preventive war found in the international relations literature amounts to the assertion that it may be rational to attack an adversary that is gaining in relative power, since war now is better than war later.¹⁶ This claim fails to explain why the rising and declining states could not negotiate bargains, perhaps across time, that would avoid the risks and costs of fighting. Surely the rising state does not want to be attacked while it is relatively weak. What stops it from offering to make concessions, possibly in the future, that would avoid war? The analysis here shows that both states would indeed like to cut such a deal, and that what prevents them is the inability to commit to the deal rather than the changing power distribution per se. At its base, the problem of preventive war is a commitment problem occasioned by anarchy – if contracts could be written and enforced in international politics, preventive war would not occur between rationally-led states. Thus the analysis establishes a specific mechanism by which anarchy can be said to cause international conflict.¹⁷

In domestic politics, the commitment problem considered here must be resolved in order to have a functioning democracy. If losing an election means that the governing party will be subject to depredations by the winners, or will have a greatly diminished chance of returning to power, then the party can have a strong incentive not to hold elections. For democracy to work, opposition parties must be able to commit themselves not to use state power to expropriate the current leadership when they are out of power, or make them completely unable to return to office. Thus, an authoritarian regime’s willingness to hold elections may depend critically on what the leaders expect would happen to them if they lost.

justified by different arguments.

¹⁶See, for typical examples, Howard 1983, 15-16; Gilpin 1981, 191. As far as I know, Van Evera (1984, 62-64) is the only treatment of preventive war that sees that the issue of credible commitment figures into the problem.

¹⁷The results also speak to the vexed question of whether a balance of power makes war more or less likely between two states or coalitions: The commitment problem is more likely to produce preventive war when the states are not too far apart in relative power (I show this in a model tailored to the international setting in work in progress). Even so, the commitment problem may be undermined only for quite large differences in relative strength, so that the effect may occur only at the extremes. For example, the Japanese attack on the U.S. in 1941 had a strong preventive element, yet Japanese leaders recognized their significant inferiority in aggregate capabilities. In single-period bargaining models where war may occur due to private information, offsetting effects tend to make the likelihood of war independent of the balance of power (Fearon 1992; Wittman 1979).

If the opposition cannot commit itself not to jail the authoritarian leaders, then elections might not be held even when both sides would prefer them to be.¹⁸ Similarly, for Rhodesia and now for South Africa, the central political obstacle to majority rule is the difficulty in engineering a credible commitment by the majority representatives not to expropriate the whites after the franchise is extended.

Giving the minority some bargaining power. The equilibrium discussed above has a somewhat disturbing and probably unrealistic “knife edged” quality in the case where the commitment problem causes war. If the minority group anticipates even an infinitesimal decline in its ability to rebel once the new state has consolidated, then the commitment problem operates in full force – the group opts for immediate war. The reason is that under simple majority rule, the minority group will have no bargaining power whatsoever in the new state. Majority rule implies that the majority can and will push the minority to the point of rebellion. Thus, if rebellion would be even marginally more difficult in the future, it makes sense to fight now rather than accept the worse peace that will follow.

This vicious commitment problem would be attenuated if political institutions or other factors gave the minority some leverage in the political process that follows independence. For example, if consociational institutions could be constructed to give the minority a say in determining the new state’s policies, the minority would need to worry less about the decreased value of its threat to rebel. Alternatively, if some government policies could not be fully implemented without the cooperation of the minority, then the minority group would have some bargaining power in the new state. Russians in Ukraine, for instance, play a major role in Ukrainian heavy industry; this fact gives them *de facto* bargaining leverage that rural Serbs in Croatia lack.

To consider the effects of increasing the minority’s bargaining leverage we abandon the assumption of majority rule, supposing instead that government policies in the new state are determined by a generalized Nash bargaining solution.¹⁹ In the second period (i.e., in the new state), the set of policies that both majority and minority prefer to a fight is represented by the interval $[1 - p_2 - c_m, 1 - p_2 + c_M]$. The minority prefers a fight if the policy outcome x is greater than $1 - p_2 + c_m$, while the majority prefers war if x is less than $1 - p_2 - c_M$. We will suppose that the more political bargaining power the minority has, the closer is the policy outcome to the minority’s most preferred outcome in this set, $1 - p_2 - c_M$. Specifically, let $\alpha \in [0, 1]$ be a measure of the minority’s bargaining power in the new state. The political outcome will be taken as

¹⁸A paper by Navia (1993) suggests that resolution of this commitment problem aided the exit of Pinochet in Chile in 1988.

¹⁹For ease of exposition I will not consider what happens “at the boundaries” in this version of the model. If we allow the majority to make any demand $x \geq 0$, then the results are valid exactly as given.

$$x^*(\alpha) = \alpha(1 - p_2 - c_M) + (1 - \alpha)(1 - p_2 + c_m) = 1 - p_2 - \alpha c_M + (1 - \alpha)c_m.$$

The policy outcome $x^*(\alpha)$ is thus a weighted average between the minority and majority “threat points,” with the weight determined by the minority’s structural bargaining power. Notice that simple majority rule is equivalent to the case of $\alpha = 0$, and that the minority “gets more” (or has more political say) the greater is α .²⁰

It is straightforward to show that if the minority group expects the policy outcome $x^*(\alpha)$ in the new state, then the group will acquiesce in the new regime provided that

$$p_1 - p_2 < \alpha(c_m + c_M)$$

In words, ethnic war will not occur if the drop in military efficacy expected by the minority group is not too large, with “how large” being determined by majority and minority costs for conflict and by the scale of minority political leverage in the new state. Several hypotheses follow.

First, the commitment problem is more likely to cause violence the greater the expected change in the military balance between the two groups that would follow independence. This implies that violence is more likely between groups that are of roughly equal size than between very large and very small groups. Even so, if the costs of conflict are thought to be small, then the commitment problem may operate even for fairly small and weak minority groups.

Second, the commitment problem is more acute when the groups view the costs of conflict as small relative to the value of what would be gained or lost in a war of secession. So, for example, strong nationalist sentiment on either side will make the commitment problem more acute, as would the existence of rural social structures that lower the costs of guerilla mobilization (as compared to the costs of mobilizing urban dwellers). On the other hand, strong economic interdependence between groups might undermine it by raising the costs of war.²¹

²⁰ $x^*(\alpha)$ can be rationalized with the following extensive form: The minority chooses whether to opt out; if the minority enters the new state, Nature selects either the majority or the minority (with probability α) to make a “take it or leave it” offer to the other group; the group that did not make the offer then chooses whether to rebel. $x^*(\alpha)$ will then be the expected outcome in the second period.

²¹Some case examples: (a) In Yugoslavia, strong Croatian nationalism clearly made Serbs in Krajina more fearful about the consequences of a shift in relative power, whereas in (so far peaceful) Ukraine it seems to have been crucial that the leaders who gained independence were not extreme Ukrainian nationalists. (b) Laitin (1993) argues that differences in rural social structure that bear on the costs of mobilizing fighters

The logic behind these conclusions is more subtle than one might guess at first glance. It is not a simple matter of nationalism (or low costs of battle) implying a lack of willingness to compromise, and hence war. Rather, as long as fighting is costly, the groups would ideally like to reach an agreement that would avoid the costs. The problem is that nationalism and low military costs make the set of peaceful agreements both sides would prefer to fight smaller, thus rendering shifts in relative power more consequential for the minority. The costs of conflict are like mutual hostages – when these are very important, it takes a bigger anticipated shift in political terms to make the minority willing to sacrifice its hostage.

Third, and in a way most critically, the greater the political bargaining power of the minority in the new state (α), the less vicious is the commitment problem. This is entirely intuitive: The more the minority can protect itself against legal and constitutional change by the majority, the less it needs to fear the consequences of a less effective threat to rebel. The whole trick of consociational democracy is to devise political institutions that give minorities constitutional protection against potentially oppressive majorities. Guaranteeing minority representation at the apex of government and giving minority representatives veto power in important policy areas are two of the principal means by which this has been attempted (Lijphart 1977, ch. 2).

One of the valuable features of the modelling exercise is that it suggests why consociationalism is in practice so difficult to devise and sustain in plural societies.²² Suppose that before the start of the above game the majority group could announce a constitutional plan that would guarantee the minority political powers large enough to make attempted secession not worthwhile. Why should the minority believe any such announcement? Why should it believe that the majority would not tear up or fundamentally alter the plan at its earliest convenience? In other words, what can a majority do to make a power-sharing plan credible? As long as there exist institutional structures in civil society that serve the interests of the majority group and aggregate its demands, it will be difficult to convince minorities that these structures will not be returned to and used against them at some point in the life of the new regime. The only credible and durable consociational forms may be institutions that cannot be abandoned without leaving the majority group incapable of governing itself. But this will typically require the destruction or disassembly of institutions in civil society that articulate the majority group's interests, which is never an easy (or even a necessarily desirable) prospect.²³

help explain why there has been more ethnic violence in Basque country and Georgia as compared to more industrialized Catalonia and Ukraine. The argument would seem to apply nicely to rural Croatia as well. (c) Finally, relatively high levels of economic interdependence across groups in the Ukraine, as opposed to Croatia or Georgia, may have made the commitment problem less severe.

²²See Rabushka and Shepsle (1972) for another angle on the problem.

²³The analysis also suggests that consociational experiments will come apart in war when one group expects the value of its option to secede to decline significantly in the future. Weingast's (1991) analysis of the politics

4 The war in Croatia, 1991-92

On June 25 1991, the Croatian Assembly in Zagreb voted to declare Croatia an independent state. Violent skirmishes between Serb and Croat “irregulars” in Croatia had been on the increase ever since an election gave Franjo Tudjman’s Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ) control of the Croatian Assembly in May 1990. However, these clashes were sporadic and quite minor in terms of loss of life. The declaration of independence, by contrast, was almost immediately followed by a full scale ethnic war. The war lasted about one year and may well resume when and if the conflict in Bosnia flames out.

This section examines the origins of this ethnic war in progress, focusing on the role played by the commitment problem discussed above. I argue that while there is certainly more to the story, the central issue was the inability of Serbs in Croatia to trust Tudjman’s and other Croatian officials’ pronouncements that Serbs would have equal rights and equal protection in the new Croatian state. Evidence is introduced below. First, however, I will briefly sketch several alternative explanations I have heard advanced and which are suggested by other theories of war and nationalism.

One could try to explain the war in Croatia as an inevitable consequence of old and deep nationalist passions, the corollary of the “ancient hatreds” argument given at the outset. The idea here is that the Croats have always wanted an ethnically pure Croatia, and that the Serbs living in Croatia have always wanted to be part of a Greater Serbia, or at least to have their own ethnically pure mini-nation. The collapse of the Communist center merely provided an occasion for these powerful underlying nationalist imperatives to assert themselves. In this view, the issue of credible commitment by the majority not to abuse the minority is irrelevant. Even if these could be made, the Croats would not want to make them and the Serbs would not care one way or the other – in either event they would wish to fight to secede in order to attain their own nation. This view implicitly supposes that Serbs and Croats are willing to pay virtually any costs for exclusive nationality.

A similar, slightly more subtle argument would explain the war as a consequence of the increased salience of “national identity” in the wake of the fall of Communism, rather than taking a fully primordialist approach. The core claim is the same, however. Nationalist passions render cohabitation impossible, but the Serbs and Croats have conflicting territorial

leading to the U.S. Civil War is suggestive here (although perhaps the antebellum U.S. was not technically a “consociational democracy”). In brief, the Missouri Compromise provided for balance in the entry of new slave and free states into the union, thus preserving the South’s veto power in the Senate on bills affecting slavery. Weingast argues that the breakdown of the Compromise and accompanying sectional realignment of politics undermined the political commitment arrangements that protected Southern slaveholders, exposing them to the risk of sudden loss of their capital and encouraging political exit.

claims, ergo war.²⁴

A third view locates the causes of the Croatian war in Belgrade rather than Krajina. The idea here is that Serb irregulars in Croatia were merely proxies. It may be that they were used by Milosevic and his friends to further the power political (and not solely nationalist) end of making a big Serbia. Or it may be that fostering a war in Croatia was a good way for Milosevic to deal with his opposition in Belgrade, so keeping himself in power. In either case, the issue of credible commitments by the Croatian government is again moot – even if they could have been made, they would have been ignored, because the Serbs in Croatia were simply acting on behalf of politicians and army generals in Belgrade.

Each of these accounts contains elements of truth. But each is also inconsistent with relevant evidence about circumstances in the mixed-population areas of Croatia in the second half of 1990 and the first few months of 1991. Most importantly, these explanations greatly exaggerate the homogeneity of the views of Serbs in Croatia before the war began in earnest, and they also misrepresent these views. The first hand accounts of Misha Glenny (1992), Michael Schmitz (1992), and other journalists suggest that with the exception of a relatively small number of extremists, prior to the war the majority of Serbs in Croatia were not rabid nationalists bent on secession for the sake of national identity. Nor were they, with the exception of some extremists, closely controlled by or responsive to Serb politicians in Belgrade. Moreover, Serbs and Croats in the mixed areas recognized the costs and danger of an ethnic war and sought to avoid it.

Glenny writes that “Before May 1991, Croats and Serbs lived together in relative contentment throughout the regions which have now been so dreadfully ravaged” (p. 19). He reports on “a network of Serbs in Knin [home of the highest concentration of ‘gun-toting’ Serb extremists] who believed that Babic [an extremist Serb leader in Krajina] was driving them towards a senseless war” (p. 20). Commenting on a town in Banija district where the first large scale fighting of the war occurred, Glenny writes that

Babic had been sending emissaries from Knin in an attempt to undermine the social democratic forces in Glina in favour of the militant Serb nationalist line. The Serbs in Glina resisted Babic’s bloody entreaties until June [1991] but by then they felt that they no longer had a choice – it was Croats or Serbs, and they were Serbs. (p. 93)²⁵

²⁴Van Evera (1993) gives several arguments on how nationalism makes for territorial disputes that may lead to war.

²⁵Elsewhere Glenny claims that “the local Serb leaders in Glina maintained regular contact with the Croatian government in Zagreb. They appealed to the government in Zagreb and the local police chief in the nearby town of Petrinja not to continue intimidating local Serbs by a show of force” (1992b, 31).

On the Croatian side, Glenny discusses the case of a well-respected local leader in Slavonia who, in the first months on 1991, “was determined to stop distrust between Serbs and Croats from sliding into open hostility. For weeks before his [assassination], he travelled tirelessly from village to village striking local deals to prevent the extremists in both [Serb and Croat] communities from assuming a dominant influence” (p. 106). At a higher political level, a group of Croatian intellectuals and politicians evidently tried to persuade Tudjman in the summer of 1990 to change his policy on Krajina in order to avoid a war (p. 14).

Schmitz (1992) confirms these impressions. He found that in 1990, Serbs in Krajina “were reluctant to follow the strategy of confrontation” favored by the extremists.

When I talked to people in the streets, in shops, and bars I found few people who asserted they felt a threat. On the contrary, Croats and Serbs were peacefully working and living together. In interviews they talked convincingly about friendship, intermarriage, and tolerance among the different religions (Christian Orthodox and Roman Catholic). At that time the militants appeared at first sight as an exaggeratedly nervous splinter group. “That’s just politics,” commented common people ... (p. 25, emphasis added)

These reports, along with numerous observations like that noted at the beginning of the paper, argue strongly against the view that the war was made inevitable by deep and wide nationalist passions crossed with conflicting territorial claims. It appears that most Serbs and Croats in Croatia were not from the outset intent on having separate, ethnically pure nations. To the contrary, with the exception of a relatively small number of extremists led by Milan Babic, Serbs and Croats in the mixed population areas recognized that war would be costly and viewed it as unnecessary – until May and June 1991. These months, according to Glenny, saw a rapid and near total “homogenization” of opinion (1992, e.g. p. 85). Serbs and Croats who had resisted the extremists’ appeals finally opted for division and war.

In a large measure, the commitment problem explains this relatively sudden change. For Serbs, the Croatian declaration of independence meant that they were entering a new state in which they lacked any serious indication that the government would and could credibly guarantee Serb rights – worse, the government had in recent months acted so as to engender widespread fears that it might actively persecute Serbs. According to Glenny, “when Croatian independence was declared on June 25 ... , Glina’s Serbs, fearing the worst, sided with the thuggish forces of the Martincevci [Chetnik irregulars],” whom they had previously resisted (1992b, 31).

Consistent with this interpretation is a history of unsuccessful efforts to solve the commitment problem politically, most occurring in the Summer and Fall of 1990. Immediately

after the election of Tudjman and the HDZ in May 1990, Serbs in Croatia grew quite worried about their status in the republic. Primarily through Jovan Raskovic, leader of the Croatian Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), they asked for a range of guarantees on rights and “cultural autonomy.” For example, in a speech given in late June Raskovic stated that Serbs accepted the Croatian people’s right to a sovereign state, but that in such a state Serbs must be guaranteed an equal position. The Serbs, according to Raskovic, wanted cultural autonomy, and not a second state within Croatia. “The Serbs in Croatia should be allowed to speak their language, to write their script, to have their schools, to have their educational programs, to have their institutions ...”.²⁶ Raskovic met repeatedly with Tudjman to negotiate on guarantees and the status of Serbs in Croatia.²⁷ According to Glenny, Raskovic’s “main political strategy as leader of the SDS was to avoid armed conflicts between Serbs and Croats. ... Raskovic had hoped to strike a deal with Tudjman which would have granted Serbs cultural autonomy, including such privileges as control over the local school system in Serb majority areas” (p. 17, 18).

For their part, Tudjman and other Croat leaders certainly recognized that what has been described here as “the commitment problem” was at the root of the increasing tensions in the Serb-populated districts. Immediately after the election, Tudjman declared that the HDZ was ready to guarantee “civil and ethnic national rights not only to [the] Serbian, but also to any other population living in Croatia.” “We have offered our hand to the Serbian population and to all others. There will be no preferences regarding religion; we will create conditions for a normal coexistence by all sections of society in Croatia” (FBIS, 8 May 1990, pp. 55-6). Shortly after this speech, Tudjman offered Raskovic the position of Vice Premier in the Croatian Assembly (which Raskovic declined).

However, at the same time as he was professing to guarantee Serbs rights in Croatia, Tudjman was speaking and acting in ways that belied this intention. Tudjman and other HDZ leaders openly employed symbols of the wartime Nazi Ustasha regime which are anathema to Serbs. On the ground, the HDZ moved to end Serbian domination of the police forces in a number of the mixed districts, a move that greatly alarmed Serbs in these areas. Serbs were also systematically fired from government jobs in Zagreb and elsewhere, in what was taken by Serbs as an indication of what might transpire in a new Croatian state.²⁸ Perhaps most significantly for the argument made in this paper, the HDZ pushed through constitutional changes that were thought to undermine the political security of Serbs in the republic; at

²⁶Quoted in Foreign Broadcast Information Service, Daily Report: Eastern Europe (hereafter FBIS), 27 June 1990, p. 83.

²⁷See FBIS, 19 June 1990, p. 72; 24 July 1990, p. 72; 2 August 1990, p. 42; 14 August 1990, p. 60.

²⁸Serbs were disproportionately represented in the Croatian bureaucracy. This was part of Tito’s complex balancing strategy – Tito bought the Serb acquiescence in Croatian autonomy in part by preferential treatment in the government administration of Croatia (see, for example, Glenny (1993, p. 14)). Tito’s Yugoslavia might be productively viewed as a consociational authoritarian regime.

the same time the HDZ rejected supramajority rule on issues of minority rights. On July 26, according to Tanjug news agency,

The Croatian Parliament ... adopted ... constitutional changes despite the protests of the Serbs in republic, as well as the left bloc of Croatian parties. Parties of the left, which after the recent multiparty elections became a minority in the republican parliament, believe .. that basic questions such as the regulation of the position of peoples in the republic should be decided by a two-thirds majority. The majority (HDZ) does not accept this stand, as in this way their absolute majority in the parliament would not be sufficient for making important parliamentary decisions.²⁹

Why did the HDZ leadership not make a more concerted and serious effort to extend credible political commitments on Serbs minority rights, and so avoid the costly war they got? Available evidence does not allow anything like a well-documented answer, but a some plausible guesses can be offered.

First, it is clear that key elements of Tudjman's political base were strongly opposed to any conciliatory gestures towards the Serbs. In particular, the HDZ apparently receives major financial support from Croatian emigres, who, in a familiar pattern, are more rabidly nationalist than Croats living in Slavonia. Emigres do not pay the full costs of war in the old homeland, a fact that lessens their incentive to seek compromise. Tudjman's private views on the Serb question in 1990-91 were not entirely clear. In a number of speeches and interviews in 1990, Raskovic claimed that Tudjman in fact wanted to offer stronger and more credible guarantees of cultural autonomy to the Serbs, but that he was prevented from doing so by "the Ustasha core" of his party.³⁰ Possibly as an unintended consequence of the electoral strategy that won power for the HDZ, Tudjman may have found himself committed to a policy that in effect fostered ethnic war.

Second, some evidence suggests that Tudjman (stupidly) overestimated Croatia's ability to fight against the Yugoslav army and the willingness of the European states, especially Germany, to support him militarily, while underestimating the willingness of Serbia to of-

²⁹FBIS (quoting Tanjug), 27 July 1991, p. 39, emphasis added. In August, a delegation of Serbs from Croatia complained to the Yugoslav president that "on the basis of several recently adopted constitutional and legal solutions in Croatia, institutions and organizations on an exclusively national basis are being set up as institutions only for Croatian people [sic]. [They further stressed] that in this kind of situation, not only the rights of Serbs in Croatia to politically express their own interests are under a threat, but they are also exposed to constant brutal pressure and threats, that is, that their elementary security has been imperiled" (quoted in FBIS, 14 August 1990).

³⁰See FBIS, 26 July 1990, p. 60; 27 July 1990, p. 36; 2 August 1990, p. 42.

fer resistance.³¹ If a political leader overestimates the likelihood of military success, this has the effect of reducing the set of bargains both sides would prefer to a fight.³² In this way, Tudjman's optimism may help explain the failure of negotiations with Raskovic over guarantees.

Even if Tudjman and the HDZ had been more inclined to try to engineer a credible institutional commitment to the Croatian Serbs, it is not clear whether they could have succeeded. Raskovic's rejection of the Vice Premiership may be indicative – the offer was a merely symbolic gesture in that it would not have conferred power on Raskovic to block Croatian political and economic depredations against Serbs. Acceptance by the HDZ of some form of supramajority rule might have worked better, but even here the party's crypto-Ustasist tone, its lack of internal control over extremist thugs, its commitment to quick redistribution of economic spoils in favor of Croats, all rightly made moderate Serbs in Croatia disinclined to trust verbal or paper guarantees. The history of Ustasha massacres at the end of World War II point in the same direction. As a Belgrade reporter put it, Serbs in Croatia “were inclined to take [Tudjman's] promises with a grain of salt, especially after they were increasingly attacked physically by members of HDZ factions, believed to be extremists” (FBIS, June 11 1990, p. 101).³³

In sum, the war in Croatia is not adequately explained either by old and general nationalist aspirations or as a proxy war. As Glenny notes, “At no point did Raskovic express an interest in taking Serb areas out of Croatia. The autonomy he demanded would be realized within a Croatian state, whether part of Yugoslavia or not” (1992, p. 19). By all accounts Raskovic was a popular leader who represented the median Serb in Croatia – that is, moderates rather than the extremists who favored a war of secession. As Raskovic's negotiating efforts failed and as the HDZ pushed increasingly threatening measures in Parliament and in the mixed districts, he was gradually outmaneuvered by Milan Babic, an extremist who benefited greatly from the support of nationalists in Belgrade (including Milosevic – see Glenny (1992a, 17-18)). But the majority of Serbs appear to have withheld active support from Babic until the Croatian declaration of independence made them an unprotected minority in a new state controlled by a threatening majority party. As suggested by the argument given in the last section, the prospect of costly war then appeared better to the Serbs than

³¹Glenny (1992, xx); Posen (1993, 38).

³²Separating true excess optimism by Tudjman from the effects of the domestic political pressures he faced will no doubt prove next to impossible. For discussions of “war optimism” see Blainey (1973), and for its effects on bargaining, Fearon (1992).

³³Or, in a Borba article, “Tudjman should be asked whether he is aware of the fact that his party has fomented national and nationalistic passions among Serbs in Croatia, to whom his verbal guarantees of a ‘peaceful and stable life’ do not mean a thing when they are facing an amnesty of the ‘Independent State of Croatia,’ which represents the greatest historical trauma in the minds of Serbs in Croatia” (FBIS, 2 April 1990, p. 86).

that of a worse peace later on.

5 Conclusions

The commitment problem discussed here appears either to lurk or to have caused inter-ethnic violence in many places besides the former Yugoslavia.³⁴ A short list might include Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine, Estonia, Zimbabwe, South Africa, and Northern Ireland. Particularly because of its importance in Eastern Europe, the commitment problem deserves more attention from Western policy makers than it has received. To conclude I will very briefly discuss a few relevant cases from this region and then close by commenting on policy implications.

Other cases in Eastern Europe. In late 1987, perestroika encouraged Armenians to attempt to renegotiate the status of the Nagorno-Karabakh (NK) Autonomous Oblast, where Armenians had faced serious economic and cultural discrimination by the Azeri authorities in Baku for decades (Saroyan 1989). Demonstrations, strikes, and other events connected with Armenian demands were soon accompanied by minor acts of violence, which escalated into sporadic feuding between young Azeris and Armenians in 1988-89. Armenians in the NK grew increasingly concerned that the Azeri government could not protect them from physical attacks, as did the Azeri minority within the NK.³⁵ Nonetheless, levels of organized violence remained relatively low until the collapse of the Soviet center in August 1991, soon after which a full scale war developed between Armenia and Azerbaijan over NK. At this point, Armenians in NK faced the prospect of entering an independent Azerbaijan without any credible guarantees on their physical or economic security, while the Azeri minority within the NK faced the same dangers should NK successfully detach itself.

Even so, leaders on both sides saw that a war would be costly and sought to avoid it.³⁶ One month after the coup, Yeltsin and Kazakh president Nazarbaev brokered a deal under which Armenia agreed to renounce claims on NK; Azerbaijan agreed to grant a high degree of cultural autonomy to the Armenian population of NK; armed forces were to be withdrawn from all sides; and a mechanism for permanent bilateral negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan was created. Russia and Kazakhstan agreed to guarantee the deal. The agreement broke down (in part due to the action of paramilitary forces fully controlled

³⁴A recent article by Glenny (1993) implicates the commitment problem in the war over Bosnia, though as in the Croatian case there are other factors at work as well.

³⁵See various reports by Elizabeth Fuller for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 1988-1992.

³⁶More precisely, leaders in Erevan and Baku sought an agreement that would avoid the costs of fighting. Armenian leaders in NK had concluded long before that only unification with Armenia or true independence would ensure them against abuse by Azeris.

by neither Baku nor Erevan), and Soviet/Russian troops proved unable and unwilling to stop the fighting in NK. By February 1993, with the costs of the war crippling Armenia, the Armenian president was reported to see the only way to end the conflict as “through international guarantees for the security of Armenians living in Nagorno Karabakh, which Azerbaijan has been unable to provide.”³⁷

Similar dynamics seem to be at work in Moldova and possibly Georgia.³⁸ In Moldova, Russians in the Trans-Dnestr region seceded from the republic on 2 September 1990. The occasion was the passage of a law making Moldovan the state language, but Russians were more broadly worried by the Moldovan nationalist organizing that had followed on perestroika and which seemed to point in the direction of independence or even unification with Romania (Fane 1993, 141). Either outcome would imply new and likely worse political terms for the Russians. According to Daria Fane (1993, 141), “Some leaders explained the trans-Dnestr secession as ‘uncertainty about their future and the fear of waking up in another state in the morning’.” While minor episodes of ethnic violence have occurred in Moldova, full-scale war has not, probably because settlement patterns allowed for a relatively clean break, as in Czechoslovakia. When ethnic groups are not highly interspersed, as in Croatia, the onus for beginning a war following secession is shifted to the majority group, which may have incentives to wait until it grows militarily stronger.

Ukraine, of course, is to date the most striking example of serious and successful efforts to defuse the commitment problem by political means. By contrast to Croatia and Georgia, in the struggle for leading the independence movement the most extreme Ukrainian nationalists were outmaneuvered by a group of former communist leaders and more moderate nationalists. In consequence the Ukrainian leadership that assumed power was not publicly committed to cultural and economic policies that would give Russian and other minorities a strong incentive to secede rather than acquiesce in the new state. President Leonid Kravchuk has used this latitude to send costly signals about his willingness to resist Ukrainian pressures to revise political terms to the detriment of minorities (for examples, see Laitin 1993, 23-24).

Some policy implications. During the Clinton administration’s hesitations over what to do about Bosnia, Senators and a welter of pundits called on the President to give a stronger account of what U.S. ends should be in the former Yugoslavia and how we should go about achieving them. The administration’s difficulties on this score reflect a broader confusion about exactly what U.S. interests in Eastern Europe should be in the post Cold War environment, and what principles ought to guide our foreign policy there. The analysis of this paper suggests a general theme for U.S. security policy in Eastern Europe that deserves

³⁷Celestine Bohlen, “Amid War for Enclave, Armenia Sees Little Hope,” New York Times, 3 February 1993.

³⁸Georgian independence was accompanied by violent secessionist struggles by Abkhazians and Ossetians. See Laitin (1993) and Jones (1993).

more serious attention and stronger emphasis than it has gotten: The U.S. should actively support and push majority governments in the new states to construct credible political guarantees for the rights of ethnic minorities.³⁹

It is well known that minority fears figure in many of the Eastern European conflicts, and many have called on new leaderships in the region to guarantee minority rights. Nonetheless, the centrality and logic of the commitment problem seem poorly understood and its implications inadequately addressed. Three examples follow. First, in Yugoslavia Western powers took actions that seriously exacerbated the commitment problem. As an immediate consequence of Germany's December 1991 decision to recognize Croatia, Bosnia declared independence, which gave the Bosnian Serbs the same incentive to opt for war that Croatian independence had given the Krajina Serbs. No doubt other factors were at work as well, but it is possible that German leaders did not fully appreciate the force of the commitment problem. Second, in the U.S., James Baker had announced in September 1991 that fair treatment of minority groups would be one of five conditions new states in the region would have to satisfy if they wanted U.S. economic aid. But as Van Evera (1993, 36) notes, neither the Bush nor the Clinton administration has made any serious effort to elaborate or implement such a policy. Third, at the broadest level the public debate in the U.S. over how to understand the conflicts in Eastern Europe has been dominated by the ancient blood feud view rather than a discussion about the politics of commitment and the construction of workable consociational institutions.

How would the the West implement a policy of supporting credible guarantees for minority rights in the new states of Eastern Europe, and exactly what would such a policy recommend? On the first question, neither the U.S. nor the Western European states have the resources to credibly guarantee agreements between ethnic groups in Eastern Europe by themselves. They do, however, have the resources to incline majority groups to make serious efforts to engineer such commitments. The most obvious policy instruments are economic aid, trade and investment incentives, and access to valued international institutions (the IMF, World Bank, EBRD, and perhaps the EC). All of these can be conditioned, to various degrees, on what political arrangements majority leaders devise that bear on the status of minorities.

The second problem – precisely what sorts of constitutional or other forms of commitment to recommend – is much more difficult, and doubtless would depend very much on the specific case in question. Neither the argument of the paper nor the empirical literature on consociational democracy suggest that stable power-sharing agreements across ethnic groups will be easy to construct. The Yugoslav case indicates that whatever commitment arrangements are prescribed, they will have little chance of working once widespread fighting breaks out. The wars in Croatia and Bosnia have made it very hard to imagine how credible

³⁹For the same recommendation and an interesting analysis of related issues, see Van Evera (1993, 33-34).

consociational forms might be constructed there. Tragically, there seem to be no alternatives except a horrible war of attrition or large scale resettlement schemes. The former is likely to encourage polarization among the major powers, particularly if a Greater Serbia succeeds in taking exclusive control of Krajina. The latter will create fragile and permanently bitter, revanchist states. At least, this seems to be the case for Croatia, where the fundamental issues behind the war of 1991-92 remain unsolved, stalled only by the conflict in Bosnia.

There are some larger, in a way more conceptual obstacles to a U.S. foreign policy in Eastern Europe that would put resolving commitment problems at center stage. The United State's favorite outcome in Eastern Europe is probably the development of prosperous, tolerant, multi-ethnic democracies accompanied by little or no border change. However, as the argument of the paper suggests, the use of majoritarian principles can create a commitment problem that generates secession movements and large scale ethnic violence. The U.S. is thus caught between objectives and principles. We desire stable borders and the development of peaceful multi-ethnic democracies, but we retain a strong belief in the Wilsonian program that favors self-determination and majority rule for any "people" that wants them. The dilemma is that pushing seriously for multi-ethnic democracies may require embracing non-majoritarian, consociational principles and also playing down the sacred right of self-determination.

The alternative would be to take the Wilsonian route, adopting a foreign policy that passively or actively favored creating a state for every "people." While U.S. traditions and the general zeitgeist might make this course seem right or "natural," I suspect it would be a bad thing in both the short and long runs. For the long run, the problem with the Wilsonian program of self-determination is that it creates incentives that work to undermine the program. If national identities are not fixed and historically given, if they can be constructed over time, then privileging national communities internationally creates incentives for political entrepreneurs to "rediscover" and construct national identities at successively more local levels. We can see this happening in Western Europe and the process may have even greater potential in parts of the East. In the short run, sticking with the Wilsonian tradition may imply decades of violent border conflicts, guerilla wars, and international commissions designing states and transferring people here and there by ethnic criteria. Despite the obstacles, a foreign policy that makes consociational democracy a priority deserves a serious look.

6 References

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