Political Geography xxx (2017) 1–11

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Political Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/polgeo

The patterns of violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Security, geography and the killing of civilians during the war of the 1990s

Tomislav Dulić

The Hugo Valentin Centre, Uppsala University, Thunbergsvägen 3D, 751 20 Uppsala, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 5 August 2016
Accepted 27 March 2017
Available online xxx

How can we best explain the uneven spatial distribution of lethal violence against civilians during civil wars and other conflicts? This question has attracted an increasing amount of research interest during the last decade, when the dissemination of georeferenced statistical data has facilitated the use of GIS software for the study of civil war violence. While many scholars focus on the relationship between the spatial distribution of violence and the topographic, economic or environmental character of land (for an overview, see O'Loughlin & Raleigh, 2008; Raleigh, Witmer, & O'Loughlin, 2010), others have looked into how local-level cleavages and antagonisms influence the violence (Costalli & Moro, 2011; Di Salvatore, 2016; Slack & Doydon 2001). Yet another group of researchers have focused on the military-strategic logic driving the belligerents. Proponents of the ethnic security dilemma theory for instance emphasize the role of information failure among defensively oriented belligerents caught up in a process of resource accumulation (Posen, 1993). Adding to the discussion are those focusing on the indiscriminate killing of civilians, which is attributed to inept counter-insurgency, or a lack of information needed for selective targeting (Fearon & Laitin, 2003, pp. 75–76; Kalyvas, 2006).

Even though geostatistics have been used to explain some of the puzzles, most models have drawbacks. Explanations focusing on breakdowns in command and control struggle with the fact that violence sometimes is both premeditated and planned. A similar problem exists insofar the ethnic security dilemma theory is concerned, where scholars face the problem of having to show the attacking side was defensively oriented at the onset of crisis (Roe, 2000; Tang, 2009). Adding to the theoretical shortcomings are data and measurement problems. One frequent issue is that datasets often fail to distinguish between civilian and military victims, or between actors across dyads. Such problems are serious if one has the ambition to understand different belligerents' motives for targeting civilians, while taking into account those historical, cultural and political contexts in which violence happens (Kalyvas, Shapiro, & Masoud, 2008, p. 398).

This analysis addresses some of the problems by using a dataset of civilian deaths during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina that has been disaggregated into the Bosniak, Bosnian Serb and Bosnian Croat ethnic communities. The assumption is that in order to gain a deeper understanding of the geographic dispersion of civilian deaths, one needs to take into full account the way in which territories are attributed importance by different political and military elites. While rent-seeking violence should disproportionately affect areas with valuable resources, counter-insurgency killings will either happen in rebel-controlled areas or trace the intensity of combat. Ethnic conflict, by contrast, has often been argued to affect areas with parity in demographic control. This has become evident since the end of the Cold War, when transitions to democracy have created a situation where territorial demands have become legitimized by demographic dominance over space. Belligerents may therefore come to the conclusion that they must change the demographic composition of territory in "their" favour (Bell-Fialkoff, 1999, p. 57; Naimark, 2001, p. 3) in order to remove potential treats to control and security.

I introduce the concept of "spatial securitization" in order to explain the uneven distribution of civilian deaths across space. By this is meant a process through which elites attribute importance to specific administrative and other territorial units, depending on political and military context. I predict that while high levels of ethnic heterogeneity do not necessarily translate into above-average levels of violence, homogenous municipalities will display a lower magnitude of violence than the average. This is because ethnic dominance produces strong legitimacy in territorial claims. A belligerent might therefore find it counterproductive to spend resources on attacking a region that one cannot legitimately claim in a peace settlement. However, such areas may also be attacked if and when they are of great strategic importance and thus highly securitized.

Four regression models have been designed to test the

E-mail address: tomislav.dulic@valentin.uu.se.

http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.03.009

hypotheses; one cross-sectional and three that have been disaggregated into the Bosniak, Bosnian Croat and Bosnian Serb ethnic communities. The results show that increased levels of violence are strongly associated with the municipalities that the Bosnian Serb elite considered to be highly important from a security perspective across victim groups, while Croat and Bosniak victims were primarily affected in their own securitized municipalities. Another important finding is that high levels of ethnic dominance had a negative influence on the killing of civilians. The conclusion is that violence will be rather uncommon in areas where an incumbent can count on control and therefore has no need to target civilians. Conversely, the evidence fails to support the idea that areas where no one actor has demographic control are disproportionately violent, unless the territory was highly securitized.

Theory

The civil wars literature can be divided into research that focuses on the character of land and violence on the one hand, and those studies that explore the impact of human geography on conflict on the other. Research for instance suggests that mountainous terrain is conducive to guerrilla warfare, while forested terrain is not (cf. Collier & Hoeffler, 2004, p. 570; Fearon & Laitin, 2003). Other results show that access to raw materials has an influence on violence, either because it provides an opportunity for looting, or for securing those assets that facilitate the continuation of war (Collier, Hoeffler, & Rohner, 2009; Gilmore, Gleditsch, Lujala, & Rod, 2005; Hegre, Østby, & Raleigh, 2009; Lujala, Rød, & Thieme, 2007). The effect of environmental change is another topic that has attracted considerable interest, with GIS being used to explore the relationship between violence and freshwater resources (S. Yoffe et al., 2004; S. Yoffe, Wolf, & Giordano, 2003; S. B. Yoffe and Ward, 1999) or climate change (Raleigh & Urdal, 2007). The results show no direct relationship between climate change and conflict, although land pressure may contribute to increased tensions and the spreading of conflict through migration flows (Barnett & Adger, 2007; Salehyan, 2008; Swain, Swain, Themnér, & Krampe, 2011; Theisen, 2008; Urdal, 2005). A number of studies focus on how the intensity of war in a region may become influenced by exogenous factors, such as "spill-over" effects from neighbouring countries (Furlong, Gleditsch, & Hegre, 2006), or the distance to state capitals (Buhaug, Cederman, & Rød, 2008; Cederman, Buhaug, & Rød, 2009).

Strategy and violence

While some have sought to explore the relationship between the intrinsic character of land and conflict, others focus on how the logic of military strategy influences when and where violence will break out. Even though scholars tend to agree that macro-level decision-making processes play a major role in explaining why mass killings happen in the first place (Midlarsky, 2005; B. A.; Valentino, 2004), they still differ in their assessment as to why incumbents occasionally resort to the indiscriminate killings of civilians. While some view indiscriminate violence as a rational form of counter-insurgency (Lyall, 2009; B.; Valentino, Huth, & Balch-Lindsay, 2004), a majority believes it represents a type of "breakdown" due to inept policing or information failure. Kalyvas (2006) for instance posits that actors prefer using selective violence against civilians in order to establish control over territories and dissuade defections. However, they may resort to indiscriminate violence when the cost for selective targeting becomes too high. Selective violence will therefore be more common in areas under incumbent hegemonic control, because its implementation is contingent upon information and a lower risk of denunciation. Indiscriminate violence, by contrast, should primarily affect areas firmly controlled by an opponent, where there is a lack of information for selective targeting and the risk of defections becomes irrelevant once counter-insurgency operations begin.

The argument is plausible from a theoretical point of view, but has received mixed empirical support. Balcells (2010) for instance shows that regions with parity in control saw an average increase in the level of selective violence during the Spanish Civil War. Lilja and Hultman (2011) reached a similar conclusion in a study of intra-ethnic violence in Sri Lanka, arguing that an incumbent enjoys more social control in dominated areas and therefore does not need to use terror. In addition, Bhavnani, Miodownik, & Choi, (2011) study of the strategic interaction between Israelis and Palestinians on the Gaza strip suggests that one has to add the relative technological strength of the belligerent to the calculus, with Israelis using missiles for the purpose of selective targeting deep inside areas under Palestinian control.

Another problem is that the focus in Kalyvas's spatial model is on intra-ethnic violence during political conflicts, which leads to certain assumptions that are largely inapplicable to ethnic conflicts. In such situations, incumbents frequently use indiscriminate killing of civilians as a means by which to secure control over territory through forced expulsion of "undesirables" (Melander, 2009). This means that while killings only affect a relatively limited proportion of the population (usually military-aged men and local elites), the entire ethnic group becomes the target of violence. The attacking side does not need to fear defections due to an a priori assumption of the fundamental hostility of out-groups. As a result of these structural preconditions, civilians become attacked irrespectively of their own behaviour. The defence strategies identified by Kalyvas – such as "fence-sitting", denunciations and defection – therefore cease to be of any utility.

Space and violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina has served prominently as one of the most important case studies used by scholars who seek to explore the relationship between ethnicity and the spatial distribution of violence in civil war. Particular attention has been paid to the role of the microfoundations of violence, such as "ethnic contestation" and its influence on violent interaction. Drawing on Olzak's (1992) theory, Slack and Doydon (2001, p. 145) for instance argue "that ethnic competition perceived through population numbers might be a strong stimulus to inter-ethnic hatred and in turn civil war in Bosnia and Herzegovina". The importance of ethnic contestation and polarization has been confirmed in studies by Bulutgil (Bulutgil, 2009) and Costalli and Moro (Costalli & Moro, 2011; Costalli and Moro, 2012). Adding to these are studies that challenge the "anthropocentric" focus and employ concepts such as "urbicide" to explain the underlying motives for violence as an effort to destroy urban culture (e.g. Coward, 2006, 2008).

While providing important insights, some of the studies also struggle with problems in terms of conceptual clarity and operationalization. It for instance seems more reasonable to explain the destruction of houses and cultural objects belonging to "the other" as a way to achieve "ethnic cleansing", rather than as being directed against urban civilization per se (cf. Shaw, 2008).[1] As for the

[1] I has also been pointed out that such explanations unless handled very carefully wrisk legitimizing stereotypical views of the war as "a 'revenge of the countryside' in which uncultured, uneducated and backward villagers waged war on the civilized and enlightened city dwellers and their urban culture" (Grodach, 2002, p. 77).

Please cite this article in press as: Dulić, T., The patterns of violence in Bosnia and Herzegovina: Security, geography and the killing of civilians during the war of the 1990s, *Political Geography* (2017), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.03.009