

## Rethinking asymmetric conflicts: beyond the “clash of civilizations”

It's economy, stupid! (Bill Clinton)  
It's political economy, stupid! (Slavoj Zizek)

This paper is based upon some conceptual and empirical sources devoted to political economy of real conflicts and to the concept of the so called new or asymmetric (degenerated, postmodern, postclassical) wars (putting aside the question how old they really are).

The departure point of the analysis is a classification of such wars and conflicts by Stefan Mair (2003). These are low intensity wars of long duration between states and different kinds of subgovernmental actors. These actors are challenging the economic, institutional, political order and sovereignty of the established states, their monopoly in some functional fields.

Mair distinguishes four forms of such conflicts and their actors: warlordism, organized crime, terrorism and rebels (Figure 1). The concrete cases are categorized on the base of some criteria like economic vs. political objectives, the main target groups of violence, the geographical scope of the use of violence and the attempts to replace the state monopoly (ibid.: 12).

In my analytical framework, the distinguishing between economic incentives of the warlordism/organized crime on the one hand, and the political ones of the terrorism/guerrillas on the other hand is of crucial significance. Within a system-analytical concept, this distinction has a top position in the hierarchy of criteria, and the other distinction are subordinate to it or derived from it.

Though of a great conceptual and didactical value, the scheme of Mair is a pure analytical one. He considers his categories as ideal-typical ones, never present in their pure form. Each concrete case contains some features of the whole spectre of the distinct forms, while the symptoms of any of them could only prevail but by no means exclude the symptoms of the alternative ones.

Figure 1. Classification of the subgovernmental actors of low intensity conflicts (Stefan Mair 2003: 11-12)

<u>Ideal types of actors</u>	<u>Organized criminals</u>	<u>Terrorists</u>	<u>Warlords</u>	<u>Rebels</u>
<i>Distinguishing criteria</i>				
<i>Objectives</i>	economic	political	economic	political
<i>Target groups</i>	other organs of force – official security forces (police, the military), or competing rebel groups and criminal gangs	unarmed civilians	unarmed civilians	other organs of force – official security forces (police, the military), or competing rebel groups and criminal gangs
<i>The geographic scope of the use of violence</i>	acting on a global scale with a limited territorial base (transnational organized crime)	acting on a global scale with a limited territorial base (international terrorism)	limited, aims at the consolidation of control over a certain territory	limited, aims at the consolidation of control over a certain territory
<i>Relation to the state monopoly on the use of force</i>	coexists with the state monopoly or rather requires it	coexists with the state monopoly or rather requires it	trying to replace the state monopoly on the use of force by their own monopoly	trying to replace the state monopoly on the use of force by their own monopoly

Besides, there exists a close logistical and other interrelationship and cooperation between concrete actors that could be specified as the representatives of respec-

tively different forms. They supply each other with weapons, economic infrastructure, ideological legitimacy, access to the international markets and so forth.

Mair suggests some abstract examples of such interrelationship, and this is where his analysis stops, and where ours should start.

**Firstly**, it makes sense to extend the issue of the relations between different kinds of conflicts and actors beyond the analytical framework which has been outlined by Stefan Mair.

The empirical task here is to reveal some stable patterns of such relations. For instance, what are the usual forms of cooperation and symbiotic service exchange between terrorism and organized crime? More complex, between all the mentioned forms of the non governmental military and paramilitary actors, including corrupted state officials and agencies in particular cases? What are the preconditions for the development of this or that form of such cooperation? What are the most promising ways of preventing, troubling or destroying such cooperation?

**Secondly**, the analysis should be unfolded in the temporary dimension. That is to trace the inner dynamics of the development of a concrete conflict case in the course of some years. Low and high intensity wars should be considered not so much as mutually discrete entities or processes, rather as different phases or aspects of the same conflicts. There are some general presuppositions for such an analysis:

1. Some different stages and parallel “streams” within the development of any concrete conflict could be separated. It’s another matter as distinction between several organizations, field commanders, paramilitary groups etc: the distinction is not between but across participants;
2. After all, it is the respectively prevailing role of political vs. economic factors and incentives within different phases and streams that allow drawing the distinction between them. For instance, ethnically, religiously or ideologically shaped political rationales and narratives could have been dominant in escalating (fostering) the conflict, determining its structure and dynamics in an initial stage. Later, they can

turn into (or be replaced by) economic ones, and vice versa. The other traits presented in the figure 1 are going to change as well;

3. There can be observed some relative stable patterns of such dynamics; of variations in conflict features in the course of its development. E. g., guerrillas of yesterday become (could be rather specified as) organized criminals today and as warlords tomorrow.

An empirical analysis of asymmetric conflicts like the Chechen war could deliver a verification of the outlined presuppositions. Such conflicts could be understood as an instance of falling and rebuilding of state sovereignty over a certain territory. A general account of such processes in Europe some centuries ago has been suggested by the historian Charles Tilly (1985).

Working with an empirical case could depart from and go along with some more concrete presuppositions. In doing so, a rather crude distinction between the **initial** ore **escalating** phases of the conflict and the **continuing ones** should be suggested.

One could hardly imagine a regular temporary order or clear cut empirical distinction between the phases outlined above. They can go along with each other or alternate each other. Hence, it would be more accurate to speak about **escalating** or **high intensity** aspects of conflicts **vs. continuing** or **low intensity** aspects of them.

E. g., intensive terrorist attacks are events typical rather for an **initial** phase than for a **continuing** one. Anyway, they could be committed to revive and continue the conflict, if there is a widely shared notion of its attenuation.

After all, it should be distinguished between the actions objecting to win and therefore to end the conflict; and the ones objecting to merely continue it. The high intensity actions of the second kind could be conceptualized as a **post-continuing** phase of a conflict.

The conflict origins and original determinants could be identified as a very radical political change or event: e. g. a collapse of political order, disintegration of a national state body, external invasions in the sense of “classical” war as well as a

state failing or collapse. There are being released a plenty of aggressive energies under such conditions.

The flows of these energies are structured alongside with the political and ideological controversies. The conflict escalates as a collision between two (or more) relatively homogenous ethnic or religious communities. Each of them is cemented by common interests. A conflict between different entities or identities is in the core of the fight. These entities are viewed as mutually idiosyncratic and hostile civilizations, cultures, systems of collective values.

Each of the parties is guided by the considerations that are external to the conflict itself. That means that the goals can be achieved either outside of the conflict area or after the conflict has been settled or won. It could be the restoration of the political order, state sovereignty in a certain region. Or it could be opposite to this – escape from the previously dominant political order and establishing a new, independent one.

The both rivalling parties do their best to win, that means to end the conflict as soon as possible. The conflict is a mean; the different versions of the after-conflict order are the goal to be achieved.

In the **continuing stage**, the whole features mentioned above tend to change radically up to their opposites.

Here, no rapid political change can be observed like destruction, rebuilding or establishing of institutional order, large scale events like the breakdown of empires, regional or international systems.

The conflict is not an explosion any more; rather it is a slack process, which has become normality. The original energies of collision have lost much of their intensity.

Many file-and-rank-fighters are tired and disappointed about the initial objectives; about the cost-and-benefits-relationship of going on to fight. They would prefer to

stop fighting or have already done so. The costs of discipline and control become too high, the level of them become too low.

The religious and ethnic narratives have been ceased to be relevant for the real agenda of the conflict and for the motivation of its actors. Now, they are the mere superficial and contingent demagogic patterns which are deployed to outwardly and inwardly legitimize the aggression.

What remains at the core, are rather mundane economic considerations. These have been described in details by the commentators of war and post-war economies (Collier 2000).

**In the continuing stage**, the previously homogenous communities tend to have been disrupted in many fractions.

The upper fractions on the both sides have rather pseudo-political considerations in their minds. They are not able to suggest any social and economic solutions for themselves and their constituencies. That's why they tend to an aggressive or repressive way of acting as a mean to merely keep the power by imitating seemingly tough efforts of solving the problems.

On the side of the state, this trend has been depicted in criminological literature as a turn to a repressive mode of governing. National state is becoming increasingly punitive, being deprived the ability of economic and social governing under the pressure of the development usually called globalization (Caplow & Simon 1999: 65, 79; Garland 1996, 2000, 2001; Christie 2000).

The middle fraction consists of participants of the conflict that have personally and institutionally grown up under war conditions. The warfare has become their way of life and thinking. They have no skills needed for a successful management of their own affairs under peaceful conditions.

On the side of the state, these are military bureaucracies and industries; those involved into the business of war and reconstruction, whose vested interest are closely connected to continuing the war.

The common interests of the middle fractions of the conflicting parties prevail over their mutual hostilities and idiosyncrasies now, without any necessity to assume a conspiracy between them.

The only fractions that are really interested in stopping the war are the bottom ones, the majorities of the populations on the both sides.

Here is a summary of the previously delivered considerations:

Figure 2. High vs. low intensity conflict phases

	High intensity	Low intensity
Background:	A radical political change	No rapid change
Form of conflict:	An explosion	A slack process which have become normality
Ethnic, religious, cultural controversies:	Conflict of interests <b>alongside</b> with them	Conflict of interests <b>across</b> them
At the core of conflict:	Political and ideological considerations	Pseudopolitical and economic considerations
Goals of the rivals	To win the war	To continue the war
Conflict parties	Relatively homogenous ethnic or religious communities, looking cemented and highly inspired by common interests	Fractioned, tired, disappointed, disillusioned, pragmatic, cynical
The real conflict of interests	Between entities or identities, viewed as mutually idiosyncratic and hostile civilizations, cultures, systems of collective values	Between lower fractions on the both side (interested to end the conflict) and middle-upper ones (interested to go on infinitely continue it)

And some general remarks, as a conclusion:

While superficial visions of the conflict continue to interpret it as a war between different cultural, ethnic, religious communities, the real conflict develops increasingly to the one **across** the cultural, religious and ethnic differences.

The deepest contradiction can be identified as the one between the interests of the low fractions of the both communities on the one side and the middle fractions of them on the other side.

The top fraction, whoever it is, is swinging between the two sides and trying to keep its popularity among them both. In doing so, it gets under pressure of contradictory definitions of means and goals of its activities.

The official rivals are supposed to be willing to win, but they are not. Instead, the most influential actors of them are interested to infinitely continue the low intensity war balancing between partial victories and partial defeats. One expects from them some readiness to negotiations whereas there is no subject of negotiations between them. They just don't want to stop the war; the war is not a mean to achieve a goal any more, it has become the goal itself.

However, these developments remain ignored in the public discourses. That means that the real conflict remains hidden, and the problem definitions become increasingly misleading, due to an excessive public fascination with the concepts like that of civilization's clash and due to mass medial fixing upon sensational events typical for the **initial escalation** stage of conflicts.

Mass media broadcast into the collective conscience distorted pictures and ideas. For these pictures and ideas, a biased vision of the relation between economic and cultural dimensions of the conflicts is very typical:

While the conflict is achieving its **continuing and post-continuing** phase, the mass medial, public and political discourse remains still fixed on the features and qualities of its **initial** phase.

Such understating is not instructive and supportive for the ways of collective acting and thinking that could contribute to settling the conflict by putting a collective pressure on its actors. To be able to put such pressure, the majorities should first reject the pictures and ideas that correspond rather to the shared interests of the immediate actors of the conflicts on the both sides. They should reject the concepts like that of Samuel P. Huntington. That are not cultural **differences** between civili-

zations, what is supplying fuel to the low intensity conflicts, rather very **similar** economic interests of certain fractions in seemingly conflicting civilizations should be identified as the main source of this fuel. That's why we should say to Huntington, not so much with Bill Clinton, who wanted subordinating politics to economy... Rather with Slavoj Zizek, who suggested re-establishing public (political) control over economy...

## Literature

- Ахмедов, М. (1999): Средства массовой информации как фактор стабилизации национальных и федеративных отношений. – Рукопись диссертации: М.
- Бурганова, Л. & Корнилов, П. (2003): Реконструкция структуры образа военного конфликта (по материалам средств массовой информации). – Социологические исследования: 6. – 56-63
- Жуков, И. (2001): Война в современном дискурсе средств массовой информации. – А. Ситов (ред.): Лингвистические исследования в 2001 г. – СПб: ИЛИРАН. – 53-65
- Жуков, И. (2002): Критический анализ дискурса печатных средств массовой информации: некоторые особенности сообщений о Северо-Кавказском конфликте 1998-2000 гг. – Рукопись диссертации: Тверь
- Кандель, П. (1999): Косовский кризис и этнополитические конфликты на постсоветском пространстве. – Косово: международные аспекты кризиса. – <http://pubs.carnegie.ru/books/1999/05dt/11chp7.asp>
- Панфилов, О. (1996), ред. А. Симонова: Информационная война в Чечне. Факты, документы, свидетельства. Ноябрь 1994 – сентябрь 1996: <http://www.internews.ru/books/infowar/>
- Серебрянников, В. (2000): Косово и Чеченская война в коллективном сознании в России и на западе. – Социологические исследования: 10. – 66-71
- Соснин, В. (1998): Социально-психологическая динамика этнических конфликтов. – Национальная электронная библиотека: <http://www.sad.html>
- Тишков, В. (1999): Социальная теория этнических конфликтов. – <http://www.impulse.kz/mif/Obch/teor.html>
- Тишков, В. (2001): Общество в военном конфликте. Этнология Чеченской войны. – М.: Наука
- Altheide, D. (1997): The news media, the problem frame, and the production of fear. – Sociological Quarterly: Vol. 38, Issue 4.
- Bennett, W. J. (2002): Why We Fight: Moral Clarity and the War on terrorism. – New York: Doubleday

- Caplow, T. & Simon, J. (1999): *Understanding Prison Policy and Population Trends*. In: Tonry, M. & Petersilia, J. (eds.): *Prisons*. - Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press: 63-120
- Christie, N. (2000): *Crime Control as Industry. Toward Gulags, Western Style*. – Routledge
- Collier, P. (2000): *Doing well out of war: an economic perspective*. – M. Berdal & D. M. Malone (eds): *Greed and Grievance: Economic agendas in civil wars*. – Lynne Rienner, Boulder CO: 91-111
- Dunlop, J. B. (1998): *Russia confronts Chechnya: roots of a separatist conflict*. – Cambridge University Press
- Garland, D. (1996): *The Limits of the Sovereign State. Strategies of Crime Control in Contemporary Society*. – *British Journal of Criminology*. – 36: 445-471
- Garland, D. (2000): *The Culture of High Crime Societies. Some Preconditions of Present "Law and Order" Policies*. – *British Journal of Criminology*. – 40: 347-375
- Garland, D. (2001): *The Culture of Control*. – New York: Oxford University Press
- Mair, S. (2003): *The New World of Privatized Violence*. – *Internationale Politik und Gesellschaft* 2: 11-28
- Münkler, H. (2004): *Wandel der Weltordnung durch asymmetrische Kriege*. – Schroefl, J & Pankratz, T. (Hrsg.): *Asymmetrische Kriegsfuehrung – ein neues Phaenomen der internationalen Politik: Baden-Baden*. – 85-94
- Musolff A. (1999): *Promising to end a war – language of peace? The rhetoric of allied news management in the Gulf War 1991*. – Schäffner, C., Wenden, A (eds.): *Language and Peace – Amsterdam*
- The National Security Strategy of the United States. – Office of the Presidency, September 2002
- Quasthoff, U.M. (1989): *Social prejudice as a resource of power: towards the functional ambivalence of stereotypes*. – Wodak, R. (ed.): *Language, Power and Ideology*. – London – New-York: 181-197.
- Rojo M.L. (1995): *Division and rejection: from the personification of the Gulf conflict to the deionization of Saddam Hussein // Discourse & Society*. – Vol. 6(1): 49-79.
- Tilly, Ch. (1985): *War Making and State Making as Organized Crime*. In: EVANS, P.-B.; RUESCHEMEYER, D. & SCOCPOL, T. (eds.): *Bringing the State Back In*. - Cambridge
- Wodak R. (1996): *Disorders of discourse*. - London & New York