

Introduction

- Researching conflict in Eastern Europe--what are the political science and international relations perspectives?
 - Focus on comparative international politics
 - Intra- and inter-regional comparison
- Researching conflict needs to clarify
 - What is being researched?
 - From what theoretical perspective, based on what assumptions?
 - How or with what methodological approaches?

Empirical observation as a starting point

- Conflicts in Eastern Europe are not a new phenomenon: from the late 1980s, in the context of Soviet institutions' decreasing capacity and willingness to manage the multiple challenges of managing a highly complex and diverse state, conflicts that had previously been simmering below the surface became more obvious both within and between the Union republics and across a range of formal and informal structures.
- As the Union eventually disintegrated in 1991, further conflicts erupted laying bare changing power relations and the way they played out between self- and re-asserting, often reciprocally contested, and increasingly non-inclusive identities that often formed the basis for mobilising groups into conflict with each other.
- This resurgence of 'identity conflicts' was not a purely post-Soviet phenomenon: the former Yugoslavia and the former Communist countries in East Central Europe experienced similar challenges, albeit of different scale and intensity.
- Notwithstanding significant differences in the setting and dynamics of these various conflicts, they all occurred in a context of transitional openings when agents of change had brief, but promising opportunities to reconfigure their states' underpinning institutional structures.
- The decisions taken at these critical junctures gave rise to contested, and thus far in many cases incomplete, processes of state and nation-building.
- Yet, the dynamics of conflicts emerging in this period 25-30 years ago did not only have local and state-level consequences but increasingly intersected with regional-level and global-level developments.
- As a consequence, protracted conflicts like those over Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Transnistria, over the Nagorno-Karabakh territory, and the more recent crisis in Ukraine constitute blended conflicts that play out in an antagonistically penetrated region, and in this sense are conceptually similar to conflicts in Iraq and Syria, Yemen, and Western Sahara.
- Conceptual similarity needs to be grounded in proper conceptualisation. So, how may we conceptualise, and subsequently operationalise, 'blended conflict' and 'penetrated region'?
- In my view, 'blended' is both more than multi-layered/faceted/dimensional and more than multi-level, it is about the dynamic connectedness of actors, structures, and other factors at and across different levels of analysis: horizontally, vertically, and 'diagonally'.
- The notion of 'blended', thus, already implies a degree of 'penetration', that is a significant role for actors that are external to the state and/or the region in which the conflict is situated or where it originated. Penetration adds to conflict complexity, especially when the penetrating outsiders are, or grow to become, antagonists.
- As is the case with conflicts in the post-Soviet space, local conflicts then become overlaid with external antagonisms and easily turn into another arena of regional- and/or global-level conflicts. This is not to say that they do not retain a dynamic of their own, but this 'Eigendynamik' ebbs and flows very much in relation to the intensity of 'active' penetration.
- Thus, multiple actors and alliances of actors on the ground and beyond are in constant flux and contextually variable, not least because their agendas differ from local to global aspirations with punctual but no sustainable overlap: Geopolitical aspirations of regional and

great powers, domestic elites operating in a context of often fragile states with weak institutions that are unable to provide security and other basic public goods, transnational organised criminal networks, religiously motivated terrorist organisations in their different manifestations, legitimate local grievances couched in the language of human rights and self-determination have a tendency to create a toxic and contagious brew of challenges that are difficult to manage domestically and globally.

- As a consequence, blended conflicts in antagonistically penetrated regions are also characterised by intense internationalisation.
 - External actors with opportunistic and strategic motivations are more easily drawn into conflicts, more willing to exploit and stoke local tensions, and more adept at bargaining locally, regionally and globally over their involvement in conflicts.
 - External actors have different relationships with each other over different issues across different arenas of interaction: think how the West (EU/NATO/US) and Russia have interacted over Ukraine, Syria, North Korea, Iran, terrorism, organised crime, climate change, etc.
 - Blended conflicts in antagonistically penetrated regions are, thus, also a new manifestation of multi-polarity, in the sense of not only multiple centres of power, but also multiple arenas in which these centres of power pursue different interests in different alliance configurations.
 - At the same time, external actors also have different relationships with the local actors they support or constrain: variation is in the level of control they exercise, the 'due diligence' they conduct before committing or withdrawing support, and the resulting proliferation of more local actors soliciting external support.
 - Different external-local relationships also manifest themselves in the way in which forms and means of external support vary: from direct military, material, technical, and financial supply lines to political and diplomatic backing of presumptive allies be they incumbent governments or their challengers. On top of that, forms and means of external support also interact in more complex ways: overt and covert forms of support and their gradual or abrupt escalation have unintended and unforeseen consequences that shape conflict trajectories and constrain or enable conflict management opportunities.

Where do blended conflicts in antagonistically penetrated regions 'sit' theoretically?

- In itself, the two concepts lend themselves to typological theorising for understanding and explaining various dimensions of the real-world phenomena they relate to.
- Depending on the specific question one is interested in, as a mid-range theory, they would need to 'borrow' from grander theoretical frameworks, or perhaps rather such grander theoretical frameworks would need to be adapted to the specific context of blended conflicts in antagonistically penetrated regions.
 - For example, neo-classical realism may help us understand better why external actors penetrate a particular region or country within it in the first place, how they do it, and under what conditions they might increase or decrease the intensity of their penetration or withdraw.
 - Constructivism, and especially theories of securitisation and de-securitisation, can contribute to explaining the origins, changing nature, and protractedness of blended conflicts.
 - Theories of mediation and ripeness can offer insights into why international organisations succeed or fail in negotiating, implementing, and sustaining conflict settlements.
 - That said, the deductive approach from theoretically-grounded hypothesis to testing it and thereby confirming, refining, or disconfirming a particular theory is not necessarily

to best or only way of using the two concepts. As they are themselves in many ways the productive of inductive reasoning or even just systematic observation, there is also significant scope still for more inductive approaches that generate more hypotheses within looser theoretical frameworks and thus contribute to further typological theory-building in an iterative inductive-deductive approach.

What are the methodological implications of these empirical and theoretical observations?

- First of all, this type of research, in terms of time and space, has always been heavily geared towards case studies, both single and small-n comparative.
- This is partially due to the relatively small number of cases, their accessibility, the existence of a critical mass of country and regional specialists in academia, and foreign office and IO bureaucracies that tend to be similarly organised in regional and country desks with thematic approaches becoming only recently more prominent.
- This is a strength, but potentially also a weakness, especially if research questions remain 'confined' temporally and spatially to the post-Soviet region, not least because this, in turn, also constrains methodological innovation.
- So, what is to be done? On the one hand, I am a strong believer in small-n, in-depth, comparative case study analysis, using co-variation and process-tracing as principal methods of data-analysis, relying on document and discourse analysis, key-informant interviews, focus groups, surveys, and the Delphi approach as the main methods of data gathering.
- It is worthwhile reflecting also on the necessary ethical considerations of using such research methods in (semi-) authoritarian and (post-) conflict contexts: how safe is it to carry out research for the researcher and his/her interlocutors, how reliable is the information obtained, and how should we weight different, and possibly contradictory evidence in our accounts? There are no general or straightforward answers to these questions, but in my experience common sense and sensitivity to context are good starting points for finding case-specific answers.
- There are good empirical and theoretical reasons of 'branching out' beyond the temporal and spatial confines of the post-Soviet region--if only to answer the 'so what?' question in a more convincing and satisfactory way for current and future research funders, users, and beneficiaries. And, fortunately, the methodological tools to do so are also available:
 - Set-theoretical methods, especially QCA, is a good way of dealing with problems of equifinality and complex causation.
 - Statistical methods, including TSCS analysis, can increase the number of observations and allow modelling time and space with both continuous and binary variables.
- Yet, it is not simply the application of these methods to the post-Soviet region that I have in mind, but also their ability to better connect and integrate post-Soviet research empirically and theoretically to broader debates in political science and international relations:
 - Bottom-up: aiming for greater generalisability by testing a typological theory of blended conflicts in an antagonistically penetrated region against a larger universe of cases.
 - Top-down: aiming for greater specification of grand theories by refining them in a more typological way for the particular setting of blended conflicts and/or penetrated regions.

Conclusion

- Researching conflict in Eastern Europe from a political science and international relations perspective, or more precisely from a comparative international politics, thus, perhaps works best on the basis of analytically precise concepts that are firmly grounded theoretically and applied in a methodological rigorous way.
- It also requires openness beyond theoretical and disciplinary boundaries to create, and benefit from, the added value that is implied in notions of complementary and compatible theories and disciplines.

- And finally, researching conflict in Eastern Europe cannot be done properly or reach its full potential if it remains spatially or temporally confined to a particular region. Therefore, the idea of a typology of conflict regions is a very promising one from a comparative international politics perspective and is likely to be one of many significant contributions that your projects will make beyond just conflict in Eastern Europe.