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15. March 2005

Online at <http://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/4239/>

MPRA Paper No. 4239, posted 24. July 2007

“New Wars” on the Balkans – Business as Usual

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The monopoly over the exercise of violence is the main defining element of states according to the Weberian ideal-type taxonomy. (Weber 1991, in Jung, 78) However, the ability to wield effective control over a fixed territory and to use physical force, extract taxes and operate a system of arbitration has been claimed and successfully attained by other actors. As suggested by some, the erosion of the state’s monopoly over legitimate organized violence has provided the fertile ground for the proliferation of ‘new wars’ over the past few decades. (Kaldor, 4). On the other hand, state authorities have often been complicit in most illegal activities accompanying warfare and it might be reasonable to interpret the distinction between political and criminal as a false dichotomy (Kalyvas 2001, in Andreas (b), 51).

Most of the contemporary military conflicts are classified as ‘new wars’, quite distinct from the confrontations between the standing armies of European sovereigns which served as a state-building exercise (Tilly, 173). These new types of conflict blur the lines between public and private, informal and formal, economic and political (Kaldor, 2) - the categories whose definition and adjudication are the essence of the state’s claim to legitimacy (Volkov, 165). It is tempting to relegate the ‘new wars’ to the territorially confined domain of the pre-modern and modern and contrast them with the post-modernity of the developed world (Cooper). It appears that the world can be divided into ‘zones of peace’ with high levels of economic prosperity, full-fledged political systems and functioning civil societies and ‘zones of war’ ravaged by poverty, corruption and collapsed state institutions and civic relations. (Buzan and Little, in Jung, 11). Such perspectives, however, overlook the fact that the ‘new wars’ bring together the ‘local’ and ‘global’ and engage them in a complex interplay.

The high levels of violence and acts of barbarity that are part of the everyday course of intra-state conflicts no longer shock television viewers worldwide whose instant access to disturbing footage is one of the privileges of living in the technologically developed post-modern world. The instant information flows, however, are only one aspect of the close connectivity between the domains of peace and conflict. Intra-state wars are internationalized both formally and informally (Andreas (b), 30). On the one hand, peacemaking missions by international institutions, humanitarian aid and diplomatic initiatives purport to keep violence in check and channel conflicts towards peaceful resolution. On the other hand, illicit supplies of arms, military hardware and embargoed items, people smuggling and the provision of enforcement and security services by foreign mercenaries are perceived as factors that lead to the continuation of violence. The picture, however, is far more nuanced and a differentiation between 'good' and 'bad' international influences would amount to an over-simplification. Indeed, a benevolent practice such as humanitarian aid has often assisted the warring sides and prolonged their conflict (Kaldor, 10; Schlichte, 33). Conversely, criminal activities, while condemned as greed-driven and self-serving, may generate positive effects such as improved access to much-needed supplies for the civilian population (Andreas (b), 33).

The incentives that the 'new wars' provide for the flourishing of illicit trade make them radically different from traditional warfare. Inter-state war, the two world wars serving as prime examples, leads to greater centralization, autarchy, increased control and the mobilization of resources by the formal state structures (Kaldor, 9). The growing pervasiveness of the state and its ability to monitor and regulate all aspects of society ensures enhanced enforcement capacity which leaves little room for the continuous undertaking of illicit activities. The 'new wars' are composed of entirely different structures and practices.

They open up states to pressures from within and without, leaving multiple contending centers of power and blurred chains of command. Political authority is increasingly fractionalized and power holders are easily captured by criminal interests. Borders are permeable, subject to informal control by contending militarized units, and the high demand for scarce goods offers a lucrative business opportunity for those who are able to provide them. Thus, illicit actors are able to operate and profit, forming alliances with local and central elites in a setting that entails no distinction between political and economic motives (Andreas (a), 6).

A key question that arises in the context of the nexus between political, economic and military interests in the 'new wars' is whether activities such as smuggling, trafficking and arms dealing can be conceptualized as 'illicit' or should be interpreted as the logical by-product of an environment in which social norms and values have lost their standing. Schlichte has suggested that by imposing enormous costs on societies, intra-state wars 'destroy state allegiances' (36). A consequence of this is the emergence of contending power structures on which individuals in war-torn societies depend for their survival and livelihood. Moreover, the spread of criminality to all levels of society, and the 'criminalization of politics' (Andreas (a), 6) entails a collective sense of complicity, making it difficult to distinguish between culprits and victims.

The normalization of violence and its exercise by various informal and semi-formal militias, quasi-state security units and rebel groups not only takes up the functions of the state but also alters its claim to legitimacy as a 'political authority based on formal regulations' (Jung, 17). While the territorial boundaries that delimit physical space are eroded by conflict, the structural boundaries of the state, defined by Volkov (168) as 'constituted through the behavior and attitudes of participants', are radically modified by the dramatic alteration in the

expectations and normative definitions of society. In this regard, the 'new wars' not only provide a favorable incentive structure for the growth of illicit trade, they also reinterpret previously entrenched normative boundaries and limitations. Therefore, as violence becomes a feature of everyday life, the institutionalized 'normalcy' of social relations is replaced by an environment in which a degree of predictability and safety can only be attained through constant readiness to compromise and adapt to the new structural boundaries.

It would be an over-simplification to attribute the legitimization of illicit practices solely to the violent setting in which they take root and flourish. In practice, identical activities can be praised or defamed by political authorities and societies depending on the particular context. The heroes of the day can easily turn into tomorrow's war criminals and profiteers if they lose the government's approval. Societies are also quick to denounce those whom they have hailed as their champions provided that the circumstances have changed. However, the use of the legitimacy/illegitimacy duality for instrumental purposes does not change the underlying redistribution of the moral categories of right and wrong. The fact that some of the actors involved in arms trafficking or embargo busting are vilified at a particular point in time does not mean that the activity as such will be condemned accordingly.

The relationship between the criminalization of society and the onset, persistence and end of military conflicts cannot be given a clear unidirectional interpretation. The typical 'new war' results in a rearrangement of existing power and economic relations, serving as a 'highly effective mechanism of criminalized social advancement'. (Andreas (a), 4) While both winners and losers emerge, it is likely that those who have managed to capitalize on the benefits provided by the opportunity structure of conflict will consolidate their power and yield increased informal, or in some cases even formal, political influence. Thus, if the

conflict serves the interests of the ‘winners’, they are likely to actively engage in prolonging it. While the ‘new wars’ have devastating effects for societies in general – destroying the economy and infrastructure, and bringing the battlefield to people’s homes – the illicit trade that accompanies them provides economic opportunities for adaptation at the micro level.

The ‘new wars’ act as a catalyst of illicit trade and generate considerable profits for those who are able to strategically position themselves in the informal economy. In a sense, the outcomes are not very much unlike what happens in any legitimate economic environment – there are big gains for a limited number of participants, while others profit less and some are inevitably left without any share. However, there are two features of the clandestine war economies that merit discussion because of their inherent connection to the development of conflicts and the role of societies in them. First, the overlap between the economic and military dimensions of the ‘new wars’ establishes a class of violent entrepreneurs who are actively engaged in both illicit trade and combat. Their material success and moral claim as the defenders of the group against its enemies grant them respect and appeal as models for emulation. Second, apart from setting the ground for the emergence of power holders who organize and deploy violence for economic and military ends, the clandestine economies of the ‘new wars’ also incorporate the whole society. Individuals engage in it as active providers of goods and services or as passive recipients, or sometimes as both. It is difficult, however, to distinguish between their motives for involvement – as suggested by Andreas, the polarization between ‘greed’ and ‘grievance’ is a false and misleading dichotomy (Andreas (b), 6).

Military conflicts lead to a dramatic upheaval of existing social and economic hierarchies, radically repositioning the standing of individuals in them. The story of the ‘new wars’ is to a

large extent one of rapid adaptation to new circumstances and dramatic realignment of resources. As suggested by Andreas, the onset of conflict allows for ‘elite formation overnight’ – criminals coming back from their prison terms abroad establish themselves as powerful military commanders and previously obscure clerics or teachers emerge as charismatic leaders able to capture the hearts and minds of the people and channel the collective ethos in particular ways. ((b), 5) Amidst the collapse of public order and the disintegration of existing social relations, the distribution of power is radically altered by the outbreak of conflict and continuously modified during its persistence. In a milieu where violence has become the norm, those best suited to explore the opportunities for rapid advancement and accumulation of power resources will be the ones in possession of qualities that are normally considered to be going against society’s basic norms and values. The ‘winners’ in the ‘new wars’, those able to amass economic and political resources, are likely to correspond to Veblen’s definition of the ‘predatory man’ – ‘asserting themselves forcibly in any case where no occupation alien to the predatory culture has usurped the individual’s everyday range of interests and sentiment’ (Veblen, 264).

The emergence of the ‘predatory man’ as the embodiment of successful social and material advancement in the context of war, coupled with the criminalization of politics, creates a new normative framework within society. In conjunction with other factors, such as persistent propaganda involving the dehumanization of the enemy and the appraisal of uncompromisingly militant behavior, the availability of the ‘predatory man’ as a template for success conditions social perceptions and attitudes towards violence. As the ringleaders of illicit trade networks are typically active as paramilitary leaders or rebel commanders, there is a symbiosis between their assertiveness through success in the battlefield and through the attainment of economic gains by participating in the clandestine economy. Hence, the strength

of the 'predatory man' as a referent object is reinforced by his ability to pose as the defender of a particular national, ethnic or religious community against an enemy that threatens its physical and cultural survival. It is not surprising, then, that the combined appeal of economic prosperity and physical strength, harnessed in defense of the endangered community, sets violence as an acceptable and even desirable type of behavior.

The possibilities of financial profit through involvement in illicit trade and the attainment of social respect through fighting the enemy bond together as an ideal that can attract a large pool of young males who are facing unemployment and destitution in war-ravaged societies. Thus, fresh recruits for both paramilitary formations and criminal networks are easily available. In fact, it is impossible to differentiate between the two structures and membership in one usually means involvement in the other one as well – the term 'quasi-private criminal combatants' used to describe Serbian paramilitaries captures their ambivalent status (Ron, 2000). The distinction between war and illicit activities is difficult to make – acts that are aimed at personal enrichment can easily be attributed to the goal of protecting the group or supplying it with goods vital for its survival. The key element that ensures success in both is the effective control of violence. The capacity to apply and manage organized force (Volkov, 59) is the definitive feature of warlords and militia commanders who have succeeded in sustaining themselves in prolonged military conflicts while at the same time securing the profitability of their illicit operations. As the 'new wars' effectively challenge the state's monopoly over the use of force, violence remains a contestable resource whose control ensures the survival of groups and individuals and enables them to pursue and attain their objectives.

The predatory men of intra-state wars, the formidable commanders and organizers of violence, are able to operate successfully because of their incorporation in a favorable

political and social setting. They are able to count on approval and support by the state as long as their activities are congruent with the goals of political and military commanders. The inclusion of criminal actors into the political establishment allows them to continue with their profitable activities and consolidate their gains during the course of war and to emerge as the leading members of a new elite in its aftermath (Andreas (a), 4). Moreover, the persistence of illicit trade is inevitably contingent upon the involvement of society in its clandestine infrastructure. The distinction, prevalent in the ‘grievance’ and ‘greed’ literature, between *conflict exploiters* and *conflict dependents* (Ballentine and Nitzschke, 16) attempts to draw a clear line between those involved for the sake of profit and those who are merely seeking to ensure the survival of themselves and their families. Such differentiation is meaningful at the micro-level as participation in the clandestine economy is often the only means of livelihood left for individuals trapped in violent conflicts. However, the ‘criminalization’ of society distorts its normative basis, turning violence and illegal activities into acceptable practices even after the termination of conflict (Andreas (a), 4). Hence, the criminal dimension of war is perpetuated after the fighting has subsided, leaving a long-lasting legacy of disrupted social structures, political systems and economies captured by the interests of the former violent entrepreneurs turned businessmen or officials.

The relationship between violence, illicit trade, and the onset, continuation and ending of conflict is complex, unpredictable and constantly conditioned by the interplay of domestic and international interests and power realignments. It brings a dramatic transformation of existing social structures, rendering traditional state boundaries, both territorial and structural, meaningless and introducing a different setting in which the ability to control violence leads to empowerment, while the ability to adapt one’s normative perceptions, attitudes and beliefs secures survival. Thus, accommodation to the changed circumstances and the ‘normalization’

of violence and illegality becomes the norm. This leaves a lasting impact on societies, allowing the ethos, social relations and power balances established during conflict to persist long after the war has formally ended.

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