

ARTICLE by Oana Tranca  
*What Causes Ethnic Conflict Diffusion? A Study of Ethnic Conflicts in Azerbaijan and  
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**What Causes Ethnic Conflict Diffusion?**  
**A Study of Ethnic Conflicts in Azerbaijan and Macedonia**

by  
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### ***Introduction***

The main question at the core of this article is why do certain ethnic conflicts spread violently to neighboring countries and threaten regional stability, while others remain confined to their initial frontiers? Case studies of two ethnic conflicts that, despite having a high potential for regional diffusion, have followed different paths in their evolution, can provide useful insights regarding risk factors that enhance the diffusion potential of ethnic conflicts. The ethnic conflicts involving Serb and Albanian minorities in Macedonia and the conflict of Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan were chosen in order to test several exploratory hypotheses.

Indeed, during the years following the end of the Cold War, there was a growing concern that after its independence, Macedonia would be the next big ethnic debacle in the process of Yugoslavia's collapse. Even if Macedonia escaped the Serb nationalist ambitions, it faced many challenges coming from all of its neighbors, mainly Greece, Bulgaria and Albania. Thus, the potential for a regional conflict having at its center this fragile new state was enormous for many IR specialists in the academic and political fields. Surprisingly, nothing comparable to the full-scale war between Armenia and Azerbaijan, that which did in fact break out as a consequence of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, happened between Macedonia and one any of its neighbors.

This article explores several research avenues in order to discover why two conflicts displaying a high potential of diffusion have actually followed a different paths. First, a contextual variable, the impact of third-party interventions, is analyzed.

Second, another contending, but possibly complementary, research design that focuses on the role of social factors such as identity formation and salience of past traumatic experiences is put to test. Are the ethnic majority's new and more flexible identity as well as its religious affinity with most of its neighbors, factors inhibiting the diffusion probability of Macedonia's ethnic conflicts? At the other end of the spectrum, adversaries in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict are ethnic groups that have a well-differentiated identity that evolved antagonistically to each other over several centuries.

Is this the main factor that provoked the Armenian intervention in defence of its threatened kin minority?

### ***Ethnic Conflict Diffusion***

New developments in the literature studying the international spread of ethnic conflicts show that concepts such as diffusion, contagion and escalation are often employed in an interchangeable manner. For example, for Lobell and Mauceri<sup>2</sup> diffusion and contagion describe the same phenomenon, a spill-over process by which conflicts in one country directly affect neighboring countries, whereas escalation involves the drawing of other states, non-state actors or outside ethnic groups into the conflict. Their definition builds on the seminal work of Lake and Rothchild<sup>3</sup> which discusses most of the main causes and scenarios that cause the spill-over of ethnic conflicts. The problem however with such general and imprecise definitions is that they tend to ignore other phenomena that characterize the evolution of an ethnic conflict. For example, if escalation signals an increased number of actors to the conflict, which other term could we use to describe a new stage of intensified antagonism or violence in the evolution of the conflict? In reality, a great number of authors use “escalation” to designate the intensification of the conflict from a low-intensity confrontation to stages leading to open war<sup>4</sup>. In fact, the escalation of a conflict is often measured in terms of

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<sup>2</sup> Steven E Lobell, Philip Mauceri, “Diffusion and Escalation of Ethnic Conflict”, in Steven E. Lobell and Philip Mauceri (eds.), *Ethnic Conflict and International Politics: Explaining Diffusion and Escalation*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004) p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> David A. Lake, Donald Rothchild, “Spreading Fear: The Genesis of Transnational Ethnic Conflict”, in David A. Lake and Donald Rothchild (eds.), *The International Spread of Ethnic Conflict* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> David Carment, “The International Dimension of Ethnic Conflict: Concepts, Indicators, and Theory”, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 30, no. 2 (1993), pp. 137-150; William J. Dixon, “Third-Party Techniques for Preventing Conflict Escalation and Promoting Peaceful Settlement”, *International Organization*, vol. 50, no. 4 (1996), pp. 653-681; P.G. Roeder, “Clash of Civilizations and Escalation of Domestic Ethnopolitical Conflicts”, *Comparative Political Studies*, vol. 36, no. 5 (2003), pp. 509-540; N. Spalding, “A Cultural Explanation of Collapse into Civil War: Escalation of Tension in Nigeria”, *Culture and Psychology*, vol. 6, no. 1 (2002), pp. 51-87.

violence as well as casualties and destruction<sup>5</sup>. Consequently, from this perspective, escalation signifies the transition to a new stage of the conflict, more intense or violent<sup>6</sup>.

Other definitions of diffusion, especially in the literature dealing with the international spread of war, use this term to designate an increased number of actors in an international dispute (assuming that each dispute begins with two actors)<sup>7</sup>. Even if this development may or may not be correlated with an intensification of the conflict (escalation), we are dealing with a different process affecting the evolution of the conflict. On the other hand, contagion refers to the process by which one group's actions provide inspiration and guidance, both strategic and tactical, for groups elsewhere<sup>8</sup> and is therefore different from a diffusion process in the sense mentioned above. I believe that distinguishing between the two types of processes - diffusion and contagion - is fundamental for this study, because each of them follows a different scenario and has different causal mechanisms

For analytical purposes, given that the two conflicts at the center of this paper suffered all of the three processes mentioned above, I choose to use the concept of diffusion, as defined by the literature on the international diffusion, i.e. designating the participation of additional actors to the conflict. Table 1 schematizes the definition of these concepts, diffusion, contagion and escalation as employed in this paper.

Table 1: Concepts

Concept	Definition	Examples
Diffusion	Direct form of spill-over, defined as the spread of an ethnic conflict from its initial locus, i.e. the national frontiers where it emerged, to neighboring states, by the	Serbia's intervention in the conflict opposing the Croatian Serbs of Krajina to the Croatian government

<sup>5</sup> David Carment, Patrick James, *Peace in the Midst of War* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> Dixon, "Third-Party Techniques".

<sup>7</sup> Mats Hammarstrom, Birger Heldt, "The Diffusion of Military Intervention: Testing a Network Position Approach", *International Interactions*, no. 28 (2002), pp. 355-377.

<sup>8</sup> Ted Robert Gurr, "Minorities, Nationalists and Ethnopolitical Conflict", in Chester A. Crocker and Fen Osler Hampson, with Pamela All (eds.), *Managing Global Chaos: Sources of and Responses to International Conflict* (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996).

	implication of additional actors to the conflict. Channeled by regional proximity.	(1991-1995)
Contagion	Indirect form of spill-over, that refers to the process by which one group's actions provide inspiration and guidance, both strategic and tactical, for groups elsewhere. Channelled by networks of groups sharing similar discriminations and grievances.	Sparking of violent confrontations between the Macedonian Albanians and the Skopje government fuelled by the success of the Kosovo Albanians in drawing NATO's intervention on their side (2001)
Escalation	New stage in the evolution of a conflict characterized by its intensification from a low-intensity confrontation to stages leading to open war.	Rwandan conflict after April 6 1994.

***The Contextual Variable: Third Party Intervention***

It is important to distinguish between an actor to the conflict and a third party intervening in the conflict. A third party intervention may also take the form of a military or non military intervention and change the course of the conflict. A third party may also intervene in favor of one of the parties to the conflict in order to resolve the dispute. However, the true test of a third party intervention is its non-discriminatory practices and actions aimed at solving the conflict. This important aspect, as well as its willingness to take actions and build strategies aimed at resolving the conflict, defines a third party as opposed to an actor to the conflict<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Impartiality is achieved by non-discriminatory actions according to the norms accepted by the international community. A third party may abandon neutrality, without losing its impartiality. Neutrality is a necessary condition for a humanitarian organization, such as the Red Cross, which does not aim to resolve the conflict, but to ease the suffering of civilians, Mary Kaldor, *New & Old Wars: Organized Violence in a Global Era*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999). However, if a third party is to intervene efficiently in order to achieve the resolution of a conflict, it sometimes have to take actions against one or more parties to the conflict; however non-discriminatory practices and actions aimed at solving the conflict define a third party as opposed to an actor to the conflict.

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Brecher and Wilkenfeld<sup>10</sup> define an actor to a crisis as a state whose foreign policy or national security decision makers perceive a threat to basic values, such as existence, influence, territorial integrity, political regime, survival and economic welfare. In the case of ethnic conflicts, the threat perceived by an ethnic group can be passed on to kindred ethnic groups living in neighboring countries. Therefore, any intervention in the name of ideological, religious or ethnic ties constitutes a clear sign that we deal with an actor to the conflict and not with a third party intervention. The intervention of a state that shares ethnic ties with the group in conflict has clearly a less impartial nature and tends to favor the interest of the kindred group which is generally detrimental to the resolution of the conflict.

The main questions we have to answer when analyzing third party intervention concern the nature of the intervener, the timing of the intervention and last but not least the outcome of the intervention with regard to the resolution of the conflict or other positive development.

Third party interveners in conflicts may be states, coalitions of states, international and regional organizations, ad-hoc commissions (created to act in specific conflicts) or any other entity that possesses an international status<sup>11</sup> and that aims to affect the evolution and/or the outcome of the conflict. Consequently, there are unilateral and multilateral forms of intervention that may take place separately, consecutively or simultaneously. International organizations as well as individual states are often under pressure to become involved in the resolution of ethnic conflicts, especially when highly publicized human rights violations or threats to the regional or international order are present. The post-Cold War world has witnessed a long-term decline in the utility of unilateral interventions toward cost-effective multilateral preventive strategies. However, aside this evolution there is not much theoretical or empirical evidence capable of assessing when and under what conditions third parties should intervene in order to affect

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<sup>10</sup> Michael Brecher, Jonathan Wilkenfeld *A Study of Crisis*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Dixon, "Third-Party Techniques".

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in a positive manner the course of an ethnic conflict. Carment and Harvey<sup>12</sup> found that UN performs poorly when acting alone in stopping international crises from escalating. However when states add their support to the UN, intervention becomes a great deal more effective. These findings do not explicitly apply to ethnic conflict diffusion but they can easily be adapted. Hence, building on the previous theoretical and empirical evidence, we can devise a first research hypothesis, specifically applicable to ethnic conflict diffusion:

*Hypothesis 1: International/regional organization and states intervention combined will perform better in preventing ethnic conflict diffusion than intervention by international/regional organizations or states alone.*

The timing of the intervention is also important in order to assess its success. Two main contending views are present in the literature. The first, most generally accepted, is that intervention is most effective when parties come to the conclusion that there is no other acceptable alternative than to agree to the mediation of a third party. This situation is commonly known as a “mutually hurting stalemate” and occurs when a conflict has attained a stage when it is “ripe for resolution”<sup>13</sup>, when parties have exhausted most of their resources to continue the fight and they see no possibility of victory for one side or the other.

The second theoretical perspective regarding the timing of the intervention and its probability of success emphasizes preventive strategies<sup>14</sup>. Thus, intervention should take place at the incipient stage of the conflict, or even before its outbreak, when warning signs are detected.

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<sup>12</sup>David Carment, Frank Harvey, *Using Force to Prevent Ethnic Violence: An Evaluation of Theory and Practice*, (Westport: Praeger, 2001).

<sup>13</sup> William I. Zartman, *Ripe for Resolution: Conflict and Intervention in Africa*, (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

<sup>14</sup> M. S. Lund, *Preventing Violent Conflict: A Strategy for Preventive Diplomacy*, (Washington DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1996).

Carment and Harvey<sup>15</sup> have concluded at the end of their extended study that there is always a greater chance to obtain a settlement in the early stages of international crises where ethnic issues are at stake (a situation corresponding to a potential ethnic conflict diffusion scenario) and although there is a chance that tensions will re-emerge in the future this alternative is preferable to waiting for a situation of “mutually hurting stalemate”. Besides the dangers of genocide, refugee flows and ethnic cleansing that may result from this latter solution, a very probable consequence is a deadlock where parties, having mutually exhausted their resources, prefer to preserve the status-quo to a negotiated solution to the conflict (for example, territories conquered during the conflict remain under the control of the winning side without no legal recognition, so the other party may hope to recover them eventually when there is a change in the military balance). While these findings do not specifically apply to a diffusion process, they constitute the background of our second hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2: Intervention in the early stages of an ethnic conflict exhibiting a high potential of diffusion has better chances of stopping diffusion than intervention when a conflict enters a phase of “mutually hurting stalemate”.*

A major problem however for preventive intervention is to gain support from the parties to the conflict before they have experienced the destructive consequences of violence and thus learned the value of cooperation<sup>16</sup>. Consequently, attitudes, behavior and personalities of the leaders of conflicting ethnic groups play a major role in the success of a third party intervention. In fact, consent on behalf of ethnic group leaders greatly facilitates the intervention and has also a positive effect on inhibiting the diffusion risk of a conflict. Hence our third hypothesis:

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<sup>15</sup> Carment, Harvey, *Using Force to Prevent Ethnic Violence*.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Ryan, “Preventive Diplomacy, Conflict Prevention, and Ethnic Conflict” in Carment, James, *Peace in the Midst of War*.



*Hypothesis 3: Consent on behalf of ethnic group leaders concerning a third party intervention in the country where the conflict takes place inhibits the diffusion risk of the conflict.*

Another problem with conflict prevention is that it is difficult to ascertain whether it was successful. If violence never broke out, how can we be sure that it was the result of third party intervention or simply the consequence of fortunate circumstances or other unpredictable factors?

In the case of ethnic conflict diffusion, successful prevention means essentially deterring other neighboring states to take part into the conflict. Therefore it is useful to have recourse to elements of the deterrence theory which can offer relevant indicators as far as how to ascertain the success of a third party intervention. The theoretical evidence points to three necessary elements in order to guarantee the success of a good deterrence strategy: actions (deployment of air, sea or ground forces), statements (public announcements, threats of retaliation) and support for retaliation (positive domestic and international public and media reactions)<sup>17</sup>. Building on these findings, we can design a similar hypothesis pertaining to ethnic conflict diffusion:

*Hypothesis 4: When all three elements: actions, statements and support for retaliation are present, third party strategy for preventing ethnic conflict diffusion will succeed. If one of those elements is missing, the strategy will fail.*

In addition to third party intervention as a contextual variable, an alternative but possible complementary explanation of ethnic conflict diffusion is coming from the field of social psychology. This perspective aims at explaining the influence of factors such as identity formation and collective perceptions of the in-group and the out-group on the evolution of particular ethnic conflicts.

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<sup>17</sup> Carment, Harvey, *Using Force to Prevent Ethnic Violence*.

### ***The Social Psychology Explanation***

Social psychology is a relatively new trend in the study of ethnic conflicts. This analytical perspective focuses on particular aspects of the relationships between ethnic groups, such as categorization, stereotypes, and attitudes<sup>18</sup>. Elements borrowed from social psychology may be helpful to understanding whether the behavior schemes stemming from historical antagonistic identities as well as negative perceptions of the enemy group can actually influence the implication of external actors in ethnic conflicts.

One indicator often used in social psychology to explain collective behavior is the stereotype. Stereotypes are generalizations concerning an ethnic group which stem from the attribution of characteristics which would, in the eyes of an objective observer, seem unjust<sup>19</sup>. Other authors define stereotypes as prejudices applied to certain groups that condition generalizations concerning individual members of those groups, exclusively on the basis of their appurtenance to a specific group (racial, ethnic or religious)<sup>20</sup>.

Building stereotypes is a collective process that emerges when there is a consensus among the members of a certain group with regard to traits that are common to another group. Traditionally, stereotypes were considered an inferior form of cognitive process because they usually took the form of an exaggerated or of a simplified perception of reality. In addition, stereotypes were usually morally condemned because they were an arbitrary and intransigent means of categorizing individuals without their own consent<sup>21</sup>.

However, more recently, authors began considering stereotypes as a basic cognitive process, which is neither desirable nor undesirable in itself. In short,

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<sup>18</sup> Donald M. Taylor, Fathali M. Moghaddam, *Theories of Intergroup Relations – International Social Psychological Perspectives* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 1994).

<sup>19</sup> Taylor, Moghaddam, *Theories of Intergroup Relations*.

<sup>20</sup> R. A. Baron, D. Byrne, *Social Psychology: Understanding Human Interaction* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1977).

<sup>21</sup> Taylor, Moghaddam, *Theories of Intergroup Relations*.

stereotypes may be defined as a scheme conditioning collective perceptions of a certain group<sup>22</sup>. Stereotypes form simultaneously with and are part of the group formation and achieve consensus among the originating group in conflict situations<sup>23</sup>. Stereotypes are potentially dangerous accelerators of a conflict because of the simplifications and generalizations they entail, as well as because of their biased distortions of reality.

How do stereotypes influence ethnic conflict diffusion? Obviously, stereotyping by an external actor may influence its support for the party it perceives in a positive way and against the party that is subject to negative stereotyping. This may be an interesting angle to analyze in order to reveal the psychological motivations of an external actor's implication in its neighbor ethnic conflict.

However, by themselves stereotypes may not explain aggressive behavior. For social psychology, the history of the group relations also plays an important role. This is especially meaningful when conflicts are involved, because strategies of changing group behavior that are necessary in order to transform a confrontational attitude into a cooperative one, may fail if no alternative pattern of behavior exists. In short, groups that built their separate identity in an antagonistic manner to other groups, tend to perpetuate this behavior in time.

One indicator of this social phenomenon is how individuals categorize current events, by giving priority to certain similarities to past events and by deciding to ignore essential differences<sup>24</sup>. This explains why during the Bosnian and Kosovo conflict, certain Serbs tended to perceive Muslims as long-time enemies going back to the Ottoman conquest and the Serbian fight for independence.

Also repression or genocide in the past tend to make groups more sensitive to threats to group survival or repetition of past events. Even in a situation when information is ambiguous, precedence will be given to elements that suggest an eventual reiteration of past traumatic events that are engraved in the collective psychology of the

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<sup>22</sup> D. L. Hamilton, *Cognitive Processes in Stereotyping and Intergroup Behaviour* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1981).

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, Moghaddam, *Theories of Intergroup Relations*.

<sup>24</sup> Taylor, Moghaddam, *Theories of Intergroup Relations*.

group. “Never again” is the slogan of groups that suffered threats of annihilation in their past. Their historical experience makes them particularly vigilant but sometimes also extremely biased when interpreting attitudes or behavior of traditional enemies<sup>25</sup>.

In what manner these social processes affect ethnic conflict diffusion? The main assumption is that when groups with traumatic past experiences feel threatened once again, they tend to gather all the support they can get in their defense, inviting thus additional actors to act on their behalf. Another situation may arise when a particular ethnic group feels that a keen group risks renewed persecution and it feels constrained to act in order to prevent a repetition of past atrocities. Based on previously discussed arguments, a fifth hypothesis, designed specifically for an ethnic conflict diffusion process, will be tested:

*Hypothesis 5: Traumatic past events that threatened group annihilation by a rival group enhance the diffusion potential of the conflict.*

In the next section of this paper I proceed to the testing of all of the research hypotheses developed above. In each of the case-study, I start by an in depth analysis of the impact of third party interventions, as detailed by the hypotheses presented above, , and I proceed subsequently to evaluate the influence of social-psychological factors and their relationship to the ethnic conflict diffusion potential.

### ***Case Study One – Nagorno-Karabakh***

Although many authors underscore the historical roots of the Armenian-Azerbaijani conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, my analysis will focus mainly on the recent conflict that erupted in 1988 and that continues still today. However, references to past events will be used in order to better comprehend certain aspects of the conflict.

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<sup>25</sup> This theory is similar to the theory of “symbolic politics”. Stuart Kaufman, *Modern Hatreds – The Symbolic Politics of Ethnic War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press 2001).

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Briefly, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict concerns long-standing grievances of the Armenian population inhabiting this autonomous region inside Azerbaijan. Historically both ethnic groups, Armenians and Azerbaijanis, claim this region. The causes of this conflict are multiple, including alleged discrimination, tentative of assimilation and ethnic domination suffered by the Armenian minority at the hands of the Azerbaijani majority dating back to 1920 when Nagorno-Karabakh became an Azerbaijani province under the Soviet rule. However, material and cultural grievances were developing on the background of a central issue to the conflict, the constant sense of historic injustice that the Karabakh Armenians as well as the Armenians in the Armenia proper harbor about the Azerbaijani rule over this territory. The recurring Armenian agenda to redeem and integrate Karabakh was an important source of tensions and antagonism between the two Soviet republics and radicalized policies of repression and discrimination against the Armenians inside Azerbaijan, as well as against Azerbaijanis inside Armenia. Once the two republics gained independence, the Karabakh issue became the object of an interstate dispute.

The conflict began in 1988, on the background of the glasnost and perestroika policy promoted by the Soviet regime and on the background of deteriorating living conditions in the region, when activists both in Karabakh and Armenia presented the Soviet authorities with a petition signed by 80 000 people demanding the transfer of the former to the latter<sup>26</sup>. The petition and its eventual rejection by Moscow inflamed nationalist passions on both sides which, in combination with other factors that will be analyzed below transformed the conflict in one of the most violent and deadly confrontations in the ex-Soviet republics which resulted in mutual massacres and deportations, as well as in an interstate open war.

- The Contextual Variable: Third Party Intervention

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<sup>26</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatred*, p. 60.

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As anticipated by the analytical framework developed in the first section of this paper, the first necessary step is to identify the third parties involved in the conflict. Third party interventions will be analyzed chronologically.

The first tentative of conflict management took place in early 1988 when the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was still in an incipient stage and Azerbaijan as well as Armenia were still under Soviet rule. Naturally, Moscow was the main intervener. As mentioned earlier, relationships between Azerbaijan and the Soviet government were sufficiently independent for Moscow to be considered a third party. For example, the establishment of the Volsky Commission which temporarily placed the administration of Nagorno-Karabakh under direct rule from Moscow was perceived in Azerbaijan as a loss of sovereignty and an infringement on its republican rights<sup>27</sup>.

Theoretically, the central Soviet government in Moscow could have assumed the role of managing and mediating the conflict. However, its third party status has been tainted by several of its actions that violated the norm of “non-discriminatory practices aimed at solving the conflict”.

Most notoriously, in early 1990, Gorbachev chose to ally himself with the regime in Baku. During “Operation Ring” in 1991 the Soviet troops stationed in Azerbaijan assisted local Azerbaijani forces to ethnically cleanse Armenian villages. The reasons behind Moscow’s actions had nothing to do with solving the conflict. Apparently, Gorbachev’s aim was to force the neighboring republic of Armenia (which took a deep interest in the fate of its persecuted kin group in Azerbaijan) to sign the Union Treaty, to which Azerbaijan had already adhered and which represented a last tentative to maintain the Soviet Union<sup>28</sup>.

Another reason why Moscow was not perceived as an impartial arbiter of the conflict by either of the parties was the fact that nationalist movements both in Armenia (the Karabakh Committee which was later renamed the Armenian National Movement or ANM) and Azerbaijan (Azerbaijani Popular Front or APF) were also profoundly anti-

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<sup>27</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatred*, p. 75.

<sup>28</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatred*, p. 75.

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communist and favored independence. Consequently, when Moscow decided to crack down on nationalist leaders in both republics, its actions were perceived as protecting its own interest.

All eleven leaders of the Karabakh Committee were arrested by the Soviet authorities in December 1988 on charges “of fomenting public disorder” and incarcerated without trial until May 31<sup>st</sup> 1989<sup>29</sup>. In January 1990 in response to the Armenian Supreme Soviet proclaiming the union of the Armenian republic and Nagorno-Karabakh as well as to its decision to provide a budget for this region, anti-Armenian riots spread to Baku which resulted in the death of at least 74 people most of them Armenians<sup>30</sup>. Soviet troops on the ground did little to abate the violence but when the riots lost their intensity, they seized the opportunity to crush the Azerbaijani Popular Front, which the Soviet Minister of Defence openly admitted was the chief goal of the operation<sup>31</sup>.

The beginning of the URSS dissolution starting August 1991 opened the way to other third party interventions. Already in September 1991, President Yeltsin of Russia and President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan tried to mediate the conflict; however it is likely that personal ambitions more than solving the conflict motivated their actions. When after three months, President Gorbachev resigned, they abandoned altogether any interest for the fate of Karabakh<sup>32</sup>. Other short lived interventions by Iran (from February to May 1992) and again by President Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan (in August 1992) did nothing to influence the pace of the conflict.

Iranian involvement was confined to stopping the hostilities in the short term and was mainly fuelled by Iranian desire to be recognized as a regional power and thus diminish Turkey’s role in the region<sup>33</sup>.

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<sup>29</sup> Michael P. Croissant, *The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict – Causes and Implications* (Westport, Connecticut and London: Praeger, 1998), p. 32.

<sup>30</sup> Croissant, *The Armenia-Azerbaijan Conflict*, p. 37.

<sup>31</sup> Erik Melander, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Revisited – Was the War Inevitable?” *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 3, no.2, 2001, pp. 48-75.

<sup>32</sup> Moorad Mooradian, Daniel Druckman, “Hurting Stalemate or Mediation? The Conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, 1990-95”, *Journal of Peace Research*, vol. 36, no.6, 1999, pp. 709-727.

<sup>33</sup> Mooradian, Druckman, “Hurting Stalemate or Mediation?”

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Nazarbayev's intervention was also perceived as having self-centered motives because he intransigently defended the sanctity of borders above self-determination because of his own concerns over the separatist intentions of Kazakhstan's Russian minority. In addition, his attitude was naturally perceived as biased by Armenians and undermined his credibility with at least one party to the conflict.

In any event, at this time (spring 1992) Armenia started to openly support the military operations of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians against the Azerbaijani forces so a diffusion process was already in place.

Consequently, in the light of our first research hypothesis which predicts that international/regional organization and states intervention combined will perform better in preventing ethnic conflict diffusion than intervention by international/regional organizations or states alone, the fact that no regional or international organization added their efforts in order to prevent ethnic conflict diffusion in the case of Nagorno-Karabakh may be an important explanatory aspect. This case-study shows that state intervention alone even when it involves a great power with significant leverage on the two parties may not be sufficient to prevent ethnic conflict diffusion because of suspicions by one or both parties that intervention is biased and selfish. It is important to mention however that the conditions prior to the diffusion process in the Karabakh conflict were not favorable to an intervention by another third-party beside the central government in Moscow. In the early stages of the end of the Cold War, the conflict was still considered an exclusive Soviet internal affair.

The second important aspect to be analyzed is the timing of the intervention. The second hypothesis assumes that intervention in the early stages of an ethnic conflict exhibiting a high potential of diffusion has better chances of stopping diffusion than intervention when a conflict enters a phase of "mutually hurting stalemate".

The incipient stages of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict offered some possibilities of intervention that could have prevented its diffusion. Unfortunately, these opportunities were hampered by the lack of an impartial, conflict-resolution-oriented third party.



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In early 1988, when the petition for the transfer of Nagorno-Karabakh to Armenia was rejected by the Communist Party officials in Moscow, the popular reaction was of peaceful protests. When responding to popular pressure, the Supreme Soviet of Nagorno-Karabakh passed a resolution calling for the transfer of the region to Armenia, the central Soviet authorities reacted rapidly rejecting the demand. In the beginning, Armenia responded with caution and large demonstrations in support of Karabakh could still be controlled by the movement's leaders<sup>34</sup>. However following incoherent and uncoordinated actions on behalf of the central Soviet authorities in this critical period preceding the violent escalation of the conflict fundamentally hampered subsequent mediation efforts. Once serious ethnic violence started in Sumgait, on February 27 1988, it easily escalated on both sides with killings and forced deportations of Armenians from Azerbaijani dominated areas and Azerbaijanis from regions with an Armenian majority. The gravity of the situation was heightened by the generalization of the Azerbaijani expulsions from the Armenia proper as well.

In the early stages of the conflict, Moscow intervention as a third party should have focused on negotiating the conflict instead of adopting a paternalist, authoritarian attitude towards the belligerents. Sending Soviet troops to the province sent mixed signals. Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians initially viewed them more as protectors than a deterrent against separatism while authorities in Baku interpreted this move as signaling Moscow decision not to change borders<sup>35</sup>. Consequently, the conflict continued with ethnic cleansings on both sides which ended up with the complete ethnic homogenization of regions previously inhabited by Armenians and Azerbaijanis, as well as important groups of refugees belonging to each ethnic group, which subsequently constituted the nucleus of the radical faction in their respective nationalist movements.

Consequently, Moscow not only did nothing to prevent ethnic-cleansing which in turn radicalized both parties and escalated the conflict, but except for an aborted decision to place Nagorno-Karabakh under its direct rule, mostly used its influence at the level of

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<sup>34</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatred*.

<sup>35</sup> Melander, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Revisited".

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the communist republican leadership who proved unable or unwilling to control ethnic violence. In addition, this favored the emergence of nationalist movements and of small guerilla groups outside the institutional framework of the republics. These unofficial forms of mobilization drew support from an ever larger radicalized population which began to oppose communist leadership in general, and Moscow's implication in particular.

In conclusion, no significant effort of preventive intervention on behalf of the only third party able to manage the conflict took place at the early stages of the conflict. The next step in the escalation of ethnic violence in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was the result of "Operation Ring", a campaign led together by the Soviet Army and the Azerbaijani special police forces in the spring of 1991 and which amounted to a systematic ethnic cleansing of the Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians. Thus, the central Soviet authorities abandoned all pretense of impartiality and openly sided with the Azerbaijani government. The fact that Moscow chose to solve the Karabakh issue by force was interpreted by some authors as a third party effort to induce a mutually hurting stalemate that would force parties to the negotiation table, especially because force was also previously used against the nationalist opposition that threatened communist rule in Azerbaijan<sup>36</sup>.

In the summer of 1991, given their inability to stop the aggression against civilian populations, Karabakh Armenian leaders proposed that all parties reconsider previous constitutional changes. The proposition was favorably received by both Baku and Yerevan and a first meeting took place between Nagorno-Karabakh representatives and the Azerbaijani President Mutalibov<sup>37</sup>. However neither side pursued the talks and one of the Armenian participants was assassinated soon after<sup>38</sup>. It was unclear who was behind this assassination, although there were wide-spread opinions that radical elements on the Armenian side were responsible. Extremist Azerbaijani elements could have as well

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<sup>36</sup> Melander, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Revisited".

<sup>37</sup> Melander, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Revisited".

<sup>38</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatred*.

played a role in this tragic episode<sup>39</sup>. Either way, this event together with the unstable situation following the abortive coup in Moscow in August 1991 put an end to any negotiation attempt.

To interpret the attempt to pursue negotiations as the result of a mutually hurting stalemate that, if circumstances were more favorable, could have led to a pacific resolution of the conflict or at least could have prevented the diffusion of the conflict, is still highly contentious. Kaufman<sup>40</sup> considers that the conflict was unmanageable after 1988 and that for emotional and symbolic reasons, the Armenians could not have accepted a renewed Azerbaijani domination. Security concerns drove mainly the logic behind rejecting the deal on the Azerbaijani side.

While I tend to agree to this latter interpretation of the 1991 events, I think that the main factor that hindered the prevention of a diffusion process was the escalation of the conflict to a stage where violence became the main means of managing the conflict which in turn led to the predominance of radical elements on both sides of the belligerents. This situation was actually aggravated by Moscow's violent and biased intervention which fundamentally eroded confidence at least on the Armenian side.

At this stage of the conflict, it is problematic to say that Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, despite their military setback, would have agreed to negotiations under Soviet supervision. Maybe they could have accepted a temporary compromise as means to reduce their material and human costs in the short-term, but it is doubtful that it could have solved the conflict on the long-term, or prevent its diffusion. Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians clearly preferred a more extensive intervention of the Armenian republic.

Hence, the second hypothesis seems to be confirmed in the case of the Karabakh conflict: intervention at later stages of the conflict is less efficient in preventing diffusion.

As for the consent of leaders of the belligerent groups concerning a third party intervention, it is clear that both parties only reluctantly accepted involvement. As

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<sup>39</sup> Melander, "The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Revisited", p. 71.

<sup>40</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatred*, p. 78.

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mentioned above, third parties involved in the Karabakh conflict before its diffusion were perceived as lacking credibility, promoting discriminatory practices towards one of the adversaries and pursuing selfish interests.

In addition, Moscow tried to control the conflict by putting pressure on the communist leadership both in Baku and Stepanakert without taking into consideration the fact that the true leaders in the conflict were the nationalists that emerged from the popular spontaneous protests. Those leaders were treated by Moscow as agitators and imprisoned.

Even the communist leadership often capitulated to popular pressures and decided to ignore Moscow directions. Gorbachev's attempts to change the course of the conflict by changing Communist Party First Secretaries in Armenia (Demirchyan) and Azerbaijan (Baghirov) with new leaders, Suren Harutiunyan in Armenia and Abdul-Rakhman Vezirov in Azerbaijan were soon curtailed. The new leadership was forced to respond to the pressures of nationalists. In reaction to Moscow's arbitrary policies, the nationalist movements took an open anti-Soviet turn<sup>41</sup>. Consequently, the third hypothesis concerning the consent and cooperation of the political leaders in an ethnic conflict as means of enhancing the ability of a third-party to stop diffusion is also confirmed.

Finally, were all the three elements: actions, statements and support for retaliation present in third party strategies of intervention in order to avoid the diffusion of the conflict?

Moscow's management strategy was simply incoherent. Announcement of an economic aid package for the disadvantaged Karabakh region was fuelled through Baku authorities who were naturally biased against Armenians<sup>42</sup>. Following the first important escalation of the ethnic violence in Sumgait, Moscow established the Volsky Commission which was destined to put Karabakh in neutral hands, under direct rule from Moscow, only to return it a year later to Azerbaijani jurisdiction. Soviet troops in Baku

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<sup>41</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatred*, p. 65.

<sup>42</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatred*.

did nothing to protect Armenians against Azerbaijani violence in January 1990 but turned against Azerbaijani nationalists only when killings and expulsions ended. However, during “Operation Ring”, the Soviet army openly supported Azerbaijani ethnic-cleansing of Armenian villages. These are only but a few examples of the incoherent and contradictory strategy that Moscow adopted in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. Its actions didn’t confirm its statements and reasons for retaliation were at least imprecise and ambiguous. In conclusion, Moscow’s intervention was a failure by the standards enounced by the forth hypothesis and unsurprisingly could not prevent the diffusion of the conflict.

In the following section, an alternative explanation from a social psychology point of view is applied to the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict in order to asses its diffusion potential.

- The Social Psychology Explanation

The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict evolved under the shadow of collective fears rooted in past experiences in the case of both of the belligerent groups. The Armenian genocide of 1915 at the hands of “Turks” constitutes a particularly powerful reference in the Armenian national conscience. Hence two main interpretative schemes condition Armenian perceptions of their environment and their relationships with other groups: (1) the Armenian people suffered in the past almost complete annihilation and massive extermination<sup>43</sup> which must be avoided at any cost in the future and (2) “Turks” were the main victimizers of the Armenian nation, hence any suspicious action on their part must be met with decisive actions.

This interpretative scheme is so powerful that it actually influences the behavior of other groups. For example, although Turkey was a steady ally of Azerbaijan in the conflict with Armenia, it made a distinct effort not to appear too supportive of the former, because the powerful Armenian diaspora in the West would take any opportunity to

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<sup>43</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatred*, p. 53

picture Turkey as planning new atrocities against Armenians. These circumstances made it difficult for the Turkish government to be “too anti-Armenian” even in the context of Turkish massive popular opposition against the Armenian occupation of a part of Azerbaijan and support for a more active involvement in the conflict on behalf of the latter. Prime Minister Demirel actually stated that a Turkish intervention on Azerbaijan’s side would only result in putting the whole world on the Armenian side<sup>44</sup>.

These aspects resurfaced during the Karabakh conflict and proved extremely powerful in mobilizing popular support in Armenia. The “genocide” theme was recurrent in the political discourse at mass rallies in Armenia: destruction of historical monuments in Karabakh was qualified of “cultural genocide”, Armenians’ demographic decline in comparison with Azerbaijanis was called “white genocide”, while the pollution problem was termed “ecological genocide”. It is understandable then why Armenians from Azerbaijan called the Baku policies of discrimination and repression “genocide against the Armenian population between 1920 and 1987”<sup>45</sup>.

On the other hand, the Azerbaijani identity formed relatively recently (around the 1930s) in comparison to that of the Armenians who trace their roots to the 4<sup>th</sup> century when they adopted Christianity. Before developing a more precise definition of their identity, Azerbaijanis called themselves Caucasian Turks, Muslims or Tatars and were more interested in Pan-Islamic, Pan-Turkic ideas rather than nationalist ideologies<sup>46</sup>.

Two main conclusions may be drawn from these observations: (1) Azerbaijani felt particularly vulnerable given their recent identity, which developed simultaneously with and was largely influenced by the establishment of their state and perceived any attempt to change their frontiers as a threat to their survival as a group; (2) Persistent claims that Armenians issued over Karabakh starting as early as 1920 engraved in the construction of the Azerbaijani ethnic identity as a persistent threat to their state integrity and therefore to their survival as a group.

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<sup>44</sup> Svante E. Cornell, “Turkey and the Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh: A Delicate Balance”, *Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 34, no.1, 1998, pp.51-72.

<sup>45</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatred*, p. 55.

<sup>46</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatred*, p. 56-57.

On the other hand, because until relatively recently, Azerbaijanis were not strictly differentiated from other Turkic groups, it was more easy for Armenians to assimilate them to their traditional enemies, the “Turks”. Negative stereotypes by Azerbaijanis who collectively represented Armenians as troublemakers and resented them for their “advanced” status<sup>47</sup> were used as justifications for ethnic violence: “The Armenians finally got what they deserved” and “Your people did worse things” were common opinions among the Azerbaijanis<sup>48</sup>. This kind of attitudes that refugees from Nagorno-Karabakh shared with Armenians in the Armenia proper probably inflated even more the sense that the basic survival of the group was threatened.

Consequently, for the Armenians, once the Karabakh conflict begun and especially once ethnic violence started to spread, any new killing of ethnic-kin by the “Turks” was a confirmation of their worst fears that a repetition of past events that threatened group annihilation was taking place. The Nagorno-Karabakh Armenians actively sought the protection of the Republic of Armenia where large popular support in their favor forced even communist elites, loyal to Moscow, to back Armenians in Nagorno Karabakh, first with declarations reaffirming the rightful union of their territories and subsequently by informal and formal assistance which in the end resulted in open warfare between the two countries, Armenia and Azerbaijan as a result of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In conclusion, the fifth and last hypothesis is also confirmed in this case study. Traumatic past events that threatened group annihilation by a rival group did enhance the diffusion potential of the conflict, by attracting the participation of a neighboring country in defense of a kindred ethnic group.

While most of my theoretical assumptions seem to be confirmed by the diffusion of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, the second case study is meant to challenge some of those findings and to help us understand better which factors are more likely to explain ethnic conflict diffusion for a larger number of cases.

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<sup>47</sup> Melander, “The Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict Revisited”, p. 55.

<sup>48</sup> Kaufman, *Modern Hatred*, p. 64.

***Case Study Two - Macedonia***

Macedonia is an extremely complicated case-study. After its independence in 1991, two ethnic conflicts threatened to diffuse in neighboring states: the first one involving Serbs was mostly fueled by Belgrade's nationalist policies and the other one involved the important Albanian community in Macedonia. Because ethnic conflict diffusion is highly dependent on the regional and international context, Macedonia's geo-strategic position was considered a liability. Thus the ethnic conflicts in Macedonia were commonly considered potential detonators of a wide-spread regional conflagration involving all of its neighbors but also Turkey and Russia<sup>49</sup>. These opinions were in part justified by geopolitics and historical precedents. Several states in the region have nourished in the past plans to add portions of the Macedonian territory to their own: Greater Serbia, Greater Bulgaria, Greater Albania and Greater Greece were ideas still present at the time of the Macedonian independence, only marginally in certain cases, but still dangerous enough to provoke fears of a regional conflict. And aside from territorial issues, a series of other stakes drew the interest of neighboring states. Ethnic conflicts in Macedonia could have offered the pretext for external intervention. In addition, in the 1990s, the proximity of ethnic war in Croatia, Bosnia and later in Kosovo offered a lot of opportunities for ethnic conflict contagion.

As many ex-communist states, Macedonia faced problems of democratization, economic deprivation and social unrest and was particularly vulnerable to foreign intervention because of its lack of military defense (the Yugoslav army made sure to retrieve most of its military materiel when it left). Serbia's intentions were for long kept voluntarily unclear with regard to the new state. Mixed signals were sent, many of them

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<sup>49</sup> John Shea, *Macedonia and Greece: The Struggle to Define a New Balkan Nation*, (Jefferson, North Carolina and London: McFarland & Company, 1997).



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destined to openly threaten the Macedonian sovereignty, such as the “secret” plan to divide its territory between Serbia and Greece<sup>50</sup>.

A potential Serb involvement in Macedonia was justified by the alleged presence of 300 000 Serbs in territories adjoining Serbia, though official statistics confirmed roughly only ten percent of this figure. Until 1996, Serbia refused to recognize the new independent republic<sup>51</sup>. Belgrade nationalist policies encouraged ethnic Serbs in Macedonia to radicalize their demands toward the Skopje government and they even declared their own Serbian republic at one point<sup>52</sup>. These developments were suspiciously similar to scenarios that led to war in Croatia and Bosnia.

On the other hand, Macedonia had to face an unexpected enemy. Greece felt so threatened by the use of the country name “Macedonia” by the small ex-Yugoslav republic, as well as by the use of several symbols that Greece considered its own, on the Macedonian flag and coins, that not only it blocked repeatedly Macedonia’s international recognition but actually put in place an embargo against Macedonia, an action that seriously crippled the latter’s economy. Economic hardship opened the door to ethnic tensions between groups that had to compete for less and less available resources in a context where hostile neighboring states openly encouraged rebellion against the government.

Unrest among the Albanian community in Macedonia which forms more than 20% of the country’s total population was also beginning to emerge. Actually, in the 1980s the grievances of ethnic Albanians in Macedonia paled in comparison to those of the Kosovo Albanians where protests in 1981 and 1989 led to martial law being imposed in the province. In Yugoslavia, Albanians have long sought to be recognized as a constituent nation like the other main ethnic groups. Their request was apparently denied because their homeland was outside Yugoslavia, in Albania. Albanians also requested the

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<sup>50</sup> Shea, *Macedonia and Greece*.

<sup>51</sup> Alice Ackermann, *Making Peace Prevail: Preventing Violent Conflict in Macedonia* (Syracuse, N.Y.: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

<sup>52</sup> Alice Ackermann, “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia – A Relatively Successful Case of Conflict Prevention in Europe”, *Security Dialogue*, vol.27, no.4, 1996, p. 415.

unification of the Albanian-inhabited territories in a new republic within Yugoslavia but Macedonia strongly opposed such a move<sup>53</sup>.

The conflict was also fueled by Macedonian fears, which often resulted in outright discrimination and violation of the Macedonian Albanians' rights. In 1988, because of fears that the Albanian higher birth rate could disturb the ethnic balance, families with more than two children could not benefit from the state sponsored health insurance for their additional children. In 1989, the Macedonian constitution was amended in order to designate the Yugoslav republic as the "state of the Macedonian people" by replacing the old definition where it was the "state of the Macedonian people and of the Albanian and Turk minorities"<sup>54</sup>. Finally, in 1990 a strong Macedonian nationalist, pro-independence and more or less openly anti-Albanian party emerged, under the resurrected name of a 19<sup>th</sup> century nationalist/terrorist organization, the VMRO.

In conclusion, in early 1990s in Macedonia conditions seemed ripe for the escalation of ethnic strife and a potential diffusion by the involvement of neighboring countries.

- The Contextual Variable: Third Party Intervention

Macedonia was fortunate enough to benefit from third party interventions at the early stages of its ethnic conflicts, one obvious reason being the lessons learnt in Bosnia and Croatia. First third party on the ground was the Working Group on Ethnic and National Minorities which was an ad-hoc organism created within the framework of the International Conference on Former Yugoslavia. It became involved in negotiating the Macedonian Albanians' demands for territorial autonomy with the Skopje government and it actually managed to obtain compromises on both sides, as Albanians gave up their pursuit of autonomy and Macedonian authorities agreed to increase the number of Albanian-language schools and television broadcasting in Albanian and other minority languages. It also held negotiations with leaders of the Serb community in Macedonia

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<sup>53</sup> John Phillips, *Macedonia: Warlords and Rebels in the Balkans* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004).

<sup>54</sup> Phillips, *Macedonia: Warlords and Rebels*.

and convinced them to give up the project of an independent republic in exchange for a minority status recognized in the constitution<sup>55</sup>.

The Working Group was perceived as an impartial/neutral organization and thus was able to gain the confidence of the belligerent parties. However its credibility would have probably been diminished without the preventive engagement of both the UN and the OSCE.

The OSCE Spillover mission to Skopje was the first international organization to arrive in Macedonia with an explicit mandate for preventing the escalation and the diffusion of ethnic tensions. Its task consisted in monitoring external and internal threats and in mediating potential explosive situations. But once again, its mission would have probably suffered if not supported by the military presence of the UN troops.

United Nations were for the first time deploying troops in order to prevent ethnic conflict diffusion. Once a Security Council Resolution was passed on 11 November 1992, the first UNPROFOR unit already arrived in Macedonia on 6 January 1993. And most importantly, the United States also began participating in the deployment mission in July 1993<sup>56</sup>. This was a powerful signal to neighboring states that ethnic conflict resolution in Macedonia was managed by the third parties present in the country and no other external involvement, especially a violent one, was welcomed. This message was particularly addressed to nationalists in Belgrade but also to more adventurous politicians in Albania and Greece. The first hypothesis is therefore confirmed: international/regional organizations and states intervention combined has better chances at inhibiting ethnic conflict diffusion than intervention by international/regional organizations or states alone.

A second aspect to be assessed is the timing of the intervention. As mentioned above, third parties arrived in Macedonia early enough to prevent the spiral of ethnic tensions. Radicalization signs, both on the side of Macedonian Serbs and Albanians were

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<sup>55</sup> Ackermann, "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia", p. 415.

<sup>56</sup> Ackermann, "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia".

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emerging, especially when both groups held referendums and declared independent republics on Macedonian territory.

Although at the time there was no wide-spread ethnic violence in Macedonia, from the moment when in November 1992, the Macedonian President Gligorov presented the UN Secretary-General a formal request of a UN preventive mission it took only two months for the first troops to arrive. They were deployed along Macedonia's borders with Serbia and Albania in an explicit move to deter any foreign involvement.

The fact that interethnic violence was prevented also served as inhibitor because potential external actors lacked tangible proofs of government repression of their ethnic kin and the stability of the country was not at risk, so fears of contagion were unfounded. Thus there were fewer opportunities for mass mobilization in adjoining countries.

Following China's veto at the Security Council, UNPREDEP mission was terminated on March 1<sup>st</sup>, 1999. In 2001 serious ethnic violence broke up between Macedonian Albanians and the Macedonian government. This situation was the consequence of Albanians perceiving that the last ten years did not fundamentally improve their status in Macedonia and that they were still not treated as equals with the Macedonian Slavs<sup>57</sup>. Obviously the escalation of violence was also fuelled by the contagion of the conflict in Kosovo and by the new international climate that the Albanian leaders in Macedonia perceived as favorable to their cause. This seriously enhanced the sense of threat on behalf of the Macedonians which became even suspicious of NATO involvement because it failed to stop the spread of the armed guerrilla actions from Kosovo to Macedonia<sup>58</sup>.

Fears of escalation grew high when the Macedonian army started a serious offensive against the Albanian rebels around Tetovo at the end of March 2001. Once again high fears of ethnic conflict diffusion provoked an early preventive intervention. This was well resumed by the words of Lord Ashdown: « the cost of doing it will be far

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<sup>57</sup> Phillips, *Macedonia: Warlords and Rebels*, p. 88.

<sup>58</sup> Phillips, *Macedonia: Warlords and Rebels*

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less that the cost of civil war, with a potential to widen into a regional conflict involving two NATO nations, Greece and Turkey, on opposite sides »<sup>59</sup>.

Two days after the beginning of the Macedonian offensive, Lord Robertson, Secretary-General of NATO and Javier Solana, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs arrived in Skopje<sup>60</sup>. Once again the good timing of third party intervention, at the early stages of the conflict stopped not only its escalation but also its potential spill-over to Kosovo, Serbia, Albania and possibly Greece and Turkey.

A peace agreement brokered by the EU, which was the consequence of a compromise between the parties on the official use of the Albanian language in specific situations as well as a more representative presence of Macedonian Albanians in police forces, was accepted by both parties at Ohrid, on August 8 2001. The agreement also opened the way for the deployment of NATO troops which during “Operation Harvest” disarmed most of the Macedonian Albanian guerrillas involved in the conflict.

While the second hypothesis which assumes that intervention in the early stages of an ethnic conflict exhibiting a high potential of diffusion has better chances of stopping diffusion than intervention when a conflict enters a phase of “mutually hurting stalemate”, is confirmed in the case of the Macedonia’s Serb and Albanian conflicts in the early 1990s, its validity is less clear for the 2001 Albanian conflict. In 2001, serious ethnic clashes occurred before third parties intervened and it may be argued that the agreement was accepted when Macedonian Albanian rebels have taken the town of Aracinovo from where they could have threatened vital spots in Skopje<sup>61</sup>. However, in my opinion this kind of situation may be hardly qualified of “mutually hurting stalemate” because both parties had still resources to continue the fight and to seek a resolution by the use of force. Timely intervention by EU and NATO put an end to a violent strife that had not at the time, exhausted its potential for escalation or diffusion.

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<sup>59</sup> Cited in Phillips, *Macedonia: Warlords and Rebels*, p. 104.

<sup>60</sup> Phillips, *Macedonia: Warlords and Rebels*

<sup>61</sup> Phillips, *Macedonia: Warlords and Rebels*.

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An extremely important aspect that made the Macedonian ethnic conflicts more manageable than others was the willingness of the belligerent parties to accept third party intervention. The Macedonian President Kiro Gligorov requested himself the UN presence in his country in order to counteract more biased interventions by neighboring countries. He adopted this solution although he knew that concessions would have to be made to Macedonian Albanians and despite a heightened state of popular opposition to such concessions and the nationalist ambiance that prevailed in the Balkans at the time.

On the other hand, moderate Macedonian Albanian leaders were willing to pursue political dialogue and were participating in government after the 1994 elections<sup>62</sup>. Although Macedonian Albanians often voice their discontent with the discriminatory policies and practices of the Macedonian government, a majority does not endorse violence. And even after the 2001 radicalization of the conflict, when the Ohrid agreement was signed, one of the guerilla leaders voiced his confidence in the capacity of third parties to insure its application by the Macedonian government: « they will not betray us, not now we have NATO, the United States and the European Union »<sup>63</sup>.

In conclusion, as hypothesized above, consent on behalf of ethnic group leaders and their confidence in the capacity of the third party to mediate the conflict diminishes the risk of ethnic conflict diffusion. Parties to the conflict will not seek foreign allies to insure their gains by force and potential external actors will have fewer reasons to get involved if neither of the belligerents welcomes them.

Finally, when analyzing third party intervention in Macedonia we cannot help but notice that all elements necessary for a good deterrence strategy were present. The UN preventive deployment force signaled the will of the international community to take a firm stand against the exploitation of ethnic tension by unfriendly neighboring states. Prompt actions whenever ethnic tensions seemed to get out of control were accompanied by clear statements such as the one by President Clinton in 1994 that the mission in

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<sup>62</sup> Ackermann, "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia".

<sup>63</sup> Ali Ahmeti, cited in Phillips, *Macedonia: Warlords and Rebels*, p. 146.

Macedonia was “part of a continuing commitment toward resolving the extremely difficult situation in former Yugoslavia”<sup>64</sup>.

Firm commitment in favor of protecting the Macedonian territorial integrity was repeatedly shown by UN forces when they had to deal with Serbian soldiers taking position on the Macedonian side of the border in the summer of 1994<sup>65</sup>.

In the wake of the 2001 ethnic violence, the arrival of EU and NATO high representatives in Skopje with the explicit mission to stop the escalation and diffusion of the conflict as well as the sending of NATO troops on the ground once the Ohrid agreement was signed showed again that third parties made explicit efforts to enhance their credibility and capacity of deterrence. The fourth hypothesis is then confirmed in the Macedonian case.

- The Social Psychology Explanation

An alternative explanation for the absence of diffusion in the case of Macedonia’s ethnic conflicts will focus on the role of stereotypes and the role of traumatic past experiences.

Macedonians developed their identity relatively recently in comparison with their neighbors who tried to assimilate them by turns. Their historical and cultural symbols became the object of contention with other groups which claimed them as their own. Greece and Bulgaria in particular have both denied the specificity of the Macedonian ethnicity, Greece because it claims that the terms “Macedonia” and “Macedonian” cannot be applied to a non-Greek nation and Bulgaria because it contends that there is no such thing as a Macedonian nation, they are in fact Bulgarians. Serbia itself qualified Macedonia as an “artificial nation”<sup>66</sup>.

The fact that most of those declarations were part of the political rhetoric at a time when ethnocentrism seemed to be on the everyday agenda of Balkan politicians, does not

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<sup>64</sup> Bill Clinton, cited in Ackermann, *Making Peace Prevail*, p.117.

<sup>65</sup> Ackermann, “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia “.

<sup>66</sup> Ackermann, “The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia “.



eliminate the real threat they posed to the survival of the former Yugoslav republic. They actually had very important consequences. Greece seemed prepared to block indefinitely Macedonia's admission to international organizations while actually holding talks with Belgrade over a possible partition of the country<sup>67</sup>.

Why Greece seemed so threaten by a small, underdeveloped country with no allies is hard to explain without the help of psychological factors. Past traumatic experiences, i.e. Tito's efforts to control part of the neighboring Greek province through the use of a partly Slavic communist guerilla organization during the Greek civil war fueled Greek perceptions that the ex-Yugoslav republic endangered Greece's integrity<sup>68</sup>. However the sense of threat on the Greek side should have been greatly diminished by its uncontested military and economic superiority over Macedonia as well as by its membership and influence in regional and international organizations. The fact that a country with practically no army and that was almost entirely dependent on foreign aid could have planned an irredentist campaign against a NATO and EU member is simply ridiculous. And perhaps one proof that Greek rhetoric in the early 1990s was exaggerated, was the fact that besides several economic embargos against Macedonia (which were nevertheless extremely crippling to the Macedonian economy and internal stability), the Macedonian government never considered Greece a real threat because they knew it was constrained in its actions by membership in the EU and above all in NATO<sup>69</sup>.

Recent nation-building in Macedonia has inevitably antagonized other ethnic groups, because the underlying process of affirming one's identity often provokes others to protect and assert their distinct identity. In the context of the Serbian nationalist policies in the 1990s, Macedonia had to act in order to prevent the rise of nationalist tendencies among its own Serb minority which clearly bore the danger of a Serbian potential involvement. Macedonian Albanians also issued demands for equal ethnic rights

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<sup>67</sup> Takis Michas, *Unholy Alliance – Greece and Milosevic Serbia* (Texas A&M University Press, 2002).

<sup>68</sup> Michas, *Unholy Alliance*, p. 41.

<sup>69</sup> Kiro Gligorov, cited in Michas, *Unholy Alliance*.



with Slav-Macedonians in response to the latter aggressive affirmation of their national identity, caused partially by the hostility of neighboring countries.

Macedonia's past is shadowed in violence and domination by external actors. The "Macedonian Question" was at the center of two Balkan Wars that destabilized the whole region at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And in the recent wars of former-Yugoslavia, traumatic historical events seemed to be a very useful tool in mobilizing one ethnic group against the other. How could Macedonia escape a repetition of its past?

One method political leaders in Macedonia used in order to diminish the escalation and diffusion potential of ethnic conflicts was to avoid rhetoric that glorified one ethnic group's past and demonized the other's. Contrary to practice common to many Balkan politicians that use traumatic historical events, symbols and myths that are deeply engraved on the collective memory of the group, in order to justify controversial decisions, Macedonia tried to detach itself from the image of past violence and instability and focus on its "European" future.

In the case of Macedonia, certain stereotypes helped to play down ethnic violence. For example, Macedonians perceive themselves as a peaceful people and not as "warriors" as in the case of other Balkan nations. In fact, Macedonians and Albanians each pretend to be more peaceful than the others<sup>70</sup>. Also, there are no past historical traumas between Albanians and Macedonians, so there are no historical precedents that could have been exploited in order to heighten the sense of mutual threat. And Macedonians escaped the trap of assimilating their Albanian co-nationals to their historical enemies, the Ottomans (a cognitive scheme widely used against Muslims in the Bosnian and Kosovo conflicts).

These developments inhibited ethnic conflict diffusion because no ethnic group in the neighboring countries felt threatened enough in order to become involved in Macedonia's ethnic conflicts. Even when ethnic tensions escalated between Macedonian Albanians and Macedonians, Albania never went further than formal condemnations of the repression against its ethnic kin. Kosovo Albanians adopted a more active role

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<sup>70</sup> Ackermann, *Making Peace Prevail*.

probably because they had recently suffered threats of group annihilation. However another plausible interpretation would be that the leadership of Kosovo Albanians simply took advantage of the opportunity offered by NATO's intervention in order to increase their support to ethnic kin in Macedonia.

The Macedonian case teaches us that the past does not necessarily condition the present if dangerous cognitive schema promoting aggressive behavior against other ethnic groups are timely detected and acted upon and positive instead of negative stereotyping is promoted. However such attitudes should not be limited to the political elites; it should be the task of a strong intelligentsia and civil society to spread them among the population.

### ***Conclusions - What made a difference?***

The two case studies at the center of this paper were meant to test several theoretical assumptions regarding the structural conditions as well as the impact of third party interventions in relation to ethnic conflict diffusion. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict was chosen because it was an example of a rare but extremely violent case of an ethnic conflict that transformed into a regional interstate conflict. On the other hand, the evolution of the Macedonian ethnic conflicts challenged the conventional academic wisdom as well as the pessimistic predictions of politicians: despite the extremely adverse structural conditions that characterized both of its ethnic conflicts and a violent and unstable past that seemed to predict more violence and instability, Macedonia managed to contain ethnic violence. If escalation could not be avoided, external involvement and spill-over of its ethnic conflicts was kept under control.

The research hypotheses that were tested on those conflicts were meant to cover a wide spectrum of potential factors that could have explained why diffusion occurred in one case and not in the other.

First of all, a general conclusion may be drawn. While it is always extremely useful to detect hot spots of ethnic violence that have a high potential of degenerating in

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wide-spread regional instability (and structural factors such as those analyzed in this paper may offer a preliminary assessment of such conflicts), ethnic conflict diffusion may still be avoided. In short, structural factors surrounding certain ethnic conflicts may predispose them to diffusion but they cannot offer an exhaustive explanation of why diffusion actually happened.

In the case of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, a whole plethora of aggravating conditions were present: mismanagement, lack of credibility and inefficacy of third party intervention, salience of past traumatic events in interpreting the present and stereotypes that accentuated mutual ethnic suspicions and fears.

Macedonia also had the potential of becoming the center of a new a Balkan war fought over ethnic issues. However in this case, third party intervention fulfilled most of the conditions insuring effectiveness: participation of international and regional organizations supported by individual states, in particular the US, intervention at the early stages of the conflict before violence could have provoked extreme radicalization of the parties, consent on behalf of leaders of both belligerent parties and finally firm actions accompanied by statements from high-placed decision makers and a good deterrence strategy.

In addition, in Macedonia, myths of historical past hostility and negative perceptions of other groups were downplayed by the political leaders instead of being used as mobilizing tools. However masses are still sensitive to negative stereotypes such those portraying the higher birth rate of the Macedonian Albanian population as a conspiracy to upset the demographic balance in Macedonia and to acquire dominance over Slav Macedonians.

The subject of religious antagonisms was not extensively approached in this paper because I chose to adopt a wider analytical framework involving elements of social psychology. When religion became an issue in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict it was mainly because of the need of distancing oneself even more from a group that was perceived as the “traditional enemy” and also because it offered an additional reason to identify Azerbaijanis with the “Turks”. Religious differences were mainly a tool

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facilitating the salience of traumatic past experiences when interpreting the present and were not by themselves a cause in the escalation or diffusion of the conflict. In Macedonia, religious antagonisms are even less relevant when studying ethnic conflict diffusion. In fact two of its most hostile neighbors were Serbia and Greece, both countries of Christian Orthodox majorities like Macedonia itself.

Although this paper shows that there is hope for containing even most diffusion-prone ethnic conflicts, it also shows that a combination of appropriate intervention strategies and willingness of political elites to collaborate and complete third party efforts is difficult to attain and may be often the result of fortunate circumstances. The experience of the Yugoslav wars has rendered both international bodies and Macedonians more willing to avoid confrontation and to favor cooperation in solving ethnic issues.

And finally, this paper puts in perspective opinions that doubt the success of third party intervention in Macedonia because it failed to address the long term resolution of its Albanian conflict and could not prevent the 2001 upsurge in ethnic violence and the subsequent change in leadership towards more radical elements on both sides. The case of Nagorno-Karabakh shows that in Macedonia too, it could have been a lot worse.