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Violent Non-State Actors in the Western Balkans

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Abstract

In conflict-prone and/or post-conflict environments, the action of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) brings up many security concerns and issues since it wedges in the grey zones of state authority. Indeed, violent non-state actors emerge and function countering the state: in the opposition to state authority they find their *raison d'être*, since most of them challenge the legitimacy and the integrity of the state itself. A typology of violent non-state actors through the lines of authority over population or authority over territory can help us explain where the “lost spaces” of state sovereignty are. While during state collapse a certain typology of VNSAs emerge, post-conflict societies are keener to becoming the theatre of other types of VNSAs, such as criminal gangs which exploit the ties between legal and illegal spheres of state economy. The Western Balkans, in this sense, offer a perfect example of how different VNSAs counter state authority while trying to impose their own, since they have seen the emergence of all different types of VNSAs after the end of the Cold War and the collapse of Yugoslavia: starting from insurgents and warlords during the Balkan Wars, criminal gangs that wedged in illegal trafficking of many types, and, more recently, jihadi groups belonging to transnational network of radicalized Islamic extremism.

Keywords: Violent Non-State Actors, Western Balkans, Insurgents, Warlords, Jihadi Groups, Criminal Gangs

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“Looking forward, we think of the Republika Srpska as a free port where are guaranteed investment and social control.”

(Milorad Stakic¹, March 1996)

Introduction

Violent Non-State Actors (VNSAs) are increasingly gaining importance inside the field of International Relations theory. In conflict-prone and/or post conflict environments, the action of violent non-state actors (VNSAs) brings up many security concerns and issues since it wedges in the grey zones of state authority.

This paper tries to shed light on the different violent non-state actors present in the Western Balkans after the end of the Cold War and on the respective states' weakness. Indeed, violent non-state actors emerge and function countering the state: in the opposition to state authority they find their *raison d'être*, since most of them challenge the legitimacy and the integrity of the state itself. A typology of violent non-state actors through the lines of authority over population or authority over territory can help us explain where the “lost spaces” of state sovereignty are. This also gives us a better understanding of VNSAs at large, differing them from one another while grasping their particular features.

Afterwards the analysis shifts to the different Western Balkans countries with an overall post-Cold War assessment. In applying the typology of VNSAs to these countries, we can better appreciate the evolution that they have had during those years in terms of solidity and integrity. The paper then deals with the particular security issues stemming from each one of them, while trying to address possible future trajectories and policy implications.

Violent Non-State Actors: A Typology

In the XX century, the focus of International Relations Theory had been the study of the world order, the international system and the interplay among states (by looking also at their respective foreign policies). The main actors that interacted in the international realm were thereby the states, which were considered (at least in theory) as the last instance organizations where authority laid: the state does have the monopoly of the use of force in a given territory. Indeed, the “Hobbesian problem” of the lack of central authority shifted from inter-individual

¹ “Former leader of the <<Crisis Committee>>, condemned for war crimes.” [quoted in Strazzari 2008]

relations to international ones. In the world system we do not have a central authority that can settle disputes among states, thereby creating an anarchical environment where the risk of war is always present.

However, in the last decades, many actors that transcend state boundaries and authority have risen, in many cases also by having a say in shaping agendas in world forums or even by influencing state policies. Such actors include international NGOs and multinational corporations. New problems emerge with these actors, as the state is asked by the citizens to tackle many different issues stemming from the action of such actors. Multinational corporations such as big high-tech or web-related companies can influence the state and its policies regarding, for example, employment and taxation. In any case, a common feature of these actors is that they use peaceful means trying to accomplish their agendas. Many other non-state actors are not peaceful in nature, embracing violent means of pursuing their goals. Violent non-state actors (VNSAs) emerge in contrast with state authority since they challenge it at the monopoly of the use of force (Vinci 2009).

Therefore, a first clarification should be made inside the ensemble of non-state actors: the use of force, or its lack of. VNSAs arise in conflict-prone environments and are usually one of the main reasons of the escalation of violence in a certain territory and timespan. Still, they differ a lot from each other, and a categorization is needed in order to better understand VNSAs, their nature and their actions.

A categorization of VNSAs

VNSAs emerge in contrast with state authority, more properly they challenge the monopoly that the state has on the use of force. The monopoly of the use of force is held by the state within a given territory, and is enforceable over a determined group of people: the ones that are part of the community which lives in that given territory. This means that the state, in its core essence, has a double degree of authority: over territory and over population, the lines where it can employ force as the sole legitimate user. Since VNSAs counter state authority, we can try to distinguish them across those same lines.

Therefore the first indicator is the possible presence of authority over territory. If a VNSA has authority over a certain territory means that it firmly controls that piece of land and it deploys its jurisdiction over it. Boundaries may shift across time, but in any case a core part must always be under the control of the VNSA. The second indicator revolves around the authority over a group of people, i.e. over a certain (section of the) population. This authority is less tangible than

the first one, but however we consider it by a proxy: the legitimacy that the VNSA has in contrast with the state regarding to a certain group of people. The intersection between these two indicators gives us the grid of the typology of VNSAs (see Table 1, page 6).

Weighing other indicators

As to other possible indicators discarded for the purposes of this paper, one the first ones could be the organizational structure of the VNSAs. However the organizational structure is very nuanced and differs a lot across time and space. VNSAs can be decentralized or depend upon a strong centre, from more cellular structured to a quasi-state organization (Vinci 2009). The structure of a VNSA depends more on “ground” conditions and is not stable over time. This means that we cannot grasp a lot from such an indicator.

Another possible way to study VNSAs is to look at the way they finance their operations and, that is, their very subsistence. Usually, when these actors emerge it means that we are at the fringes of state control and many grey zones of illegal economy emerge. These actors can then exploit this illegal ways of financing in order to strengthen their capabilities. Such means of illegal financing include drugs traffic, traffic of human beings, illegal arms trade, and support of a transnational network. Nonetheless there does not seem to be a single way that an actor decides to follow in order to finance itself. They can shift from one to the other depending on their capabilities, and the windows of opportunity that the same environment offers.

The last indicator concerns the means of violence or, more specifically, the way in which violence is perpetrated. It is common to find classifications of VSNAs that differ from religious terrorist groups, to insurgent guerrilla groups etc. This classifications however has a shortcoming: it reflects the ways in which different actors conduct warfare; warfare conversely is strictly connected not only to relative capabilities, but also to strategic considerations. A small group cannot take over sustained conventional military campaigns, since they have not the capabilities to do it. Thus they would hypothetically prefer to carry on guerrilla warfare or terrorist attack. However this does not mean that once that they have more capabilities they automatically shift to more conventional means. Or, at least, if this happens, they could always use again less conventional means. Warfare is changing in more general terms even for states themselves, the ultimate actors of the international realm, becoming more hybrid in nature and, that is, involving many different, parallel and coexisting (more or less violent) means to achieve a certain goal. Thus, ways of conducting warfare do not offer clear-cut divisions of VNSAs.

Fill in the blanks

Now it only remains to analyse how the two indicators found – that is, authority over territory and authority over population – intersect with each other and to what VNSAs corresponds each match.

If a VNSA has both authority over territory and over population, it better fits the type of insurgents. Indeed an insurgent group is often constituted and based on ethnic grounds: thus the group has not only a great internal cohesion, but also it recalls a larger (imagined) community of people for which it battles (Anderson 1991). This (ethnic) group projects its aspirations to a certain piece of land, seen as crucial to its survival and to its future existence. Often it is looked at as a homeland, a place which the group is bound to for historical reasons and that is seen as indispensable (Toft 2003). Indeed insurgents do coagulate in a defined space, and are even backed up by a defined population in carrying on their actions (Toft and Zhukov 2015). This means that the VNSA in this case does not only have the control over a certain territory and population, but also the legitimacy given by the people to exist and continue fighting for their purposes. In this case nation-hood – and a common feeling of belonging to it – is actioned and used by the insurgents to get support since it is considered as a valued good for that group of people (Varshney 2003).

A second type of VNSAs is defined by the presence of authority over population and by the absence of authority over territory: this is the case of jihadi groups. Jihadi groups are defined (mainly) cellular groups that advance political demands through the use of the ideology of jihad. It is true the many insurgent groups assume religious connotations, especially during ethnic conflicts (Wilhelmsen 2005). In this case they do not appear to be linked to any specific territory and do not need the support of grassroots members in order to achieve their subsistence (Toft and Zhukov 2015). However, this concerns more a situation where a civil war is on the line: religion functions as a sort of ethnic marker (Elbasani 2015) and it also helps to organize a violent situation (Wilhelmsen 2005). Indeed, in scenarios where overall peace is achieved, jihadi groups do have a control over a certain section of the population, mostly those who live in marginalized (sub-)urban areas (Manciulli 2017, Pioppi 2017), since even the control that state has on these areas is not so strong (Vespa 2017). Local preachers often have a crucial importance in the process of radicalization of new members, so that the jihadi constellation does have a control on the population. Formally they are not linked to a certain piece of land. Even though Islam has played a key role in the civil wars broken out from 1940 to 2000 (Toft 2007), the practice of Islam is becoming increasingly less linked to ethnic conflicts, providing alternative explanations and fuel to violence, and a new space where global, regional and local processes converge (Elbasani and Roy 2015).

A VNSA that, conversely, has no authority over people but has a strong one over a territory is the type of warlords. A warlord can be defined as a “feudal landlord” (Marten 2013), imposing their control over a piece of land, ruling in defiance of state sovereignty. Of course they do have a control over militias or even on regional followings in some cases – creating a sort of “warlordism continuum” (Rich *ed.* 1999) – but the differences on such control can be very huge: that is, we cannot take it as a clear-cut indicator of the type of warlord. Even if warlords rule countering the state, modern types of warlords have increasingly gained the complicity of state leaders (Marten 2013). However, it goes beyond the scope of this paper to analyse such a relationship.

The last type of VNSA does not present either authority over territory or authority over population: an example of this kind can be that of criminal gangs. Criminal gangs do not need either one of these kinds of authority in order to perpetuate their actions. They do not need the support of the population, since they do not depend on their legitimation or on their financing. Conversely they do not need a piece of land to impose their direct control on, because they depend more on governing different types of flows – arms trade, human and drugs trafficking etc. – and, moreover, they are not linked to a particular land by ethnic or historical ties. This leaves no space in where to put criminal gangs in our grid.

Table 1 – The typology of VNSAs

		Authority over Territory	
		<i>Present</i>	<i>Not Present</i>
Authority over Population	<i>Present</i>	Insurgents	Jihadi Groups
	<i>Not Present</i>	Warlords	Criminal Gangs

A Post-Cold War Assessment of the Western Balkans' VNSAs

The dissolution of Yugoslavia and the ten-year long widespread violence and ethnic conflicts left on their wake a number of unresolved problems in the Western Balkan region. Two of the most prominent examples are definitely Bosnia and Kosovo. In Bosnia we have the division of the country in two distinct territorial entities (one being the Republika Srpska), and in Kosovo there are strong Serbian minorities in the northern municipalities. Moreover Kosovo is considered by Serbian people as the cradle of the Serbian nation since 1389, thus linking the particular territory of Kosovo to two different homelands: one being that of Serbia and the other one that of Kosovo Albanians.

We can define the situation of Bosnia and Kosovo as frozen conflicts: stalemate situations of a given country or region, concerning territorial or minority disputes with a high degree of friction. These disputes coalesce different types of emotions – such as resentment, fear, hatred – and of political demands that cause friction among these different ethnic groups.

When violence is perpetrated during a civil war, its logic does not follow only the national-level cleavage. Local-level dynamics influence the use of violence since *“the locus of agency in civil war is simultaneously located at different levels of aggregation”*, even though local frictions follow the more general cleavage (Kalyvas 2006:365). In fact, in the Bosnian civil war violence firstly emerged when settling ethnic disputes, but afterwards, in later phases of the conflict, it was more related to subsequent ground-level strategic implications (Costalli and Moro 2012).

However ethnicity remains, in last instance, the most dominant cleavage in nowadays Bosnian politics, while in Kosovo ethno-nationalist mobilisation was high even before the conflict. Indeed mobilisation across ethnic lines had a great “neighbouring effect” in the region, especially if we consider countries such as Montenegro that did not experience violence in its territory, but nonetheless had an increase in ethno-nationalism (Dyrstad 2012). This can possibly be the case even for Albania, a country that has not experienced an ethnic conflict in its territory, but that nonetheless has a population with a profound sense of belonging to the nation and which, in turns, advances nationalist demands towards so-called irredent Albanian territories – especially towards Kosovo and western Macedonia.

Considering all the complicated interethnic relations that exist in the Western Balkans region (Dyrstad 2012), we can ultimately say that *“[i]n the Balkans, ethnic unrest is exacerbated by both the number of ethnic disputes and their proximity to their countries of ethnic origin – thus tying all the Balkan states (and beyond) into a common problem”* (Griffiths 1993). As a

consequence, there still is in the Western Balkans a great danger of political fragmentation and of a “renationalisation” of politics as it was the case in the early ‘90s (Larrabee 1991).

Insurgents

From all this preamble stems a first important point: the main VNSAs that have been in play in the Western Balkans are definitely insurgents. The same Yugoslavia was a federation, thus implying the existence of subnational territorial entities with strong presence of a certain ethnic group. The constitution of 1974 had granted a higher degree of independence for the six republics and the two autonomous territories. An attempt made by Tito in order to soften centrifugal nationalist forces, in a country that by formation was multi-ethnic. However, Tito’s death in 1980 determined the fall of the strongest pillar of this unity, creating the conditions for the further violent developments in the region (Berend 1996). In fact in the ‘90s political and social turmoil reached its apex: *“[a] heterodox creature between East and West, the Yugoslav federation imploded in a violent, ten-year-long agony, during which nationalist projects collided with each other”* (Strazzari 2007:185).

All the insurgents of the different subnational entities had control over their territory, and had authority on and the legitimation of the respective population. Every one of these groups achieved the goal of separatism and created new states for their ethnic groups. However, as was mentioned before, there still exist stalemate situations, especially in Bosnia and Kosovo but not only there. Indeed even in FYR Macedonia there are many nationalist demands from the Albanian minority.

Jihadi Groups

As to what pertains jihadi groups, the Western Balkans are a perfect hub for Islamic radicalization due to the presence of both unresolved conflicts and of marginalized (sub)urban areas, or of zones of identity and social cleavages (Manciulli 2017). Economic backwardness creates the necessary room for manoeuvre for local preachers and/or NGOs that can influence (usually less educated) people (Gall 2017). Therefore, the area that ideally encompasses Bosnia, Kosovo, Albania and FYR Macedonia – where the vast majority of Islamic believers in the region reside – can become and, partly, have already become a sort of “free zone” for the development of radical Islamic cells, as a consequence even of the partial control that states have on this area (Vespa 2017).

Even though the Islam of the Balkans has always been a moderate one which sees the quasi-personal relationship between the individual and Allah, “[n]onetheless, [in the Balkans] religious authorities, intellectuals, and lay believers differ considerably in their interpretation of the core religious doctrine and practices, and generally, what it means to be a “good” Muslim in a particular society and at specific moments in time.” (Elbasani and Tosic 2017:3).

Notwithstanding the presence of this localized Islam, there exists a jihadist network that transcends states’ boundaries and supports the creation and maintenance of radicalized cells. The islamist world intercepts some trajectories of modern globalization, as it can be seen from the presence of different connection networks among groups and cells belonging to the global jihad. Despite the deeply-rooted presence in a determined political and social context, islamist networks are also heavily supported by the complex global islamist community.

Warlords

Especially during the Bosnian conflict, the Balkans saw the emergence of many figures that can be related up to a certain extent with the warlord type. Characters such as Jusuf Prazina (aka Juka), a Bosnian warlord that occupied mount Igman – a few kilometres from Sarajevo – and who, in that occasion, fought against another warlord – i.e. Zulkifar Alispago (aka Zuka) – proliferated during those years (Strazzari 2008:102-103). However, with the end of the war, the warlord type ceased to exist since all the territories were incorporated under the control of the new “states” that emerged. The warlord type is probably the one that needs most a state fragility or failure, because the warlord is not only strictly connected to warfare logics but also because only when the state is absent a warlord can control a certain piece of territory for a sufficient amount of time.

Criminal gangs

During the ‘90s, the collusion between legal and extra-legal was a marker of Western Balkans dynamics (Strazzari 2008). This dynamics revolved around state fragility and loss of sovereignty. For example, in Albania, in the state failure of 1997, criminal gangs ruled many of the territories, especially in the South (Rich *ed.* 1999). But, since criminal gangs do not need either authority over territory or authority over population, they continued to exist even after the Balkan wars. Indeed, one of the main problems of nowadays Albania is the one of criminal gangs connected to drugs cultivation and trafficking.

In many of these contexts, during and after the war, these criminal gangs existed and acted in complicity with the state apparatus. For this reason many concerns arrive from the Balkans,

where the fusion between legal and extra-legal permits allows for the creation of spaces when smugglers traffic drugs, weapons, human beings etc.

Security Concerns and Policy Implications

Although the Balkans have lived a decade of relative stability, we cannot say that peace is definitively achieved. The system analysed until now presented a highly volatile environment, which in turn has generated very cumbersome channels for conflict management, if not at all. Security in the Western Balkans depends on the different ethno-nationalisms clashing with each other, and this does have an influence on the security of the whole continent. This is the why Western powers have tried to tie the Western Balkans future – economically and militarily – to the standards of the West. Anyhow an analysis of the security issues emerging from such an environment must be tackled, if we want to address even (possible) policy implications.

Insurgents

Insurgents present the worst case of VNSAs from the state viewpoint, mainly because insurgents can rely both on the authority over a specific territory and on the legitimation granted by the people which live in that territory. Insurgents have heavy grassroots support, since the future of their campaign is linked to the same survival of that precise ethnic group. Still we have a couple of situations in the Balkans that can possibly lead to further friction: the abovementioned “frozen conflicts” in Bosnia and Kosovo. Both of these situations appear as insurmountable problems in the path of the European integration of the respective countries. The Dayton Agreement of 1995, although managed to close the war and end the bloodshed in Bosnia, proved to be too rigid for any further development. In Kosovo, on the other hand, the main problems come from the northern Serbian municipalities – sort of insurgents inside insurgents, a topic very much debated in the literature. Moreover, problems can arise even in FYR Macedonia, since it sees a huge presence of Albanian minorities.

The problem of insurgency is one of the main ones for multi-ethnic countries, since the desire for an ideal nation-hood of a certain minority can always be actionable by political elites for their purposes, thus making this kind of issue ever present.

Jihadi Groups

One of the future problems with jihadi groups will be the deradicalization of the returnees, especially women and children (The Soufan Group 2017; Morina 2017). It will be necessary the

creation of methods to include once again these individuals in the social context. If we consider the importance that younger generations wield in the perpetuation of the message and the political-ideological projections of jihad, it clearly emerges the centrality of the issue. Moreover, it is needed to apply even practices of deradicalization of people that are already radicalized, both in the jail system and in marginalized zones. Not only: many people of Balkan origin that were radicalized during the Balkan wars - or that eventually took part in those conflicts during the '90s - kept the islamist worldview up until nowadays (Vidino 2017).

In perspective, the integration in the European Union represents a key point in the political and social evolution of the Western Balkans. Indeed, if we consider economic backwardness as the one of the main factors that fuel Islamic radicalization in marginalized areas, economic and institutional development of these countries vis-à-vis integration is a crucial aspect in the analysis of the future of jihadism in the region. The economies of these countries are still fragile and many segments of the population struggle to see any improvement in their daily life. Thus economic development is one of the hinge points around which revolves the whole fight on jihadism. The European Union must necessarily pose itself as a credible interlocutor in this fight.

Warlords

Warlords are more proper to situations where the state has failed or is about to, considering that this would provide a necessary window of opportunity for the warlord to impose its control on a determined piece of land (key feature of warlordism according to our typology). The overall (relative) stability of the Balkans provides (theoretically) no room for the emergence of new warlords. As soon as frictions escalate into conflicts, state organs have to be careful even about these aspects.

Criminal Gangs

Criminal gangs do not challenge the monopoly on the use of force by the state, and they do not present any authority on land or people. As a consequence, this remains a public security concern: criminal gangs do not undermine state sovereignty or integrity. In order to better tackle this problem, however, Western Balkans countries need to form more effective and efficient police forces, which would be able to counter the illegal actions of such groups. Even in this case, the role of the European Union and of NATO is crucial: they can provide frameworks already tested by the respective Member States police organs, useful information, data and best practices, while also creating a network to better tackle overall transnational organized crime.

The particular position of the Western Balkans – at the core of the European continent – makes this region very important for European security and, thus, for transatlantic relations as well. Indeed European security is one of the main reasons why, in recent decades, western powers have engaged in the Balkans and have tried to tie the future of these countries to democratic and liberal principles. It is known, in fact, that democracy is an important tool for channelling possible conflicts in peaceful paths, even more so when coupled with policies of post-conflict reconstruction and development.

Therefore a crucial point consists in the cooperation of different type of international organisations when dealing with highly volatile environments such as the Western Balkans. This means that organisations such as the European Union and NATO have to integrate more their policies and, thus, to provide a coherent and holistic framework for the Western Balkans. Even if in theory this could be an important achievement, in practice it can be more difficult than expected. Different organisations follow different logics, with different agendas and different goals. While NATO is a more strategic and security organisation, the European Union tries to economically develop possible candidate countries. The harmonisation of these policies, therefore, can prove to be troublesome.

Conclusions

This paper had the aim to provide a framework of conceptualizing violent non-state actors (VNSAs) and to apply this framework to the Western Balkans. VNSAs emerge countering the state, and they do it by challenging the core essence of the state: i.e. the monopoly of the use of force. The state has this monopoly over a certain territory and towards a certain population. Since VNSAs mainly challenge the integrity of a state and its sovereignty, we can analyse them across the same lines of authority. Indeed, we can create a typology by intersecting the presence or not of authority of a VNSA over a certain territory with the presence or not of authority over a determined population. This gives us a grid (see Table 1, page 6) of categorization of VNSAs, the most important ones being insurgents, jihadi groups, warlords and criminal gangs (according to each intersection).

If we consider the situation of the Western Balkans after the Cold War, we can see that the region has provided the ground for the emergence of each one of this types of VNSAs, each characterized by its own features, while bringing their respective security issues. While insurgents appear to be the worst problem for a state (since they have both authority over a specific territory

and authority of a distinct group of people), criminal gangs do not pose much of a threat for state integrity and sovereignty, relegating them to mere public security problems. The other two types provide online one reason of concern: jihadi groups have control over people, especially in marginalized and underdeveloped areas, while warlords impose their authority only over a certain piece of land.

However, all of these types of VNSAs can be better tackled only through the means of a deep cooperation of international organizations (such as NATO or the European Union) and the Balkan countries, considering the fragility of the latter.

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