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The difference mafias make: a triadic model of organized crime in ethnic conflicts

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ABSTRACT

I propose a Simmelian triadic model of the interrelations between (1) host states, (2) separatist movements, and (3) organized crime. It formalizes three generalizable relational configurations: organized crime as (a) *tertius gaudens*, (b) mediator and (c) *divisor et imperator*, with operationalizable features defining the nature of each pair of relationships among the three agents. Using the paired case studies of the Serbia-Kosovo and Georgia-South Ossetia ethnic conflicts from 1989–2012, I illustrate the utility of the conceptual model in explaining divergences in separatist success. The model is argued to be superior to conventional and near-universal dyadic conceptualizations – overt or implicit.

KEYWORDS

Crime; war; nationalism; insurgency; ethnic

When mafias instrumentalize states or social movements, this is called 'corruption.' But when states or social movements instrumentalize mafias, this is called 'patriotism.' This article seeks to formalize, in a stricter and less normative manner, the nature of these recurring relationships.

Contemporary violent conflict, quite apart from its tragic destructiveness, is an important avenue to legitimacy and sustainable social power (Mann and Haugaard 2011, Mann 2012a, 2012b), including between nationalist movements with mutually-incompatible territorial claims. In the classic nationalist view, access to power, recognition, resources and social goods begins with the recognition of collectivities and individuals as equals in a political community that shares historical origin and culture inside a territorial unit (Smith 1991, Calhoun 1997). But nationalism, as modernity's most salient ideology, is also inherently prone to violence as an instrument of state-building. To be sure, numerous case studies indicate that separatist movements can be rather peaceful (Malešević and Ó Dochartaigh 2011), while insurgents in ethnic conflicts do not have to be primarily motivated by nationalism (Malešević and Ó Dochartaigh 2018). But modern bureaucratized states – even democratic ones that nominally disowned primordialist nationalist claims – always bear the seeds of exclusionary policies towards sectarian, tribal, ethnonational and racial minorities who do not share the titular constituency's ancestry or culture (Mann 2004, Malešević 2013). In defense against such persecution, separatist movements naturally rely on what are perceived to be criminal – including violent – tactics in executing civil war and insurgency.

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Structurally, insurgencies and civil wars are special because they pose radical (not reformist) challenges to state power at the fundamental, Weberian level of legitimate monopoly over physical force (Olsson 2013, Brett *et al.* 2017). In disputing territorial integrity, separatist insurgents are deemed inherently illegitimate, not merely for their 'foul play' tactics. But when they additionally utilize criminal resources – such as smuggling of war matériel or mafia alliances – insurgents acquire an even deeper aura of illegitimacy. The question of nationalist self-determination as an end thus gets fatefully entangled with tangential questions of the degree of criminal means with which the self-determination struggle is waged.

These criminal entanglements have also led to a certain economic reductionism regarding organized crime's role in ethnic insurgency. Scholars pressing economic factors are often hasty to categorize violent social movements as purely a form of rent seeking in countries rich with natural resources (Collier 2000, de Soysa 2002, Humphreys 2005). Economic approaches also tend to suggest that inequality and poverty are drivers of insurgency and civil war (Collier 1998, Fearon and Laitin 2003, Pearce and Dietrich 2019), even as insurgency appears in regions that are economically well off (e.g. Basque or Northern Irish separatism) and lacking a 'resource curse.' This school of thought, although certainly well-acquainted with organized criminal activity, fails to recognize that organized crime is not a mere enabler or catalyst of political actors, but is itself interested in patrimonial governance and even state-building.

Applying a theoretical gem from Georg Simmel, I propose a model that contextualizes the interactions and logics of action of (1) states facing ethnic insurgencies, (2) rebel ethnic movements fighting for separatist autonomy, and (3) organized criminal actors who fatefully adjudicate between the two.

1. A Simmelian model of organized criminal relations in insurgencies

Elsewhere (Mandić 2021), I have argued that organized crime is an important explanatory factor in understanding separatist movement success in West Africa, Eastern Europe, and the Middle East. Unlike in Canada, the UK or Belgium, separatist trajectories in most of the world depend critically on mafia resources, political leverage, and access to globalized smuggling networks. Instead of a dyadic relational dynamic, the state-separatist story is critically shaped by a third, neglected non-state actor: organized crime. A precise conceptual picture of *how* exactly mafias impact insurgencies has remained controversial and elusive (Reno 1999, Hirschfeld 2015, Kalyvas 2015, Felbab-Brown *et al.* 2017, Üngör 2020).

What exact role, then, does this 'third man,' to evoke Graham Greene's immortal character, play? What political posture does organized crime adopt towards the separatist movement? And towards the state? How do mafia relations – to the state on the one hand, and separatists on the other – determine separatist success? To tackle these questions, I schematize a model of the triadic relationship and illustrate its potential usage in comparative analysis with the cases studies of Serbia and Georgia in the 1990s and 2000s. The divergent trajectories of organized crime in the two societies go far in explaining differences in separatist outcomes.

Namely, organized crime in Serbia evolved from the role of *tertius gaudens* ('the third who rejoices'), to *divisor et imperator* ('divider and ruler), back to *tertius gaudens*; in contrast, organized crime in Georgia evolved from the role of *tertius gaudens* ('the third who rejoices'), to non-partisan mediator, and back to *tertius gaudens*. I suggest that these differing trajectories – process-traced through three phases – account for the greater success of Kosovo's separatist movement than South Ossetia's. Taken as a whole, the trajectory of Kosovar separatism was one of continuous, *un*interrupted progress; the trajectory of South Ossetian separatism, on the other hand, was one of *interrupted* progress. The role of organized crime was central to this difference in the two trajectories: whereas it hindered separatist success mid-trajectory in South Ossetia, it was consistently conducive to Kosovo's success.

The triadic model is suggested below not as an essentialized or reified statement on the nature of separatism, nor as an overly-schematic description of some state-separatist-mafia kinesis. Sociology is not physics, nor should it be (Lieberson and Lynn 2002). Conceptual models are only useful as heuristics: they are merely meant as analytic tools to capture rough approximations of patterns. They are useful only insofar as they shed light on dynamics that are overlooked by competing approaches, in which case their application can advance a richer explanatory account and better predictions. In our domain, since scholars have often harbored implicit conceptualizations of how and when mafias play certain roles in ethnic conflicts, a step towards formalization may aid in clarifying and scrutinizing the details. The model is potentially useful if – and only if – scholars accept the premise that agentic criminal actors do indeed generate significant impacts on separatist outcomes. If the reader is unpersuaded that mafias can play formative roles, there is little this article will say to her.

2. Process tracing

For the sake of manageability, I select a 23-year temporal scope (1989–2012) of Serbian-Kosovar and Georgian-Ossetian relations. These two separatist trajectories are not only simultaneous, but they share a number of structural similarities that make them excellent candidates for comparative analysis. Critically, both of these historical processes capture the tremendous causal weight of organized crime. In both Kosovo and South Ossetia, mafias repeatedly determined the fate of states, separatist movements and the relations between them. They did so, however, in distinct phases: the relational configuration of state, separatist movement and organized crime evolved differently in the two cases. In other words, the sequence of relational triadic forms diverged critically in the two societies.

To capture the divergence, I synthesize dozens of scholarly sources on the ethnic conflicts of Serbia-Kosovo and Georgia-South Ossetia employing process-tracing. The basic premise of this kind of analysis is that *sequences matter* in processes of separatist movement development (Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003, pp. 363–4, Rueschemeyer 2003, p. 325). The temporal ordering of events related to state-separatist-criminal relations clearly influenced outcomes. Even in such a short historical period, we see quite a variety of effects of organized criminal involvement. For instance, organized crime served as a central link in the causal chain from state disintegration to state consolidation (Phase 1 in Georgia); indeed, it is extremely difficult to imagine the

emergence of the post-Soviet Georgian state apparatus without the incorporation of major mafias into the ruling elite. At another time, organized crime served as a link in the opposite direction, from state consolidation to near-disintegration through *coup d'état* (Phase 3 in Serbia); in this instance, the Serbian state apparatus was shaken to the core when its principal mafia, including its elements in the renegade state apparatus, assassinated the Prime Minister.

Similar causal mechanisms – linking state repression against insurgents, separatist instrumentalization of criminal resources, and criminal mediation and profiteering – have generated different effects depending on whether they operated before or after (1) a particular war (i.e. 1999 Kosovar war and the 2008 Ossetian war), (2) a democratic transition (i.e. the 2000 Bulldozer Revolution and the 2004 Rose Revolution), (3) a massive ethnic mobilization (i.e. by Kosovars and Ossetians), or a birth/disbanding of a criminal militia (i.e. the JSO and the Mkhedrioni). As Pierson (2000) concisely remarked in relation to sequence analysis, the issue is not just what, but *when*. Triadic models allow us to pinpoint such dilemmas.

The impact of organized crime, then, depends fundamentally on whether its particular relational role is assumed before or after *critical junctures*. I use the often-hyperinflated term (for correctives, see: Capoccia and Kelemen 2007, Soifer 2012) in a weak sense to capture turning points that imposed major constraints on future separatist outcomes in a clear direction. I refrain from carrying the weighty 'baggage' of a strict path dependency approach claimed in much of quantitative political science. These junctures simply mark historical developments in the trajectories of Serbia and Georgia that have considerably constrained most future possibilities – there is a 'no turning back' quality to them. They also signify severances in the causal chains within phases, which are simply easier to trace than causal chains between phases.

Concretely, the first critical juncture in Serbia is 1996, when Serbian organized crime begins to expand and deviate from regime control, when the organized criminal fringe of the separatist movement first appears; and when Serbia turns its attention and repression to the separatist province after seven years of ignoring it. The second critical juncture is 2000, when the Bulldozer Revolution unseats Milošević with the support of criminal militias; when organized criminal networks reach their zenith; and when Kosovo's *de facto* independence begins to grow under international supervision. The *first critical juncture* in Georgia is 1995, when the state is consolidated after organized crime emerges victorious in the civil war; when separatist organized crime begins to emerge; and when state-separatist relations begin their 'frozen' status supported by criminal interests on both sides. *The second critical juncture* is 2004, when the Rose Revolution brought Saakashvili's anti-crime government to power; when a crackdown on the Ergneti market disrupted multi-ethnic criminal cooperation; and when the host state broke the 'frozen' status by provoking a war with separatists.

Accordingly, I divide the period into three phases for each case, each phase characterized by a dominant tradic relationship between state, separatists and organized crime (see Figures 1 and 2). The phases are separated by critical junctures that fundamentally transformed the role of organized crime in both the host state and the separatist movement. Furthermore, each new phase brought different organized crime effects on state-separatist relations, elaborated below. Though significant changes occur within each phase (and are noted), none are as drastic as the ones between phases.

3. Triadic forms

The model draws on classic sociological theorist Georg Simmel, who was fascinated by triads as bedrock social forms: atomic components of society at both mirco- and macro-levels. A theoretical formalist, he insisted that triadic relations – between two parents and a child, or competing firms and a client – have a logic of their own, regardless of the particular entity occupying the position. Given the profoundly interactive nature of separatist movements and organized crime, reciprocal effects or what Simmel called 'interaction' (*Wechselwirkung*) is a promising unit of analysis. As conceptual models of social interaction, Simmel's triadic forms are the most convenient tool for differentiating, ordering and explaining state-separatist-criminal triads.

Three kinds of roles in triadic forms will prove useful for our purposes:

(1) A *tertius gaudens* (the third who rejoices) benefits from disagreement between the two, but does not cause it. His 'advantage' either 'result[s] from the fact that the remaining two hold each other in check and he can make a gain that one of the two would otherwise deny him,' as when a financial broker plays parties against each; or 'because action by one of the two parties brings [advantage] about for its own purposes – the *tertius* does not need to take the initiative,' as when foreign investments in a region increase as neighboring regions' rioters disrupt each others' economies. It is worth noting that the *tertius* can thus 'rejoice' both actively or passively, as his advantages can come about as decisions or permissions of the other two in the process of instrumentalizing him (as when a driver is given a tip to catch up with another far-away car) or as opportunistic 'seize-the-moment' initiatives exploiting conflict (as when a taxi driver double-charges a couple who are obviously not communicating because of a quarrel).
(2) A *mediator* assuages the factors that produce tension between the remaining two, as when a child brings parents together. More specifically, a *non-partisan* mediator 'either produces concord of two colliding parties' before leaving the triad entirely, or 'functions as an arbiter who balances [. . .] their contradictory claims against one another and eliminates what is incompatible,' as when mediators boost negotiations between labor and management.
(3) A *divisor et imperator* (divider and ruler): pro-actively creates conflict between the remaining two in order to secure a dominant position or other gains, as when empires create borders to sever ethnic/religious unity of potentially rebellious populations (Wolff 1950, pp. 146–7, p. 154–62, p. 162–9).

Critically, these triadic forms do not imply that all three agents are equally powerful or formative of relations. On the contrary: conceptualizing something triadically forces us to clarify the asymmetries of power to a greater extent than we are perhaps – lazily – accustomed to in hegemonic dyadic perceptions. So, for example, tremendous asymmetries in power need not determine outcomes *if* the relational configuration is favorable to weak parts of the tie in question. 'The power the *tertius* must expend,' for example,

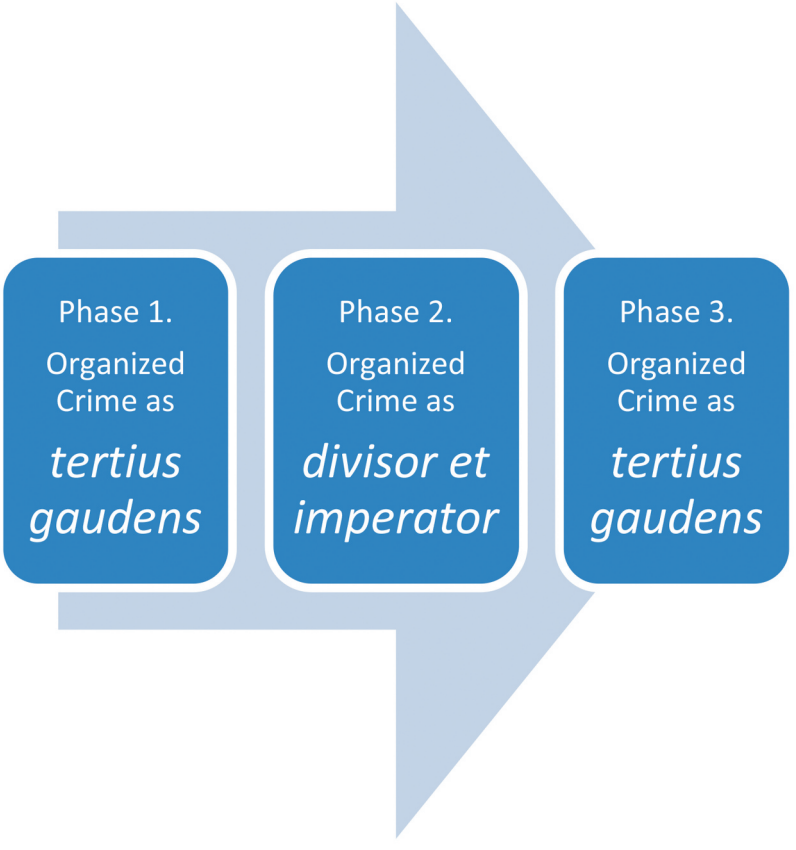

Figure 1. Serbian phases, 1989–2012.

> . . . in order to attain his advantageous position does not have to be great in comparison to the power of each of the two parties, since the quantity of his power is determined exclusively by the strength that each of them has relative to the other (Wolff 1950, p. 157).

Just as small parliamentary parties, otherwise weak and insignificant, sometimes acquire nationally-decisive voting leverage when dominant, larger political parties collide, so too can organized crime acquire enormous power when host state and separatist movement collide. Furthermore, triadic relations draw our attention to counterintuitive causes of relational change that are not immediately visible when evaluating the motivations of agents like states, movements and mafias in isolation. Relations of patronage between separatist movements and organized crime may not overlap with relations of patronage between the host state and that organized crime.

Having casually described these roles in theory, I formalize the roles of organized crime vis-à-vis the host state and the separatist movement as follow, with six distinguishing features of each (see Figure 3):

Organized crime as *tertius gaudens* when:

A1 = Separatist movement promotes organized crime indirectly, as unintended consequence of confronting the host state.

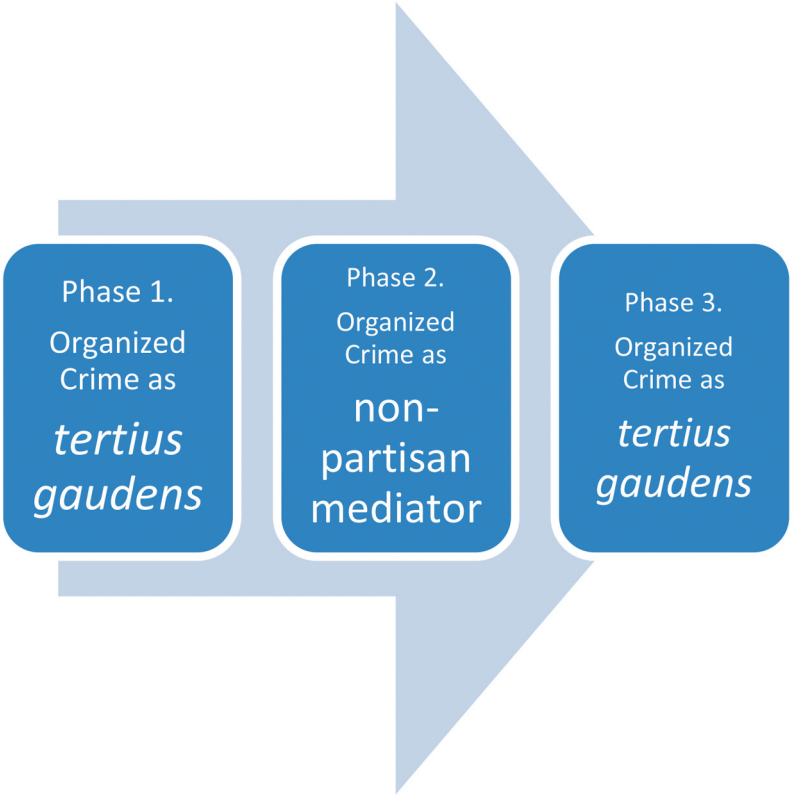

Figure 2. Georgian phases, 1989–2012.

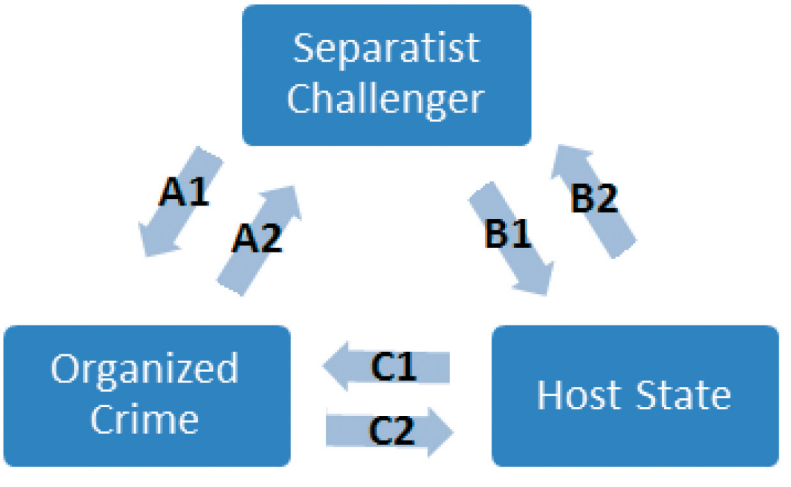

Figure 3. Triad of host state, separatist movement and organized crime.

A2 = Organized crime promotes separatism for its own ends, exploiting its weakness/division.

B1 = Separatist movement confronts host state.

B2 = Host state confronts separatist movement.

C1 = Host state does not confront organized crime sufficiently, or not at all.

C2 = Organized crime confronts host state, exploiting its weakness/division.

Organized crime as *Non-Partisan Mediator* when:

A1 = Separatist movement relies on organized crime as much as the host state does.

A2 = Organized crime does not support separatist movement.

B1 = Separatist movement is disincentivized or disabled from confronting fight host state.

B2 = Host state is disincentivized or disabled from confronting separatist movement.

C1 = Host state relies on organized crime for its own ends.

C2 = Organized crime incorporates elements of host state for its own ends.

Organized crime as *divisor et imperator* when:

A1 = Separatist movement relies on organized crime for survival.

A2 = Organized crime co-opts separatist movement.

B1 = Separatist movement is incentivized and empowered to confront host state.

B2 = Host state confronts separatist movement.

C1 = Host state confronts organized crime.

C2 = Organized crime is incentivized and empowered to confront host state.

Needless to say, an infinity of alternative configurations is logically possible. But since none have been seriously explored for the sequences that bring them about or for their consequences, these three are a promising start to help capture patterns across regions and periods. Applying these three, the divergent processes by which organized crime changed roles in Serbia and Georgia can be summarized as follows in Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1. Effects of relations on separatist success in Serbia.

Phase 1. 1989–1996		Phase 2. 1996–2000		Phase 3. 2000–2012	
Relation	Effect on Separatist Success	Relation	Effect on Separatist Success	Relation	Effect on Separatist Success
Regime-sponsored organized crime emerges.	+	Organized crime detaches from state control; used against Kosovo.	+	Organized crime fails in *coup d'état*; state crackdown curbs it.	+
Kosovo parallel institutions emerge with marginal criminal elements.	+	Organized crime ascends to mainstream of separatist movement.	+	Organized crime develops 'Mafia state.'	+
Opportunity for mafia co-optation of separatist movement arises.	+	Newly-criminalized separatists triumph in war.	+	Kosovo acquires *de facto* independence; Serbia's sovereignty recedes.	+

Note: First row summarizes organized crime–host state relations (C1 + C2).
Second row summarizes organized crime-separatist movement relations (A1 + A2).
Third row summarizes host state-separatist movement relations (B1 + B2).

Table 2. Main effects of relations on separatist success in Georgia.

Phase 1. 1989–1995		Phase 2. 1995–2003		Phase 3. 2003–2012	
Relation	Effect on Separatist Success	Relation	Effect on Separatist Success	Relation	Effect on Separatist Success
Organized crime grows through Civil War; limited state crackdown curbs it.	+	Organized crime partially outlives state crackdown.	-	Comprehensive crackdown on organized crime.	+
South Ossetian organized crime born.	+	South Ossetian organized crime flourishes by bridging ethnic divide.	-	Organized crime re-ethnicized; the factor curbing separatism is removed.	+
Failed reintegration mobilizes separatists.	+	Georgian co-optation fails, as does separatists' strategy.	-	Assault on Ergneti revitalizes separatism, leads to war.	+

Note: First row summarizes organized crime–host state relations (C1 + C2).
Second row summarizes organized crime-separatist movement relations (A1 + A2).
Third row summarizes host state-separatist movement relations (B1 + B2).

4. The Serbian trajectory

In Phase 1, the Serbian coercive state apparatus drew on the criminal underworld to evade sanctions, preserve regime stability, and – most importantly – to mobilize resources for a dizzying series of unpopular wars in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. Though publicly presented as national heroes defending Serbian rights, mafia heads were recruited with little or no military experience, simply for their law-breaking credentials (Nielsen 2012). Most fought on battlefields in Croatia and Bosnia in paramilitary groups; after returning to Serbia, they were tasked by the security apparatus in assassinations, kidnappings, robberies, racketeering, money laundering and blackmail. Some six-hundred murders of state officials and mafia figures were executed in Serbia proper under Milošević. The state-wide murder rate increased by a factor of 2.5 from Milošević's ascent to power in 1989 to 1997 (Kaliterna 2005, p. 33). A sizable number of these – if not the majority – are believed to have been committed by the government through 'thugs-for-hire.' The host state had – like Frankenstein – created a monster that it was about to lose control over.

Simultaneously, separatist Kosovo's parallel institutions began to emerge as bedrocks of the mafia ascendency that was to come. Though separatist institutions benefited from organized crime, it was not used against Serbia in this phase. Low-scale, somewhat disorganized violence in Kosovo did contribute to the gradual demographic shift in favor of the separatist community, but this long-term shift was primarily due to a discrepancy in natality rates.[1] The rate of the shift increased in the early 1990s, when roughly 79,971 Serbs, Roma, Montenegrins and other non-Albanians disappeared between the 1991 census and 1995 estimates. This acceleration was in part due to the coercive practices of newly-crafted Albanian institutions that amounted to a shadow state-within-the-state.

The seeds of the militarized struggle that was to follow were laid in 1990, when the first armed group designated by Belgrade as 'terrorist' was discovered, though its size and strength was negligible. Between 1991 and 1997, 377 attacks were recorded. Mostly targeting Serbian policemen and state officials, the perpetrators were undertrained,

moderately-armed bands without apparent coordination or hierarchy between them. Serbian military analysts – chauvinistic and paranoid by nature – conceded that Kosovo separatist violence in this phase 'did not represent a serious danger to the security of vital interests of the [then] Yugoslavia' (Mijalkovski and Damjanov 2002, pp. 75–6, p. 61).

Serbia showed unwillingness and inability to confront separatist drift in Kosovo. The regime's only confrontation was largely symbolic and aimed at domestic constituencies in Serbia proper. The defining collective action of Milošević's reign was June 28th, 1989. In front of a half-a-million Serbs, he delivered a speech in Kosovo to commemorate the 600th anniversary of a defeat by the Ottoman Empire. The event was saturated in nationalist mythology, and solidified Milošević's image as savior of the Serbian nation in Kosovo.[2] It came a month after the host state rescinded Kosovo's autonomous status.

This act was to be the closest thing to a compromise the host state indulged in during this entire phase. More importantly, it was the closest thing to a confrontation that Serbia managed throughout the phase. As its aid to Kosovo waned, Serbia's influence on the territory gradually dissipated; in addition, its disregard of the territory and signals of disinterest and impotence themselves encouraged separatist success. The more akin to a private criminal gang the host state became, the more the separatists were encouraged to drift away.

The separatists thus laid the foundations for *de facto* autonomy. Riding on a wave of mass popular unrest in October 1988 and a major miners' strike in 1989, the movement went on the offensive in the 1990s. It took what it could from Serbia – financially and bureaucratically – but rejected any obligations towards it. A majority explicitly embraced independence from Belgrade in a landslide referendum boycotted by Serbs. The 'Pandora's Box' of separatism having been opened in Slovenia, Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina, Albanians were logical candidates for a similar separation. Indeed, their cultural and ethnic distance from Serbs was greater than anything Croats or Bosnian Muslims could claim.

The separatist movement decidedly declined to use organized criminal resources to confront Serbia, however. The principal force behind the development of parallel institutions was the region's first parliamentary party, Ibrahim Rugova's *Democratic Alliance of Kosovo*. With 700,000 members, its leaders were mostly intellectuals. Rugova – a writer, former communist dissident and emulator of Vaclav Havel – emphasized nonviolent resistance against Serbia. The withdrawal of participation in Yugoslavia's system and the self-organizing of quasi-state organs were followed by boycotts of elections (1990, 1992 and 1994) that had solidified Milošević's rule. Rugova even declined explicit offers by Bosnian Muslim and Croatian separatists to open another anti-Serb front in Kosovo. The hope was to extract compromises by negotiation.

This confrontation strategy failed miserably. Entangled by three wars and sanctions, Milošević failed to even acknowledge Kosovo's separatist leaders. Given the Albanian population's size, their participation in elections may very well have unseated him – another reason to tolerate separatist divergence from Serbia's political scene. So long as Serbia was preoccupied elsewhere (and the Milošević regime with its own perseverance through organized crime), Rugova's leadership was ignored and left to its own devices. The host state would come to pay dearly for its failure to seize the opportunity of a negotiating partner.

The moderate separatist strategy began to wane after the 1995 Dayton Accords ending the Yugoslav wars. Milošević was suddenly praised as a 'man of peace' by the very Western countries that bombed him into submission. Kosovo was excluded from the agenda at Dayton. Kosovo Albanian representatives were conspicuously absent from any international negotiations, while their separatist peers in Croatia and Bosnia-Herzegovina were seemingly rewarded for their militancy. The US, EU and NATO instantly recognized and intervened militarily on behalf of the breakaway Yugoslav republics, but their support for Kosovo was restricted to occasional lukewarm pronouncements of support. Even when Rugova's delegations were invited to Yugoslav war-related talks, they were typically relegated to observers with no interests of their own. The separatist movement's failure to confront the state was now recognizable to all.

The region's population grew impatient with the nonviolent approach, and thus receptive to the claim of militant criminal fringes: that only war would deliver sovereignty. Milošević's conduct in the Yugoslav wars – including his reliance on criminal militias for ethnic cleansing – seemed to prove 'that pacifism led nowhere,' that Rugova 'was meek and deferential,' and that the host state's attention can only be attracted through armed struggle. By the beginning of 1996, a majority of Kosovo Albanians was no longer supportive of the Democratic Alliance of Kosovo (Rogel 2004, p. 77, Simić 2000, pp. 53–81).

After 1996, in Phase 2, organized crime transitioned into the role of *divisor et imperator*. On the host state side, organized crime was more autonomous of the state than ever – up to and including the Bulldozer Revolution of 2000, which is critically assisted by Milošević's mafia apparatus; on the separatist movement side, mafia ascendency militarized and internationalized a hitherto low-intensity conflict to unprecedented levels, propelling Kosovar separatism to historic victories.

In Kosovo, organized crime ascended to the mainstream of the separatist movement when the KLA (Kosovo Liberation Army) eliminated rivals, solidified its leadership by force and confronted the host state violently. The US representative in Priština notoriously publicly scolded the group for their criminal tactics, which the 'Serbs interpreted as a go-ahead to clamp down on "terrorists" in "their" province' (Rogel 2004, p. 78). Learning from the separatists of Croatia and Bosnia, the KLA knew it could only secure a military intervention from the West if Serbia could be provoked into escalation. The immediate trigger for NATO intervention came with the killing of KLA fighters in Račak, which publicized Serbian ethnic cleansing. Though the incident is unquestionably a massacre, it remains disputed for it is suspected that bodies of armed KLA militants were presented as executed civilians to mobilize US intervention (Brock 2005, p. 314, Rainio *et al.* 2001).[3] Regardless, the so-called 'Račak Effect' brought decisive diplomatic support for the KLA and definitively marginalized Rugova's accommodationist, non-criminalized option. More generally, Serbia's vicious, indiscriminate response further encouraged military intervention:

> The Serbian regime [could have] aimed its activities against the mafia-linked, foreign-supported assassins of Serbian police, civilians and state employees, including ethnic Albanian ones. Instead, Belgrade struck back not just at the criminal elements but at

> civilians as well. [. . .] By allowing its paramilitaries to target Albanian civilians, the Serbian regime itself helped place the KLA on the map of 'freedom fighters' (Udovicki and Ridgeway 2000, p. 331).

Furthermore, efforts were made to spread ethnic violence to neighboring states. KLA-marked uniforms began appearing through the Preševo, Bujanovac and Medvedje Liberation Army, referring to three southern Serbian towns with substantial Albanian populations (Simović and Karanović 2004). Albanians in Macedonia were also provided arms and funding during an insurgency in 2001. For many, the war was not over and the Albanian minorities in neighboring states were encouraged to follow Kosovo's example.

As Serbian repression mobilized Albanians around the KLA, OSCE monitors, journalists and government observers flooded the separatist territory. All sides approached a failed negotiation at Rambouillet with utter cynicism. After Milošević's refusal of a war-guaranteeing ultimatum, NATO air strikes began. Contrary to popular misperception of Serbian nationalist 'scholarship' that US/NATO interventionism created and puppeteered Kosovo separatists, the better-documented thesis is that NATO was provoked into war on behalf of Kosovo separatists *because of* and *after* the militant escalation that the KLA enabled by the arms smuggling bonanza of 1997 (Mandić 2021, pp. 63–81).

The overall effect of organized crime's role was tremendously conducive to separatist success – even more so than in Phase 1. First, the Serbian use of criminal militias against separatists worsened the backlash against repression. Serbian organized crime was no longer merely ignoring Kosovo, it was proactively molesting it – and the molestation mobilized an understandable response. Second, the Kosovo separatist movement gained unprecedented credibility and capacity through criminal empowerment – this eventually secured NATO support, an accomplishment that had eluded noncriminal separatists. Third, the KLA co-opted the separatist movement and triumphed over the host state.

Finally, in Phase 3, organized crime returned to the role of *tertius gaudens* – but not before a dramatic confrontation with the state which tested its strength. Organized crime staged a failed *coup d'état* and assassinated the Prime Minister Zoran Đinđić, exploiting host state weakness and the muffled confrontation with Kosovo. Serbia's crackdown on organized crime was limited, anti-corruption reforms were retarded and later reversed. In Kosovo, organized crime effectively acquired its own government apparatus, inspiring the proverbial moniker 'Mafia state,' originated in *Foreign Affairs* (Naím 2012), diversified, expanded internationally and ethnically homogenized Kosovo in the face of host state incapacity. Separatists acquired *de facto* independence, gained international recognition and disregarded the host state; Serbia engaged in symbolic, futile measures in confronting Kosovo, notably mafia-aided riots in Belgrade. Organized crime on each side, largely non-overlapping, survived and thrived on the emerging Serbia-Kosovo frozen conflict.

The pinnacle of Serbia's loss of credibility and sovereignty was catalyzed by organized crime. In 2008, a massive public rally was called – the largest since October 2000 – to protest Kosovo's Declaration of Independence. The Minister of Internal Affairs instrumentalized small bands of hooligans and criminals at the protest to engage in vandalism. They were evidently permitted to besiege Belgrade buildings owned by foreign states that recognized Kosovo, including burning down the entire American embassy with one casualty. More generally, the government would continue to employ criminal gangs to

intimidate political opponents, including private businesses and business leaders (Correia 2010). Right-wing extremist groups that served as neighborhood branches of Serbian narco-traffickers were given new domestic legitimacy as defenders of the national cause of Kosovo.

The host state's sole remaining leverage was quasi-formal funding channeled into Serb-populated northern Kosovo (the Mitrovica, Zvečan and Lipljan municipalities) and Serb enclaves south of the Ibar river. Non-Albanians gradually fled, were sporadically terrorized, or became reliant on the Kosovo administration for aid, employment or protection. During this phase, Serbia channeled as much as 650,000 Euros *daily* to Serbian communities in Kosovo, though much of it was diverted to organized crime due to the total lack of oversight. While planned construction projects stagnated in Serbian enclaves, some 300 million Euros were embezzled.[4] Serbia also did little to assist over 200,000 refugees from Kosovo. In sum, the host state's credibility and practical influence over the separatist territory (with the partial exception of its north) was never lower – a development largely *caused* by organized crime in Serbia and *exploited* by organized crime in Kosovo.

In sum, the final phase was likewise highly conducive to separatist movement success. First, Serbia's confrontation with separatists is crippled by an organized criminal assault on the host state. Second, Kosovo's organized crime expands and solidifies independence for the separatist movement. Third, Kosovo acquires sufficient capacity to simply disregard the host state and to pursue state-formation within the bounds of the international presence – its organized criminal base is entirely independent of organized crime in Serbia.

5. The Georgian trajectory

Like in Serbia, in Phase 1 organized crime played the role of *tertius gaudens*. Mafias effectively moved from non-existence or obscurity into government quarters at the zenith of the Georgian civil war, which they helped conclude. Once consolidated, the host state became pervaded by criminal networks that would significantly dominate the political scene. Shevardnadze's crackdown on them was limited, crippled by separatist pressures. South Ossetian organized crime was born as a reaction to the First South Ossetia War. Initially rudimentary, it arose as mimicry of the Tbilisi organized crime scene; Ossetian elites gradually monopolized smuggling, but not unruly militias. Georgia's failed reintegration mobilized separatists, provoked Russian support, and united the Ossetian separatists. Organized crime was largely reactive and defensive, as was the South Ossetian separatist movement.

The overall effect on separatist success was clearly conducive to the insurgents. First, Georgia's civil war and its aftermath make South Ossetian separatism feasible by provoking mobilization for war and discrediting the host state. Second, the separatist movement acquires Russian patronage and organized criminal capacity – the latter in large measure as a reaction to Georgia's aggressive criminal militias. Third, the South Ossetian population is united and mobilized behind the separatist leadership because the sheer criminal chaos of the host state leaves little alternative.

Dissident and writer Gamsakhurdia was Georgia's first elected president.[5] His brief, tumultuous rule (formally November 1990 to April 1991) was marked by civil war (1991–3) followed by a disorderly interval (1993–1995) before Shevardnadze consolidated his

newly acquired position. The government's capricious and aggressive attitude towards opponents quickly united civil society against it. The crucial element that ensured this opposition's (costly) triumph was the involvement of organized criminal militias that nearly single-handedly unseated the unpopular president.

Critically, Gamsakhurdia turned to mafia kingpins for help in crushing Ossetian separatism by force. South Ossetia, in other words, was assaulted by the host state's most notorious criminal figure and his militia – an important incentive to form defensive separatist paramilitaries by any means necessary (to which we return below). The chaotic, lawless years following the civil war were entirely products of in-fighting among rival criminal gangs. As Driscoll (2015) rightly notes, the Georgian case was less an ethnic story than a 'violent breakdown of intra-ethnic bargaining within the post-independence national elite, after certain members of the elite succumbed to the temptation of allying with warlords' (p.48).

The two central mafia-squadrons, Kitovani's National Guard and Ioseliani's Mkhedrioni, proceeded, in effect, to centralize and discipline criminal branches on their turf. They thus acquired the closest approximation to a monopoly of violence in Georgia. They were preoccupied with profiteering in the civil war, including the rewarding war pillaging in Abkhazia (1992–1993) which overshadowed the South Ossetia threat to the north.[6] Organized crime thus benefited from separatist confrontation more than either the state or the separatist movement. The dysfunctional central state was compelled not only to suspend Georgian-Ossetian enmities, but Georgian-Russian ones as well. As host state breakdown progressed, Ioseliani's ties to regional mafias (including Soviet) proved firmer than any commitments to Georgia, let alone Russia.

Gamsakhurdia's central failure was his adoption of the most antagonizing attitude towards separatist minorities of any post-communist Georgian governments that were to follow. His public rhetoric was replete with Georgian exclusivity, relegating minorities to non-indigenous visitors. One of his very first statements upon assuming office – later a major slogan of his rule – minced no words: 'Georgia is for Georgians! Ossetians, get out of Georgia!' (Souleimanov 2013, p. 125). Ossetians were singled out for the strongest condemnation despite their miniscule numbers compared to minority Abkhazians. They were 'regarded as a virtual "fifth column" of the Kremlin [and] repeatedly threatened . . . with deportation' officially and publicly (Souleimanov 2013, p. 90). Even as Gamsakhurdia was openly negotiating autonomy principles with Abkhazia, no host state official signaled any compromise to the Ossetians.

In autumn of 1989, Gamsakhurdia led a 'March on Tskhinvali' to promote unity and mobilize against Ossetian separation. As many as 30,000 (Collier and Sambanis 2005, p. 268), but at least '10,000 Georgians, mostly pugnacious youths' were preempted from even reaching the capital due to South Ossetian militias and locally-organized civilian barricades (Souleimanov 2013, p. 124). The resulting clashes marked the first violent episode of the separatist struggle, before Georgia's own independence from the Soviet Union was even solidified. The deaths on both sides were the major impetus for the formation of local armed bands and village-based paramilitaries that would serve as bases for future escalations.

In September 1990, the South Ossetian government proclaimed itself a Republic and openly appealed to the USSR to annex it in an explicit rejection of all Georgian authority. The host state responded by repealing the province's *oblast* status – the first abridgment

of autonomy since 1922. Ossetians boycotted the election that brought Gamsakhurdia to power, the election of Georgia's supreme council in 1990, as well as the 1991 referendum on independence from the Soviet Union. Tskhinvali even issued a 1989 declaration of support for Abkhazia's separatist actions (see Diasamidze 2003).

Torez Kulumbegov, head of the South Ossetian Supreme Council, was imprisoned for treason. Though the repressive measure was only one of many Georgian attacks on critics, journalists and political opponents, Ossetians perceived it exclusively as a nationalist move. Instead of negotiating with the receptive Kulumbegov (widely considered a missed opportunity; see George 2009, p. 113), the host state snubbed him. In January 1992, South Ossetia held a (formally illegal) referendum revealing 92% support for joining Russia. Violent clashes sporadically continued until March 1992, with the highest intensity of fighting in the spring of 1991.

The First South Ossetia War claimed 600 casualties and 65,000 internally displaced persons (Jones 2013, p. 84). Ossetians were expelled from near-border cities like Gori and Borjomi with at least tacit support from Tbilisi. The 1992 Kekhvi massacre (when Georgian militias killed 32 civilians on a bus) came to symbolize Georgian aggression. Russian troops – including tanks that easily blocked Georgian militias from approaching – were welcomed with relief and enthusiasm. They too participated in ethnic cleansing of Georgians from southern villages in the province. Russia also had economic leverage, imposing a blockade on Georgia in 1992. Georgia's dependence on Russian gas and raw materials caused the blockade to precipitate the host state's rapid economic deterioration.[7]

Though Russian intervention was critical in defending Ossetia, it was by no means the instigator. 'The proximate cause [of the first Georgian-Russian war] was of a specifically *local* nature,' determined by endogenous forces on South Ossetian territory (Souleimanov 2013, p. 157).[8] Ioseliani himself boasted that the first Ossetian war was caused by Georgian paramilitaries under his control mostly acting independently of Gamsakhurdia's explicit orders, a conclusion shared by scholars. Though Russian parliamentarians and other officials routinely issued bombastic statements (including threats of bombing Georgia proper), their influence never extended beyond assistance to (North and South) Ossetian forces. Indeed, far from Russian troops and their satellites being maneuvered according to Moscow's will, 'it remains an open question as to what degree the actions of individual Russian army units were coordinated or directly controlled by the Kremlin' (George 2009, p. 124).

Thus, Georgian warfare, economic and regular, failed categorically. The host state's assault was such a half-done venture that it is only called a 'war' by courtesy. Total war deaths hardly exceeded one thousand, while conventional warfare by the host state through artillery, tanks and air forces was nonexistent.

South Ossetia was thus liberated from any realistic prospect of Tbilisi control. The war gave separatist elites a false sense of victory (they 'defeated', after all, a superior army with an improvised assortment of untrained volunteers), and ensured an entanglement of Russian and South Ossetian interests. Were it not for the outbreak of civil war in Georgia itself, it is questionable if the Russian-backed separatists would have been able to resist a concentrated attack by Georgian forces. Eventually, Georgia humiliatingly joined the Russian-dominated CIS and signed a Georgian-Russian Friendship Treaty in 1995, as soon as the host state was reunified.

Importantly, Ossetian militias were primarily defensive and reactive, remaining so after the first war. Indicatively, 'there were no Ossetian incursions into other parts of Georgia for hostage taking or for expanding the territory' (George 2009, p. 128). Furthermore, there was no recorded intra-Ossetian violence, perhaps a reflection of the rudimentary nature of organized crime in this phase.

As a broader legacy, however, South Ossetian organized crime was born in the wake of the First South Ossetia War. Though large-scale organized crime was almost non-existent before the late 1990s, the foundations for later criminal networks were set in this phase – particularly locally-based militias with connections to Russian smuggling routes. The province's utter lack of resources in the 1990s was a mixed blessing. On the one hand, 'South Ossetia was the first target of Gamsakhurdia's program,' a major analysis concludes, 'in part because it lacked resources' (George 2009, p. 112). The region had boasted profitable mines for zinc and lead, factories for wood products, and beer/fruit juice plants. Modest to begin with, these quickly shut down in the civil war chaos anyway. Impoverished South Ossetia was mistakenly considered an easy target. The Ossetian organized crime that emerged was indeed modest and dependent on Russian peacekeepers as senior partners. The need to make smuggling profitable followed the need for creating militias, and not vice versa.

On the other hand, *Georgian* organized crime was not as motivated to place the region under its control. For its part, Kitovani's 'National Guard had little interest in protracted warfare in a province with no lootable resources' (Collier and Sambanis 2005, p. 268). Nilsson (2014, p. 107), in his analysis of Georgia's conflicts, agrees: 'key actors on the Georgian side simply lost interest in reasserting control over South Ossetia due to lack of lootable resources'. In this sense, Russian-Ossetian smuggling ties were free to gradually develop without much interference or competition. At the very earliest stage of separatist conflict, Boris Yeltsin and Gamsakhurdia signed the *Qaybegi Compromise*, which envisioned the disarmament of illegal groups in South Ossetia by a joint Russian-Georgian force (Jones 2013, pp. 64–5). As street-fighting and chaos crippled Tbilisi, this was never implemented. On the contrary, the civil war period instituted habits that were to plague South Ossetia for two decades.

In Phase 2, however – in fatefully sharp contrast to the Serbian trajectory – organized crime began to play the role of *mediator*. In this unique Phase, conditions were surprisingly unfavorable for separatist success. To be sure, the host state curbed organized crime that threatened its stability, but maintained profitable patronage networks that enabled the Ergneti Market to develop. For more than a decade, South Ossetian organized crime flourished through Ergneti, steadily alleviating ethnic tensions and pacifying separatism. Georgian co-optation attempts and separatist maximalist positions both failed because criminal interests on both sides of the border preferred the status quo.

I will forgo a detailed historiography of the Ergneti Market and its subduing effects on Ossetian separatism (see Mandić 2021, p. 218fn85f). Suffice it to say that scholars, peacekeepers and monitoring organizations, foreign troops, and civil sector groups all marveled in unison at the pacifying effect of mafias via the Ergneti Market. Its multiethnic character and impartiality were critical, as was its focus on non-violent contraband unconducive to political agitation.[9] Though still alive, the separatist movement failed to confront the host state or even to achieve any increased autonomy.

It is worthwhile remembering just how profoundly Ergenti smuggling blocked state-separatist escalations. Despite unprecedented and aggressive attempts by both sides, the host state and separatist movement elites simply failed to confront each other, thus perpetuating disputed and porous (but profitable) borders that neither was satisfied with but both surrendered to. Host state co-optation attempts had no precedent to rely on. Throughout the Soviet period, South Ossetia was characterized by a lack of client-patron relations with power centers in Moscow and Tbilisi. Unlike in Soviet separatist regions like Chechnya or in Georgia itself, 'patronage structures [. . .] were nonexistent' in South Ossetia (George 2009, p. 19).[10] This compelled successive Georgian elites to improvise, as they could not rely on preexisting interactions. Gamsakhurdia's anti-Ossetian chauvinism further tainted any subsequent Georgian leader in co-optation attempts.

Unlike his predecessor, Shevardnadze enjoyed excellent relations with the Ossetian leadership in the 1990s, boasting to an analyst that he could have reintegrated South Ossetia 'any time he wanted' (George 2009, p. 2). South Ossetian president Chibirov also demonstrated greater receptiveness to dialogue and settlement by political means. Though the Ossetian leadership refused to retract its demand for the restoration of *oblast* status, they tempered their maximalist demands. In 1996, a South Ossetian parliamentary declaration stated that the province would remain in Georgia, leaving its sovereignty undisturbed, if autonomy was formally reinstated. But Shevardnadze, now unhindered by civil war, rejected even this demand. In part due to the perception that autonomy was a remnant of Soviet imperialism designed to marginalize Georgia, and in part due to overconfidence of the host state political leadership (George 2009, p. 127), this Ossetian settlement offer was squandered and never made again.

By 2001, Georgia paid dearly for missing the opportunity to negotiate. A change in Ossetian leadership removed any cooperative separatist elements. Eduard Kokoity, a Russian-born Ossetian with greater ties to Russia than to South Ossetia, was elected president. His victory was enabled by the same Tedeyev clan that brought his predecessor Chibirov to power; the family financed most of Kokoity's campaign. He filled Ossetian institutions with Russian-born cadres (sometimes even non-Ossetians), and reinstituted a maximalist separatist position. South Ossetia was now unwilling to remain in Georgia under any circumstances, calling only on integration with North Ossetia and Russia. In 2003, Kokoity even turned against his Tedeyev funders, removing several of them from their positions. Despite it all, popular mobilization for the maximalist demands was rendered impossible by Ergneti, discrediting the separatist movement as a whole. Kokoity's nationalist posturing and irredentist crowing fell on deaf ears.

The Georgian position also became more entrenched in the early 2000s. Shevardnadze was encouraged, if not pressured, to apply military solutions to South Ossetia by an American Al Qaeda concern in Chechnya. In 2002, with post-9/11 anxiety, the US not only gave Russia permission to crush Chechen separatism, but trained and armed four Georgian brigades in an 18-month program to curb terrorism in northeastern Georgia. The Chechen refugee camps in question touched directly on South Ossetian territory; movement of weapons and fighters was assumed to flow through the province, though evidence is scarce.

Ergneti, once again, resisted all these pressures. '[C]orrupt ties can mitigate ethnic violence,' the leading monograph on the Georgia-Ossetia showdown notes, while 'anti-corruption movements such as the Rose Revolution in Georgia destabilized, rather than stabilized, the country's ethnic political situation' (George 2009, p. 7, p. 11) by shutting Ergneti down. This destabilization ultimately led to war because the organized criminal stakes had become too high. South Ossetian politicians and businessmen had no realistic prospects of industrializing their region or discovering resources in it. Their one and only advantage was their geographic position as a bridge to Vladikavkaz, the capital of North Ossetia.By assaulting the mafia enterprise that was Ergneti, the host state reawaked the dormant separatist beast.

Thus, paradoxically, the separatist movement was compelled to fight over the closing of Ergneti, even though the organized criminal enterprise had greatly retarded their ability to mobilize separatist sentiment for years. They were simply too weak and unpopular to confront the state. Their only chance was to provoke Russian support. However, it would be misleading to treat South Ossetia as a mere instrument of Russian foreign policy. On the contrary, Russian customs officers and criminal distributors were integrated against Moscow's will into a durable, multi-ethnic partnership with Georgian criminals and corrupt state officials. The Russian government was in favor of a political settlement (preferably merger), while Russia's criminal circles colluded with South Ossetia's to promote the status quo. Organized crime on all sides favored disputed borders to an international consensus on how to regulate them.

Overall, the effect on the success of the separatist movement in this unique phase was *negative*. First, since Georgia's organized crime survived the post-civil war crackdown, it became an accomplice in curbing separatism for its own criminal interests. Second, and most importantly, the Ergneti Market grows in this phase. It pacified separatism and fostered multi-ethnic cooperation through massive, routinized and systemic smuggling. Third, separatist elites became unable to mobilize the Ossetian population, which increased their dependence on Russian support. Thus, irredentism became the only feasible separatist demand, and weak at that.

With Saakashvili's crackdown on Ergneti in the Second South Ossetia War, organized crime returned to the role of *tertius gaudens* in Phase 3. Georgia comprehensively cracked down on organized crime at all levels, rekindling separatist hostility and eliminating crime-driven ethnic reconciliation. The closing of the Ergneti Market eliminated the central force suppressing separatism, as the separatist elite exploited popular support for smuggling. Organized criminal unity was ethnically re-divided. Tensions over the closing of Ergneti quickly escalated into war, rekindling separatism further. Having been deprived of organized criminal partners confronting the host state for so long, South Ossetian separatism failed to confront Georgia single-handedly or sustain autonomy without Russian dominance.

Saakashvili's intra-Georgian anti-corruption policies were significantly successful, leaving behind mere 'elite corruption,' all of it non-violent, diffuse and demilitarized. The organized criminal connections that used to pervade the highest echelons of the executive branch shifted to the Georgian parliament (Shelley 2007, pp. 7–9). This meant that criminal clans could not bribe or coerce their way to a given outcome as easily because decision-making in the legislative branch was itself so divided and slow. Perhaps most importantly, the political culture had transformed profoundly. Non-transparent conduct was now stigmatized and under state-encouraged NGO scrutiny. It was this new

set of norms that (tragically) provided useful ideological cover for attempting to confront separatism. The attempt not only failed, but was directly counterproductive from the host state's perspective.

But the crackdown on organized crime under the guise of 'anti-corruption' in the separatist territory was another matter. The crushing of Ergneti decidedly pushed the separatist pendulum towards hardline, uncompromising maximalism. Officially, 'South Ossetia's zero-sum independence position emerged' even during the Ergneti period (George 2009, p. 134), but was deeply insincere because the separatist authorities knew full-well that their entire sustenance depended on Ergneti's multi-ethnic, anti-conflict foundation. With the crushing of Ergneti, the official separatist party line lost its only structural inhibition:

> . . . the idea of South Ossetia's secession from Georgia prior to early 1991 [when war broke out], floated only by part of Georgia's South Ossetian community, found support with the overwhelming majority of [the] Ossetian population. From this moment on, those South Ossetian politicians championing the conception for the "Ossetians' organic bond" with Georgia came to lose support (Collier and Sambanis 2005, p. 271, Souleimanov 2013, p. 128).

Organized crime quickly exploited the market demand as well as the collective ethnic mood. Smuggling continued to be a necessity because separatist sentiment skyrocketed in reaction to Georgia's incursion.

After the retarding effects of the nearly decade-long Ergneti Market, the separatist movement was again in conditions favorable to success in the final phase. First, Georgia not only failed to confront the separatists but revitalized them by assaulting Ergneti and waging war. Second, South Ossetian separatists regained popular support from their (previously demobilized) constituency, though they remained incapable of confronting the host state independently of Russia. Third, organized criminal activity ceased to promote reconciliation, returned to the status of mere instrument of the separatist movement.

6. Implications

In sum, I have argued that a critical reason for Kosovar separatism's higher success compared to South Ossetian separatism's is the difference in organized criminal relations to state and movement from 1989–2012. These relations evolved differently in Serbia and Georgia, as the two trajectories featured different reconfigurations of state-movement-criminal triadic relations. Concretely, the fact that organized crime played the role of *divisor et imperator* in Kosovo's Phase 2, but the role of mediator in South Ossetia's Phase 2, was critical. We have seen how organized crime was a decisive endogenous factor in at least molding, if not defining, state-separatist relations. We have also seen that exogenous factors – notably international military support – are themselves dependent on organized criminal agency to be determinants of separatist success as well.

Four conclusions are worth stressing about the advantages of this approach. First, the customary emphasis on foreign military intervention as a necessary (if not sufficient) condition for separatist success begs the crucial question of *how* such foreign support is obtained.

Organized crime has the potential to 'make or break' ethnic polarization, which in turn can secure foreign allies in war. Serbia's Phase 2 and Georgia's Phases 1 and 3 demonstrate that organized crime may be a crucial element in attracting or repelling an external army. One possibility is that mafia-militias get greater international support than their non-criminalized separatist colleagues because they have greater credibility and capacity to attract attention and create crises (as with the KLA before the Kosovo war). Mafias have clout *on the ground*, and this endogenous leverage is critical in attracting exogenous allies. Another possibility is that international partners with the potential to intervene are reluctant because their own criminal networks are as invested as the host state is in maintaining an ambiguous *status quo* with disputed borders (as with Ergneti before Saakashvili).

Second, organized crime must not be relegated to a side-effect or mere trigger of host state action. Its capacity to challenge the host state head-on through coups determines the very nature of the state or the pace and direction of its development. Mafias are just as relevant as military juntas – when successful – in determining state capacity and policy. Yet military juntas receive far more attention as central actors on the political stage than mafias. Whether the state instrumentalizes the criminals (as with Serbia's Phase 1) or the criminals instrumentalize the state (as with Serbia's Phase 2) is an all-important difference. The centrality of Georgian organized crime in causing civil war and replacing one elite with another (in Phase 1) is arguably a greater factor in South Ossetia's separatist progress than anything the host state did to the separatist movement directly. The Milošević-generated criminal class could not – and did not – challenge the state in any systematic way in Serbia's Phase 1, let alone attempt a coup of the sort that unseated Gamsakhurdia. In Serbia's Phase 3, when organized crime did partially instrumentalize the state after killing Đinđić, Serbia-Kosovo relations were directly affected. Without some kind of formalization of the triadic relations, we conflate these and other dramatic differences.

Third, the marginality or centrality of organized crime within a separatist movement may determine state-separatist relations regardless of levels of violence. It is not simply the (intuitive) case that criminalized separatists have more difficulty negotiating, affirming legitimacy and extracting compromises. If organized crime is central to the separatist movement, it may provoke – and defeat – host state repression which in turn solidifies criminal statehood. Serbia's Phase 2 features the 1999 Kosovo war: it resulted from a host state crackdown on a highly-criminalized and violent movement. However, organized crime can be central to the separatist movement and be completely nonviolent (and, indeed, promoting ethnic reconciliation), yet still provoke host state repression that results in separatist success. The 2008 South Ossetia war (Phase 3) was a result of Georgia's crackdown on the multiethnic, peace-preserving Ergneti Market. Indeed, these instances show that the level of violence is itself a by-product of the kind of organized crime (primarily drug- and arms-traffic based vs. marginally so).

Finally, host state success in curbing its own organized crime has direct effects on separatist movement mobilization – even when multi-ethnic organized crime is non-existent. Georgia's zenith of organized crime (Phase 1) during the civil war was reflected in South Ossetia's reactive mimicry of host state militias, a criminalized political culture, and an ethnic 'cover' for illegal profiteering. Saakashvili's contribution to reversing this trend (Phase 3) is clearly reflected in increased capacity to (at least attempt) reintegration. The transition from Milošević to the post-Bulldozer Revolution in Serbia (Phase 2 to 3) shows how fatal host state anti-crime failures can be on sovereignty over separatists.

Georgia and Serbia effectively lost sovereignty over their separatist regions to the same extent (in 1991 and 1999, respectively), but the former's capacity to regain it was incomparably greater because it decriminalized itself.

Thus, we see that a more formalized, relational triadic model may uncover counter-intuitive and neglected factors. A dyadic alternative is obviously less likely to capture many of these realities by misattributing agency, overestimating state capacity, and homogenizing separatist civil society. Not only does organized crime have the capacity to generate outcomes against both state and separatist movement tendencies, but it has the capacity to both hinder *and* advance separatist success. When states, insurgents and mafias are conceptualized as interactive, relational triads, we frame our analysis in such a way as to sensitize ourselves to these neglected processes, as well as to formalize and specify with some precision and rigor how we interpret historical evidence as proof of one-or-another kind of relationship.

Notes

1. Between 1945 and 1998 (when full-scale conflict began), Serbs and other minorities were reduced from 60% to less than 15%. Simultaneously, the Albanian population grew from 40% to 85%.
2. On centrality of this event in Serbia's Kosovo policy, see Zirojevic (2000).
3. The controversy reached the NATO parliamentary assembly. Finnish and Russian investigators said one thing in their report, William Walker, American diplomat, said another in his. See (Rainio *et al.* 2001, and also:, Adam and Heine 2001, Kenney 1999).
4. See B92′s Insajder investigative projects 'Nemoć Države' and 'Patriotska Pljacka,' 2009–14.
5. It may even be argued that Gamsakhurdia's rise to power was aided by organized crime, not merely his fall from it. Dissident Merav Kostava co-founded with Gamsakhurdia the youth organization 'Gorgasliani' and was jailed by the Soviets for it. The prominent Georgian independence activist and human rights agitator was killed in an automobile accident in 1989 – an incident concluding weeks of death threats and at least one failed KGB attempt at his life. His death is widely regarded as a Soviet murder by the Georgian population at large. Perhaps the most important outcome of the death was that Gamsakhurdia became 'the only widely known person in public life credited with being a dissident' – a significant reason he ascended to power in Georgia (See Souleimanov 2013, p. 91).
6. A curiosity, Abkhazia – one of the more successful separatist movements in the post-Soviet space – has a minority portion of Abkhaz nationals in the breakaway territory (less than 20% at certain times in the period – far less than Georgians, Mingrelians and others). On Abkhaz separatist movement's receptiveness to confederal and gradualist solutions prior to the independence declaration of 1999, see Coppieters (2003, pp. 187–212).
7. Russian hypocrisy in regards to separatist causes was already as enormous as NATO's in the former Yugoslavia. The luckless separatist effort of the *prigorodny rayon* in North Ossetia was crushed by Russia between 1992–8, to say nothing of Chechnya.
8. Emphasis in original.
9. Between 1999 and 2002, Ergneti smugglers assisted movement from the nearby Pankisi Gorge bordering Chechnya, 'a haven for Chechen rebels and transnational criminal networks' (Nilsson 2014, p. 108). This is a rare and marginal example of Ossetian criminals acting against Russian interests. But the bulk of criminal activity was ethnically impartial.
10. She further concludes that '[r]egions with the protection of wealth or patronage could engage in "safe" separatism, whereas those without clientelist linkages or wealth could not' (George 2009, p. 28).

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