CHAPTER FIVE

Commitment Problems and
the Spread of Ethnic Conflict

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If international politics among the major powers turn hideously ugly in the next twenty years it will be a simple matter to use hindsight to show how this was "inevitable." Frightening analogies to the 1920s and 1930s can be spun out. A protracted, costly war has ended with the collapse of one of the combatants, its economy ruined and chaotic, its people resentful and ripe for mobilization by authoritarian demagogues who can easily argue for restoring national pride by means of expansion—Weimar Russia, as some have termed it. The largely pathetic response of the Western states through NATO and the UN to Serbian aggression in Croatia and Bosnia has already recalled the impotence and incoherence of the League of Nations. And for a time the major powers' reactions to "the Third Balkan war" produced divisions reminiscent of older alignments that might conceivably foreshadow a return to insecurity in Western Europe. Russia, France, and Britain have tended to favor Serbia while Germany and the United States have leaned toward Croatia.1

Continuing the analogy, the principle of national self-determination remains as powerful and problematic today as it was in the 1920s and 1930s. No one seriously questions the principle,2 but in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe after communism, "self-determination" strongly pursued would seem to imply an endless succession of irredentist and secessionist wars, state repression of minorities, ethnic cleansing, enormous numbers of refugees and attendant problems, and perhaps fertile grounds for escalation to major-power conflict. In the 1930s, according to some, Chamberlain' and company's acceptance of the principle of self-determination deeply influenced their initial response to Hitler's expansionist program (Taylor 1961, 189). In responding to diverse ethnic conflicts and nationalisms to the East, the Western powers have been similarly torn between the desire for peace and stable borders on the one hand, and acceptance

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2 Etzioni (1992–1993) is a recent exception.
of the principle of self-determination on the other. Could this confusion foster ethnic wars and allow them to spread across borders in such a way as to ignite serious major power conflict?

In this paper I develop two related arguments. First, the analogy sketched above is probably not warranted. It is unlikely that the upsurge of ethnic conflict observed in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union since the end of the Cold War will repolarize the major powers and reintroduce severe security conflicts among them. I argue that under present conditions ethnic wars and conflict in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union are likely to be self-limiting. They will rarely spread far, and if they do this will tend to occur gradually rather than in major, simultaneous conflagrations. Although the Western states' failures in the former Yugoslavia are disgraceful on humanitarian grounds, they are not comparable to the League's failures regarding Italy, Japan, and Germany in the 1920s and 1930s because the conflict in the Balkans is much less likely to spread so as to engage fundamental security interests of either the Western powers or Russia.

Nonetheless, the Western powers have a range of other good reasons to try to understand, prevent, and contain these conflicts. These reasons include humanitarian objectives (the value of preventing slaughter), economic objectives (the value of trade with prosperous states in the region), and to some extent ideological objectives, in that the success of exclusivist ethnic programs in Eastern Europe may contribute to undermining the legitimacy of liberal democratic "civic" notions of citizenship in the West. The second main argument of the paper concerns the causes of the so-called resurgence of ethnic violence in the former Communist countries. Understanding the causes of these conflicts is a precondition for understanding the circumstances under which they might spread and the likelihood that different policy instruments can succeed in containing them.

Though increasingly criticized, a standard view in the U.S. media is that "ancient hatreds" explain the increase in ethnic violence in the former Communist countries. A typical story line is: "These people, the Xs and Ys, have hated and warred against each other for centuries, this is their natural condition. While strong, Communist domination kept them from killing each other, but ultimately the 'pot' boiled over (or it boiled over when the lid was removed)."

Although I agree that the end of Communist domination was a critical factor, I argue for a different mechanism connecting it to the onset of large-scale ethnic violence. In brief, I argue that the collapse of Communist central governments has in several places created a commitment problem that arises when two groups find themselves without a third party that can credibly guarantee agreements between them. The problem is that in post-Soviet Eastern Europe, ethnic minorities are unable to commit themselves not to exploit ethnic minorities in a new state. Ethnic minorities, such as the Serbs in Croatia, Armenians in Azerbaijan, and possibly Ossetians in Georgia, anticipate that regardless of what the ethnic major-

3 The Western reaction to Chechnya—opposed to the brutal suppression of a movement for self-determination, but reluctant to condemn Yeltsin's regime for acting against the further dissolution of the state—provides a dramatic illustration.

4 In an important article, Barry Posen (1993b) has also argued that Ethnic wars in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union may stem from the effects of anarchy. I discuss differences between our approaches below.


such conflicts are prone to spread like wildfire from one state or region to another needs to be questioned. Indeed, the opposite might be the more reasonable explanation. I argue in this section that ethnic conflicts have properties that should tend to make them self-limiting in geographic extent. Further, if and when they do spread in Eastern Europe, they are unlikely to engage basic security interests of the Western powers.

In the first place, ethnic conflicts that turn violent are typically “about” irredenta or attempts to secede to found an independent nation state. This means that the claims that give rise to ethnic conflicts will typically extend only as far as there are “brethren” to bring into Greater Rutania, or brethren for Rutania to intervene to protect. Moreover, the progress of a Greater Rutania only directly threatens neighboring states with non-negligible Rutitian populations, or states that are unlucky enough to possess territory that was at some point in the past allegedly controlled by Rutitians. In the cases of, Say, Serbia, Croatia, Albania, Macedonia, Hungary, Romania, and Slovakia, the bulk of any such irredentist project involves only some borders with only some immediate neighbors. And although border conflicts among minor powers can be notoriously long-lived and difficult to settle, they tend to “simmer” rather than explode, and they have not in the past made for general wars or caused tremendous grief among the major powers.

Even if and when irredentist projects in Eastern Europe cause significant tensions or war, the major powers are not likely to be seriously threatened by them, for two major reasons. First, whereas before 1945 major powers often had to worry a lot about who would fight with whom in the event of a war, a number of developments since 1945 have made this central concern of old-school balance-of-power politics almost a non-issue. If the first line of defense against these worries is the “pluralistic security community” of Western Europe and a general European zeitgeist that views war as unthinkable, the final and sturdiest line of defense is the nuclear revolution. This has had the crucial effect of making major powers far less dependent on allies than they ever were before. The nuclear revolution means that the progress of a Greater Serbia or even a Greater Hungary would not create a state large enough to tip any relevant “balance” of concern to the major powers—the alliance preferences of minor powers simply do not matter as much as they did in the non-nuclear past. For example, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries competition between Prussia, Austria, Russia, and the Ottoman Empire over the control of Eastern Europe was motivated in part by concerns about how alliances and influence in the region would affect the overall balance of power, and World War I grew in part from Austria-Hungary’s fear of expanding Russian influence in the Balkans. More recently, Stalin wanted imperial control of Eastern Europe both because it meant that the first line of defense could be stationed far from the homeland and that he would not need to worry about multipolar alliance politics in which Eastern European states might enter a hostile coalition against the Soviets. The nuclear revolution has undercut or at least greatly diminished the motive for such balancing and “spheres of influence” behavior.

The second main reason why the spread of ethnic conflict in Eastern Europe need not engage the major powers’ security interests is that for the most part ethnic conflicts are particularist rather than universalist. Anyone can ascribe to the principles of Marx and Lenin or classical liberals, but not anyone can be a Serb, Hungarian, or Russian. For regimes founded on universalist ideological principles, the expansion and relative success of regimes founded on alternative universalist principles poses an indirect threat by calling domestic legitimacy into question—if their regime principles are doing so well and attracting new adherents, what is wrong with our principles? The Cold War was not simply about geopolitics but was also a struggle for “hearts and minds” in this sense. Except at the margins or perhaps in the long term, ethnic conflicts cannot be a struggle for hearts and minds since ethnic identity is presumed to be ascriptive. Greater Serbia does not envision converting Hungarians en masse into Serbs. Thus the progress of irredentist projects does not have nearly as direct implications for the domestic politics of the major powers as the ideological struggle in the Cold War did. More generally, this is another feature of ethnic conflicts that should tend to make them self-limiting rather than highly liable to spread from state to state.

One could object to or counter the above arguments on several grounds. First, although it may be true that irredentist projects in Eastern Europe can only extend so far, what about the possibility of diffusion through chain reactions? Ethnic conflicts typically produce large numbers of refugees, whose arrival in a new place may cause new tensions and problems. For example, the government

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7 I should make it clear that I am using “self-limiting” to refer to the spread of ethnic conflict from one group or place to the next, on and on across borders. Within a particular region, ethnic conflict may in some circumstances be “self-catalyzing” rather than self-limiting. Indeed, the commitment problem model of ethnic conflict developed below has this flavor.

8 The First and Second Balkan wars were handled reasonably well by the major powers—it was a conflict between a minor power and major power that started the Great War.

9 Russian leaders vigorously object to a NATO that excludes them and extends up to present Russian borders, but they would be much more inclined to take drastic actions to stop the expansion if it were not for nuclear weapons. And it seems unlikely that Gorbachev could have “let Eastern Europe go” in the first place without facing much stiffer opposition from the military had it not been for nuclear weapons.

10 Both Huntington (1993) and S. Kaufmann (1996) make this distinction and develop other implications.

11 This is not to claim that ethnic identities are unalterably fixed by objective characteristics, but rather that the social understanding of ethnicity holds that it is not a matter of choice, as is a universalist ideology.

12 Nazi Germany illustrates the possibility of an irredentist/expansionist program that envisons not converting but murdering other ethnic types in order to take their land and eliminate “inferior” groups. This could happen again, but it is important to note that the social Darwinist premises of this approach are not seriously advocated by state leaders anywhere (as far as I know). Lebensraum is “out,” replaced by the more democratic premise that all countries are created equally and have an equal right to control territory and to sell characteristically national tourist items. Universalist religions (Islam, Orthodox Christianity) could conceivably mobilize large numbers of converts across political boundaries in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, although this seems unlikely, and even if it occurred it might not threaten the legitimacy of the (secular) Western republics.
in Belgrade has tried to resettle Serbs fleeing Croatia and Bosnia in Kosovo, where their presence adds to tensions with the ethnic Albanians who make up the vast majority. Likewise, refugees from Rwanda may have heightened ethnic tensions in Burundi, as they have on numerous occasions in the past. There is no doubt that the presence of Hutu refugees and militia in eastern Zaire following the 1994 violence in Rwanda figured directly in the uprising of Zairian Tutsi and other groups against the refugees and the Zairian government. In the worst case, then, one can imagine a chain reaction in which ethnic war causes refugees, who destabilize a new place, causing more war, causing more refugees, and so on.

A closely related argument concerns possible demonstration effects of ethnic conflict. Even without flows of refugees or some other material transborder impact, it could be that if people in state B simply observe increased ethnic conflict in state A this will increase the risk of similar violence in state B. Seeing pictures and hearing stories of killing due to ethnic antagonisms in state A could make people in state B more fearful and worried about the dangers posed by ethnic others in state B—"if it can happen there, why couldn't it happen here?" Heightened fears and suspicions could then play into the hands of ethnic entrepreneurs seeking to mobilize an ethnically based political coalition, and so increase the ethnification of politics in state B. Lemarchand (1994a, 60) argues that exactly such a demonstration effect exacerbated ethnic tensions in Burundi in the 1960s and subsequently: "no other event did more to sharpen the edges of ethnic hatred in Burundi than the Hutu revolution in neighboring Rwanda [1959-1962]. . . . By identifying their political aims and aspirations with their Rwanda kinsmen, [some Hutus] impudently to the Tutsi of Burundi hegemonic motives that the Tutsi did not at first possess but to which they eventually gave a substance of truth. Conversely, many Tutsi saw in the Rwanda upheaval an ominous prefiguration of their own destinies. A kind of self-fulfilling prophecy was thus set into motion."

Demonstration effects might also work through learning by political elites. For example, observing how Milosevic successfully used the ethnic card in Serbia to cement his hold on power might encourage other politicians in trouble to try similar tactics.

Although chain reactions and demonstration effects are without doubt possible mechanisms for the cross-border spread of ethnic conflict, these arguments tend to neglect the countervailing incentives that potentially affect publics and governments often have to slow, contain, or arrest such processes. Concerning demonstration effects, for instance, ethnic conflict in state A need not inevitably lead people in state B to become more hostile to ethnic others in their own country. Instead, they might respond that "such things must not be allowed to happen here." And regardless of public reactions, governments can surely have strong incentives to counter possible demonstration effects or chain reactions. Empirical evidence suggests that governments worry about the impact of refugee flows and other means of transmission, and may respond preemptively. For example, as they observed the severity of the Bosnian war, Albanian leaders in Tirana dramatically moderated their calls for active pursuit of autonomy and secession of Kosovo province, in large part from fear of war with Serbia or a major refugee crisis. With the encouragement of the leadership in Tirana, the Kosovan Albanians constructed a shadow government and a private, underground educational system as part of a strategy that seeks autonomy while avoiding bloodshed. Finally, the war in Yugoslavia has served as a powerful object lesson in what can happen if political leaders foment, and mass publics support, interethnic hostility. Rather than increasing the legitimacy and power of ethnic appeals in Eastern Europe, the war may have the opposite effect, in part through the action of international organizations interested in acting more aggressively to prevent similar conflicts from developing. This is not to argue that countervailing forces will always undermine demonstration effects and chain reactions—the Rwanda-Burundi-Zaire case suggests otherwise—but that it is wrong to suppose that they will always or even usually produce rapid cross-border transmission of ethnic violence.

A third, much stronger objection to the "self-limiting" argument concerns Russia, the major power most likely to be directly affected by or implicated in the spread of ethnic conflict in the region. The assertion that particularist ethnic conflicts have minimal implications for the domestic legitimacy of major power governments has less weight regarding Russia, since Moscow faces numerous possible secessionist struggles within its current territory. Russian leaders might fear that successful irredentist or secessionist wars to their east will encourage more secessionist struggles within its current territory. Russian leaders might fear for their hold on power war (though I would argue that this is still very unlikely).

12 Experts on the former Soviet Union have noted a strong trend away from popular support for secessionist wars. See Schmidt (1993) and Zanga (1992). Western pressure seems also to have been significant.

13 The possibility of an intifada-like struggle in Kosovo is growing, although this would hardly count as a case of rapid, trans-border spread of ethnic conflict. See references in note 13.

There are two possible dangers here that concern the cross-border spread of ethnic conflict. Regarding the first, it seems something of a leap to argue that the demonstration effect of ethnic conflict in Eastern Europe would be decisive for would-be secessionists in Russia—they are much more likely to pay close attention to how the Russian government responds to demands for increased autonomy within the federation (as in Tatarstan) and for independence (Chechnya). The second danger—that increasing Russian irredentism will have the effect of fomenting and spreading ethnic conflict in the former Soviet republics—seems much graver and more probable. There is a variety of mechanisms by which a more openly irredentist leadership in Moscow might directly or indirectly bring about ethnic violence in the former republics, from military reconquest to offering support for Russian-speaking separatists and extremists. Countervailing incentives may work to dampen the effects of some of these mechanisms; for example, the danger of Russian irredentism gives the leaders of majority ethnic groups in Ukraine, the Baltic states, some Central Asian states, and Moldova strong incentives not to foment ethnic discord or encourage its spread. Nonetheless, the fact that countervailing incentives or forces exist does not mean that they will be enough (of course, in the case of direct military intervention by Moscow, countervailing forces are almost entirely irrelevant). As I argue below, the mere presence of an overtly irredentist government in one state can exacerbate a commitment problem that can lead to increased ethnic conflict in neighboring states, despite the existence of countervailing incentives for the neighboring state governments to prevent such escalation.

**Ethnic War and the Problem of Political Commitments by the Ruling Group**

Although there are reasons to doubt the "wildfire" metaphor as it concerns the likelihood that ethnic conflicts will spread rapidly from state to state, it may be more compelling as a description of the dynamics of ethnic conflict within particular communities.

Yugoslavia provides some striking examples here. Full-scale war between Serbs and Croats erupted in the Krajina region of Croatia in late June 1991, more or less immediately following the Croatian parliament's declaration of independence on June 25. Although interventions by the Serb-dominated Yugoslav National Army (JNA) made for some of the worst fighting, it is significant that the conflict was characterized by very local-level, house-to-house warfare—Serbs and Croats in the mixed communities of Krajina and Slavonia were almost completely polarized at the time of the declaration and took up arms against the other group. Indeed, ethnic polarization and conflict in this case has the look of "wildfire," in that the two communities were not nearly so divided only months earlier. Journalists traveling in the region in 1990 reported that most people seemed to have had no use for or interest in the exclusivist arguments pushed by the minority of extremists.

Misha Glenny (1993, 19) writes that "before May 1991, Croats and Serbs lived together in relative contentment throughout the regions which have now been so dreadfully ravaged." 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" (20). Commenting on a town in Banja district where the first large-scale fighting of the war occurred, Glenny states that "Babic had been sending emissaries from Knin in an attempt to undermine the social democratic forces in Glina in favor 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" (93). On the Croatian side, Glenny discusses the case of a well-respected local leader in Slavonia who, in the first months of 1991, "was determined to stop distrust between Serbs and Croats from sliding into open hostility. For weeks before his [assassination], he traveled tirelessly from village to village striking local deals to prevent the extremists in both [Serb and Croat] communities from assuming a dominant influence" (106). At a higher political level, a group of Croatian intellectuals and politicians evidently tried to persuade the Croatian leader Franjo Tudjman in the summer of 1990 to change his policy on Krajina in order to avoid a war (14).

A reporter for the Frankfurter allgemeine Zeitung, Michael 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, inter-marriage, 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." (25).

These reports, along with many similar observations by other reporters and scholars, argue 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. On 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 the spring of 1991. These months, according to Glenny, saw a rapid and nearly total "homogenization" of opinion. Serbs and Croats who had resisted the extremists' appeals finally opted for division and war.

The rapid polarization of Serbs and Croats in Croatia represents a puzzle. It is inconsistent with an "ancient hatreds" explanation, according to which we would expect to find seething and widespread hostility waiting to erupt at any time. This is very definitely not what we find in 1990 and even early 1991, except in the...
case of some extremists. It is also a puzzle for more “top-down” arguments that argue that elites, primarily in Belgrade, directly created ethnic polarization. In this account, extremists like Milan Babic were simply pawns of Slobodan Milosevic operating in Belgrade (which is probably true), and they were able to force polarization by means of terrorism, intimidation, and assassinations. Although there is something to this, it should be noted that these activities were going on from early 1990 (following multiparty elections in Croatia in May), but rapid and thorough polarization appears not to have occurred until shortly before the declaration of independence in June 1991.

I argue that the rapid polarization of ethnic opinion and the subsequent conflict in Croatia is explained by a commitment problem operating between the majority Croats and the minority Serbs in Croatia. With the declaration of independence, Serbs in Croatia, whether extremist or utterly indifferent to such things, faced the prospect of entering the new state of Croatia with no credible guarantees on their political status, or economic and even physical security. And although the Croatian majority government could have done much more to try to assure the Serb minority, there was nothing credible they could do to commit themselves not to pursue policies detrimental to Serb welfare and security in the future, after the Croatian state had grown stronger. Faced with this prospect, it could make sense for even nonextremist Serbs to try to fight now rather than later, despite the costs of civil war and the existence of bargains that majorities on both sides might have preferred.

To make this argument more precise, it is helpful to use a simple game model of the problem faced by a majority and minority ethnic group after the disintegration of an “imperial” authority previously over both of them. I sketch and analyze this model next. It is a stylization intended to make clear a particular political dynamic that I argue is empirically important, even if the way the dynamic operates in particular cases is invariably more complicated and qualified than in the stylized model. In particular, whereas in the model I treat the majority and minority groups as unitary actors, the discussion of the Krajina case (below) indicates that in reality intragroup politics matter significantly. To understand exactly how it matters, however, I argue that one needs a prior understanding of the core commitment problem clarified by the simple model.

A Model of the Commitment Problem

Consider a majority group M and minority group m. Suppose that living together in one state affords the groups total “benefits” worth \( B \), which will be divided between the two according to the political rules of the game in the new state. We can think of \( B \) either as solely economic or including political and other benefits as well. In Croatia, Serbs and Croats cared not only about access to state patronage and consideration for jobs in the public and private sectors but also about the curricula taught in schools, the alphabet used on street signs, symbols of the new state, and a range of things connected to views of relative status. We can think of each group’s share of \( B \) as representing its value for a given resolution of all such issues.

In the first period of the game, the minority group will decide whether to fight for secession or to acquiesce and enter the new state. If they fight, a war occurs that is won by the majority with probability \( p_1 \), and which costs \( c_M > 0 \) for the majority and \( c_m > 0 \) for the minority. Victory for the minority means successful secession, in which case it receives benefits \( b_m \), the value of independence for the group. The majority, on the other hand, receives \( b_M \), the benefits of living in the smaller state it is left with. If the majority wins a military conflict, it will take all the benefits \( B \), leaving nothing for the minority, which is forced to remain in the majority’s state. It follows that the expected payoffs for civil war in the first period are \( pB + (1 - p_1)B_M - c_M \) for the majority, and \( p0 + (1 - p_1)B_m - c_m = (1 - p)B_m + c_m \) for the minority. I assume that \( b_m + b_M < B \), so that the total benefits of living together in the new state exceed the sum of the groups’ values for separation.

If this is not the case, then there is no reason for the groups not to separate happily and peacefully as soon as they can.

If the minority decides to enter the new state instead of opting for secession, then I assume that “majority rule” means that the majority group decides on a division of the total benefits between the two groups. Let \( \alpha \) be the proportion of \( B \) that the majority proposes to keep for itself in the new state. After the majority makes its demand (which might in practice represent the specification and implementation of a constitution), the minority will decide a second time whether to try a war of secession. Payoffs are the same as for civil war in the first period, except that now we assume that the probability that the majority defeats the minority increases to \( p_2 > p_1 \). The idea here is that it will be more difficult for the minority to secede after the majority has consolidated its control of the new state and begun to build up the police, army, and security apparatus.

The appropriate solution concept for the model specified above is subgame perfect Nash equilibrium. In a subgame perfect equilibrium, players cannot rely on threats or promises that they would not want to carry out if they actually had to make the choice. This is natural for the strategic situation considered here, where it is obvious that what the minority wants to do in the first period depends on its expectations about how the majority would divide up the benefits \( B \) in the

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23 This is the flavor of Gagnon’s (1994–1995) account.
24 The model presented here is a simpler version of that presented in Fearon 1994. See that paper for a fuller treatment.
25 This can be justified more thoroughly as follows: If the minority loses, it has revealed that it cannot secede successfully by force, so in the future its probability of winning secession by war drops close to zero. Since fighting is costly this means the minority will accept an offer of zero rather than fight.
26 In the case of \( b_m + b_M > B \), a transfer from the minority might be necessary if the majority’s value for peaceful separation \( b_m \) is less than its expected value for forcibly trying to prevent secession; it is conceivable that problems with bargaining or commitment might engender conflict in this particular case.
27 It may also be more difficult for the minority to obtain help from ethnic brethren in nearby states or from the international community after it has already agreed once to enter the new state.
new state. Likewise, the division proposed by the majority will depend on its expectations about what the minority would be willing to accept. Working backward, in the second period the minority does best to accept any offer of benefits worth more than its second-period value for fighting to secede. Thus any division \( \alpha \) such that \((1 - \alpha)B \geq (1 - p_2)b_m - c_m\) will be accepted in preference to war. Given this fact, the majority does best to push the minority just up to its willingness to fight in the second period, choosing a division \( \alpha^* \) such that \((1 - \alpha^*)B = (1 - p_2)b_m - c_m\) if \((1 - p_2)b_m - c_m \geq 0\), and \(\alpha^* = 1\) if \((1 - p_2)b_m - c_m < 0\). Thus if the minority were to acquiesce rather than fight in the first period, peace would prevail and payoffs would be \(\alpha^*B\) for the majority and \((1 - \alpha^*)B\) for the minority in the second period.

But here is the dilemma. As long as the minority group would prefer fighting in the first period to receiving none of the benefits in the new state (i.e., \([1 - p_1]b_m - c_m > 0\)), then it will strictly prefer to fight for secession in the first period. Acquiescing yields a peaceful settlement worth \((1 - \alpha^*)B = (1 - p_2)b_m - c_m\), whereas fighting in the first period yields \((1 - p_1)b_m - c_m\). Because the minority is more likely to succeed at war in the second period than in the first \((1 - p_1 > 1 - p_2)\), secessionist war in the first period is strictly better than being "pushed to the wall" short of war in the new state. That is, it is better to fight for secession now than to be forced to live with a worse situation in the new state, albeit peacefully.

The outcome of immediate civil war, however, makes both majority and minority worse off than they ideally could be. It is easy to show that since war is costly, there will always be peaceful settlements in the new state that both groups prefer to a violent conflict in either period. For example, the majority would ideally like to commit itself in advance to offer a division \(\alpha' < \alpha^*\) such that the minority would prefer to receive this in the new state rather than fight to secede in the first period (i.e., \(\alpha'\) such that \((1 - \alpha')B\) is just greater than \((1 - p_1)b_m - c_m\)). If the minority could be guaranteed that the majority would in fact implement this division in the new state, the minority would then prefer not to fight. But the majority cannot credibly commit itself to make such moderate demands in the new state, because at that point its bargaining power will have increased due to the consolidation of police and army capabilities. Costly ethnic war is thus explained as the result of the majority's inability to make a credible commitment to the minority.30

This commitment problem may help explain the rapid polarization of ethnic groups in Croatia following the declaration of Croatian independence in June 1991. For Serbs, the Croatian declaration of independence meant that they entered a new state in which they lacked any serious indication that the government would and could credibly guarantee Serb rights. And even if the government did seek verbally to reassure the Serbs that their rights would be respected, the Serbs could not be sure that such policies would be faithfully implemented in the future, given diverse majority pressures for jobs for Croats and possibly for efforts at cultural homogenization or exclusion. According to Glenny (1992a, 31), "when Croatian independence was declared on June 25... Glina's Serbs, fearing the worst, sided with the thugs from the Hrvatska Narodna Stranka [Serb extremists]," whom they had previously resisted.

If the commitment problem model does capture something of what was going on in Croatia, then we might expect to find evidence of Croatian leaders trying to work out guarantees with Serb leaders. In fact, in addition to offering verbal assurances of equal treatment on numerous occasions, the Croatian President Tudjman met with the leader of the Serbs in Croatia, Jovan Raskovic, several times in the summer and fall of 1990 to discuss precisely the issue of commitment to guarantees on the Serbs' status and "cultural autonomy."31 The talks failed. Raskovic stated that he believed Tudjman wanted to offer stronger and more credible guarantees, but was prevented from doing so by extremists within his party, the Croatian Democratic Union (HDZ).32

That the model captures an important aspect of what was happening in Croatia prior to the outbreak of war is indicated by the centrality of the question of guarantees and commitment in both Serb-Croat and intragroup political debate in 1990 and early 1991. The case also shows, however, that the model sketched above is too simple in that it leaves out important dynamics that bear on whether groups will be able to resolve the problem. In the Croatian case, it is significant that while Tudjman did offer verbal reassurances to the Serbs and negotiated on guarantees with their political leadership, he also took actions that had the opposite effect of frightening the Serbs. For example, symbols of the wartime Ustasha regime hated by Serbs were adapted for use by the new Croatian government, and in 1990 Tudjman's party pushed through constitutional reforms that removed supramajority rules for votes on (among other things) ethnically sensitive issues. Such actions would tend to exacerbate the majority's commitment problem, and so are inconsistent with the model.32

Two factors are left out of the model that seem to bear directly on Tudjman's motivation to try to construct a credible set of guarantees for the Serb minority. First, in the model I assume that the two ethnic groups can be represented as "unitary actors," when in fact what "the group" decides to do is the product of complicated internal political dynamics. In the Croatian case, Tudjman had been

30 It is important to note that cultural differences, disagreements, and misinterpretations between ethnic groups (which are almost always present) are not enough to explain why violent conflict sometimes occurs between them. Even if there are disagreements and resentments, fighting is costly—in the case of ethnic war obviously so—so that groups should have strong incentives to settle their differences without war. Of the literally hundreds of geographically contiguous or intermixed ethnic groups in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, only a tiny fraction has engaged in widespread, serious violence since 1991 (Fearon and Laitin 1999). Arguments such as the commitment problem story given here are required to explain such costly violence, at least on the presumption of roughly rational actors. For a more general version of this argument applied to interstate war, see Fearon (1995).

31 According to Glenny (1993, 19), Raskovic never demanded outright secession.


33 At least, they are inconsistent with a simple and straightforward interpretation of the model. One could, however, argue as follows: if the problem really is unresolvable (there is no way that the majority can credibly commit itself), then any negotiations and discussions will just be for show, and the leaderships of the two groups will have no reason not to take provocative actions if this helps them gain support within their own group.
elected in May 1990 on a platform whose central elements were increased autonomy for Croatia within the federation and "decommunization," which was understood to imply a reduction of Serb representation in Croatian public-sector jobs (Woodward 1995a, 118–19). Thus, to appear to make concessions on this matter was to appear to cede ground to the (largely Croatian) opposition parties that had argued against him and which constituted a significant share of the legislature. Further, Tudjman's election campaign had done surprisingly well (though it still did not win a majority of votes cast) in a large part because he had been massively funded by wealthy émigrés with (typically) extremist views about kicking out the Serbs—émigrés do not bear the costs of civil war that Croatians living in Krajina recognized they would. Thus intragroup political dynamics can militate against efforts to construct credible guarantees for the minority.34

The second key factor affecting Tudjman's interest in constructing a credible commitment concerns the role of Serbia. For good reasons, Tudjman and other Croats strongly suspected that Milosevic and some important military leaders in Belgrade were actively trying to create a Greater Serbia that would include Krajina—that is, that Milosevic was an irredentist. This increased the risk of committing to the Serbs in Croatia, since to do so credibly might entail actions (such as letting them keep their arms or control police stations in some towns) that could hurt Croatia in the event of war with Serbia.

Although the case is more complicated than the model (as is always true), the complexities are harder to order and make sense of without a clear statement of the underlying problem of commitment by the majority to the minority. Though I lack the space to do so here, the basic commitment problem described here appears to operate in a number of other cases as well. The war over Nagorno Karabakh is probably the best example: The disintegration of Soviet authority led Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh to try to fight for secession right away rather than face an uncertain future as a minority in the new state of Azerbaijan. By February 1993, with the costs of supporting the war effort 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."35

The commitment problem model also implies a number of hypotheses on the question of why ethnic violence occurs (or is more likely) in some cases rather than others. I will sketch these in the next section, after some observations on how the argument given here differs from Barry Posen's analysis of the "security dilemma" as a source of ethnic war, which also stresses anarchy as a causal factor.36 Whereas my argument identifies and examines a specific commitment problem that may occur between a majority and minority group and may cause ethnic war, Posen argues that first, interspersed settlement patterns create offensive advantages, which (following Jervis 1978) exacerbate the security dilemma, and second, "the complexity of these situations makes it possible for many competing groups [simultaneously] to believe that their prospects in a war would be better earlier rather than later" (34); thus preventive wars become likely. The specific commitment problem I have described does give rise to a sort of preventive war undertaken by the minority, although it is motivated by the majority's inability to commit to certain political bargains in the future rather than by mutual miscalculations of the course of relative power. In addition, the security dilemma is typically assumed to explain how the structural condition of anarchy can make for escalating hostility or even violent conflict between actors that are interested only in their own security and have no fundamentally aggressive or revisionist desires. By contrast, for the commitment problem I describe to operate, there must be some set of substantive issues over which the minority and majority have conflicting preferences, either in the present or in the future. Otherwise, the minority has nothing to fear concerning what policies the majority will implement in the new state, and the fact of anarchy is then inconsequential. In the security dilemma argument, hostility is said to grow not from a specific mechanism that requires conflicting preferences, shifting relative power, and anarchy, but rather from mutual uncertainty about the other side's intentions. It is not made clear, however, why signaling between states or groups cannot be used to reduce this uncertainty, if in fact the parties are interested only in security.37 Finally, the commitment problem account gives an explicit answer to the question of why the groups in conflict cannot bargain to a settlement both prefer to a costly war, whereas the security dilemma account does not (Fearon 1995, 384–85).

Factors Affecting the Severity of the Commitment Problem

The model allows the identification of several factors that should influence the question of whether the commitment problem will produce ethnic war or peace. These are: one, the military strength and cultural preferences of the minority; two, the pattern of settlement of minority and majority groups; three, the presence of external guarantors or ethnic brethren in a neighboring state who are both willing and able to threaten credibly to intervene on behalf of the minority if they are abused in the new state but not otherwise; four, the extent of the minority's expected decline in ability to secede in the future; and five, the value of the "exit" option for individuals in the minority group, and the social and political organization of the minority.

34 Intragroup dynamics, chiefly in the form of intimidation by the extremists supported by Belgrade, also affected the Serbs' disposition to compromise with the Croats.
36 See Posen (1993b). The commitment problem and security dilemma arguments are sometimes said to be similar (e.g., Cederman 1996).
RELATIVE MILITARY STRENGTH AND CULTURAL PREFERENCES OF THE MINORITY

In the model, the commitment problem operates only if the condition \((1 - p_1)b_m - c_m > 0\) holds, which in words means that the minority would prefer to fight in the first period rather than accept zero benefits in the new state. ("Zero benefits" should be interpreted as the policies the majority would follow if the minority had no military bargaining power at all.) The commitment problem does not operate if fighting now is worse for the minority than the worst situation they would face under the new regime (i.e., \([1 - p_1]b_m - c_m < 0\)). Thus, if either the minority is very weak relative to the majority \((p_1 \equiv 1)\), or if its costs for fighting are very large relative to its (cultural) value for secession, the minority will prefer simply to acquiesce and there will be no war. Conversely, if the minority is militarily strong relative to the majority (as with Serbs in Krajina and Bosnia), then the commitment problem is more likely to operate.38

Many small ethnic groups in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Republics may fit this case. For example, in 1988 Milosevic pushed through constitutional changes that rescinded Kosovo's status as an "autonomous province," a move widely and correctly interpreted by the vast Albanian majority to presage greater oppression (Woodward 1995a, 94–95). Although some violence occurred, Kosovars did not fight en masse to secede, mainly because they lacked any serious prospect of success at a reasonable cost—it was better to accept greater oppression (and probably a lower ability to fight for secession in the near future) than to fight for secession in the present.

SETTLEMENT PATTERNS

In the game analyzed above, if the minority wishes to secede it must "fight its way out." This formulation implicitly assumes that the minority and majority groups are interspersed in the area in question. In cases where the groups are not intermixed—that is, if minority-held territory within the new state is relatively compact—then nothing stops the minority from simply declaring their own autonomous region or state. This puts the burden of violent escalation on the majority group, and if the majority prefers fighting later \((p_2 > p_1)\), then the majority will want to wait. On the other hand, if the minority and majority groups are highly intermixed, then the minority cannot simply declare political autonomy or sovereignty and have the declaration be effective. To control the territory they need to eject (or subjugate) members of the majority group. Thus, when populations are highly intermixed, to "secede" means to fight, and we should expect war by the logic of the model (assuming other conditions are fulfilled).39

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38 It is worth stressing that the commitment model makes no a priori assumption about the relative military as opposed to political strength of the majority and minority groups (formally, the minority's probability of winning at war in the first period could be greater than 1/2). It is entirely possible for a numerical majority group to be relatively weak militarily, as in the case of Hutus in Burundi prior to 1993, or Muslims in Bosnia.

39 In Posen's (1993b) account, by contrast, interspersed populations are more prone to violence because of greater offensive advantages.
government comes to power in Russia with irredentist leanings, the commitment problem will be likely to "kick in" in a number of the former republics, exacerbated as in Yugoslavia by Moscow-supported Russian groups of local extremists. Irredentists in Moscow would have the effect of increasing the value of a struggle for secession by minority Russian groups, thus making it more likely that the commitment problem could come into play. Further, if irredentists in Moscow help instigate incidents of ethnic violence in the former republics, the local Russians' fears of majority intentions might increase so as to make them worry about future reneging on the existing "ethnic contract" by the majority-controlled government. Increasing irredentism in Russia probably poses the greatest and most likely danger for a rapid, cross-border spread of ethnic conflict through the region.

**EXTENT OF THE ANTICIPATED DROP IN ABILITY TO SECEDE**

The more the minority expects that its prospects for seceding will fall if they enter the new state, the more likely it is that the conditions for the commitment problem to produce violence will hold.\(^43\) This is significant for applying the model to cases in which a minority is already living in an established or consolidated state run by a distinct ethnic majority, such as, for example, the case of African Americans or other minorities in the United States. Here, we should expect large-scale violence or secession attempts only when something happens to make the minority fear a sudden and irreversible drop in bargaining power, meaning the minority's ability to fight for secession or autonomy.\(^44\) For instance, once the Kosovan Albanians had accepted the drop in bargaining power following Milosevic's rescinding Kosovan autonomy in 1989, they faced no commitment problem until the next time something happened to shift relative military prospects further away from the Kosovars.

**VALUE OF THE "EXIT" OPTION FOR MEMBERS OF THE MINORITY AND THEIR SOCIAL AND POLITICAL ORGANIZATION**

For simplicity, the model treated both majority and minority groups as unitary actors. In fact, individuals in both groups face a very difficult decision, and not all will choose the same way due to variation in individual circumstances. For example, faced with a future risk of oppression by the majority, a member of the minority might well choose simply to exit (emigrate) rather than take up arms and fight. Massive numbers of Serb refugees testify to the relative appeal of this option—fighting is very costly and very dangerous. We should expect, then, that the better the exit option, the lower the chance an individual will stay and fight.

In general, we would predict that urban dwellers with professional or other modern-sector skills would do better by exiting than would rural farmers (who lose their means of livelihood, land).\(^45\) And by the same logic noted above, the better one's expected exit option in the future, the lower the majority's incentive to oppress you in the future, so that the commitment problem might operate much more strongly for rural people than for urbanites. Largely consistent with these expectations, urban Serbs in Zagreb either took the exit option and became refugees in the early phase of the conflict, or have remained in Croatia, while the fight was prosecuted almost entirely by rural Serbs (aided by the JNA).

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SPREAD OF ETHNIC CONFLICT**

The commitment problem argument is consistent with the view of the first half of this chapter, that ethnic violence in Eastern Europe is likely to be self-limiting for the most part. The principal causes of conflict in this account are particular to relations between two groups concerned with a certain patch of territory, rather than something likely to spread "like wildfire" across borders.

Nonetheless, the commitment problem argument does suggest two interesting points about the most likely paths for the international spread of ethnic conflict, should this occur. I briefly discuss these by way of a conclusion.

First, the commitment-problem logic is most likely to foster the rapid and catastrophic spread of ethnic conflict in the case of what might be called nested minorities. Diverse histories of nationalism and the construction of ethnicity have left, in several places around the world, the following sort of arrangement. Members of group A are a minority within an administrative unit dominated by members of group B, but group B can at the same time be viewed as a minority within some larger administrative, state, or regional unit in which group A constitutes a majority.\(^46\) Some examples: 1. Serbs were a minority within Croatia, whereas Croats would have been a minority within a Serb-dominated Yugoslavia without Slovenia. 2. There was an Azeri minority within the Nagorno Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, whereas the Armenian majority within Nagorno Karabakh was a distinct minority within the Soviet Socialist Republic of Azerbaijan. 3. Irish Catholics have been a minority within Protestant Northern Ireland, whereas Protestants would be a minority within a unified Irish Republic; furthermore, Catholic Ireland may be viewed as a "minority" of sorts in the shadow of the United Kingdom. 4. Tamils are a minority within Sri Lanka, although in the larger region, including Tamils in nearby India, the Sinhalese are the minority.\(^47\) In these examples, minority-majority relations are nested or linked together at successive administrative, state, and regional levels.

When there are nested minorities, a change of power relations or state collapse at one level can ramify via the commitment problem through the other levels. In the case of Yugoslavia, Tito's construction had solved the nested commitment problems by relying implicitly on a balance of power—Slovenia and Croatia bal-

\(^{43}\) For the formal argument, see Fearon 1994.

\(^{44}\) Other conditions noted above need also to be met for the commitment problem to operate.

\(^{45}\) Also, some research suggests that social networks among urban people are badly suited for mobilizing the kind of groups of young men needed for a guerrilla struggle, so that the value of the "fight" option would be higher for rural people as well. See Petersen (1992).

\(^{46}\) Donald Horowitz (1990, 454) discusses essentially this phenomenon, referring to ethnic minorities with an "external affinity." See also Kaufman (1996, 114).

\(^{47}\) Tambiah (1986, 110) notes that the Sinhalese fear of being "engulfed" by south India inspires actions against the Tamils that risk making this true in a "self-fulfilling prophecy"
anced Serbia. Slovenia's decision to exit the federation implied that if Croatia remained in the federation, it would be a minority beneath the Serbs, and there was no question of the Croat leadership accepting any verbal or paper commitments from a Milosevic-led Serbia. In turn, however, the decision of Croatia to exit the federation implied a commitment problem for the minority of Serbs in Croatia, as argued above. Similarly, greater autonomy for Azerbaijan in the late 1980s increased the fears of the Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh, whose desires for their own autonomy then ramified into conflict with the local Azeri minority.

Fortunately, Yugoslavia appears to have contained the only major instance of such a nested-minorities problem in Eastern Europe (possibly Moldova-Transdnestr would count as well), so that the further spread of ethnic conflict due to their "unraveling" will not occur. Probably more significantly, the second (and related) way that the majority-minority commitment problem can play into the spread of ethnic conflict concerns the cross-border effects of irredentist politics. As noted above, increasing irredentism in one state, even at the level of declaratory rather than implemented foreign policy, can exacerbate the commitment problem in neighboring states with significant numbers of the minority perceived as co-ethnics of the irredentists. The biggest danger here obviously concerns Russia. To date, Yeltsin's government has sent mixed signals concerning the "near abroad," speaking frequently of the rights of the Russian speaking minorities while being ambiguous and sometimes contradictory as to Russia's role in "protecting" them. A more actively and openly irredentist policy might raise the value of the military or secessionist option for Russian-speakers in the "beached diaspora," thus raising the risk that the commitment problem between majority and minority could subsequently be activated. Alternatively, as the fear of Russian "fifth columns" grows in ex-republic majority governments, existing implicit bargains between majority and minority groups may be undermined. It may be that the Western powers and relevant international organizations can do little to prevent this from happening, but it surely makes sense to consider the possibility and what might be done about it—country by country—in advance.

Increasing irredentism in Hungary, which is possible though less likely, would also exacerbate commitment problems in Romania and Slovakia.

See the perceptive analysis by Van Houten (1995).

The phrase is from Laitin (1995a).

CHAPTER SIX

Is Pandora's Box Half Empty or Half Full?
The Limited Virulence of Secessionism and the Domestic Sources of Disintegration

STEPHEN M. SAIDEMAN

Does secession spread? If so, can it be contained? These two questions must be addressed to understand the challenges posed by ethnic divisions within and between states today, as secessionist conflicts have perhaps been the most controversial and internationalized form of ethnic conflict. The coincidence of the disintegrations of the Soviet, Yugoslav, and Czechoslovak federations suggests that secession spreads with potentially nasty consequences. Further, there seems to be more secessionism today than ever before. Consequently, we need to comprehend the processes through which separatism within a particular state may or may not spread, causing conflicts within and between states. The heart of the argument here will be that secessionism is less likely to spread between states than previously thought, though it may spread quite rapidly within a state, as the events and institutions within states' boundaries greatly shape the incentives of politicians and the fears of ethnic groups. Separatist crises may generate dynamics that encourage separatism elsewhere, but to understand where it will (or will not) spread, we must study the conditions that foster separatism.

An alternative approach to this question is presented here, focusing on two interacting domestic processes that further separatism: the use of ethnic identities by politicians to gain and maintain power, and the ethnically defined security dilemmas faced by politicians' constituents. Although this interaction between ethnic politics and ethnic security dilemmas can be applied to ethnic conflict in general, the focus here is on ethnic secessionist movements for three reasons: first, this article is responding to the conventional wisdom concerning contagion which, in turn, focuses on the threat of ethnically driven secessionism; second, the disintegration of the three states in question was the result of ethnic seces-

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Not all secessionist movements are ethnic in nature, nor do all ethnic disputes become secessionist conflicts.

For a similar approach focusing directly on ethnic conflict, see Kaufman 1996.