Author-Critic Forum:

WARLORDS AND COALITION POLITICS IN POST-SOVIET STATES

(by Jesse Driscoll)

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Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States opens with the observation of the puzzling short length of the post-Soviet wars as compared to other civil wars that emerged from decolonization, successfully tackles the existing realist, liberal interventionist, and postmodern imperialist approaches to this question, and develops an alternative explanation of civil war settlement in the post-Soviet space that focuses on the coalition formation and incorporation of militias into the states that were formed following the Soviet collapse. In this argument, postwar consolidation is not a result of strong sovereign authority inherited from the Soviet institutions, international (Western and Russian) intervention, or subsequent disarmament of armed actors, but a bottom-up process whereby warlords *become the state* and access rents associated with sovereignty as part of the new governing coalitions. This argument is convincingly supported with a range of primary and secondary materials, mainly interviews, that Driscoll collected over an extended period of time in the difficult research settings of Georgia and Tajikistan.

The theoretical scope, originality of the argument, ethnographic fieldwork and formal modelling underlying the mixed-methods approach of the book, and its analytical rigour make *Warlords and Coalition Politics* a core reading suitable for undergraduate and graduate courses in international relations, comparative politics, security studies, civil war studies, post-Soviet politics, and research methods. For a scholar of state formation and war in the contemporary international system, Driscoll shifts the focus from foreign actors to highlight the importance of local agency and power dynamics, seeing warlords as "political actors capable of overturning local order" (45) and co-opting international influence in the process, yet recognizing that these actors are fundamentally interchangeable. For a scholar of post-Soviet politics, Driscoll shifts the focus from Russia to offer a highly detailed analysis of multiple local armed actors involved in the post-Soviet transformation in Georgia and Tajikistan. For a graduate student embarking on fieldwork, Driscoll demonstrates the way in which ethnography informed his understanding of civil war settlement and discusses the ethical dilemmas and practical challenges that he faced and that should be carefully considered in human subjects research in authoritarian contexts.

The comments that follow focus on the ethnographic foundation of the book. Driscoll spent nearly twenty-five months in challenging research sites and faced difficult choices during and after fieldwork. He collected life histories, interviews with commanders, and ethnographic

observations. Of 300 interviews, 173 were with former combatants: this data is fundamental to the account of civil war settlement in this book. It provided the grounds for innovation and rich understanding of why actors' decisions "made sense at the time" (16). Explaining the (variation in) behaviour in complex social situations requires such understanding. However, this approach involves trade-offs. The theory that follows draws heavily on the cases under study. Based on the grounded knowledge of the Georgian and Tajik cases, the core assumption of the book, that warlords understand the repercussions of installing a president in their given historical moment, anticipate international aid and assistance, and calculate their actions accordingly, can be seen as a strong assumption in the highly contingent world marked by exogenous shocks and limited information. Would relaxing this assumption change the theoretical expectations of the book?[1]

Empirically, this is related to a potential issue of ex post facto rationalization of former combatants' interview responses. Driscoll's "account emphasizes the ability of domestic actors in a civil war zone to anticipate and frustrate the desires of foreign development professionals to make politics open and transparent" (14). Yet did warlords in fact recognize and intentionally divert these international agendas or is this conclusion drawn retrospectively from respondents' recollections? How do we know that respondents did not simply reproduce dominant narratives of warlord politics that emerged after the events but remembered from first-hand experience or second-hand accounts of others that warlords anticipated international rents and acted with this anticipation in mind? Both options have important implications, but they carry different weight empirically. In other words, did the sequence of events, where anticipation is observed prior to action, support the account offered in the book systematically across the interviews? Similarly, how did recruits know which militia to join or switch to, given unpredictability of membership in the final governing coalitions? Did commanders continue to articulate their promises or were these promises assumed? Why did some *but not other* men join or switch at different stages?

Driscoll is commendably open that he "gradually learned to ask the right questions" and that the quality of data improved as he "mastered enough local detail to ask face-saving follow-up questions and signal that [he] had recognized a half-truth" (19; 21, fn. 38). As questions and follow-ups changed in the course of the fieldwork, are they comparable across the interviews? If not, what does this mean for the analysis in the book? Furthermore, while Driscoll discusses how he addressed the issue of misrepresentation (19, fn. 34-35), were the issues of memory and potential bias addressed in similar ways? For example, could group discussions of past events prevalent in Georgia reshape memories of the events among former combatants? Could former combatants' past or present loyalties shape their responses about their commanders' activities? Finally, while Driscoll notes selection problems resulting from snowball sampling,[2] the effects of this strategy could be discussed further. In particular, a proportion of "respondents were only 'passing through' the capital" (18, fn. 32). Does this imply that key potential respondents could have been missed as they were physically absent from Georgia and Tajikistan?[3]

[1] Elsewhere, I challenge a similar assumption, of the actors' knowledge of risks involved in civil war mobilization, and demonstrate variable perceptions of risk underlying mobilization decisions (Shesterinina 2016). In Driscoll's account, warlords might similarly operate with the variable knowledge of what it might mean to install a president.
[2] Note that even in challenging research contexts, snowball sampling in not the only respondent selection strategy. For example, I used targeted selection methods in addition to snowball sampling during my fieldwork in Abkhazia.
[3] In my work, the repercussions of such exclusion are clear: I cannot comment in-depth on one category of the civil war mobilization continuum—individuals who fled Abkhazia during the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992-1993 and remained in Russia or elsewhere thereafter. What does this exclusion entail here?

Despite these questions, Driscoll masterfully employs the interview material to analyse a range of options available to warlords. The result is sophisticated understanding of the variety of motivations to engage in violence during the post-Soviet transformation. He is honest about his use of narratives to support his arguments, the importance of anonymity during and after his research, including his choice to destroy field notes to ensure his and respondents' security, and difficulties of access and dangers of fieldwork, such as being taken for a spy. In light of ongoing debates on data access and research transparency, the book presents a valuable example of what it can mean to be open about the data we use, the process of data generation, and its analysis. On personal reflection, Driscoll offers the strongest analysis of the Georgian armed actors to date, without which my work on Abkhaz mobilization would be difficult. In this way, the depth of ethnographic engagement in this book illustrates the potential for accumulation of knowledge in the discipline.

References

Shesterinina, Anastasia. 2016. "Collective Threat Framing and Mobilization in Civil War" (with Online Methodological Appendices). *American Political Science Review* 110(3): 411-27.