

The Volunteers don't quit!

ON THE DEMOBILISATION OF VOLUNTEER BATTALIONS IN UKRAINE

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Master Thesis | Radboud University | Human Geography: Conflicts, Territories and Identities

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11-06-2022

Abstract

In 2014, Ukraine saw the rise of Volunteer Battalions that mobilised to support Ukrainian state in securing their territory. However, once mobilised, it proved a challenge to disarm, demobilise and reintegrate (DDR) these non-statutory armed forces. This research asks why state attempts to demobilise PGMs have not been met with effect. Drawing on existing literature on pro-government militias (PGMs), this research presents a theory that explains how PGMs harm peacebuilding efforts, particularly DDR.

I offer a four-step process that explains that the presence of PGMs means an absence of DDR practices:

1. PGMs *assist a government* in crisis. The mobilisation of PGMs is often a response to a state's inability to secure the countries' territory and protect its citizens. They provide military strength, associate with politicians and stimulate popular support for the government. PGMs thereby preserve a government's legitimacy.
2. PGMs become increasingly entangled in the conflict. The relationship between government and PGMs allows PGMs to act with relative autonomy. In this position, PGMs *grow increasingly powerful*.
3. PGMs have the ability to *influence political decisions* as they have attained strong military power, political representation and popular support for their actions.
4. PGMs have the ability to *restrain the political will for peacebuilding*, hence the implementation of DDR, and the ambition to do so granting they are unlikely to support policies that harm their status and position.

To conclude, I argue that utilising their influence, PGMs will restrain the political will for peacebuilding, hence the implementation of DDR. I test this theory by researching the mobilisation and evolvment of the Volunteer Battalions in Ukraine. This case illustrates and supports my theory. With this argument I contribute to a better understanding of how PGMs are able to go from local armed groups into influential political actors. Moreover, I show how PGMs endanger peacebuilding efforts and that DDR is limited in offering a framework for dismantling PGMs. Therefore, the core implication of this study is the need for renewed attention to DDR practices, particularly in combination with PGMs.

Acknowledgements

This research is the final product of my master Human Geography at the Radboud University. Along the way, I have enjoyed the support of many important people. This thesis is made possible because of them. First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor Romain Malejacq. He supported the process with crucial feedback and, in doing so, he was able to give me the necessary confidence and motivation. Furthermore, I would like to give a special thanks to Maureen Recoque who has read over the thesis, probably twice, and helped me to grammatically and structurally improve. Also, I would like to express my gratitude to the friends and family that have supported me along the way through the highs and the lows. Marlotte, thank you for your optimism and encouragement, thank you for believing. Angélique and Peter, thank you for the necessary tough love and understanding. Lucas, my studybuddy, thank you, just for being there. And last, but definitely not least, thanks to Rabia, Maureen and Sanne, for creating the crazy but encouraging atmosphere to write this masterpiece.

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1. Introduction

The Puzzle

Around 6 in the morning on the 24th of February, about an hour after the United Nation's Security Council gathered to denounce Russia's recent activities at the Ukrainian border and appeal for diplomacy, Russia's president Putin declared a 'special military operation' in the Eastern region of Ukraine, the Donbas (United Nations, 2022). Since the end of November 2021, the tensions at the Russian-Ukrainian border were on the rise. Russian troops moved closer to the Ukrainian border and gathered in occupied Crimea. These forces consisted of "armoured units, drones, electronic warfare systems, and (...) tens of thousands combat-ready Russian [soldiers]" (Puri, 2021, para. 2). The Russian military operation (many would speak of an invasion) aimed at demilitarising the former Soviet state Ukraine. Putin declared the operation was a response to the demands of rebel leaders, the latter writing him letters from the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, requesting him military assistance against Ukraine's aggression. Within 30 minutes of Putin's announcement, explosions were heard in Kyiv (Chichowlas & Clark, 2022).

Anticipating the possibility of a full-scale invasion, Ukraine adopted a national resistance act on January 1 2022 allowing the short-term recruitment of civilian volunteers in addition to the core 10,000 of military personnel. As Russian troops moved further into Ukraine, many civilian volunteers fought alongside Ukrainian soldiers. In fact, in just a matter of days, 130,000 Ukrainian volunteers were added to the ranks of Ukrainians Armed Forces (UAF) (IWPR, 2022). Not only nationals volunteered to add to the ranks of the military. Volunteers come from over 50 different countries. The 'International Legion' counted 20,000 voluntary fighters as of March 2022 (Abend-Vilnius, 2022). In the first weeks of March, thousands of civilian volunteers took the train heading for the frontlines (Glinski, 2022). Although lightly armed at first, the volunteers quickly became armed with heavier military materials, such as tanks, through the capture of Russian artillery (Frias, 2022).

In 2014, Ukrainian volunteers had also played a significant role in securing the Ukrainian territory against a Russian-backed separatist threat. The Ukrainian state and its military forces proved not in a position to respond appropriately on all fronts. The shortcomings of the state motivated Ukrainian citizens to organise into Volunteer

Battalions (Bilban, 2018; Hunter M. , 2018)¹. Heroes to many, these non-state armed groups are credited with saving the country when the state was not able to do so. The state demanded for the formal demobilisation of these fighters in 2015. How is it that these units re-appear almost immediately after the national resistance act at the start of 2022? Or, have they never left?

In Ukraine, the Volunteer Battalions have not demobilised convincingly despite state efforts. In this research, I address this puzzle. In general, I aim to compose an answer to the question why state attempts to demobilise PGMs have not been met with effect. I argue that PGMs are likely to disrupt the successful enforcement of demobilisation, disarmament and reintegration (DDR) policies. The case of Ukraine's Volunteer Battalions functions as an illustration to my argument.

PGMs and peacebuilding

The Volunteer Battalions in Ukraine are not a unique phenomenon. In fact, PGMs have played a significant role in over 80 percent of country-years of armed conflict between 1981 and 2007 (Steinert, Steinert, & Carey, 2019). The development of PGMs as prominent non-state actors in conflict also spiked research on these armed formations. Mitchell et al. (2014) defined PGMs as militias that 1) are pro -government or sponsored by a government; 2) are not part of the regular security forces; 3) are armed; and 4) are organised. There may be much variety between PGMs. The relation between PGM and government can change over time and can differ in strength. Some PGMs enjoy a relatively high level of autonomy (Hakonsholm, 2018). Others, may remain weak organisations, under complete control of the state, and only perform the 'dirty jobs' for the state (Aliyev, 2016). There may also be differences in size, arsenal, and political engagement among PGMs (Carey, Colaresi, & Mitchell, 2015).

In the short term, PGMs may appear beneficial to the state, especially when the state lacks the capacity to fight domestic insurgents, or needs to evade accountability (Mitchell, Carey, & Butler, 2014; Akins, 2021). In these situations, PGMs can be crucial to the survival of the state, supporting its institutions and maintaining its legitimacy (Aliyev, 2019b). However, in the long run, PGMs negatively affect state security: they harm the

¹Ukraine's Volunteer Battalions have gone by different names, such as Territorial Defense Battalions and paramilitary units. For consistency, I will refer to them as Volunteer Battalions only.

state's monopoly on violence (Carey, Colaresi, & Mitchell, 2015); they engage in human rights violations (Mitchell, Carey, & Butler, 2014); and they hinder the road to long-term peace (Steinert, Steinert, & Carey, 2019; Aliyev, 2019b). What is more, the longer PGMs remain active, the longer they will pursue their own agenda (Abbs, Clayton, & Thomson, 2020). Indeed, the collaboration with, or tolerance of militias does not mean the state has complete control over the formation and activities of the PGMs (Jentzsch, Kalyvas, & Schubiger, 2015), nor does it mean their views are aligned with the ones of the government (Malyarenko & Galbreath, 2016). Active conflict allows PGMs to access all kinds of resources and provides them with a platform to promote their goals and ideals. With the termination of conflict, the need for PGMs disappears. As a result, PGMs often openly oppose conflict settlement (Abbs, Clayton, & Thomson, 2020). Disbanding PGMs therefore is a delicate but important matter in order for the state to regain control and agency over violence and to build sustainable peace in the aftermath of conflict.

Organisations such as the United Nations (UN) deploy specific strategies to promote peacebuilding in conflict situations (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse, & Miall, 2012). Essential to the road to peace and stability is the reform of a country's security sector (Munive & Stepputat, 2015). The practice of Security Sector Reform (SSR) is built on the assumption that an effective security sector requires an inclusive army, a police force, and border patrol under one unified command structure (McGinn, 2017). To achieve this, it is key to implement projects aiming to disarm, demobilise, and reintegrate (DDR) non-state armed groups (Munive & Stepputat, 2015). In fact, the success of SSR depends on the effective realisation of DDR, and vice versa (McFate, 2010). Both SSR and DDR as peacebuilding strategies, or practices, are considered to play a significant role in re-establishing government legitimacy and preventing the reoccurrence of conflict (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2007), thereby contributing to long-term peace and development (Muggah & Donnell, 2015).

The success of DDR has been much disputed in recent years. In general, it has been considered an adaptable tool capable of contributing to political solutions in various conflict settings (UN, 2020). Ultimately, the expectations as to what DDR can achieve have grown as have the scale, and scope of DDR practices (Muggah & Donnell, 2015). Some scholars, however, question whether the assumptions underlying DDR are applicable to current conflicts (Krause, 2012; Semigina, Kachmaryk, & Karagodina, 2021). For example,

with non-state actors becoming increasingly entangled in armed conflicts (e.g. Kaldor, 2001), also the practice of DDR has reconfigured to dealing with situations where conflict is dominated by a range of non-state armed groups. But it appears difficult to apply DDR to non-state actors such as PGMs (Munive & Stepputat, 2015). Indeed, the Ukrainian government is not the only state unable to regain control over its PGMs (Knuppe & Nanes, 2021; Aliyev, 2019b). Once arisen, PGMs are indeed hard to get rid of (Ahram, 2016; Staniland, 2015). Practices of disarming and demobilising PGMs remain exceptional (Schneckener, 2017).

Methodology

DDR is built on the political will of all parties to the conflict to engage in such a peacebuilding strategy (UNDP, 2017), and hence on their commitment to the strategy. This basic assumption offers us limited tools in conflicts with PGM involvement. I argue that PGMs that are able to become influential politically are likely to hinder strategies that result in their disengagement. They will therefore hinder the required political commitment for effective DDR.

To unpack this process, I use the method of Process Tracing. Process Tracing is a tool for qualitative analysis, often used in political science and international relations studies to explore a proposed causal relationship (George & Bennett, 2005). The first step of Process Tracing is to identify the outcome (the dependent variable). Then, the main purpose is to establish whether, and how, potential causes influence that specific outcome. These are called components mechanisms. Mechanisms consist of entities, or actors, that engage in certain activities. These activities subsequently affect the outcome, and thereby support or disprove the causal process. Each mechanism of the process, thus, should logically lead to the next (Beach, 2017). This method enables the researcher to build a theory explaining a certain outcome with regards to a specific case. In this research, I take an deductive where I draw on existing literature on PGMs to process a process able to explain the puzzling outcome in the case of Ukraine. I then test this argument through an in-depth analysis of the Volunteer Battalions in Ukraine. Through Process Tracing, this case allows me to argue that PGMs are likely to prevent the successful enforcement of DDR.

The data for this research is derived from existing literature on PGMs and DDR. Moreover, I study the case of Ukraine in support of my argument. For the case-study, all data stems from online publications, such as articles from news agencies and blogs. For data collection I use Lexis Nexis. All data for the case-study stems from the period between the start of the volunteer mobilisation in November 2013 to the start of the Russian operation in February 2022. The latter event has changed the dynamics of the situation in Ukraine dramatically. The study of Volunteer Battalions after the Russian operation may therefore require alternative approaches which is beyond the scope of this research. The timeline between November 2013 and February 2022 allows me to study how the PGMs developed from local armed groups into organisations with political influence and what danger this development can pose for peacebuilding.

Evidence may present itself in different ways. Preferably, this research would be supported by publications that clearly identify laws and debates on the demobilisation of Volunteer Battalions and the influence they may have on policies. Rather, I expect that this evidence must be interpreted. I expect evidence for my thesis will be more along the lines of indications that the Volunteer Battalions still remain and affect policy-making. Though this may not be a smoking gun, enough of these indications will suffice to make a claim.

In shaping this research I encountered several limitations. First of all, fieldwork and interviews would have been a valuable contribution to the research by providing insight into the sentiments among Volunteer Battalions towards, for example, demobilisation. Yet, given the circumstance and the scope of this research, I was unable to perform such a research. Secondly, I must recognise the amount of mis- and disinformation on the developments between Ukraine and Russia. Moreover, different parties involved in the Ukrainian crisis may have different perspectives on certain events and activities. Although I have aimed to provide an objective account on the situation, my research is naturally influenced by Western standards and personal perspectives.

The argument

Building on Aliyev (2016), I argue that PGMs have the ability to prevent DDR practices and the ambition to do so. Aliyev (2016) identifies three factors that enable PGMs to assist the state: military strength, political representation, and popular support. I present a

process explaining how the same factors that allow PGMs to be of assistance to the state arguably explain how PGMs enhance their position and influence political decision-making. Essential to Aliyev's argument is that the interests of PGMs and the state must align in order for the PGMs to assist a state in their military endeavours. However, I show that state and PGMs very rarely pursue the same goals.

Several steps occur between the PGMs' emergence in a conflict to the unsuccessful attempt at their demobilisation. I present four mechanisms to this process (see figure 1.). I structure the first three mechanisms along Aliyev's three factors: military strength; political representation; and popular support. In the fourth mechanism I discuss the interests of the state and the PGMs. When these align perfectly, PGMs' political influence may not result in the lack of support for DDR programs. However, I show that this is very rarely the case.

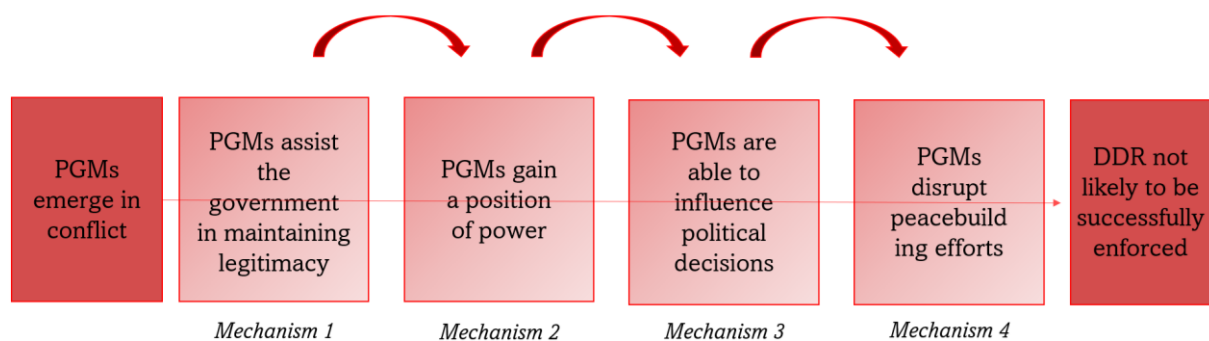


Figure 1. Process

The four mechanisms to the process are:

1. PGMs become of assistance to the government in its attempt to maintain legitimacy;
2. PGMs become powerful actors;
3. PGMs are able to influence policies;
4. PGMs use their political influence to prevent the implementation of DDR.

This process leads me to hypothesise that PGMs are likely to disrupt the successful enforcement of DDR policies. I further expand on the argument in chapter 3.

Clarification of concepts

The concept of legitimacy in relation to the state has been shaped mainly by the influential thinker Max Weber (1864-1920). The state, according to Weber, is “a relationship of rule by human beings over human beings, and one that rests on the legitimate use of violence” (Lassman & Speirs, 1994, pp. 311-312). Legitimate use of violence is a central issue in social and political theory as it determines both the structure and operation of states. Weber distinguishes three forms of legitimacy to exercise the monopoly of force: authority based on custom, the traditional power; authority based on charisma; and authority based on rule of law and democratic control (Lottholz & Lemay-Hébert, 2016). Legitimacy, however, is hardly objective. Instead, legitimacy is about the perception the subjects have towards the object and therefore about normative judgements. Legitimacy refers to the subjects’ perception of the rightfulness of the objects power. In terms of the state: “a state is more legitimate the more that it is treated by its citizens as rightfully holding and exercising political power” (Gilley, 2006, p. 500). The relationship between state (the object) and citizens (the subjects) forms the basis of this definition. The expression of legitimacy in this definition is rightfully holding and exercising political power.

Most Western states ascribe a state’s legitimate exercise of power to rationally devised rules; the rule of law and democratic control. The ideal state thereby has a clear monopoly on the use of force, meaning only the state can be the source of violence if this violence is to be legitimate. In turn, the state depends on legitimacy to maintain the right to use violence against residents and external threats (Gilley, 2006). Wulf (2007) thereby emphasises that the right to use force can be transferred to other actors if the state permits it. The decentralisation of violence results in an interesting paradox: a state may rely on non-state fighters in counterinsurgency while these ‘freedom fighters’, if not under strict state control, themselves pose a threat to the state’s legitimate use of violence. Aliyev (2016) describes this situation in relation to PGMs. By ‘subcontracting’ some of its monopoly on violence to PGMs, states seek to ensure other armed formations do not grow excessively powerful. However, by granting some of its monopoly on violence to PGMs, states lose some control over the use of force. A state’s reliance on non-state fighters does not necessarily mean the state is getting weaker, but the decentralisation of violence is strongly related to the decline of the legitimate monopoly of violence (Tuğal, 2017).

The concept of power is not easily defined. Often, scholars use power and influence as synonyms. In this research, I define power as the more general, and influence as the more specific concept. Power is a position that allows the object of power to exercise influence or control over subjects. Influence is the ability of an actor to induce other actors to act or do something they would otherwise not do. Any form of influence can therefore be viewed as a measure of power. Power can be harnessed through different sources: it can be derived from a specific status, social or political position; through command over resources; charisma; or a body of followers (Malejacq, 2020).

Any actor requires a basic form of legitimacy to exercise power. Militias often engage in charismatic gestures, use (historic) symbols and names, or spread programmes and pamphlets to foster popular support for their actions. Only by being perceived as legitimate actors can they exercise power. The use of violence is thereby a demonstration of power, but may also discredit its effect (Schneckener, 2017).

Relevance

Although I do not quantify the likelihood of success of the DDR programs, nor rule out alternative explanations to PGMs persistence, I can, in this research, focus our attention towards a valuable process. The argument I make is not only relevant academically, but has also implications for policymakers.

This research bridges existing scholarly work on PGMs and peacebuilding. Several scholars have aimed at presenting the advantages and disadvantages of PGMs' involvement in conflict. In this research, I use their work to build an argument that provides a more complete insight into PGMs. By presenting a process of how PGMs are able to grow from local armed groups into influential political actors, I offer a better understanding of the PGMs' development and their persistence during and after conflict. By considering Ukraine's Volunteer Battalions, this research provides a framework for the exploration of other cases. Although I expect my argument to work best in the case of PGMs, it may help us understand the development of non-state armed actors. This research therefore contributes to the literature on PGMs, peacebuilding and militias in general.

A better understanding of PGM development has major implications for policymakers. Existing literature has identified a potential danger in PGM mobilisation

and PGM involvement in conflicts. Yet, states still actively support or endorse the mobilisation of PGMs as means in counterinsurgency. By presenting a process of how PGMs become influential actors, this research further clarifies the risks of PGMs. As such, I challenge any plea in favour of involving PGMs in counterinsurgency strategies. This has proved even more relevant recently since the Ukrainian government has, again, encouraged the use of volunteers to support them in their recent battles. In addition, my conclusion contradicts the common assumption that DDR is a versatile peacebuilding strategy. Instead, I identify major difficulties with this strategy in conflicts where PGMs have obtained a substantial position in politics. It is crucial to comprehend PGMs' influence in such conflicts and the subsequent consequences for DDR. This is particularly important since the success of DDR influences the effectiveness of SSR and, hence, peacebuilding in general. I, therefore, encourage more research on peacebuilding efforts in combination with PGMs.

Outline Thesis

In chapter 2, I expand on the puzzle by presenting the context in which Ukrainian Volunteer Battalions mobilised, elaborate on why these Volunteer Battalions are considered PGMs, and describe previous attempts to demobilise them. In chapter 3, I discuss my argument. I present the four mechanisms and explain why PGMs are unlikely to be DDRed. I show how PGMs acquire a certain status and position through their military strength, political association and popular support allowing them to influence political decision-making. Moreover, I show why they have the ambition to use their position to prevent DDR practices. In chapter 4, I test the argument against the case of the Volunteer Battalions in Ukraine. I discuss how they have been able to remain relevant and influential actors, despite attempts from the government to press for DDR. I then elaborate on how they are able to influence political decisions. I prove the process is useful in explaining the influence of the Volunteer Battalions in Ukraine. The case thereby supports the argument that PGMs are likely to prevent the successfully implemented of DDR. In the conclusion, I discuss the limitations of this research and propose avenues for future research. I also articulate the core implication of this research: When PGMs can harm DDR practices, new efforts must be developed to disengage persisting PGMs.

2. The crisis in Ukraine and the rise of the Volunteer Battalions

In this chapter, I present a short background on the crisis in Ukraine and the context in which Ukraine's PGMs, the Volunteer Battalions, mobilised. I furthermore address how the crisis and the activities of (former) Battalions and Battalion members evolved in the last few years.

2.1. Context to Volunteer Battalions' mobilisation

In 1991, the Ukrainian Parliament declares independence from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), also known as the Soviet Union, following a nationwide referendum where 90% of the population voted for independence. Although the independence was not supported by Russia, the issue was put to rest under the Russian President from 1990 to 1999, Boris Yeltsin (Kuzio & D'Anieri, 2018). However, since its declaration of independence, the relations between the West, Ukraine, and Russia seem to be a 'triangle of competition' (Masters, 2020).

A crisis situation erupted in Ukraine at the end of 2013 when then Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich rejected an agreement that promoted further economic integration with the European Union (EU). Protesters sought the streets in the capital Kiev (BBC, 2014). Internationally, these protests are known as the "Euromaidan" (literally: European Square). In Ukraine, it is named "The Revolution of Dignity" (Umland, 2019). The protesters demanded to sign the agreement (Chupryna, 2021).

In the hope of restoring control, President Yanukovich ordered the restriction of civil freedoms and the use of violent means to crack down the protests (Bilban, 2018). His response to the situation, however, motivated further escalation. This time, the protesters also addressed the regime itself and its mode of governance. They demanded an end to the corruption and nepotism in state institutions (Chupryna, 2021). Groups became increasingly mobilised and more willing to use violence (Hunter, 2018). In February 2014, Yanukovich fled to Russia (CFR, 2021). The opposition took power in the Ukrainian Parliament and elected Oleksandr Turchynov as interim president. State security forces switched their allegiance to the new government (Bilban, 2018).

A few days after Turchynov's election, Ukraine's security was exposed to a new security threat. Russian President Putin requested the Russian Parliament to use the

necessary force in protecting Russian interests in Ukraine. The Russian Parliament approved this request since it viewed Russian interests to be threatened by the recent chaos caused by the Revolution of Dignity and the transition of power. Pro-Russian gunmen (the so-called little green men) began to seize prominent buildings in Sevastopol, the capital of the Ukrainian peninsula Crimea, a contested area. Russia views this area as Russian territory while it is internationally recognised to be part of Ukraine. According to Treisman (2016), there are several plausible interpretations to why Putin ‘annexed’ (as it would become internationally known) the Crimean Peninsula. Firstly, the seizure of Crimea was arguably a response to the threat of NATO’s expansion along Russia’s border. Secondly, the annexation was supposedly an attempt to gradually recapture the Soviet Union’s former territories and expand Russia’s influence. Thirdly, the annexation could be explained as an improvised and hastily conceived decision rather than a strategic move or geopolitical ambition. Ultimately, elements of all theories may be involved: the annexation of Crimea was an improvised gambit, which developed under pressure, triggered by the fears of NATO’s further expansion and of losing Russia’s naval base in Sevastopol².

In March 2014, a referendum took place in Crimea on the incorporation of Crimea into the Russian Federation. Seventy-nine per cent of the voters voted in favour. In response, Putin signed a bill to absorb the region into Russia. The referendum is internationally viewed as unlawfully enforced by Russia. The results are moreover considered frauded. The United States and the EU responded to these events by imposing travel bans and freezing the assets of several Russian and Ukrainian officials (BBC, 2014).

Inspired by the events in the Crimean Peninsula, separatist movements form in parts of eastern Ukraine, particularly the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts³, a region known as the Donbas. The Donbas holds close economic ties with Russia and, similar to the Crimean Peninsula, contains a relatively high percentage of ethnic Russians and many Russian-speakers (Bebler, 2015). The new Ukrainian government proved unable to re-establish law and order in eastern Ukraine which nourished the emergence of thugs and openly separatist groups in the Donbas (Bilban, 2018; Wood, 2021). Backed by Russia, the

² On the history of the Crimean Peninsula and the strategic position of the territory, see, for example, Bebler (2015).

³ An oblast is a type of administrative division.

separatist forces began seizing cities (The Economist, 2016). In the beginning of April 2014, they occupied government buildings and demanded a referendum for the autonomy of eastern Ukraine. The Russian protection allowed the separatists to hold an illegal referendum in the Donbas region and declare the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics independent from Ukraine on May 11th, after an estimated 94 per cent voted in favour of separation (Bebler, 2015; Bilban, 2018).

The declaration of independence of the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts is internationally viewed as the start of the conflict in Ukraine. These developments in eastern Ukraine changed the character of the conflict from an externally sponsored insurgency to a hybrid war between Ukraine and Russia (Käihkö, 2018b). Most military activities have occurred at the frontline where separatists aimed to gain more territory (Bildt, 2017). At the same time, tensions within Ukraine rose as well. The separatist movement in eastern Ukraine effected the cohesion within Ukraine's security forces. Some police officers, for example, sympathised with the separatist movement and defected to anti-Kiev groups. Moreover, a significant part of the Ukrainian Navy defected to Russia during the first months of the conflict (Hunter, 2018). The loyalties among both local and regional administrations became uncertain (Bilban, 2018; Wood, 2021). Ukraine became a split country dividing people with loyalties towards the 'East' and those with loyalties to the 'West', epitomized by Russia and the EU (Riabchuk, 2015).

Ukraine was not in the position to combat the opposition in the south-east and eastern parts of the country. After former President Yanukovich fled, the interim government faced legitimacy issues whereas the defence system had insufficient means to defend the countries' borders (Käihkö, 2018b). The Ukrainian government was well aware of its weaknesses in the security sector. After years of budget cuts, the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) lacked modern equipment and was poorly trained. When tensions rose at the border regions in 2014 only 6,000 of the 165,000 soldiers in the Army were combat ready though with they had limited artillery support (Bilban, 2018; Hunter, 2018). Moreover, the interior troops and the special police force Berkut were disbanded and a significant portion of the Armed Forces, particularly the Ukrainian Navy, defected to Russia in the six months following the start of the conflict (Hunter, 2018). Problems with corruption within the military and politics contributed to the shortcomings of the Armed Forces (Coffey, 2015). To secure the Ukrainian territory and to secure the state's

monopoly on violence, the UAF needed new recruits and fundings, sooner rather than later. However, as a result of a general distrust in the state and its institutions, there was little interest among civilians to join the state military (Käihkö, 2018a). For Minister of Internal Affairs Arsen Avakov, the only solution to the UAF's shortcomings and the threat of the Russian-backed separatists was to motivate voluntary mobilisation (Käihkö, 2018b).

2.2. Mobilization of Ukraine's PGMs

The Volunteer Battalions in Ukraine meet all PGM criteria: they are pro-government; they are not part of the regular security forces; they are armed; and they are organised (Bukkvoll, 2019; Aliyev, 2019b). In this section, I describe their mobilisation, their role in the conflict and their relation with the state. Moreover, I address the differences between the Battalions.

In Ukraine, volunteering is and considered to be “a manifestation of the selfless activity of patriots” and a “social need” during a crisis (Tkach & Tkach, 2019). In response to the separatist threat and the inability of the Ukrainian military to respond appropriately, Ukrainians organised into PGMs, commonly known as Volunteer Battalions (Hunter, 2018). The Volunteer Battalions initially stepped in to support the police in keeping law and order (Hunter, 2018). Some were created in cooperation with the local authorities (the municipal or the police), others were formed or initiated by large oligarchs, independent of the state (Marten & Oliker, 2017). Some already existed in composition before the Maidan protests but became more active as Volunteer Battalions, others mobilised solely as a result of the separatist threat (Likhachev, 2015). These (semi-)irregular Battalions grew rapidly in size and variety throughout 2014. In October 2014, Ukraine counted 38 battalions for about 13,500 personnel in total (Umland, 2019). In the beginning of 2015, volunteers made up a total force of 50,000 and were involved in policing tasks, but also border patrol and active fighting against separatist and Russian forces at the frontline (Bilban, 2018). These activities are semi-legalised by a law from 2000 on “Citizens' Participation in the Protection of the Public Order and State Border”. A Presidential decree on the 13th of March 2014 formalised the formation of paramilitary groups. However, the Battalions were not under official control of the government (Bilban, 2018; Hunter, 2018).

Not all Volunteer Battalions are the same. At the beginning of the conflict, most members of the Volunteer Battalions were primarily recruited from three broad groups: pro-government Ukrainians in the Donbas Region; Maidan activists and far-right nationalists. Most of the initial fighters came from eastern Ukraine but, as the conflict developed, more recruits from western parts of Ukraine started to join (Hunter, 2018). Some Battalions not only recruited locally or nationally, but also internationally (Wood, 2021). The Battalions were able to attract a large and heterogenous group of recruits with a wide variety of ideological motivations and religious convictions. Furthermore, the Battalions differed in the activities they engaged in. While some Battalions rallied around the Ukrainian flag, or the idea of securing national territory, others rallied around far-right ideologies. Some were purely local and limited their activities to policing. Others were involved in large battles and were heavily connected to political movements (Käihkö, 2018a) or political elites (Aliyev, 2016).

As the government was not able to equip their own forces, they were also not able to financially support the Battalions. The Battalions therefore relied on other sources for funding. They gathered money through fundraising and crowdsourcing (Bilban, 2018). In 2015, Al Jazeera reported that one could not walk around the Maidan square without being asked for a donation for the Volunteer Battalions (Coffey, 2015). Other financial sources were oligarchs and political organisations (Hunter, 2018). Differences in funding among the Volunteer Battalions translated in major differences in arsenal. Some were only equipped with pitchforks or airsoft guns; while others were able to acquire heavy artillery including tanks (Wood, 2021; Veldt, 2018). Since some Volunteer Battalions received large donations from oligarchs, they were able to equip themselves with better and more artillery than the conventional army (Coffey, 2015).

As products of successful citizen mobilization and organization⁴, the Volunteer Battalions are credited by many Ukrainians with saving the country (Marten & Oliker, 2017). Opinion pieces from Ukrainian magazines have described pro-Ukrainian paramilitaries as patriotic, passionate, and romantic elite groups, and even as heroic

⁴ Though these groups are products of high-level individual commitment and civil engagement, they cannot be classified as pro-democratic. While proper civil society would normally support the development of democratic institutions, these organizations may actually endanger them (Umland, 2019).

fighters for freedom, democratic values, and the territorial integrity of the nation (Malyarenko & Galbreath, 2016). Indeed, the Volunteer Battalions performed most of the fighting in the majority of battles during the first six months of the conflict. They were of significant importance to the territorial security of the state as they were able to halt separatist expansion (Wood, 2021). The most well-known Battalions in Ukraine go by the names of Azov, Donbas, Aidar, Right Sector, and Dnipro-1. They earned their fame by their efficiency on the battlefield and their ability to halt separatists' aggression. These activities have gained the members of the Volunteer Battalions the reputation of 'war heroes' (Aliyev, 2016).

However, from the start of their mobilisation onwards, major problems occurred both within as between the Battalions and with their operations. Lack of communication between Battalions and an absence of legal supervision resulted in ineffective operations and conflicts between Battalions (Mironova & Sergatskova, 2017). Bilban (2018) argues that although the state formally and legally accepted the volunteer formations, this has not guaranteed full control by the state nor the Battalions' loyalty to the state. In fact, the term 'pro-government' is ill-judged for some Battalions (Malyarenko & Galbreath, 2016). The most prominent Volunteer Battalions arguably show greater loyalty to their (non-governmental) financial contributors (Coffey, 2015) or to their ideology (Marten & Oliker, 2017). Furthermore, Amnesty International (2014) states in a briefing that Battalions engaged in lawless behaviour, such as actions amounting to war crimes.

While the Volunteer Battalions fought most battles in the first six months, the regular army force eventually began to receive a more stable funding from the Ukrainian government and was able to reform itself (Wood, 2021). This, together with the criticisms described above, led the government to aim to disband the Battalions (On the Immediate Disarmament of Illegal Armed Formations in Ukraine, 2014). It has stimulated the integration of most voluntary units with the regular armed detachments of the Ukrainian Ministry of Defence and Interior (Umland, 2019). The government thereby aimed to push direct government control either through payment or through the threat of litigation and police intervention (Wood, 2021). I elaborate on these practices in the following section.

2.3. The crisis evolved

On Peace

The role of the Russian forces was evident from the start of the crisis. Their support for the separatists in the Donbas made them an overt party in the conflict. While fighting continued, Ukraine and Russia aimed to diplomatically end the conflict (Käihkö, 2018b). There have been several attempts towards peace, starting with the Geneva Joint Statement on Ukraine in April 2014. The agreement between representatives of the United States, the EU, Russia (President Putin), and Ukraine (President Poroshenko) failed drastically with violations only days after the agreement was reached. New talks between France, Germany, Ukraine, and Russia gave rise to the Normandy format in June 2014. This format played an important role in the formatting and implementation of the Minsk Protocol in September 2014 (Goda, 2019). The aim was to cease hostilities immediately, withdraw military forces from the frontline, and commence a political resolution to the conflict (Bildt, 2017). This protocol and the resulting Minsk I and II agreements (the latter signed in February 2015) resulted in promising advances in the peace process but were not able to produce a lasting ceasefire (Goda, 2019).

The main conflict continues to take place in the separatist-held areas, the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics. These territories remain territories with special status where Russia's governing influence is significant (Bildt, 2017). In 2018, the controversial Reintegration Law was adopted. This law officially defined the separatist territories as "temporarily occupied territories" and declared Russia as the "aggressor" (Donbas Reintegration Law, 2018). Under the Minsk framework, peace would require the Ukrainian government to reintegrate the separatist regions with a measure of political autonomy (Graham & Haberman, 2020).

Volodymyr Zelenskyy was elected President of Ukraine in 2019, on the promise he would quickly end the war without breaking up the country nor allowing further Russian interference (Graham & Haberman, 2020). Since his election, Zelenskyy has indeed taken major steps in advancing peace and conflict resolution, including the evacuation of heavy weaponry from the frontline, the start of prisoner exchanges, and a reduction in ceasefire violations (Rojankysy, Fischer, & Semeniyy, 2020). The "special status" that was granted to the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in 2018, however, remains controversial and does not find support among all Ukrainians (Deprez, 2019). As Zelenskyy stated in October 2020:

“[T]he most important for me and, I am convinced, for all Ukrainians, is the end of the war in Donbas, the achievement of peace, the return of our people and the return of our territories” (Presidential Office, 2020, para. 2).

Since early 2015, the Russian government had ignored any calls or suggestions for UN peacekeepers (Grono & Brunson, 2018). Because of Russia’s veto in the UN Security Council, other members of the Council were not able to adopt significant decisions that could contribute to ending the conflict or improve Ukraine-Russian relations (Permanent Mission of Ukraine to the United Nations, 2016). Thus, when Russia proposed the deployment of peacekeeping forces along the frontline in 2017, their move was viewed with both hope and suspicion (Grono & Brunson, 2018). Although the UN peacekeeping mission Russia proposed was expected to do little more than freezing the conflict, it resulted in renewed attention for peace (Bildt, 2017; International Crisis Group, 2017). During a Paris summit held at the end of 2019, the first involving President Zelenskyy and President Putin, both sides pledged to a roadmap to end the conflict. However, specifics remained unclear (BBC, 2019).

Since the start of the conflict in 2014, over 13,000 people have been killed and more than 1.5 million displaced (Graham & Haberman, 2020). In eastern Ukraine, an estimated 3.4 million people are in dire need of humanitarian aid. Meanwhile, fighting on the frontline continues (Cincurova & Binet, 2021); the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) counts hundreds to thousands cease-fire violations a year (Herbert, 2019). The Ukrainian economy stagnates and poverty rates increase (Mamo, 2021). Furthermore, the danger of escalation lures as both sides continue to each other of mobilising military troops along the Ukraine-Russia border (Al Jazeera, 2021)⁵, and of prohibiting an effective peace settlement (Grono & Brunson, 2018).

On the Volunteer Battalions

Aside from the tensions between Ukraine and Russia, the movements that have risen out of the Volunteer Battalions are a cause for concern (Weir, 2019). Although the Battalions were considered necessary to support the UAF in the early stages of the conflict, they can

⁵ At the time of writing, the tensions in the border regions between Russia and Ukraine have escalated into a large-scale conflict. These developments, although interesting, will not be further discussed within this research.

only work as a short-term solution (Coffey, 2015; Weir, 2019). When uncontrolled, the very same Battalions that were popularly called ‘war heroes’ could pose a serious threat to the legitimacy of Ukrainian security institutions (Sheldon, 2017). In 2014, acting President Poroshenko decided on the demobilization of volunteer formations and their integration into the UAF. This strategy of incorporation arguably came as a response to global political pressure and to abide to the Minsk II agreement (Hromadske International, 2018). It may also have been influenced by the growing presence and military strength of the Battalions, and by the growing influence of their leaders (Coffey, 2015). Karatnycky (2015) describes the aims of the strategy as follows: to cripple the ideological influence of the right-wing oriented volunteer battalions; to channel the resources constituted by the volunteers into the regular forces; to establish control over their weapons; and to remove them from the front line. Since March 2014, the OSCE has been deployed in Ukraine to monitor the daily situation in all regions of the country and disarm all illegal groups (International Crisis Group, 2017; Security Council UN, 2015).

Several attempts have been made to incorporate the groups into the UAF. This integration would enable volunteers to earn a stable salary, give them access to legal weapons, and grant them the possibility of participating in combat at the frontline (New Cold War, 2015). For example, when the Ukrainian government decided on the integration of the Right Sector, they planned that some members of the Right Sector would assume roles in local police and others in the *Sluzhba bezpeky Ukrayiny* (SBU)⁶. Right Sector, however, refused. Similarly, several Battalions refused to demobilise. As a means of incentivising the submission of Volunteer Battalions to the control of the regular army, Kiev granted around 50 Volunteer Battalions the right to equip themselves with offensive weaponry. However, both Battalions formally integrated into the UAF and those not-integrated alike continued to acquire artillery independent from state institutions (Clapp, 2016). Reportedly, as of early 2022, the Ukrainian authorities were still in the process of demobilizing and integrating Volunteer formations (Hromadske International, 2018; Weir, 2019; Sheldon, 2017).

⁶ Ukraine’s law enforcement authority and main government agency in the areas of counterintelligence and combating terrorism

Assessing the extent to which the Volunteer Battalions have integrated into the formal structures is difficult. Some have emphasized the success of the Ukrainian strategy, claiming that the Volunteer Battalion phenomenon had largely ended within a year of its beginning (Käihkö, 2018a; Mironova & Sergatskova, 2017). Official statements by the Ukrainian government conclude that, by the end of 2015, all major Battalions except Right Sector, had been either dissolved or formally integrated in the UAF (Bulakh, Senkiv, & Teperik, 2017). Some go so far as suggesting that the Ukrainian strategy is a model to be followed in similar situations (Mironova & Sergatskova, 2017). However, several examples imply that the Ukrainian state actually has little control over the Battalions. Marten and Oliker (2017) argue that there continues to be a notable cohesiveness among former group members. A strong loyalty towards their old commanders also remains among veterans. Furthermore, the Battalions' access to weapons and forms of politicization threaten the stability and democracy of Ukraine. Umland (2019) states that although most of the Battalions have been integrated into the state security structures, many still operate relatively autonomous of state institutions. The legal subordination rather masks their substantial autonomy and political activism (Marten & Oliker, 2017). What is more, Volunteer Battalions continue to engage in day-to-day cease-fire violations (Mamo, 2021; OSCE, 2021).

In this chapter, I have presented the Volunteer Battalions as Ukraine's PGMs. They have played a significant role in the early stages of the conflict and they prominent actors in Ukraine today, despite the state's attempts to disband them. They continue to influence the country's social and political life. At least some of the Battalions enjoy a high degree of autonomy and continue to acquire weaponry and funding independently of government structures. The Ukrainian government indeed experiences difficulties in gaining control over these armed volunteers. In fact, Ukraine battles two battles; one on the frontline; and one internally, on the integration of its so-called war heroes.

The situation in Ukraine illustrates the advantages and disadvantages of PGMs. In particular, I consider the difficulties that arise in the demobilisation of PGMs. In the following chapter, I construct an argument that will clarify the ability of PGMs to become influential actors, to continue to sustain themselves and to prevent their demobilisation even after they have served their initial role.

3. Theory: PGMs and DDR

In this chapter, I discuss the hypothesis that PGMs are likely to disrupt the successful implementation of DDR policies. The assumption that DDR can only be effectively implemented when all parties to the conflict express the political will to engage in it is problematic when PGMs are involved. I argue that PGMs, when mobilised, can grow into powerful actors. To such an extent that they are able to influence peacebuilding efforts and prevent the implementation of DDR. I distinguish four mechanisms that subsequently compose a process in support of my hypothesis.

Mechanism 1: PGMs *assist a government* in crisis. The mobilisation of PGMs is often a response to a state's inability to secure the countries' territory and protect its citizens. They provide military strength, associate with politicians, and foster popular support for the government. PGMs thereby preserve a government's legitimacy.

Mechanism 2: As aid to the government, PGMs become increasingly entangled in the conflict. The relationship between government and PGMs grows into one of interdependence, providing PGMs with relative autonomy. In this position, PGMs can *become powerful actors*; they strengthen militarily, are able to ensure political representation, and raise popular support.

Mechanism 3: PGMs have taken on the role of war heroes, they have become a significant military power, and they have ensured influence in state's politics. These positions allow PGMs to *influence political decisions*, to alter policies and control political outcomes.

Mechanism 4: state and PGMs often do not agree to the best course of action in terms of the end or continuation of the conflict. Once PGMs have acquired the ability to exercise political influence, they are likely to exert this influence to prevent the implementation of practices that harm their status and position, such as the implementation of DDR. PGMs thus ultimately *restrain the political will for peacebuilding*.

In this chapter, I build on existing literature on PGMs to elaborate on this sequence of mechanisms. I conclude that PGMs harm the implementation of DDR.

3.1. Mechanism 1: Support the government

As PGMs mobilise in response to a need for protection and security, they support the state in maintaining some control over violence and legitimacy. They are of particular help to the state when official forces lack the ability to provide the necessary means or strength to respond to the threat.

PMGs have emerged in different types of civil war (Jentzsch, Kalyvas, & Schubiger, 2015). However, generally, they mobilise in two situations: when the government lacks the capacity to fight domestic insurgents; or when the state seeks to evade accountability on the use of force (Mitchell, Carey, & Butler, 2014; Akins, 2021). It may appear that PGMs arise either against the control of the state, or as a strategic decision of the state. In fact, it is often somewhere in between. A state may choose to align or tolerate the PGMs in lack of better alternatives (Hakonsholm, 2018). In short, PGMs arise with the purpose of supporting a state that lacks the ability to secure itself through statutory means.

Why would PGMs be able to provide the security the state is incapable of? Unlike members of official forces, PGMs' members are often unpaid and lack sufficient training. PGMs are often heterogeneous groups whose members have different motives and goals to engage in violent action. Thus, incentives between fighters and leaders may not align, resulting in organisational issues. Moreover, as informal armed forces, PGMs are legally constrained in procuring weapons (Wood, 2021). Yet, PGMS have become increasingly widespread and influential (Aliyev, 2016). In fact, in many situations of armed conflict where PGMs emerged, they have proved crucial to the state's attempt to maintain monopoly on legitimate violence (Aliyev, 2019b) and an important component in counterinsurgency strategies (Steinert, Steinert, & Carey, 2019). Aliyev (2016) identifies three major factors that enable PGMs in their adopted role to aid the state in responding appropriately to an internal threat: military capabilities, political association and popular support.

Military strength

The PGMs' military capabilities are often of great significance to the state, particularly since the state in need often does not have the military capacity or funding to support its military. Due to their informal nature, PGMs cannot rely on traditional sources of income. They do not qualify to receive tax-payers' money to fund their military endeavours

(Hunter, 2018). However, their non-statutory nature also signifies that PGMs are unbound by bureaucracy. This enables them to turn to other means of funding and use their resources more efficiently than official armies (Hakonsholm, 2018). Some PGMs are financed by the state but many rely, at least partly, on other sources of maintenance, such as foreign support, looting, crime, drugs, corporations, private donations, or crowdfunding (Estancona & Reid, 2021). PGMs, thus, have the ability to support the state militarily without draining state funds.

Furthermore, the composition of PGMs has a major influence on their military capabilities. For example, PGMs are often regionally mobilised. Recruits familiar with the territory and social circumstances give them a strategic advantage in conflict (Malyarenko & Galbreath, 2016). Moreover, local recruits are usually highly motivated to protect their home territory. PGMs are thus critical military organisations to a state in crisis. In fact, PGMs may, in terms of military strength, be superior to conventional military forces, making them (temporarily at least) irreplaceable by the army (Aliyev, 2016).

Political association

PGMs are enabled to aid the government through their association with the state's politics. Politicians can choose to secure ties with PGMs to create allies that help secure their political position (Estancona & Reid, 2021; Raleigh & Kishi, 2020). This occurs particularly in inchoate democracies and semi-authoritarian regimes (Ahram, 2016). PGMs function as a means of political security and intimidation. Leaders under coup threat, particularly in election- and post-election periods, are more likely to form PGM linkages to ensure political survival (Ash, 2016). In turn, PGMs receive funding and relative legitimacy (Bilban, 2018). Political representation can also be achieved when PGM leaders are themselves government representatives. Furthermore, an official decree can semi-legalise PGM activities. These forms of affiliation with the government not only grant them a certain legitimacy, but also justify their role as 'pro-government militias' (Aliyev, 2016).

Popular support

Popular support is essential to PGM mobilisation and continuation. As grass-root organisations, it is important for PGMs to receive positive recognition from the citizens they aim to protect and represent for several reasons (Aliyev, 2016). Firstly, popular support validates PGM existence, especially in democratic regimes. Democratic leaders

are sensitive to public opinion (Ambrozik, 2019). Popular support therefore legitimises their continued existence and role in securing the population (Aliyev, 2016). Secondly, most PGMs aim to shield local populations from the rebel threat. In order to do so, they require local recruits, and they are more likely to attract recruits when public opinion is on their side (Jentzsch, Kalyvas, & Schubiger, 2015). Lastly, as some PGMs rely on crowdfunding, popular support is essential to ensure financial resources (Hunter, 2018).

PGMs mobilise when the state is incapable of securing the monopoly on violence. As beneficial as this may be for the state in the short-term, PGMs can endanger the state's monopoly on violence and attempts to peacebuilding in the long run. The enabling factors in their assisting role provide PGMs with the means to control at least some resources, actors, or events. Therefore, their success in supporting the state is not only beneficial for the state, but also grants PGMs with a position of power. By increasing their strength through military means, political representation, and popular support, PGMs are potentially able to influence political decisions and disrupt peacebuilding attempts.

3.2. Mechanism 2: Obtain a position of power

In the previous section, I discussed how PGMs can be important actors in a conflict. As PGMs become increasingly entangled in the conflict, they obtain a position of power. This position is acquired through command over resources, political alliances, and a body of followers which enables them to exercise influence or control. I discuss first how the relationship between state and PGMs can develop into one of interdependence and then how this effects the PGMs in terms of military strength, political association and popular support.

Interdependence

The role PGMs take in assisting the state oftentimes results in a relation of interdependence between state and PGMs. As established earlier, a state can gain much from PGMs during conflict, both logistically and politically. A PGM aids the government in maintaining legitimacy and a monopoly on violence by evading accountability, and by functioning as counterinsurgents (Aliyev, 2019b). As such, PGMs can become indispensable to states in times of crisis. As the state can depend on PGMs to provide security, the PGMs depend, especially in the beginning, on the state for legitimacy. This is called 'borrowed legitimacy' (Schneckener, 2017). As long as PGMs are dependent on

the grace of the state for their survival, states remain in relative control of their activities. As long as states are dependent on PGMs for security and legitimacy, PGMs are relevant. To remain trusted parties to the state, PGMs are careful to engage in criminal activities (Aliyev, 2016). The state, in turn, provides the PGMs with some military autonomy (Schneckener, 2017).

However, the balanced relation of interdependence between state and PGMs is, at one point, likely to be ended, either by the state or by the PGMs. As long as PGMs are crucial to the state as a means to ensure its survival, or more effective than the formal forces, the state is likely to maintain its relation to PGMs (Abbs, Clayton, & Thomson, 2020). Yet, when PGMs grow too powerful, a state can attempt to either undermine, co-opt, incorporate, or coerce them (Aliyev, 2019b)⁷. Moreover, the state's political ideology can change its perception towards the PGMs, no longer tolerating their existence (Staniland, 2015), or the state regains monopoly on violence through their own military or political efforts, providing them with the power to quit the relationship of interdependence (Abbs, Clayton, & Thomson, 2020). Furthermore, PGMs can lose popular support through, for example, human rights violations and other atrocities (Mitchell, Carey, & Butler, 2014).

PGMs can also outgrow their dependency from the state. They are often mobilised with the purpose of serving the state, bound by a common interest in the military outcome (Abbs, Clayton, & Thomson, 2020). Yet, once created, PGMs tend to have a life of their own, private agendas, and, more importantly, goals and interests different to those of the government (Boisvert, 2015). In the long-term, it may be unclear where PGMs' loyalties lie. They may be rather more loyal to local interests (Käihkö, 2018a), or to their financial benefactors (Hunter, 2018). PGM members may also be recruited from parts of society that hold little pro-government sentiments—for example, because the recruits do not feel represented by their government, or because they belong to an ethnic minority (Abbs, Clayton, & Thomson, 2020). By strengthening their position, PGMs may surpass the 'borrowed legitimacy' that initially marked their relationship to the state and become relatively independent organisations with their own will and aspirations. As such, PGMs are no longer only protectors and providers of legitimacy, but they also become challengers to the state's legitimacy.

⁷ For more on these four strategies, see Käihkö (2018a).

In the previous section, I set out several factors that affect the ability of PGMs to be of assistance to the state. Military strength, political representation and popular support are arguably not only enabling factors but can also be effectively used by PGMs to obtain a powerful position in society and politics.

Military strength

The PGMs' military strength is not only a means for protection and security. It is furthermore a means through which they acquire dominance, particularly when the PGMs' military capabilities are superior to that of state forces. This may be in terms of numbers and weaponry, but also in terms of strategy and organisational structure (Aliyev, 2016). Not all PGMs are able to access the same type and amount of weaponry. A PGM's arsenal can differ from a few machetes to a significant number of tanks (Carey, Mitchell, & Lowe, 2013). If a state provides a PGM with military material, this is likely limited to light weaponry (Hakonsholm, 2018). However, PGMs often turn to other financial sources, such as private politicians (Ash, 2016) and oligarchs (Bilban, 2018). Moreover, PGMs may acquire military material as trophies, captured from enemy forces through combat. The result can be an arsenal of great significance.

The state tolerates the use of military force because the PGMs provide security, they have political affiliations, or they have been granted a semi-official status by state authority (Schneckener, 2017). State tolerance may even go as far as PGMs committing human rights violations without intervention or retribution (Mitchell, Carey, & Butler, 2014; Carey & González, 2021). PGMs' use of military power can become a particularly important issue for the state when PGMs choose to engage only in military endeavours favourable to their own interests or, when they resist the state in their military strategies (Carey & González, 2021).

Political representation

Affiliations with the government and politicians can in effect result in significant influence for PGMs. The relation between PGMs and state at first is based on shared interests (e.g. counterinsurgency, or the security of territory). This relationship, however, can be further utilised by PGMs to gain a political platform and maintain relevance. In the study of social movements, such a collaboration between state and citizens is called a 'grassroots strategy', or 'co-production'. This is a political strategy of citizens contesting for power

and influence (Mitlin, 2008). Similarly, PGMs' association with governments and politicians can be used to gain a platform to promote their ideals and goals, and acquire legitimacy (Schneckener, 2017). For example, in many instances, PGMs become a means in political competition (Raleigh & Kishi, 2020). This can go as far as PGMs engaging in violence against rivals to secure interests or supremacy of a political party (Schneckener, 2017; Raleigh & Kishi, 2020). It must be noted that though the PGMs may show loyalty to one or the other party or politician, they are not fully controlled by these governmental parties or politicians. Their role in political competition does, however, ensure that the PGMs maintain political and military relevance (Schneckener, 2017).

Furthermore, PGMs have increasingly shown interests in the creation of political parties and have taken part in institutional politics as a way of expanding their influence (Berti, 2011). Seeking to become more than just an armed group, they hope to find a greater audience among the population (Knappe & Nanes, 2021). Setting up a political wing to their armed organisation is often motivated by a need to acquire stability and organisational legitimacy (Berti, 2011). PGMs often remain careful on how they position themselves in vis-à-vis state and society to maintain relevance and maintain strategic relationships to those in power (Schneckener, 2017). PGMs thus relate themselves to the government in different ways to ensure political representation and aim to maintain their relevance and expand their influence.

Popular support

PGMs may acquire influence through popular support. In fact, when they gain popular support, this is often at the cost of the state. In framing themselves as providers of security, PGMs often oppose themselves from a corrupt and impotent government. Rather presenting itself as grass-root organisations, they gain legitimacy through collaborating with and providing security to the population (Aliyev, 2016). The popular support PGMs may enjoy also grants them the possibility to engage in politics and effectively crowdsource for their military efforts (Hunter, 2018). Some PGMs stimulate popular support by exercising some type of governance⁸, for example by granting social goods such as health care and education (Bolte, 2015). The extent to which the PGMs enjoy

⁸ For more elaborate literature on the dynamics between citizens and PGMs in terms of governance and legitimacy, see for example (Jentzsch, Kalyvas, & Schubiger, 2015).

popular support is likely to significantly influence the extent to which the state can exercise control and authority towards the PGMs (Aliyev, 2020).

The mobilisation of PGMs as assistants to the state in crisis logically results in PGMs becoming more powerful. Firstly, PGMs wish to become more influential. It allows them to remain relevant and to aim at realising their own goals and interests. Obtaining a position in which they are able to do so is thereby vital for their survival. Secondly, their interdependent relation to the state grants them with relative autonomy which they, in turn, can use to acquire military strength, political representation and popular support to strengthen their position. Maintaining legitimacy remains a constant struggle. Therefore, it is no surprise that not all PGMs are able to survive the long run. However, as the literature discussed above suggests, a significant number of PGMs are still able to maintain their relevance and even increase their influence, potentially acquiring the ability to influence state politics.

3.3. Mechanism 3: Influence political decisions

The literature on PGMs suggests that, in the long run, they can become a serious threat to the stability of the state and prevent the potential for peace (Steinert, Steinert, & Carey, 2019; Aliyev, 2019a). They are likely to engage in human rights violations (Mitchell, Carey, & Butler, 2014) and harm the state's monopoly on violence (Carey, Colaresi, & Mitchell, 2015). The previous sections illustrate that PGMs can become powerful actors within and outside state structures. Below, I show how this position is a potential threat to the state as they become able to influence politics.

Military strength

When PGMs mobilise, they may regard themselves as protectors of the political and social order (Schneckener, 2017). While PGMs are able to be effective forces in counterinsurgency, they are often first and foremost regarded as useful for the state (Staniland, 2015). They allow the state to maintain legitimacy among the population (Aliyev, 2019a). However, their military strength, as I have set out above, can become superior to that of state security forces. As powerful armed organisations, PGMs can become progressively harder to control by the state, as well as increasingly entangled in activities that go against state interests.

The more prominent PGMs become, the more inclined they are to secure their organisation and achieve their goals (Aliyev, 2020). Arguably, as armed actors, PGMs are able to do so with the use of force or through threats of violence. When the state remains militarily dependent on the PGMs or is incapable of demobilising them effectively, they threaten the state's monopoly on violence and have the ability to implement policies.

Political representation

As some PGMs are able to outgrow the relationship of interdependency between them and the state, the state must find ways to safeguard their loyalty. Above, I referred to the relative autonomy PGMs gain from the interdependent relation. This includes states withholding repercussions for PGMs' illegal activities (Mitchell, Carey, & Butler, 2014; Carey & González, 2021), or granting limited influence in political decisions (Schneckener, 2017).

As mentioned before, PGMs may be used by politicians or political parties as a means of political competition. These connections may also be an enabler for PGMs to influence political decision-making. Raleigh and Kishi (2020) stress how intense political competition, in particular in democratising countries, allows for a "marketplace of loyalties" (p. 584) where PGMs are used to physically secure politicians and intimidate. Furthermore, PGMs can be used to 'coup-proof' political leaders (Ash, 2016). By providing loyalty to some politicians or political parties and not to others, PGMs can play a great role in the composition of the ruling elite (Bolte, Joo, & Mukherjee, 2021), therefore influencing politics.

Aside from affiliating with political parties, PGMs can create a political wing to their organisation, thereby withdrawing attention from the battlefield and towards the political arena. They are then likely to fight for their interests politically (Hakonsholm, 2018; Knuppe & Nanes, 2021). These political goals are often shaped by their origins and their experiences on the battlefield (Boisvert, 2015). In fact, in many conflicts in which PGMs were active, some of their (former) members remain influential political actors even after the conflict has settled (Aliyev, 2019a; Berti, 2011). When effective in collecting support, PGMs' political wing may have significant influence on political decision-making through formal political channels.

Popular support

The popular support PGMs have acquired can also significantly enable them to influence politics. As established earlier, the weak performance of the state in counterinsurgency negatively affects the trust of the population in the official security apparatus. PGMs can make use of this lack of trust in the state and use their own position and military success to generate popular support. The population may then favour the services offered by PGMs. The public may further prefer PGMs over state security as they have personal ties to the PGMs, or because the PGMs protect the interests of an ethnic group, people, or class (Podder, 2017). Indeed, popular support for PGMs can surpass that of the government (Staniland, 2015). This secures PGMs since political leaders are likely to avoid decisions resulting in negative publicity. Furthermore, PGMs can gain followers for their political wings (Aliyev, 2020). A political electorate secures PGMs' legitimacy which further grants them with political influence (Knappe & Nanes, 2021).

3.4. Mechanism 4: Disrupt peacebuilding efforts

I have established that PGMs can influence political policies. In the discussion of this fourth mechanism, it is important to clarify why PGMs with such power are likely to exercise their influence in order to prevent the DDR of their units.

In essence, the termination of conflict is not in the PGMs' best interest. They are concerned with their survival and development (Ahram, 2016). The termination of conflict means their support is no longer needed and all that is left is the threat PGMs pose to the state's monopoly on violence. The state will therefore aim to disband the PGMs (Aliyev, 2016). What is more, PGM members often await several challenges after conflict termination. Even though they may have contributed to state victory and have been loyal to the state throughout the conflict, rarely do PGM members receive this recognition. They will have to reintegrate, deal with trauma and rebuild without the support of the state (Ahram, 2016). Conflict termination may also mean PGM members have to atone for crimes committed during combat (Aliyev, 2020). Ongoing conflict, on the contrary, is more likely to ensure the PGMs' position and continued existence. They maintain a form of legitimacy and are able to find financial support for their activities (Abbs, Clayton, & Thomson, 2020). Through ongoing conflict, PGMs maintain a platform to pursue their ideological goals (Aliyev, 2016). Moreover, private gain or the financial or political patron's gain may be a reason to thwart conflict termination and peace (Aliyev, 2019a). Preventing

the ending of conflict or a conflict reoccurrence is beneficial for the PGMs, or even necessary to preserve their existence.

This is not to say that conflict continuation is always beneficial for PGMs. High-intensity conflicts may in fact undermine their position as counterinsurgents. First of all because PGMs would suffer major casualties in large-scale combat meaning their physical destruction is continuously under threat. Second of all since PGMs are expected to deliver in their role as counterinsurgents. Long-lasting means PGMs fail in that regard. Failure to meet the state's expectations may lead to their demobilisation or integration in formal security forces (Aliyev, 2019a). PGMs will thus favour the continuation of low-activity violence over any other conflict outcomes. In other words, as Aliyev (2019a) puts it, a 'no peace, no war' situation.

DDR requires all actors to a conflict to politically commit to the process in order for it to be effectively implemented. Yet, it is unlikely that PGMs will support the implementation of a peacebuilding practice that threatens their status (mechanism 4). They also have the ability to influence political policies through their representation in government by high-up politicians or other political actors (mechanism 3). PGMs are thus a major threat to the implementation of DDR practices. It is likely that PGMs will try to exert their political influence to prevent peacebuilding efforts, such as DDR.

3.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have set out a process of four mechanisms that clarify why the involvement of PGMs in conflict is likely to negatively affect the implementation of DDR. To its core, DDR requires the political will of all parties involved to transform the security apparatus, to engage in peacebuilding activities. PGMs with political influence, however, are very unlikely to support such endeavours. As PGMs develop from a military organisation that supports the state in times of crisis into a powerful military and political actor, they pursue interests and goals often different to that of the state. Their relevance and legitimacy depend on continued low-intensity violence. To survive, PGMs will therefore favour a 'no peace, no war' situation. The position they have acquired through military strength, political representation, and popular support allows them to prevent political policies to engage in DDR practices.

By involving PGMs in conflict, the state outsources its monopoly on violence. It appears difficult to regain control, particularly when a state militarily depends on PGMs. PGMs' mere existence undermines state control which, in turn, provides the base for the PGMs to grow increasingly powerful relative to the regular forces. With PGMs able to grow into actors of significance, the state lacks the political power to accommodate programs of reform and effectively disarm them. It is why PGMs often persist even after a conflict has ended.

4. Testing the theory: Ukraine's PGMs

In this chapter, I test the theory developed in chapter 3. I use the conflict Ukraine, starting in 2014, as a recent case of a conflict in which PGMs are involved to explain how the presence of PGMs affects the implementation of DDR programs. Following the four mechanisms, I show significant correspondence between the theoretical process and the empirical reality in Ukraine. The structure of this chapter follows the structure of the previous chapter along the four mechanisms: support the government; obtain a position of power; influence political decisions; and disrupt peacebuilding efforts.

4.1. Mechanism 1: Support the government

In the previous chapter, I have set out that PGMs mobilise when the state is unable to secure its borders or monopoly on violence. I presented three factors that contribute to the PGMs' ability to support the government in these tasks: military strength; political representation; and popular support. Although there are differences between PGMs, most are able to acquire weaponry, receive some degree of political support by associating themselves with individual politicians or political parties, and foster some degree of popular support through their achievements and networks. The mobilisation of PGMs can occur either outside state control, as a strategic decision of the state, or, more often, somewhere in between. In this section, I elaborate on how the Ukrainian Volunteer Battalions have supported the government.

The Ukrainian government in need of assistance

As discussed in chapter 2, Ukraine's PGMs, the Volunteer Battalions, emerged during the 2014 conflict in the aftermath of the Maidan protests. Primarily, they were formed as a response to the inability of the Ukrainian government to secure its borders through formal

military means. The Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) was poorly trained, lacked modern equipment and was ill-organised (Coffey, 2015). Partly because of a need for governmental efficiency, partly because of a need for governmental legitimacy, the temporary Ukrainian government of 2014 allowed volunteers to participate in activities regarding the defence sector, internal security, propaganda, fair elections, and the transition of power (Minakov, 2014). Various groups, who became known as Volunteer Battalions, organised and took up arms to assist the state in its responsibility to defend the territory and patrol the country's cities. They were thereby essential to the Ukrainian government in maintaining legitimacy and the monopoly on violence (Marten & Oliker, 2017).

Military strength

As voluntary units, the Battalions have been able to provide the military strength the UAF lacked to resolve national security issues. Through informal recruitment strategies and financial support the Volunteer Battalions proved to be able to mobilise quickly, in numbers and weaponry, and therefore to respond more swiftly to the immediate threat than official state forces (Veldt, 2018). In the first months after the start of the conflict, over 40 pro-government Volunteer Battalions mobilised (Aliyev, 2020a). There were great differences in arsenal between Battalions. In the early days, the Donbas Battalion, for example, was only equipped with airsoft guns while other Battalions were reportedly better armed than the regular army (Veldt, 2018). The Dnipro-1 Battalion owned 300 AK-74 rifles, 30 M-16s, and a collection of other weapons of different type and calibre (Cohen & Green, 2016). The Aidar Battalion consisted mainly of Ukrainian veterans, receiving their weaponry through their connections in the Army (Hunter, 2018). Even though not all Battalions were equipped with heavy artillery, most proved effective on the battlefield as they were often familiar with the environment and made efficient use of resources (Wood, 2021).

The Volunteer Battalions mostly comprised of a heterogenous group of volunteers, sometimes without clear hierarchical structures, which resulted in issues within Battalions. There could be major disagreements between fighters and commanders and their strategies were sometimes far from efficient (Cohen & Green, 2016). In addition, there was a constant issue of loyalty as combatants could leave the battlefield (and many did) at almost any time without fear of sanctions (Bukkvoll, 2019). Still, during the first six months of the conflict, the Battalions fought most battles. For example, Volunteer Battalions were

crucial in the July-August 2014 offensive when a series of over 120 artillery attacks by Russian forces were reported near the Russian-Ukrainian border (Aliyev, 2016; Hyde, 2014). The Volunteer Battalions provided the official army with materials, from food to body armour and medical kits. Moreover, they “are increasingly doing the actual fighting” (Hyde, 2014, para. 10). In August 2014, Volunteer Battalions, among which the Donbas Battalion and the Dnipro-1 Police Battalion, effectively re-captured the city of Ilovaisk (Aliyev, 2016; Hyde, 2014; Shramovych, 2019). Furthermore, they played a significant role in halting separatist forces in Mariupol, a city of regional importance in south-eastern Ukraine, before the ceasefire of September 2014 (Walker, 2014). Indeed, the Volunteer Battalions proved indispensable in defending Ukraine’s territory.

Political representation

The Volunteer Battalions maintained good relations with the state and associated themselves with the state and its institutions. A Presidential decree on the 13th of March 2014 provided a semi-legal framework for the Battalion’s activities, emphasising a mutual relationship (Bilban, 2018; Hunter, 2018). The Battalions were hereby formally authorized to recruit, under the condition that the recruits were local men between the age of 18 and 50 without criminal records (Hunter, 2018). Some Battalions kept close relations with the political elite and used these connections to procure more and better weapons, including heavy machine guns, armoured vehicles, and automatic rifles (Wood, 2021). Political organisations and even individual politicians provided these Battalions with funding. The Azov Battalion, for example, used its connections with the nationalist political party Svoboda to engage with a network for recruiting and funding (Hunter, 2018). Moreover, the Azov and the Aidar Battalion were mobilised by the Minister of Interior Arsen Avakov and they maintained a close connection with him (Wood, 2021).

Popular support

In gathering popular support, Volunteer Battalions have mostly aimed to present themselves as grassroot organisations, as a ‘people’s army’ fighting a ‘people’s war’ (Aliyev, 2016). To illustrate their patriotism, many Battalions used symbols and names referring to former Ukrainian PGMs that arose during other conflicts throughout Ukrainian history. Many of these former fighters are still viewed by many Ukrainians as heroes and inspirations (Kiriienko, 2016). To maintain the image of a ‘people’s army’, the Volunteer Battalions have largely refrained from engagement in criminal activities. Moreover,

Battalion leaders who were convicted criminals, such as Azov leader Andriy Biletsky, sought to counter these accusations (Aliyev, 2016). Yet, rarely is the popular view of the Battalions affected by the previous crimes of Battalion members. Instead, the Volunteer Battalions are credited by many with saving the territorial integrity of the country (Marten & Oliker, 2017). Even the ideology of these Battalions was not deemed of great importance. Some national-radical Battalions were able to foster a large base of popular support, while national-radical parties and movements had previously been unable to gather significant electoral support. The extremist right-wing Right Sector, for example, grew rapidly in size, and the group's members soon acquired a reputation of heroes. This reputation was largely gained by effectively symbolising the demands of the Maidan Revolution and by protecting people from the police (Likhachev, 2015). In sum, they gained popular support through their actions rather than their ideologies. Popular support was necessary for the Volunteer Battalions as most Battalions depended on private donations to equip and supply their forces, but also on the assistance of non-combat volunteers offering, for example, medical aid and technical knowledge (Aliyev, 2016). Some Battalions have been primarily financed by oligarchs: Ihor Kolomoisky, for instance, provided Dnipro-1 with financial resources, as well as with ammunition and personal security. This perceived patriotic behaviour gave these oligarchs popular legitimacy (Veldt, 2018).

The Ukrainian government of 2014 faced legitimacy issues. It was unable to secure a monopoly on violence, protect its territory from insurgents, or secure its population. The only solution seemed to be the involvement of volunteers as a defence structure. The three factors of the first mechanism, as set out in chapter 3, explain the Volunteer Battalions' ability to support the state in its quest for legitimacy. The Volunteer Battalions are thereby important actors to the conflict. At the same time, these factors illustrate the fragile position of the Volunteer Battalions. To uphold their role as defenders of the Ukrainian territory and providers of legitimacy, the Battalions must maintain popular support, financial resources, and good relations with the state. The following sections elaborate on the Battalions' potential to overcome this uncertain position and on the Battalions' potential to evolve into politically influential actors that are able to restrain peacemaking efforts.

4.2. Mechanism 2: Obtain a position of power

I have argued that PGMs can become increasingly entangled in conflict and grow into powerful organisations. This section describes this potential Ukraine's Volunteer Battalions. Arguably, although some Battalions remained relatively insignificant forces, others have been able to build significant military strength and political representation and have been able to maintain popular support for their actions. These three factors are discussed in the previous section as means through which Volunteer Battalions are able to support the state. By further developing their military strength, political representation and popular support, Volunteer Battalions have the potential to become powerful actors in the conflict. As such, they may become influential, not only militarily, but also politically and among the public. This occurs particularly when PGMs and state attain a relation of interdependence in which PGMs are granted relative autonomy. This is the second mechanism of the process. I illustrate this mechanism throughout this section.

Interdependence

PGMs are enabled to acquire power in situations where the relation between state and PGMs is one of interdependence and where the PGMs are granted some autonomy over their actions.

Ukraine's Volunteer Battalions have proved indispensable for the state. At the same time, Volunteer Battalions required the support of the state to legitimise their actions. As the Volunteer Battalions had no official status, the legitimacy of their actions depended on public support, their successes, and the permission of the state to acquire weaponry and fight on behalf of the state. The lack of an official status was moreover a problem for the state which may be accused of supporting illegal militias. The result was that both state and Battalions were careful in this relationship of mutual dependence. Most Battalions became known as 'disciplined and honest' and worked closely together with the UAF (Góralaska, 2015). To prevent harm to the relationship, Battalions mostly refrained from engaging in illegal activities. The few Battalions that did engage in lawless behaviour were, however, rarely penalised (Amnesty International, 2014; Saressalo & Huhtinen, 2018). Volunteer Battalions, thus, were weakly controlled by government agencies and enjoyed autonomy, but mostly refrained from directly undermining state interests, emphasising their relation of interdependence.

This did not mean, however, that state and Battalions always saw eye to eye. Volunteer Battalions spoke out openly on their dissatisfaction with the formal counterinsurgent strategy (Puglisi, 2015). In general, at the beginning of the conflict, both state and Volunteer Battalions pursued shared interests, that of suppressing the insurgents (Hakonsholm, 2018). However, on how this was supposed to be done, their views could vary (Bukkvoll, 2019). It is no question that state and Battalions disagreed on various occasions in terms of the execution of operations. In fact, there was much dissatisfaction among Battalions on how the UAF and the state acted. “I hope it is incompetence”, said the commander of Dnipro-1 Battalion Vladimir Shilov about the behaviour of soldiers of the UAF, “but on the frontlines peoples are talking about betrayal” (quoted in Bateson, 2014). The result was both Battalions and state compromised. For example, the Azov Battalion rarely initiated major offensives independently. In turn, once the Battalion received green light from the government, the tactics and exact execution were often up to the Battalion itself. The Azov Battalion rarely engaged in battles which it did not support (Bukkvoll, 2019).

Military strength

The Volunteer Battalions grew in strength rapidly, both in number and in military capabilities. In the beginning of 2015, the Volunteer Battalions were a total force of 50,000 (Bilban, 2018). The number of fighters were thereby equal to the number of official personnel of the UAF (Aliyev, 2016). Since the beginning of volunteer mobilisation, the state only tolerated small arms among the Battalions. However, some Volunteer Battalions soon became superior to the UAF in military equipment and organisation (Coffey, 2015). They engaged in the majority of battles and did the majority of the fighting (Wood, 2021). During the first months of the conflict, regular forces saw it necessary to provide some Battalions with heavier weaponry. Once these weapons were used to good effect, it became difficult to demand them back (Bukkvoll, 2019). In turn, official forces in some cases depended on the Battalions to provide them with military or medical equipment (Kiriienko, 2016). Some Battalions, such as Azov and Dnipro-1, were able to acquire armoured vehicles, including tanks (Bukkvoll, 2019). Furthermore, some Battalions enjoyed financial independence as a result of generous patrons and private donations (Aliyev, 2016).

Volunteer Battalions and official state forces fought alongside each other in various battles (Hyde, 2014). This does not mean, however, that relations between official forces and the Volunteer Battalions were built on cooperation and mutual respect. Volunteer Battalions' members have reported that the UAF often took credit for their successes (Hromadske International, 2018). Moreover, some Battalions accuse the UAF of abandoning them in the heat of battle. For example, on the 24th of August, reported as 'Ukraine's deadliest day', soldiers from the Dnipro-1 Battalion became trapped in the city of Ilovaisk, surrounded by Russian-backed and Russian forces (Shramovych, 2019), while the Ministry of Defence retrieved the UAF and left the Battalions to do the fighting alone (Hyde, 2014).

Political representation

The renewal of the Minsk Protocol in February 2015 ended a period of intense battle in the Donbass region. Despite daily instances of violence and breaches of the ceasefire, no major battles and changes to the frontline occurred (Veldt, 2018). It is in this period that many Volunteer Battalions became (more) active politically. They either intensified their relations with political parties or politicians, for example by forwarding their commanders as politicians of these parties (Veldt, 2018), or established and developed their own political wing. Biletsky, commander of the Azov Battalion, used Azov's fame as a springboard to win a seat in Parliament in 2014 (Shuster & Perrigo, 2021). Political parties and politicians benefitted from these associations since the Volunteer Battalions' popularity improved political legitimacy to all those connected to them (Hunter, 2018). Almost all political parties included Battalion members in their political campaigns to increase electoral support. Indeed, Volunteer Battalions became political assets as "[t]he increasing involvement of Battalion commanders and organisers in politics (...) increased popular respect for the government in Kyiv [as a whole]" (Hunter, 2018, p. 110).

Some Battalions launched their own political parties. For example, in 2016, the Azov Battalion formed a political party called the National Corps, a political party composed of Azov veterans mostly (Nemtsova, 2018; Colborne, 2019). Fighters from the Azov Battalion are often showcased in the party's promotion material (Kuzmenko, 2020). As the head of the National Corps Kravchenko comments: "There are several ways of coming to power, but we are trying something through elections, but we have all sorts of possibilities" (Sergatskova, 2016, para. 11). The Right Sector labelled itself "a military-political

movement of a new format”, consisting of three segments: the Volunteer Corps; the political party; and the Prava Molod, the movement’s youth wing (Pravyi Sektor, 2021). The political party was established in March 2014 and the ultranationalist leader and then member of the Ukrainian Parliament Dmitry Yarosh appointed for president (RT, 2015). The Donbas Battalion, though not launching a new party, took over much of the political party Samopomich. The Battalions’ commander Semenchenko became the party’s president (International Crisis Group, 2020b). Several Volunteer Battalions thus became prominent actors within Ukraine’s politics and were able to voice their views politically, either through their party program or through their position in Parliament.

Popular support

The popular support Volunteer Battalions received was strongly affected by their military strength and commitment. They gained popularity because they were deemed more courageous and effective than the official army (Hakonsholm, 2018). Their sacrifices on the battlefield made them one of the most trusted institutions in Ukraine (Puglisi, 2015). In December 2014, a news organisation (quoted in Hunter, 2018) published a poll identifying the Volunteer Battalions as one of the most trusted groups in Ukraine, ahead of the government, the military, and even the Church. A July 2015 survey noted how 61% of the population completely or somewhat trusted the volunteers, in comparison to the 20% trust in government authorities (Käihkö, 2018a). In 2017 still, trust in Ukraine’s volunteers was at 66,7%, compared to 57,3% in the UAF (RISU, 2017). The Battalions thus enjoyed greater popular support than the state and its institutions. These numbers illustrate the position the Battalions acquired among the public and in terms of providing legitimacy to the state. I will elaborate on this notion in section 3.3.

This section leads me to affirm that Volunteer Battalions have been able to develop significantly since they mobilised in 2014. Through their relationship of interdependence with the government, the Battalions were granted some autonomy allowing them to evolve into organisations with great military strength, valuable political alliances, and great popular support. The influence Battalions’ have gained is visible in their control over heavy artillery, in their political role as providers of legitimacy and popular support to the government, and in their ability to avoid accountability in case of criminal activities. At this point in the process, I have shown how the PGMs of Ukraine have been able to acquire

an influential position. As powerful entities, it would follow that the Volunteer Battalions may become a danger to state's authority and legitimacy, able to influence politics, and prevent peacebuilding.

This threat has been recognised nationally and internationally since the Battalions' mobilisation in 2014. The Battalions have been viewed as a necessity considering the lack of state capacity, but also as a threat for long-term stability (Coffey, 2015). Critics have considered them insufficiently controlled by Ukrainian authorities and undisciplined (Marten & Oliker, 2017). In 2015, rumours emerged that a military coup by the Volunteer Battalions might be in the making. Volunteer Battalions, by then, were feared by the state for their military success, the politicisation of their ideas, and their outspoken criticism against Ukraine's formal counterinsurgency strategy (Puglisi, 2015). As the Volunteer Battalions gained magnitude, the need rose, for the state, to exercise control over these armed formations (Hakonsholm, 2018). By the end of 2014, Ukrainian authorities commenced their efforts to officially demobilise the Volunteer Battalions, mainly by integrating them into the official armed forces. These efforts are described in chapter 1. In that chapter, I set out that although the Ukrainian government aimed at subordinating all Volunteer Battalions to the formal defence forces the question it remains whether the Battalions have actually subordinated to the state authority. The government does not seem able to gain full control over the Volunteer Battalions despite insisting on their demobilisation. In fact, some Battalions remain relatively autonomous actors. The following section elaborates on how the Battalions remain able to influence political decisions (mechanism 3) and ultimately hinder their demobilisation.

4.3 Mechanism 3: Influence political decisions

In this section, I discuss the third mechanism. More specifically, I explain how the Battalions have been able to influence the political decision-making process. In section 4.1., I have argued the Volunteer Battalions were of great support to the state in its inability to maintain legitimacy and a monopoly on violence (mechanism 1). The Battalions were able to fulfil this role because they acquired weaponry, were officially or unofficially supported by the government, and received popular support for their 'heroic' actions. In section 4.2., I have set out how they acquired a role in the politics of the state, increasing their military strength, and maintaining their popular image of war heroes. As such, the Volunteer Battalions became relatively autonomous (mechanism 2). Below, I

show how some Battalions have been able to harness military strength, political representation and popular opinion as sources of power. As they use these sources to their advantage, the Battalions can obtain a position in which they can influence political policies (mechanism 3). This may explain why they remain significant actors today. I structure this section along three themes: military strength; political representation; and popular support.

Influence through military means

The Volunteer Battalions have proved to play a significant role in defending the Ukrainian state in the early days of the conflict. This role has been recognised widely by both government and citizens. At an award ceremony in 2014, then-President Poroshenko praised Biletsky, the commander of Azov, and other Azov Battalion members, saying “These are our best warriors (...) [o]ur best volunteers” (Shuster & Perrigo, 2021, para. 22). When the Ukrainian Parliament issued a statement on the demobilisation of all Volunteer Battalions, it hoped the Battalions would do so voluntarily (Käihkö, 2018a). However, many Battalions resisted while others remained relatively autonomous and politicised units within the UAF, with separate recruitment and command structures. Their legal subordination did arguably nothing more than masking their substantial autonomy (Marten & Oliker, 2017). The ambiguity surrounding the integration of the Battalions was used to the state’s advantage. The Right Sector, for example, performed operations that the state military and intelligence services were incapable of, for both practical and legal reasons (Käihkö, 2018a).

I argued how Volunteer Battalions were able to acquire weaponry without much interference from the state. They received both official and unofficial support from government and government institutions, they proved able to provide the security the state was incapable of providing, and they received popular support for their military endeavours. Even after the Battalions were demanded to disarm in 2015 – and many allegedly did, former Battalion members continued to have access to weaponry. Clapp (2016) reports that Battalions were still acquiring heavy guns, many had anti-aircraft missiles, the Dnipro-1 Battalion possessed heavily armoured vehicles, drones, and sniper rifles, and the Azov Battalion still had access to a tank factory. The Ukrainian government were very aware of the Battalions’ ability to acquire weaponry as some Battalions

supported the state in addressing the military shortcomings of the official forces by providing training, monetary means and weaponry (Makarenko, 2016; Puglisi, 2015).

Several incidents illustrate that Volunteer Battalions have not refrained from using this weaponry to influence policy. For example, in early 2017, armed protesters, mostly veterans of the Donbas and Aidar Battalions, used violence and threats to force the Ukrainian government in altering their policy and ban anthracite coal import from separatist-controlled territories (Marten & Oliker, 2017). In March, this demand was adopted by the Ukrainian Minister of Energy and Coal Industry (Zubkova, 2017). In April of 2017, official government policy said Ukraine would halt supplies of anthracite from areas that are not under control of the Ukrainian government (InterFax Ukraine, 2017). Furthermore, the Donbas Battalion has used its fighters to openly declare allegiance to political policies or politicians. In 2014, for instance, when Poroshenko gave a speech to Parliament, members of the Battalion guarded the building to protect Poroshenko since information regarding terror attacks was received. In 2017, however, the Battalions' allegiance shifted to Poroshenko's rival, Mikheil Saakashvili. Although the latter was not allowed to enter Ukraine, the Battalion protected him when he held an illegal gathering in the country (Fedorenko & Umland, 2021).

There is much uncertainty about the degree of disarmament and integration of the Volunteer Battalions. Although, they have allegedly laid down their weapons, many (former) Battalion members maintain access to (heavy) artillery. Moreover, the supposed integration of the Battalions into official structures seems dubious. The state, furthermore, does not seem clear in its call for disarmament and integration as it benefits from the ambiguity surrounding the Volunteer Battalions. In this situation, some Battalions maintain a grip over military operations and are able to alter governmental policies by use of military strength.

Influence through political representation

As discussed in section 4.2., many Volunteer Battalions have established a separate political wing to their organisation, or affiliated themselves with individual politicians and political parties. In fact, Sheldon (2017) argues that, by 2017, "political and military power ha[d] become inseparable at the unit level" (para.1), providing the Battalions with great political influence.

Battalion members have taken prominent positions in governmental structures or have formed their own political parties. Officially, the Ukrainian government forbid Battalion members to pursue a political career while remaining part of the Battalion. The government thereby hoped to prevent Battalion members from becoming too powerful (Minakov, 2014). However, the extent to which this policy has been effectively exercised varies significantly. The former commander of the Right Sectors' Battalion Yarosh, for example, split off from the Right Sector and was appointed military advisor to the Commander-in-Chief of the UAF in April 2015 (Gzirian, 2015). Although Yarosh had split off from the Right Sector when he took this position, he was actively involved in founding UDA, a new and non-integrated Battalion (Veldt, 2018). Melnychuk, the founder of the Aidar Battalion became an independent member of Parliament, but remained closely tied to the Battalion (Piper & Karazy, 2015). In 2014, President Turchynov and Avakov asked Andriy Teteruk to create the Myrotvorets' Battalion. The three maintained good relations. Teteruk's close ties to Turchynov and Avakov allowed him to put himself forward as a candidate for the Popular Front, Turchynov's political party, while remaining a member of the Myrotvorets' Battalion (Fedorenko & Umland, 2021).

Some political parties were formed out of Battalions. The political parties of the Right Sector and the Azov Battalion are thereby most famous. Both participated in the Parliamentary elections of 2014 and 2019. The Battalions were characterised as extremist and xenophobic. The National Corps, the political party under Azov leadership, has aimed to distance itself from the xenophobic rhetoric that characterises the Battalion. Both political parties were not popular during the Parliamentary elections and could not count on many votes (Colborne, 2019). Based on their political performance, it is generally believed that the radical nationalist groups have little political support in society and do not pose much of a threat to the government. However, Ishchenko (2018) advocates to be careful with this denialist narrative. Even though they receive little support for their political parties, they remain influential in politics through other means, as I elaborate on below.

Since the beginning of the conflict, the Volunteer Battalions were used as instruments in the power struggle between competing interests within the government, as described before. The official integration of many Battalions brought some structure and government control but, in many instances, Volunteer Battalions were still used to the

competitive advantage of certain political actors. For example, Battalions could often negotiate on whether they integrated within the Ministry of Internal Affairs or the more bureaucratic Ministry of Defence (Käihkö, 2018a; Veldt, 2018). The two ministries had different opinions on how the security sector reform was supposed to take place. A Battalions' choice to integrate with either one of the ministries was, thus, often a political one and added to the tensions between the government institutions (Facon, 2017). Another example of how Battalions are used as a means in political competition is the formation of the "National Squad". In January 2018, hundreds of men identifying as the "National Squad" marched the street. The purpose of this march was to celebrate the swearing-in ceremony of over 600 fighters to this new Battalion, performed by Biletsky, the former commander of the Azov Battalion. Biletsky, by then, was on the joined electoral list of the Svoboda party and the National Corps. The National Squad, although officially politically neutral, was therefore described as part of the Azov Movement that had close links with the Minister of Interior Avakov. The purpose of the National Squad was to patrol the cities of Ukraine. However, the new Battalion was perceived as a "manifestation of force" by the Minister of Interior Avakov towards then-president Poroshenko (Nemtsova, 2018, para.8).

Some Battalions maintain affiliations with government officials to secure their continued existence and political relevance. Moreover, in return for their support, political officials often grant them with financial and military means (Veldt, 2018). The relation between the Azov Movement and Avakov, for example, remains evident (as illustrated by the example above). This close connection to the Interior Minister may guarantee loyalty to the authorities, but it also provides the Battalion with a political guardian and relative impunity (Petik & Gorbach, 2016). Indeed, it is unlikely that Avakov would support any action or policy undermining the Battalion's relative freedoms (Taub, 2015). As of 2020, the Azov Battalion, although officially a regular unit of the National Guard, still enjoyed a special status within the UAF and was shielded from government interference. The Battalion, furthermore, continued to be politically subjective as it remained strongly tied to the far-right ideologies and to the overall Azov movement (Kuzmenko, 2020).

The involvement of the Battalions in the competition between political forces hampers the greater coordination within the government on the reform of the security sector. It moreover complicates the government's aim to regain military control and a

monopoly on violence (Facon, 2017). This confirms the hypothesis that the Volunteer Battalions have influence on the composition of the ruling elite and are able to remain relevant and relatively autonomous actors, thereby exercising significant political influence.

Influence through popular support

In both section 4.1. and 4.2., I describe how the Battalions have mostly received popular support for their actions. They were viewed as heroes. The state used this popular perception to influence the moral of the UAF as a whole and to foster support for the conflict among the population. Furthermore, some Battalions aimed to build on their popular image and expand their influence in society.

Even after their integration, Battalion members were set apart from official forces for their courage and motivation. They were posed as an example and a means to promote motivation and commitment among the UAF (Puglisi, 2015). Much of the current sentiments regarding the war are also built on the heroic actions of the Volunteers. Several commemorative practices are designed to stoke feelings of outrage to encourage ongoing support for the war. In Dnipro, for example, an exhibition provokes the public with emotions of fear, anger, and terror. A statue of a volunteer soldier is there to stir a feeling of gratitude towards the sacrifices of the volunteers (Kupensky & Andriushchenko, 2022).

Furthermore, the Battalions' popular image benefits them. Several Battalions have been accused of war crimes. Since 2014, Amnesty International has exposed lawless behaviour and violations of human rights committed by several Volunteer Battalions. There is a sharp difference, however, in how these accusations have been handled. The Shakhtarsk Battalion, for example, was unpopular among the Ukrainian population from the start and accusations against them resulted in their forced dismantling (Cohen & Green, 2016). In contrast, the accusations against other Battalions and the government's attempts to respond with legal action were received with strong public backlash (Wood, 2021). Most ordinary Ukrainians are reportedly against the prosecution of former volunteer soldiers. The widely accepted conception is that they 'did what they had to do' (Hakonsholm, 2018, p. 50). Little legal action has been taken to research and prosecute accusations of illegal behaviour by Battalion (members) (Wood, 2021).

Some Battalions have aimed to expand their influence within society. For example, the Azov Battalion has reportedly developed into a 'state within a state', distributing its own newspaper, organising children's camps, providing services to veterans and various other social services (Shuster & Perrigo, 2021; Colborne, 2019). Arguably, mainstreaming its message has allowed the Battalion to further its appeal. The Azov Battalion still actively recruits soldiers into its ranks, both nationally and internationally, and mainly via Facebook (Shuster & Perrigo, 2021). Another stream of recruits flows from the Azov website where potential fighters are stimulated to sign up for the Battalion (Saressalo & Huhtinen, 2018). Furthermore, the Battalion organises (youth) events all over Ukraine where kids and youngsters are trained in combat and aid skills, and weapon handling (Saressalo & Huhtinen, 2018).

This section on popular support illustrates how the Battalions are able to sustain their appeal and expand their network, even though they should have officially demobilised since 2015. The Battalions are able to maintain their popular image, partly because the state benefits from their reputation as well. Furthermore, there is little accountability for the Battalions' actions which provides them with relative autonomy.

In the discussion of the third mechanism, I show that Volunteer Battalions continue to enjoy a high degree of independence and prove that they are not incorporated into the official chain of command. As such, they are able to influence policies. Firstly, Battalions alter policies by the use of force. The state has failed in effectively disarming all units and Battalions are still independent military powers. What is more, former members remain able to access weaponry through their Battalion network. The Battalions' position to acquire and maintain a significant arsenal seems partly due to the fact that the state remains incapable of arming the official security forces. Secondly, Battalions contribute to tensions within state institutions and play a role in the composition of the ruling elite through their political involvement. Because of their political role, the line between military strength and political power is thin. They are able to influence politics as the Battalions' military strength becomes a political weapon. Furthermore, their political role and popular image allows them to remain relevant for the state which allows some Battalions to expand their influence. Concerningly, this also has the effect that some groups enjoy much freedom to operate as illustrated by their apparent impunity.

4.4. Disrupt peacebuilding efforts

If the Volunteer Battalions are able to influence policies, this may explain why the government has difficulty controlling the Battalions. As I argued in chapter 3, it is essential to establish why PGMs would want to influence politics. Namely, this determines whether PGMs are likely to exercise their political influence and aim to prevent or alter policies with regards to DDR. In the following section, I therefore discuss the presence or absence of political support for policies that advance DDR practices. Furthermore, I consider the development of DDR practices in Ukraine.

In the aftermath of the Maidan Revolution, many Battalions were left unsatisfied with the lack of reform within the state's institutions. In 2015, Melnychuk, the founder of Aidar, stated that only 10 per cent of those in power were new, while the others were still corrupt and had to be replaced (Piper & Karazy, 2015). Some wished to replace the entire political establishment (Weir, 2019; Shekhovtsov, 2015). Criticism was further directed towards the reform of the security sector. Many Battalions disagreed with how the UAF had taken over securing Ukraine's territory from the Battalions and with how the security sector had been 'reformed'. As a result, some believed that the inability of the state to secure itself had not been resolved and that they would be necessary to Ukrainian society again in the future (Bulakh, Senkiv, & Teperik, 2017).

In addition, Battalions critiqued how the government handled the peace negotiations. Some actively tried to impede or influence policies in that regard. For example, many members of the Right Sector expressed their dissatisfaction with the Minsk II agreement. Instead, they preferred a continuation of the fighting to finish, what they call, the Ukrainian Revolution (Shekhovtsov, 2015; Karagiannis, 2016).

There are several examples of how the Battalions' points of view have led to action against governmental policy. For example, the demand from the Ukrainian government to withdraw Right Sector fighters from the frontline was met with a bloody shootout between Right Sector members on the one hand and the formal police units on the other (Lavrov & Sukhov, 2015). Moreover, Andriy Biletsky has actively prevented the withdrawal of Azov Battalion fighters from the frontline by going there with his armed associates on the eve of the planned withdrawal. After both sides at the frontline kept firing at each other, the Ukrainian government formally postponed the withdrawal

(Kazakov, 2019).

Many Battalions have expressed that they will not accept a situation where special status is temporarily granted to the separatist territories in the Donbas region. Several supporters of the Volunteer Battalions in the Ukrainian Parliament have therefore blocked legal proposals on granting a special status to the separatist held areas (Bilban, 2018). When, in 2019, newly elected President Zelenskyy proposed the continuation of peace negotiations, he was met with mass protests united under the slogan “No Capitulation!”. Many of the protesters were veterans and members of Volunteer Battalions (Al Jazeera, 2019). The Azov Battalion has allegedly carried out attacks on parties that favour a negotiated peace settlement, despite being part of the National Guard and therefore supposedly politically independent (Melanovski, 2020).

Aside from much disagreement between state and Battalions on the status of the separatist territories, there is also an issue of loyalty. Most Battalion members show greater loyalty to their (non-governmental) financial contributors or their own Battalion than to the state. Melnychuk declared that his “soldiers’ loyalty did not always lie with the authorities and (...) some groups still operate beyond official control” (Piper & Karazy, 2015, para. 19). The Donbas Battalion engaged, as mentioned before, in a railroad blockade in 2017. Some argue this was done to secure their patron’s economic interests than resulting from their own ideals, but they proved effective in altering government policy (International Crisis Group, 2020b). In 2019, a former officer of Ukraine’s Security Service claimed that the Volunteer Battalions “obey orders only from their leaders” (TASS, 2019, para. 2). This issue of loyalty causes the relation between Battalions and state to be one characterised by uncertainty.

Thus, Volunteer Battalions desire to prevent demobilisation because of several factors; they are unconvinced by the state’s ability to secure its territory (and the strategy that follows; they disagree with the state’s view on conflict resolution; and they favour their patrons’ interests over the state’s. Some Battalions are prepared to use their position to prevent government policy towards demobilisation and peacebuilding, either with force or through politics. This is not to say that all Battalions oppose demobilisation. As discussed in chapter 2, some Battalions have integrated voluntarily within official structures or have laid down their weapons entirely. However, several Battalions remain influential outside of state structures and continue to be armed and politicised, and to act

with little accountability. It is these Battalions specifically that oppose the demobilisation of Volunteer Battalions and the state's peacebuilding efforts.

It is difficult to determine precisely the extent to which the Volunteer Battalions influence on policy-making. Interestingly, the influence Battalions enjoy may in fact be more a product of power projection than of formal political structures. The Battalions have, throughout the years, carefully maintained their image of war heroes, protectors and disciplined fighters. Malejacq (2020) suggests in his study on warlords that such an image may be a source of power. The image is used by the non-state actor to persuade all other actors of its relevance and authority. As non-state actors, the Volunteer Battalions may similarly influence political policies. Since the actual power is difficult to 'measure', the Battalions are able to project a reputation of power that is stronger than their actual resources are.

It may be difficult to exactly determine the influence Volunteer Battalions enjoy. Yet, the effect is clear: since the resolution on the demobilisation of the Volunteer Battalions in 2015, the Ukrainian government has taken no action to disband the Battalions or implement demobilising strategies. At the same time, the presence of the Volunteer Battalions in Ukraine remained significant. The absence of official policies on the DDR of Volunteer Battalions may in itself may be an indication of the Battalions' influence on policy-making. To put it differently, when the Volunteer Battalions are effective in exercising their influence on policy-making, there would indeed be no policies as a result.

However, I will not go as far as that this qualifies as sufficient evidence. Instead, I would like to point out the series of events that I discussed in this research, the process that has explained the rise of the Volunteer Battalions and their development into influential actors. Several examples have shown that these Battalions have exercised this influence, most evidently regarding the coal ban. What is more, they have openly opposed a negotiated peace-settlement, fought the UAF against withdrawal from the frontline, and, still in 2019, (former) members said their loyalty remained with their Battalion as opposed to the UAF. This, together with the absence of DDR practices, the Battalions' ability to influence politics and their attitude towards peacebuilding gives me probable ground to

assume that, indeed, the Volunteer Battalions use their political influence to evade being DDR'ed.

4.5. Conclusion

The continued existence of the Volunteer Battalions has been a topic of discussion in international politics and scholarly debate over the last years. Their presence has soured the relation between Ukraine and the West which has repeatedly demanded their disarmament. Some regard the Battalions as terror organisations; others as a short-term solution, posing an immediate threat to peace, and state's democratic institutions (Coffey, 2015).

Several Volunteer Battalions in Ukraine have grown from small armies that mobilised in response to the state's inability to secure its territory into actors of great influence. Through their engagement in the conflict, the Battalions have acquired military and political status, and public popularity. To this day, they prove able to oppose governmental policies, either through the use of force or by accessing their (political) networks.

The Ukrainian government has, since 2015, aimed to disband all Battalions and integrate their forces into the official security forces. However, whether the state actually controls these fighters is questionable. Moreover, the loyalty of both integrated and non-integrated Battalion members towards the state is uncertain. Indeed, many smaller Battalions have integrated into Ukraine's security sector and the political support for Battalions' parties is limited. At the same time, several Battalions remain, to a large extent, autonomous organisations which have the status and position to act independently of state interests and affect political outcomes. As such, Volunteer Battalions are able to halt policies that harm their position and undermine concrete peacebuilding efforts.

5. Conclusion

In this research, I have aimed to propose a theory that would explain why PGMs often remain significant even when states have aimed to demobilise and integrate them, as is the case for the Volunteer Battalions in Ukraine. By building on existing literature on PGMs, I have constructed four mechanisms that subsequently explain the process of how PGMs are able to grow from primarily military into political actors. As such, PGMs are able to influence political decision-making on the implementation of DDR practices. They are likely to exercise this influence and prevent being DDR'ed and undermine peacebuilding efforts as a whole as these practices threaten their existence. I thereby argued that DDR is not likely to be successfully enforced in a conflict setting with PGMs. I tested the argued process against the case of the Volunteer Battalions. This case has largely illustrated and supported my theory. In this conclusion, I address the implications, limitations, and the possibilities of future research of this research.

Implications

This research has various important implications, particularly concerning policy. One of the core implications of this research is that I present how DDR practices are difficult to enforce in conflicts with active PGMs. This has serious consequences for SSR and peacebuilding in general. Therefore, policymakers must explore new efforts to press the demobilisation, disarmament, or (re)integration of PGMs and non-state actors in general. This is an essential as PGMs are not a unique phenomenon. These, and other types of non-state actors rise in various conflicts.

PGMs may indeed be a valuable asset to counterinsurgent strategies, but the risks they pose for peacebuilding and stability have proven to be significant. These warnings have been made before. This research adds to our understanding of where these risk comes from and lays the ground for how they can be mediated. Policy on PGMs requires a careful consideration of how PGMs are able to harness resources which provide them with political influence. Preferably, the involvement of PGMs in general may be avoided. Alternatively, policymakers may use this research to identify several necessary agreements between state and PGMs so that the state maintains its control over the legitimate use of force and PGMs do not become too influential.

The state thus has a significant role in the control of PGMs. It is required to have a deep realisation of the disadvantages of PGMs. Moreover, the state must understand of how to deal with PGMs and their members during and after conflict. Although the state can outsource its monopoly on legitimate use of force, it must be understood what this may imply for the possible diminished political control and popular support. The long-term effects of PGM involvement must be considered. In this regard, it would be interesting to see whether Ukraine, now it has again asked for voluntary support in counterinsurgency, addresses the situation differently.

Limitations

The main limitation of this study is the absence of primary data that could provide more in-depth knowledge on how the Battalions have been able to remain powerful actors and to what extent they actually effect the political decision-making process. The framework as provided in this research may be further streamlined and perfected. As this research solely uses existing literature, quantitative data, interviews, and policy-analyses may significantly add to the reliability of the framework.

This research has tested the theory against one case, Ukraine's Volunteer Battalions. Although I believe this case to be relevant, I cannot convincingly generalise the theory. I expect the framework presented will significantly help us to better understand the rise and influence of PGMs. Further application of the theory can increase the generalisability of it.

The examples in this research were mainly limited to the few most prominent and controversial Battalions. I recognise the diversity in Battalions. However, the sources available mainly concerned these five Battalions. Expanding the scope of this research and other sources of data may enlighten how other Battalions acted between 2014 and 2021.

Since I did not speak Ukrainian or Russian, most publications I accessed were in English. By using a variety of sources I have aimed to grasp the essence of the circumstances in Ukraine, but I recognise the language barrier may have influenced my perception of the case.

Future Research

While I expect the theory of this research to work best in cases with PGMs, it further adds

to the literature on non-state actors in general as well. Future research may focus on the Volunteer Battalions, PGMs, non-state actors in general, and on DDR as a peacebuilding practice in these so-called 'new wars'.

Firstly, it would be fruitful to explore the influence of the Volunteer Battalions today and how the presence of a significant number of volunteer veterans influence Ukrainian society through an in-depth study or thorough policy analysis. Arguably, the (former) Battalions have the potential to enhance their position in case of renewed conflict. This is particularly interesting in light of the developments in Ukraine at the start of 2022. PGMs may reappear in different forms and organisational structures following Malejacq's (2016) theory on 'shape-shifting' warlords.

Secondly, and related to the first comment, I must consider the possibility that the state as well has played a role in the lack of attention towards the DDR of Volunteer Battalions. Since 2014, no official negotiated peace settlement has been agreed upon. Moreover, the conflict of 2022 illustrates that the situation is far from settled. While no negotiated peace settlement is in place, state's may still require the skills of PGMs for securing their territory. The ongoing conflict may be a possible clarification why the Volunteer Battalions have not been forcefully demanded.

Thirdly, future research may explore whether my theory is applicable to other cases, thereby contributing to generalisability of the theory. This may also streamline the process and add to its reliability. Future studies may also focus on this process from the perspective of the state.

Fourthly, examples in this research have shown that loyalty remains a major issue even after the demobilisation of PGMs. (Former) members of PGMs often remain closely associated to their unit. Often times, PGMs recruit locally. Veterans may thus still be in close proximity of their comrades. PGM members may also maintain close connections as they have developed similar ideological convictions. The close ties within networks, radicalisation, and different perspectives on conflict termination may affect the reintegration of the PGM fighters. Future research can focus on the reintegration of PGM veterans as it may involve different aspects compared to regular soldiers.

PGMs harm the state's monopoly on violence, harm long-term peace, will pursue their own agenda, and persist even after a conflict has ended. This research has identified the process that explains how PGMs grow into significant and politically influential actors. To such an extent that they are able to remain relevant and hinder peacebuilding. I have therefore laid the ground for rewarding future research projects and identified the implications for the state and policymakers. It has become clear that PGM involvement must be carefully considered and, more importantly, connected to a clear idea on how they will be DDR'ed.

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