Modes of transition and the timing of civil war onset: a comparative analysis of South Ossetia and Kosovo¹

Loretta Dell’Aguzzo
Teaching Assistant at University for Foreigners of Perugia
email: loretta.dellaguzzo@hotmail.it

Draft: 4/09/2014
Comments are welcome

Abstract
The collapse of socialism in Soviet Union, Yugoslavia and in Central and Eastern European Countries produced an ideological vacuum that favoured the emergence of nationalism and, subsequently, the onset of several ethno-political conflicts in divided societies. Whilst some states found ways to manage internal conflicts peacefully, others did not and territorial disputes within their borders spiraled into civil wars. Actually, most of these conflicts erupted during the transitions from authoritarian rule. The aim of this paper is to explain how the modes of regime change influence the timing of civil war onset, that is why some paths of transition from autocracy favoured the escalation of political violence in the short-run, whilst others delayed the onset of civil war.

I operate a basic distinction between transitions from above –when the élite in power has the capabilities to lead the process of regime change and to impose its political agenda to other social actors- and transitions from below –when the opposition leads the transition. I argue that transitions from above are more likely to ensure political stability in the short term since the regimes that emerge from this mode of regime change are more cohesive internally and the government enjoys the support of the military and can rely on a loyal bureaucracy. Since insurgencies are produced by the combined effect of motives, means and opportunity, I argue that the regimes that emerge from imposition from above can restrict the ability of separatist minorities to enhance their military capabilities and reduce the number of political opportunities to challenge the government. On the contrary, regimes that emerge from transition from below are more likely to experience civil war with an ethnic minority in the short term, because of an intrinsic weakness of the élite in power. Actually, when oppositions gain power through formally democratic elections they are certainly backed by the majority of the population, but they need to win the loyalty of the military and of the bureaucracy which can be still loyal to the former regime incumbents. Separatist groups can take advantage of the newcomers’ weaknesses and try to build resources to challenge militarily the state.

In this paper I compare the escalation of civil war in South Ossetia and Kosovo and I show how the modes of transition deeply influenced the conflict processes in these two cases: first, I explain how the exclusive transitions from authoritarian rule in Georgia and Serbia alienated ethnic minorities and worsened interethnic relations and then I show how a transition from below in the first case

¹ Paper prepared for presentation at the XXVIII Sisp Conference, University of Perugia, September 11-13 2014.
favoured the escalation of conflict before the consolidation of the post-communist regime in Georgia and how the transition from above led by Milosevic prevented the onset of armed conflict between the Kosovar Albanians and the Serbian government for almost a decade.

Introduction

The idea of a strong association between political development and violence is deep-rooted in political science. Already de Tocqueville argued that “the art of associating together must grow and improve in the same ratio in which the equality of conditions is increased” (1955, 118). This statement is quoted in Huntington’s most influential book Political Order in Changing Societies where the author argues that the increase of political instability in some geographical areas during the Fifties and the Sixties was the product of a rapid social change and the mobilization of new groups combined with a much slower development of political institutions. According to Huntington a widening of participation can overthrow traditional political institutions and at the same time prevent the development of modern ones (Huntington 1968, 3-5).

Regime change, and especially, democratization can be understood as an aspect of political development (Huntington 1963) and, as other aspects of modernization, may produce chaos and instability. According to Dahl, some paths to the first democratization can be more dangerous than others: more explicitly, the path to democracy is more problematic when inclusiveness precedes liberalization since bringing in large groups (and divergent interests) before new rules and institutions are established makes a compromise difficult to reach. Analogously, the sudden and simultaneous increase of participation and liberalization can be disruptive since it “drastically shortens the time for learning complex skills and understandings for arriving at a system of mutual security” (Dahl 1971, 35-37). The main argument of the contributions mentioned above is that mass mobilization may undermine political stability in so far as institutions are underdeveloped and thus unable to channel political participation.

The idea of an association between democratization and disorder was pushed into the background of academic literature and political debates until mid-1990s when internal conflicts rose sharply as a consequence of the end of the Cold War and the dissolution of multinational socialist federations. During the last two decades the processes of state and nation-building, regime change and civil wars developed simultaneously in several post-socialist states and this proposition regained popularity. In particular Mansfield and Snyder criticize the “‘naive enthusiasm for spreading peace by promoting democratization’ associated with the Clinton Administration” (1995, 36) and –building on Huntington- maintain that intense competition between old and new elites in the early stages of democratization may increase political instability. More specifically, while the old autocratic power structures are in decline, the new democratic institutions are still too weak to effectively regulate mass political competition. Furthermore, new and old élites in democratizing countries “have the motive and the opportunity to resort to the rhetoric of nationalism, which mobilizes mass support through the language of popular sovereignty while evading the accountability that would be provided by free and fair elections (Mansfield and Snyder 2005, 39).
In addition, most authoritarian regimes in multi-national societies are dominated by a particular cultural group. Thus, the main problem that affects regime change is how the transition will affect the interests of different ethnic groups. The stakes are often considerable, including the relative status of groups, the representation of interests within the state, how citizenship is defined, and so on (Beissinger 2008, 90). In such a context, political change increases ethnic insecurity and political competition increases ethnic strife (Saideman 1998, 2002).

Actually, recent studies confirms a non-monotonic relationship between civil conflict and regime type in most contexts and find that open regimes experience fewer civil wars and that the highest frequency of conflict occurs in intermediate democracies (Ellingsen and Gleditsch 1997)\(^2\). However, in spite of these arguments, there is no systematic evidence that democratizing regimes are the most conflict-prone. Indeed, Gleditsch and Ward (1998) distinguish between smooth and gradual democratization processes on the one hand and oscillating democratization processes full of reversals on the other, arguing that such a research design offers a better assessment of the effects of democratization on the likelihood of war and they find that smooth democratizations are less likely to engage in civil wars. Similarly, Gurr argues that ethnic rebellions are more likely to occur in failed and partial democracies than in successful ones (2000, 162).

More recently, Gleditsch et al. have found evidence that the overall effect of democracy is much stronger in cases of governmental conflicts compared to secessionist conflicts. Moreover, they suggest that part of the relationship between democracy and civil war onset may be spurious, since factors that are known to contribute to democracy and democratic stability also robustly contribute to peace (Gleditsch et al. 2009).

This paper makes two contributions to the literature: first I attempt to progress the literature on democratization and war by accounting for the effects of the modes on transitions on the timing of internal armed conflict, an aspect that has been neglected both by previous studies on democratization, which focused on the effects of how different modes of transition affect the consolidation of democracy and by the vast IR literature which focused on the impact of transitions and regime type on political stability. Second I develop a theoretical explanation as to why transition imposed from below in deeply divided societies are the most dangerous in the short run, whilst those imposed from above can prevent the occurrence of civil war in the short term.

Modes of transition and the timing of civil war onset

The process of transition from authoritarian rule alters status quo abruptly and may alter the conflict trajectories as well, since it brings new actors in the political arena, and it allows the creation of new institutions and new rules of the game, which can produce either a deradicalization or an escalation of the conflict.

Generally, regime change is characterized by a high level of uncertainty about future equilibria, especially among those that enjoyed benefits and had access to political power in the previous regime. In many post-socialist states, such uncertainty was intensified by the collapse of those state

\(^2\) See also Hegre et al. 2001; Muller and Weede 1990; Gurr and Moore 1997.
structures that had ensured social and military security over the preceding fifty years. The disappearance of stable institutions induced population to seek for personal security outside state structures. In such a context mechanisms capable of triggering a spiral of violence can activate, especially in divided societies, which face the challenge of the integration of ethnic minorities in the new regime.

During the collapse of the authoritarian regime, old and new actors have the opportunity to negotiate about the future shape of political institutions and to reduce ethnic tension through the “inclusion of all the relevant groups in the negotiating process” (De Nevers 1993, 65). An inclusive transition can therefore reduce minority insecurity creating adequate mechanisms for their inclusion into the republic’s political and social life. Transitions resulting from a compromise between the dominant nation and ethnic minorities downsize ethnic tensions in the short-term and postpone the discussion about minorities’ status to the stage of constitution-building, during which minorities that have contributed to the foundation of the new regime can actively cooperate with the dominant nation.

However, the probability an inclusive transition occurs is conditioned by new and old élites’ strategic choices. Snyder suggests that in the contemporary world, we have seen “élites jockeying for power within the ethnic group and having incentive to be immoderate” (Snyder 2000, 30) more often than élites leading their people toward compromise. In the context of regime change old élites may fear a loss of power and revenge and punishment for past actions by the next regime to emerge, thus are compelled to act out of self-preservation by seeking to maintain their positions of power (Engstrom 2009, 37). In order to preserve the status quo, they seek to capitalize on existing ethnic divides (Francisco 2000, 49). Similarly, new élites can fill the ideological vacuum left by the old regime by nationalist ideas (Snyder 2000).

In contrast with inclusive transitions, exclusive ones –that is when representatives of minorities are excluded from the founding coalition of the new regime and the dominant nation is represented by nationalist leaders- may foster the mobilization of ethnic minorities, since they react to what is perceived as an unacceptable change to the previous balance of power. Thus, exclusive transitions produce a radicalization of the conflict and raise the probability of civil war onset.

This basic distinction between inclusive and exclusive transitions however is not sufficient to predict the timing of civil war onset, since this is conditioned by the government’s ability to effectively prevent ethnic mobilization. The cohesion of the ruling coalition and the coercive and administrative capabilities of the new regime on one hand allow the redistribution of resources to the dominant nation and on the other to keep under control separatist minorities, thus preventing the onset of an armed conflict.

It is therefore essential to understand which modes of transition are more likely to establish regimes endowed with higher capabilities. We can distinguish among three main types of transition: imposed from above, imposed from below and negotiated (pactadas). In the first case the

---

3 Karl and Schmitter use the term “imposition” with reference to elite-driven transition marked by the use of coercion (1991, 275). Here the use of this term does not imply the use of force, but it is used to underline that the asymmetry of resources between two groups of actors (incumbents and oppositions) and their ideological polarization made a pacted transition impossible to occur.
government—although weakened—still has some coercive capacity and can impose its agenda to the opposition. In the second, opposition manage to bring about the collapse of the authoritarian regime, through mass mobilization. Contrary to what happened during the third wave of democratization, in the post-socialist space transitions imposed from below are the most common (McFaul 2002). Finally, negotiated transitions occur when the incumbents and the opposition seek to define (or, better, to redefine) rules governing the exercise of power on the basis of mutual guarantees for the “vital interests” of those entering into it” (O’Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 37).

Among the modes of regime change just mentioned, in some post-socialist states transitions imposed from above have established stronger regimes, since elites in power inherited from the previous regime the loyalty of the army and of the media and could rely on the expertise of the old nomenclature for the functioning of the administrative and bureaucratic institutions. In particular, the control over the military and the police, that is monopoly of the coercion, provides the government with higher repressive capabilities. How does coercion can delay the timing of civil war onset? Conventional wisdom agree that the use of repression on one hand increases the costs associated with protest (Lichbach 1987) but on the other increases minorities’ frustration and grievances since they perceive state violence as illegitimate and “unfair” (Petersen 2002). Indeed, repression can reduce the level of protest in the mid-term, but it produces a radicalization of the separatist movements in the long run, favoring the creation of groups that—due to the asymmetry of capabilities between them and the state, are induced to recur to terroristic tactics determining at last an escalation of the conflict.

Exclusive transitions imposed from below may lead to a radicalization of the conflict and increase the probability of a civil war as well. Contrary to transitions imposed from above, they produce a high level of political instability in the short run, since they establish weaker regimes, especially if they occur simultaneously with the process of state-building.

The first determinant of the weakness of the regimes that result from transitions imposed from below is that opposition is generally made up by very heterogeneous coalitions that are united by their desire to bring about regime change, but “after the fall, divisions appear among them and they struggle over the distribution of power and the nature of the new regime that must be established” (Huntington 1992, 606). In the absence of a protracted negotiate with old elites over the main features of the future regime, diverse and sometimes contradictory ideas of the groups that make up the ruling coalition emerge only after the fall of the previous regime. Thus, after the founding elections such divisions lead to an institutional gridlock delegitimizing the élite in power during an extremely critical stage (Munck and Leff 1997). This state of affairs induces minorities to take advantage of the crisis within the new government and to radicalize their demands. Second, transitions imposed from below may produce a complete de-institutionalization of the remnants of previous state structures. Moreover, such mode of transition may prevent the collaboration between

---

4 In the vast literature on democratization the use of different terms to identify the same concept contributed to a terminological Babel. Actually, the term “transformation” used by Huntington (1992) coincides with the concept of “reforma-pactada” developed by Linz and Stepan (1996) and that Mainwaring (1992) describes as “transaction”. Similarly, the words “replacement” and “rupture” on one side and “breakdown and “collapse” on the other are conceptually equivalent.

the new élite in power and the old nomenclature, due to the ideological distance between these actors (Zurcher 2007).

The final determinant of regime weakness following a transition from below is strictly connected with the process of state-building. In fact, post-socialist states experienced the dissolution of the state and the transition from authoritarian rule simultaneously. Thus, governments had to face several challenges at the same time: among other things, they had to restructure inefficient and rent-seeking state bureaucracies and reconstruct the army and the police (Wheatley e Zurcher 2003). The collapse of socialism and the dissolution of ethno-federal states had left new states without the fundamental coercive apparatuses that could provide the states with the monopoly of coercion. In such a context, the conventional asymmetry of power among state authorities and the challengers is missing, since the two groups of actors have to reconstruct their organizational capacity from scratch. Thus, minorities may become more assertive towards a weak government and the latter may be induced to fill the political vacuum at the centre with the adoption of a nationalist discourse in order to gather the support of the public opinion. Moreover, the absence of civil control over the military –frequent in the early stages of state-building– may increase political instability, since new military formations may pursue goals divergent from the national interest and attack minorities without an explicit permission. In such a scenario, political chaos can easily erupt in an armed conflict.

Transition from below and the rapid escalation of conflict in South Ossetia

In the second half of the 1980s, during the era of liberalization of the soviet regime, several dissident groups emerged in Georgia. Their main initial goal was to free the country from soviet rule and to promote Georgian national culture and identity. One of the main organizations that were established in those years was the St. Ilia the Righteous Society, led by soviet dissident Zviad Gamsakhurdia. This movement aimed “to encourage the political development and education for the Georgian people, in order to prepare them for future independence” (Aves 1991, 9) since they considered the Soviet Union as “an occupation regime” (Nodia 1996). Therefore, Gamsakhurdia opposed any form of collaboration with federal institutions and boycotted the first multicandidate elections in the country.

During the 1980s, the Georgian Communist Party (GCP) resisted glasnost thus excluding a mainstream politics that might have provided an alternative to more extreme nationalist movements (Beissinger 2002, 180). As a result, Georgian opposition was highly fragmented and only most radical nationalist groups managed to attract wide popular support. Indeed, as Liz Fuller observed “the Georgian authorities’ initial response to the creation of the St. Ilia the Righteous Society ...was virtually indistinguishable from the tactics of threats, detention, and arrest employed against the Georgian human-rights movement during the late Brezhnev era” (Fuller 1988a, 5). Moreover, the GCP at first tried to counter the radicals by setting up a semi-official movement, the Rustaveli society, which was moderately nationalist and supportive of the reformist policies the Georgian government was implementing (Cornell 2002, 157). The new organization was supposed to promote Georgia culture and language, but it was too obviously under communist control to develop into a
broad popular movement (Aves 1992, 159). In this way, the party sidelined the reformist section of Georgian intellectuals who would otherwise have looked to a Popular Front for leadership. Undoubtedly, the strategy of the party movement favoured the radicals, who managed to gain popular support by defying the government restrictions and organizing protests against the soviet regime (Jibladze 2007, 28).

By the end of 1988, the wave of popular protest against the proposed Soviet constitutional amendment that would allow the center to strike down any republican law which contradicted the all-Union law and that would abolish the right of secession, forced the local party to assuage some of the demands of the nationalists, thus in November 1988, a law was passed that strengthened the position of the Georgian language in the republic, including in minority areas, at the expense of both minority languages and Russian (Fuller 1988b). The language law combined with direct threats to ethnic minorities made by nationalist organizations raised South Ossetians’ fears about their future within Georgia.

The wind of political liberalization that swept through the communist bloc affected Georgian autonomous entities as well, where new political organizations were created. Contrary to other national movements, at first minorities’ movements aimed at resisting political change: the soviet ethnofederal system had granted them some degree of cultural and, to a limited extent, political autonomy. Therefore, in this institutional setting ethno-national groups could exercise political power over the territory where they represented the titular nationality. The onset of transition in Soviet Union and in its republics raised serious concerns among minorities, since they feared their privileges would be called into question once Georgia would achieve independence. Actually, their fears were not totally groundless since Georgian national movements insisted on issues relative to the promotion of dominant nation’s culture and tradition.

In 1988 an initiative group based on the Abkhaz Writers’ Union was formed to prepare for the creation of the Popular Front (Aidgylara). Local communist leadership feared Georgian nationalism as well and soon established contact with the founders of Aidgylara in order to unite under a common platform. The meetings between representatives of the Front and those of the Abkhaz Soviet resulted in a joint declaration calling for the upgrading of Abkhazia’s status to a full Union Republic.

As a consequence Georgian Supreme Soviet condemned the declaration and its publication in local newspapers immediately sparked furious anti-Abkhazian mass demonstrations in Tbilisi. Many of those who took part were ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia, but as they continued for weeks, the demonstrations began to take on a wider, pro-independence character (Zurcher, 2005). After a month of large-scale demonstrations in Tbilisi, a peaceful protest was broken up by Soviet troops. At least 19 were killed, 16 of whom were women. This event resonated in Georgian society, and eroded the authority of the Communist party, encouraging wide resistance to any political control from Moscow (Collier and Sambanis 2005, 266).

The intervention was intended to intimidate the nationalist movement and to deter popular movements from opposing the republican government to the extent they had done previously, but this was a terrible miscalculation. Actually, although in the aftermath of the massacre, the Kremlin tried to make amends by ordering Patiashvili –the leader of the Georgian SSR- to resign, Georgian
politics had changed forever (Goldenberg 1993, 96). The use of force against peaceful demonstrators and the arrest of Gamsakhurdia and other radical nationalists inevitably “strengthened the hands of the radicals who rejected any compromise with Soviet authorities” (Aves 1991, 28) and sidelined the moderates who were working to establish a Popular Front, whose founding congress was to be held later in 1989.

Moreover, the hardline had a devastating impact on interethnic relations as well, since the radical wing of the Georgian national movement managed to gather a widespread consensus among the population and the Communist Party lost any legitimacy. Indeed, the local authorities were forced to implement Gamsakhurdia’s nationalist agenda in order to stay in power. As Nodia points out, “in the period April 1989–October 1990, Georgia lived under divided rule: the communist government in power continued to carry out the routine management while all important political decisions were taken under pressure from or with the consent of the national movement” (Nodia 2003, 11).

The “Tbilisi massacre” had enormous consequences on Georgian transition and, especially, on relations between the dominant nation and minorities. In the following weeks, republican leadership was replaced and the nationalists held the new Party secretary to ransom. Indeed, under the threat of the nationalist organizations, in 1989 the local party issued a language law designed to increase the use of the Georgian language in all spheres of life throughout the republic.

Such provisions increased minorities’ fears who perceived the growing Georgian nationalism—and the regime weakness as well— as a threat to their survival within the republican borders. Therefore, new political organizations—backed by the local Soviet—emerged in South Ossetia as well. In January 1989 the South Ossetian Popular Front (Ademon Nykhas, AN) held its founding meeting and Alan Chochiev was elected president. Even though at first AN was organized around economic problems, attention rapidly turned against the dominant nation, who was blamed for the poor living conditions of the Ossetians. This was clearly a reaction to the growing Georgian chauvinism. Tensions between Georgians and Ossetians grew due to an open letter in support of the Abkhaz movement for separation from Georgia in March 1989. Moreover, AN demanded that the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast be upgraded in status to that of an autonomous republic and be united with the North Ossetian Autonomous Republic in the Russian Federation.

During the first months of 1989, the Oblast Soviet condemned AN campaign for unification with North Ossetia and the lack of support of the local party resulted in a limited access to the local media for Alan Chochiev and his movement (Fuller, 1989). However, the publication of the Georgian language program envisaging the strengthening the position of the Georgian language all over Georgia sparked ethnopolitical mobilization in South Ossetia and for the first time the Oblast Soviet leaned toward nationalism. The local parliament engaged in what came to be called the “war of laws” with Tbilisi, passing laws that were to supersede the mandates of the Republican government. The first act of the Oblast Soviet was the publication of a draft law which would give Georgian, Russian, and Ossetian languages the same status within the Oblast borders.

Meanwhile, in Georgia the Communist party was unable to resist nationalist agenda and the Republican government in the autumn of 1989 declared the supremacy of Georgian law over Soviet legislation. In March 1990 the Communist Party’s guaranteed right to a monopoly was removed and the first free parliamentary elections were called for October of the same year. This led to further
tensions with the Ossetians especially because the Georgian parliament announced a law prohibiting regional parties from participating in elections, in order to practically disenfranchise AN (Goldenberg 1993, 97).

The founding elections in 1990 represented the first opportunity to establish a robust representative institution to counterbalance the high rate of mobilization and it was both the first and the last time that all of Georgia, including separatist regions, participated in elections to form the first non-communist parliament (Cheterian, 2009). Thus, the exclusion of regional parties from competition fostered a sense of alienation among ethnic minorities which decided to boycott national elections and in the following weeks South Ossetia declared its secession from Georgia, only to have its declaration voided by the Georgian Supreme Soviet as unconstitutional.

Two-round parliamentary elections were held in October and November 1990, under a mixture of the proportional and majority systems: the proportional vote was divided between the Round Table led by Zviad Gamsakhurdia (53%) and the Communist Party (29%), with none of the moderate parties crossing the 4% threshold. A number of democratic moderates were elected, however, by the majority vote, and they formed the “Democratic Centre”, an eleven-member opposition faction in the 250-seat parliament. At first, this constituted the only parliamentary opposition to Gamsakhurdia, since the communists would not abandon their habit of voting with the majority. Many of the communist deputies soon quit their party and joined the ruling coalition, reducing the party to a small group of die-hard Stalinists (Nodia 1996, 6). The supremacy of the nationalist movement over Georgian politics was definitely established by the presidential elections held in May 1991, when Gamsakhurdia won a resounding victory and was elected president of the new republic with an 86.5 percent of the vote (Fuller 1991, 20-23).

Since the initial stages after the installment of the new regime it was apparent that, although Gamsakhurdia got in power through formally democratic elections, his main aspiration was to consolidate his own power within existing institutions rather than build new ones. He appointed members of his own organization to key positions in the internal security and economic structures, often provoking resentment due to the disruption of long-established patron-client networks. (Demetriou 2002a, 870). He used his monopoly over the official media to deny the opposition access to publicity outlets and resources. Moreover, radical opposition did not acknowledge the legitimacy of the government and organized elections to the so-called National Congress. The radical opposition represented in the Congress was not very popular, but it was supported by Mkhedrioni, the most powerful of the paramilitary groups. The concern of the government grew. In February 1991, the government managed to neutralize Mkhedrioni and arrested its leaders, including the head of the organization, Jaba Ioseliani (Nodia 2003, 15). Divisions within the dominant nation coupled with tensions with Abkhazian and South Ossetian minorities: whilst the center attempted to consolidate its power, ethnic minorities claimed the right to manage their internal issues on their own, through political autonomy or outright secession.

First violent clashes in South Ossetia occurred at the end of 1989 during the march on Tskhinvali organized by Gamsakhurdia “to defend the Georgian population” after the Ossetian parliament voted to upgrade South Ossetian autonomous status within Georgia (Horowitz 2005, 96). The first escalation of the civil conflict occurred during January 1991 when the National Guard conducted a
bloody raid on Tskhinvali after the elections for the local parliament. When two months later South Ossetians voted overwhelmingly to preserve the URSS, fighting intensified. The conflict protracted until the end of 1991 without blatantly escalating in a civil war. Comparing the fighting before and after 1991 reveals a shift from predominantly ‘social’ violence (consisting of skirmishes between unorganized bands of poorly-armed men) to full-scale warfare involving large military formations and heavy weaponry with air support (Demetriou 2002b, 26).

Tensions between Georgia and South Ossetia raised significantly in 1992, for two main reasons: first, the crisis and collapse of Gamsakhurdia’s government and second, the sudden availability of weapon from the collapsed Soviet Union. Indeed, divisions within the dominant nation weakened the Gamsakhurdia’s regime, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union allowed ill-equipped South Ossetians paramilitary groups to come into possession of a large amount of weapons. However, the increased South Ossetians’ military and organizational capabilities did not lead to a renewal of the hostilities: the local government did radicalize its demands but used local institutions to bring in secessionist claims again. Indeed, the sudden transformation of the conflict in civil war should be ascribed to the lack of control of the Georgian government over the military which, as well as Ossetian forces, between 1991 and 1992 benefited from the weapons obtained from Soviet military stockpiles.

As we have seen, the exclusion of ethnic minorities from the founding coalition of the new regime, reinforced by the adoption of an electoral law which actually prevented separatist movements and parties from contesting the elections. This increased minorities’ alienation and grievances against the Georgian state. Moreover, Gamsakhurdia nationalist rhetoric contributed to the radicalization of the conflict, increasing minorities’ fears, that reacted organizing paramilitary groups in order to respond to a potential Georgian military provocation. However, during 1990 and 1991 republican government’s efforts were aimed at consolidating the regime and at the organization of the first presidential elections, thus the issues concerning the status of the autonomous regions were pushed into the background.

In May 1991 first presidential elections took place in Georgia and Gamsakhurdia won 86% of the votes. At his first executive actions, new Georgian President attempted to consolidate his personal power rather than installing a democratic regime. Actually, in order to increase the control of the centre over the peripheries, Gamsakhurdia replaced the old Rayon Party secretaries with prefects appointed directly by the centre (Siroky and Aprasidze 2011, 7). Moreover, his belligerent rhetoric against both minorities and internal opponents mounted.

The newly elected Parliament’s complete inability to temper the authoritarian personality of Gamsakhurdia must be interpreted as a side effect of the transition from below that occurred in Georgia, that is the lack of experienced political personnel. Indeed, Round Table coalition won the elections by a clear margin, with 155 out of 250 parliamentary seats, whereas the ruling Communist Party (CP) received only 64 seats. All other parties failed to get over the 5%-threshold and were thus allotted only some single-member constituency seats (Lancava and Grotz 2001, 375). The

---

6 The law stated that only parties and alliances whose activities extended on the entire territory of the republic of Georgia were allowed to participate in the elections. If votes for a list did not reach a national threshold of 4 per cent no candidates from that list would be elected.
party list system had hurt candidates from Tbilisi *intelligentsia*, who were unknown outside the borders of the capital especially in the rural areas. Most of the candidates had no support base of their own, but were totally dependent on the charismatic leader for their rise to power. Actually, the main selection criteria was loyalty to the leader rather than skills and expertise (Goldenberg 1993, 97).

Gamsakhurdia’s authoritarian turn, however, produced the effect of isolating the leader rather than consolidating its power since the President’s mode of governance caused dissatisfaction even in his immediate circle. The government crisis had started by the end of August 1991, when the closest confidantes of the President stepped aside, among them Prime Minister Tengiz Sigua and Tengiz Kitovani, the commander of the newly created national guard. The latter took with him the majority of the national armed forces and called for the President’s resignation (Nodia 2003). After the putsch attempt of August 1991 in Moscow, the polarization between Gamsakhurdia and his opposition deepened. Gamsakhurdia was widely accused for not condemning the coup; actually, he tried to negotiate with the coup-makers in order to avoid an intervention of the Soviet troops in Georgia. (Cornell 2002, 165). The domestic political crisis grew worse when Gamsakhurdia tried to disband the National Guard, a military formation created out of several paramilitary groups, and subordinate it into the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The Commander of the National Guard, Tengiz Kitovani condemned the decision and left Tbilisi together with a substantial amount of National Guard troops. When the government attempted to establish firmer control over the National Guard and suppress the Mkhedrioni, the struggle for power in Georgia degenerated into a civil war. The warlords opted to seize political power directly, seeing the need to secure their monopoly on the extortion racket in order to sustain their paramilitary structures (Zurcher 2007, 139).

Gamsakhurdia’s fate was sealed in the fall of 1991 when Kitovani and the National Guard turned against him. The struggle between government militias and the two main paramilitary organizations quickly degenerated into an armed conflict which resulted in the collapse of the regime installed by Gamsakhurdia who took refuge in Mingrelia –his native region- in the fall of 1991 (Galeotti 1991, 76). Political instability in Georgia gave Tschinvali the opportunity to cut the ties with Tbilisi, expressing the will to unify South and North Ossetia and thus seceding from Georgia and entering the Russian Federation. Such opportunity became apparent when the government militias withdrew from the Oblast since they were involved in the conflict against Mkhedrioni and Kitovani. Actually, on January 1992 a referendum was held in the South-Ossetian Oblast and 90% of the population opted for unification with the Russian Federation (FH, Freedom in the world, 2012).

This reiteration of the intention to secede from Georgia did not provoke an immediate reaction, since the main paramilitary leaders in Tbilisi were in the process of assuming power over the country. Forces loyal to Gamsakhurdia had also retreated to their native power base in Mingrelia, concentrating paramilitary activity to the northwest of the country (Cornell 2002, 166). In order to bolster their credibility, the ruling Military Council invited Eduard Shevardnadze to return to Georgia to be its President. Shevardnadze’s arrival to power was thought to improve the chances of arriving at a compromise with the minorities and rebuilding the Georgian state. Indeed, initial steps were positive, given that a cease-fire agreement was reached in May, but Shevardnadze’s failure to control the paramilitary forces was already apparent. Actually, while negotiations for the ceasefire
were going on, Georgian National Guard and Mkhedrioni forces began a siege of Tskhinvali that lasted until mid-1992. During this time, the Ossetian National Guard, fitted out with anti-tank weapons and armoured vehicles, responded in kind. The armed conflict turned immediately into civil war, in which volunteers coming from North Ossetia and paramilitary formations were involved (Bowers 1994). Following a period of intense fighting in which Russian troops were also involved against Georgian forces, Shevardnadze and Russian President Boris Yeltsin on 24 June 1992 signed an agreement which established a cease-fire that came into effect on 14 July 1992 (Zverev, 1996).

Transition from above and the long-delayed war in Kosovo

After the death of Marshall Tito, political stability in Serbia was threatened by the presence of two autonomous provinces within the republican borders –Kosovo and Vojvodina- that enjoyed a high degree of cultural and political autonomy. Albanians from Kosovo considered Tito as their only source of protection from an otherwise inevitable Serbian hegemony, whilst Serbian minority aimed at reducing the power of the Albanian majority.

During the first 1980s, the southern province of Kosovo was facing a harsh economic crisis and population’s dissatisfaction rapidly turned into street protests, organized by students from Prishtina University. Such protests increased Kosovar Serbian minority’s grievances. Actually, after the 1974 constitutional reform Serbs lost considerable privileges and felt threatened by Albanian demographic and political hegemony. These feelings of insecurity induced the minority to seek allies among the Serbian leadership in order to amend the constitution, but with little success. Serbs asked federal and republican authorities to intervene in order to stop alleged acts of violence and intimidations committed by Kosovar Albanians and started to launch petitions and to organize marches of protest in 1985 (Transchel 2007, 107).

The Kosovo question in the 1980s raised widespread discontent in Serbia as well, both among the population and the intellectual élite. Actually, 1974 constitution altered significantly the balance of power between the Republic and the province of Kosovo: republican laws were discussed by the provincial assemblies and the latter could prevent their application over the whole republican territory; on the contrary, Serbia could not rule out provincial laws (Hudson 2003, 68). This state of affairs induced a group of members of the Serbian Academy of Arts and Sciences to draft a Memorandum maintaining that Serbs in Kosovo were victims of “physical, political, legal, and cultural genocide” (Vickers 1993, 222).

Until the first half of the 1980s, the Serbian and Yugoslav socialist leaderships were overtly hostile to any form of nationalism, thus on one side the state used to repress albanian protests, whilst on the other neglected Serbian discontent. The situation changed radically when Slobodan Milosevic – recommended by the relatively measured previous office-holder Ivan Stambolic- was elected leader of the Serbian League of Communist in 1986 (Meier 1999, 36). Milosevic was a party conservative, opposed to the reform movements who were in favour of greater reliance on private enterprise, multiple candidate elections and so forth (Wintrobe 2002, 8). However, during his early political career, Slobodan Milosevic showed no symptoms of being a Serbian nationalist.
The critical juncture of Milosevic career as a nationalist leader occurred in 1987, when he was sent to Kosovo by his superior Stambolic to calm down ethnic tensions between local Serbs and Albanians. Following a staged provocation, the Kosovo police started beating the Serbian protestors, and Milosevic sided with the Serbs, famously stating that “No one will ever dare beat you again!”. By siding with the Serbian protestors over the Albanian authorities, Milosevic “instantly became the leader of all Serbs” as his actions were praised by the Serbian media (Doder and Branson 1999, 43-44). From 1987 on, Milosevic cynically realized the potential of nationalism, and used his new status as the guardian of Serbs to oust his mentor, Ivan Stambolic, and rise to the supreme power in the Republic.

Actually, Stambolic sent Milosevic in Kosovo in an attempt to appease Serbian grievances, given that at that time the party platform was still grounded on the motto “Brotherhood and Unity”. However, Milosevic realized that the League of Communist was completely delegitimized in the eyes of the Serbian minority in Kosovo, who felt abandoned by federal and republican authorities, and saw an extraordinary opportunity for his political ascent, that is appropriating of the nationalist discourse and standing as the defender of Serbian interests, both in Kosovo and in the republic (Thomas 1999).

Back in Belgrade, Milosevic started to organize a faction within the party which would eventually oust Stambolic –the leader of the moderates- from power. In early 1987 Milosevic was not yet backed by the army and could not climb the ladder of the party hierarchy manu militari: his sole strength was a surprising capacity to mobilize the dominant nation and the ability to use the media as a tool of nationalist and anti-party propaganda (Doder and Branson 1999). And so a media campaign against Stambolic and his allies started, culminating at the end of September 1987 with an extraordinary Party congress.

During the summer the media started a nationalist campaign against Albanian population in Kosovo. At the same time, Stambolic, in a final attempt to put a stop to the propaganda, became a victim himself of the smear campaign orchestrated by Milosevic. Actually, during the Eighth Conference of the Central Committee of the Communist League of Serbia, Stambolic was accused of not protecting Serb minority in Kosovo and surprisingly to support “the desecration of Tito’s name and image” (Stevanovic 2004, 30) Ironically, both were accused of indecisiveness in their struggle with “counter-revolution in Kosovo” and a lack of true Titoist zeal in confronting internal class enemies. The latter accusation against Stambolic and the more liberal wing of the League of Communist of Serbia underlines that it would be a mistake to dismiss Milosevic’s discourse as nationalist tout court. Indeed Milosevic used a two-fold ideological strategy in order to take power: on one side he used nationalist discourse in order to gain support from Serbian population, whilst on the other he reassured the apparatchik of the party, the army generals and the bureaucracy presenting himself as an orthodox communist (Vujacic 1995, 32-33). Actually, his commitment to Titoism granted him the support of the elders in the party. Moreover, as Vladisavljević puts it “Milosevic emerged personally as the leader largely on the strength of his strategic position as President of the regional party Presidium, which granted him power to build up political support in the Central Committee and to change power relations in high party organs” (2004, 206). Milosevic was also aware of the power of media and appointed several media directors in the Belgrade and
Central Committee. As far as the military are concerned, Milosevic adopted a political style meant to appeal the high ranking officers; he courted the army, building links with the military leadership and taking care not to threaten their privileges (Djilas, 1993). The YNA (Yugoslav National Army) feared that democratization could eradicate its prerogatives and backed Milosevic in his fight against the liberals and moderates within the Party for ideological affinity rather than for ethnic support for his nationalist program. However, Serb overrepresentation in the armed forces may have played a role in the decision to support for Milosevic.

In late 1980s Milosevic managed to bring together a coalition comprising conservatives of the League of Communist of Yugoslavia (LCY), local and regional party elites, Marxist and nationalist intellectuals, and elements of YNA whose political power and material privileges were the first targets of the liberal-democratic forces. This unlikely coalition used the rhetoric of nationalism to mobilize population against the regime (Pesic 1994, 118). Thanks to this widespread support, Milosevic replaced Ivan Stambolic as President of Serbia in December 1987.

The consolidation of power in Serbia was not sufficient to prevent democratization in the other Federal Republics, thus Milosevic promoted the so-called “anti-bureaucratic revolution” in the provinces of Vojvodina and Kosovo and in the Republic of Montenegro in order to control at least half of the votes in the Federal Assembly. In other words, “Milosevic sought to place himself at the head of a mass movement whose aims were ostensibly nationalist, seeking to restore Serbian central control over the provinces, and direct it against the Party establishment” (Thomas 1999, 44). Milosevic’s emphasis on ‘anti-bureaucratic’ reform caught the mood of widespread public anger at the corruption and nepotism which pervaded the Party structures (Wintrobe 2002, 9).

In 1988 the anti-bureaucratic revolution marked a turning point with the destitution of the leadership of Vojvodina. The leadership of the Serbian northern province feared Milosevic populism, since it could jeopardize local autonomy. In October 1988 about 15000 protesters surrounded the government building in Novi Sad demanding that the entire Vojvodina leadership resign. Toppling the provincial leadership was the first step of the re-centralization of power (LeBor 2004, 104). After replacing the Vojvodina party leadership with his own supporters, he turned to the Montenegrin government, which drew on a massive police response to suppress the protests. The use of the police led to harsh attacks not only by the Serbian leadership, but also by Serbian intellectuals. The Montenegrin party leadership was forced to resign in early 1989 (Bieber 1993, 14). By the end of the year, the Kosovo provincial government was replaced by supporters of Milosevic as well (Magas 1993).

Moreover, in 1987 a process of abrogating Kosovo’s autonomous status in the Yugoslav Federation was begun by Serbia, culminated in the adoption of a new constitution by the Serbian Republic in 1989 that abolished all aspects of Kosovo’s autonomy. Kosovo’s judiciary, police force and provincial administration were brought under direct control of Belgrade, while Kosovo’s Provincial Assembly was abolished (Salla 1995, 428). As a result, Kosovo was fraught with protests throughout 1988–1989, and dissatisfaction was already high at the time the constitutional reforms were passed. On 17 November 1988, Trepa miners in Mitrovica started to march the 30 miles to Pristina in defense of the autonomy of Kosovo and the political establishment of Kosovo. In the following days, the rallies of the miners were joined by all strata of the Albanian populations.
Moreover, deeply concerned with the dangerous aims of Milosevic, in February 1989, 1,350 Albanian miners barricaded themselves in the depth of their mine and started a hunger-strike (Malcolm 1998, 343).

The demonstrations of March 1989 cost the lives of 22 protestors and 2 policemen. In the protests of January and February 1990, in which around 40,000 students in Kosovo participated, the YNA and special federal police forces killed 27 Kosovo Albanians and wounded many more. Martial law was maintained by the intervention of the army in Kosovo and special police forces that entered the province from other parts of the Federation (Murati 2007, 25).

At the end of the 1980s in Kosovo new political parties were founded and Democratic League of Kosovo (DLK) became the first non-communist party in Yugoslavia. The DLK’s founding meeting elected literary critic Ibrahim Rugova as its leader, and its membership exploded in the initial months, claimed at the time to number more than half million (Pula 2004, 804). In September 1991 DLK called a referendum on Kosovo independence and the overwhelming majority of the Albanian population opted for secession from Serbia. The following year Ibrahim Rugova, the party leader, was elected President of Kosovo (Thompson 1992).

Ibrahim Rugova and the DLK embraced a philosophy of nonviolence -that arose more from strategic calculations rather than from a deep philosophical belief -since the President feared Serbian repression. Indeed, as Clark underlines, “it is a misrepresentation to call him [Rugova] a pacifist. Above all, he was pragmatic. He followed a peace policy broadly speaking, but at one stage seems to have favored Kosovo having its own territorial defense system, and later worked for NATO intervention (2000, 6). Actually, Rugova believed that at that stage war would simply mean that the Albanians would be ethnic cleansed and this policy was backed by most of the population horrified by the crimes committed by Serbian armed and police forces in Croatia and Bosnia (Judah 2008, 70). Moreover, the option of an armed insurgency against Serbia was not viable since in 1989 the Republic dismantled Kosovo’s Territorial Defense force and in 1990 removed most Albanians (around 3,500) from the provincial police force replacing them with ethnic Serbs and Montenegrins (Pula 2004, 811).

Contrary to Georgia in early 1990s, Serbia exercised the monopoly of force within its borders. From the time Milosevic became President of Serbia in 1989 he established control over the YNA and supported –through the state security and the Ministry of Internal Affairs- the creation of paramilitary forces. According to Murati, these forces played three roles: first, they were used to instill fear among minorities; second, they were used as icons of Serbian bravery and nationalism in order to enhance the process of ethnomobilization of Serbs for wars; third, they were used by Belgrade to justify YNA operations in order to avoid responsibility and to blame, when needed, these paramilitary forces for obvious human rights violations against innocent civilians (Murati 2007, 26).

Throughout the 1990s Serbian government kept on marginalizing Albanian population from the political, economic and cultural life of the Province. Indeed, the development of a separate albanian institutions promoted by the DLK assisted the government’s policy of having Serbs fill all positions of responsibility in state institutions (Salla 1995, 430).
Whilst Serbian repressive policy remained stable for ten years—from 1987 to 1997—unexpected changes occurred in the Albanian side. As above mentioned, DLK gained lot of support in the beginning of 1990s and maintained to uphold its popularity until 1995, when its policy was discredited due to failures to yield concrete results in ending the Serbian rule in Kosova. Also the huge continuous violence committed by Serbian regime to Albanian population, and impossibility of this movement to protect civilians, was one of the factors that weakened the influence of DLK. The role of international community in this field is important too. Even though publicly the non-violent policy of Rugova was supported by international community, Kosovo independence was rather not supported. This further undermined the position of DLK among Albanians. The situation started to worsen in 1996. After the Dayton Accords ignored the Kosovo problem, the pacifist movement in Kosovo started to lose ground (Hudson 2003, 126).

As the pacifist movement weakened, the military option gained momentum. As a matter of fact, the first major break up within Albanian peaceful resistance movement occurred when students of the University of Pristina on 1st October of 1997 started massive demonstrations against the Milosevic regime without permission from Ibrahim Rugova. These students’ demonstrations paved the way for the liberation war led by KLA.

Due to the elimination of autonomy and widespread human rights abuses, ethnic Albanians engaged nonviolent resistance in the early 1990s. However, the ethno-political conflict escalated in 1997, when the KLA began a guerilla war and terror campaign with the goal of securing Kosovo independence. KLA gained its best momentum at this time, mainly because they came into possession of thousands of weapons and ammunitions coming from the border with Albania. In fact, in 1997 in Albania some state structures collapsed and civil population took in their hands military storages. In response, Milosevic instituted a police and military campaign against the KLA, which included massive atrocities against civilians. Thousands of ethnic Albanians were killed and over 500,000 ethnic Albanians were forced from their homes (Hornitz and Catherwood 2006, 270).

As a consequence of the widespread violence, the international community initiated mediation efforts. This resulted in the Rambouillet Accords in February 1999, which called for Kosovo autonomy and allowed NATO troops to enter Kosovo in order to secure peace. Because Milosevic decided not to recognize the Rambouillet Accords, NATO began an aerial bombing campaign on March 24, 1999 to halt the violence. After 78 days of bombing, Milosevic surrendered and subsequently many ethnic Albanians returned to their homes. But despite the NATO peacekeeping mission and Milosevic’s surrender, sects of the KLA reinitiated violence against the Serbs, causing many to flee their homes again.

On June 10, 1999, the United Nations Security Council adopted Resolution 1244, which formed the basis for the constitutional developments in Kosovo. The Resolution ended Belgrade’s governance over Kosovo, placing Kosovo under the administration of the United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo (UNMIK).
Conclusion

In this paper I emphasize the importance of regime strength, meant as internal cohesion of the ruling coalition and its ability to control the military, for the prevention—or at least, as in one of the cases here analyzed, the delaying—of civil war. Therefore, I show how different modes of transition may influence the regime capabilities and thus alter the conflict trajectories—and the timing of civil war onset—in divided societies.

The comparative analysis of the conflict processes in South Ossetia and Kosovo shows that exclusive transitions imposed from below may jeopardize political stability in the short run, since they produce weaker regimes, thus providing an opportunity for the radicalization of ethnic minorities’ claims. As a matter of fact, when Gamsakhurdia rose to power in Georgia, he could rely on the support of the majority of the Georgian nation and on the loyalty of the Parliament, but he failed to win that of the old nomenclature and of the military. Actually, Georgian executive did not exercise control over the army and the proliferation of irregular militias in the country weakened the government. The struggle between Gamsakhurdia and the leaders of the paramilitary troops led to a regime crisis, which provided an opportunity for South Ossetians separatists to radicalize their demands and declaring the independence from the Republic during the early years after Georgian independence from the USSR. Moreover, the failure to integrate the paramilitaries into the state structures and to control them is responsible for the last escalation of the conflict in May 1992, when the National Guard and Mkhedrioni entered the capital of South Ossetia for a last push, while the new chairman of Georgia Shevardnadze was involved in ceasefire negotiations.

On the contrary, transitions imposed from above, as the case of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia proves, can create stronger, internally cohesive regimes, able to manage—or prevent—minorities’ mobilization at least in the short term. Actually, Kosovar political organizations in the first half of the Nineties were forced to rely on non-violent protests, due to Serbian repression. However, this paper confirms the proposition that in the long run indiscriminate use of force against dissidents increases minorities’ grievances against the state. Therefore, once an external shock occurs—in the case of Kosovo the sudden availability of weapons coming from Albania—discriminated groups are likely to resort to violence.

This study demonstrates that popular upheavals against dictatorial regimes and transitions from below in multi-national societies may alter the political equilibrium in ways that spark instability and violence, thus hampering the process of consolidation of democracy. However, transition imposed from above are supposed to delay (not to completely eradicate the threat of) violence only in the short run. These findings suggest that the inclusion of different segments of society in the founding coalitions of the new regimes could represent the best option to prevent the onset of civil conflicts. Future research could track the impact of the modes of transition on political stability in a wider sample of cases, from different geographical areas.
References


