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Irregular Armed Groups in the Russian-Ukrainian War
since 2014

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The War in Ukraine and Irregular Armed Groups

Andreas Heinemann-Grüder

The sequence of revolt and organized violence in and around Ukraine since late 2013 culminated in a watershed first in European, then in global politics, following the beginning of Russia's fully fledged war against Ukraine from 24 February 2022 onwards.¹ The violent conflict that escalated over the last ten years represents a multi-causal and multi-dimensional series of events that were not pre-ordained by any master plan. Structural prerequisites and critical junctures created their own path dependencies. Ukraine's post-Soviet nation- and state-building was incomplete and evidenced many vulnerabilities, which turned into entry points for Russia's imperial interference. The crisis of legitimacy, the repeated frustration of popular hopes to overcome kleptocracy, corruption and oligarchic clientelism provided fertile grounds for Russia's aggression and its mobilization of discontent. However, without Russia's military intervention the internal fractures would have remained a domestic affair of Ukraine.

The irregular armed groups that mushroomed in Ukraine as a result of the turn of the originally peaceful Maidan protests into violent insurgency and counter-insurgency were and are critical actors in the conduct of war. Originally, the conflict derived its explosiveness from the deep crisis of legitimacy of the Ukrainian government under the then President Viktor Yanukovich, a crisis that grabbed the center, epitomized by the demonstrations and the insurgency on Ukraine's main square, the Maidan, but extended to the regions as well. Anti-government sentiments were fueled by

1 This publication is the result of a joint project by the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC), the St. Petersburg based Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR) and the Kyiv based Institute for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation (IEAC), which was generously funded by the Volkswagen Foundation. I would like to particularly thank Olena Shevchyk for her diligent research assistance over the years and Heike Webb for her help with editing the English translation.

frustrations over rampant kleptocracy, patronage, clientelism and corruption, as well as the erosion of the state monopoly of violence. The violent conflict was not pre-ordained or over-determined by historical or geopolitical forces or allegedly polar ethnic identities. The organized violence, the experience of massive destruction, harm, torture, repression, pain, trauma and displacement polarized, antagonized and hardened identities. From December 2013 onwards, the use of violence by Ukraine's special forces and right-wing extremist groups was the key trigger for turning the peaceful protest movement on Kyiv's Maidan square into a radical quest for changing the regime, which ultimately led to the ouster of President Yanukovich on 22 February 2014. Latent tensions between pro-European, pro-Russian, nationalist and regionalist as well as Soviet-oriented forces manifested themselves in the course of events.

This volume focuses on irregular armed groups as force multipliers, agents of illicit warfare and self-interested actors of violence. In a project conducted from 2016 onwards and funded by the Volkswagen Foundation, teams from the St. Petersburg-based Centre for Independent Social Research (CISR, one of the few remaining independent social science institutes in Russia), the Institute for Euro-Atlantic Cooperation (IEAC) in Kyiv and the Bonn International Centre for Conflict Studies (BICC) in Germany collaborated on the collective action of irregular armed groups.² The war in and against Ukraine provides fertile ground for the study of collective actors formed in the course of violent action.

Why Irregular Armed Groups?

After the change of government in Kyiv in February 2014, and in the course of the Russian intervention in Ukraine's south and east,

2 The CISR team consisted of Natalia Savaleva, Oleg Zhuravlev, Maksim Aluykov, Svetlana Erpyleva, Andrey Nevskij. Particular thanks go to Viktor Voronkov from CISR. The IEAC team consisted of Andreas Umland, Anton Shekhovtsov, Anton Pisarenko, Kostiantyn Fedorenko, Volodymyr Kopchak, Leonid Poliakov and Andrey Matiukhanov. The BICC team included Andreas Heinemann-Grüder and Olena Shevchyk, who built up the project's data bank and contributed to fact-checking, project management, and editing.

the Ukrainian government lost control over parts of its security sector. State-controlled services were defunct or switched sides—a sign of state erosion or even state capture before the Maidan protests. Pro-state militias in turn began to compensate for the paralysis or defection of the Ukrainian security sector. Russia sponsored pro-Russian militias and sent its own armed forces, although under disguise, to the Crimea and eastern Ukraine.

The study of irregular armed groups usually focuses on conducive or enabling conditions, among them political or economic grievances, greed, access to weapons or lootable resources, opportunities such as weak statehood or on onset conditions and conflict triggers such as political murder, terror attacks, pogroms or excessive state violence. A perspective on micro-dynamics looks instead at factors that transform opportunities into action, among them incentives to join an armed group, legitimizing strategies, interaction patterns between state and non-state actors and among irregular groups. Studying micro-dynamics is about the transformation of irregular groups into political or civil society organizations.

Any military is characterized by a defined and known hierarchy, by internalized command structures. None of this was a given in the irregular armed groups. Often, the groups were lumped together on an ad hoc basis; the men fighting together barely knew each other. What characterized their groupness? One of the key capabilities for survival in a combat group is mutual trust, based on a shared sense of purpose and reliable communication. In this respect, the irregular armed groups proved highly vulnerable. Loosely formed groups around a self-declared or chosen leader converted over time into more or less professional combat units with hierarchical structures and command and logistic chains, i.e., into battalions. The term battalion pertains to a military group of the infantry with a size varying between 300 to 1,200 people.

Armies worldwide have used this term differently, but as a rule, a battalion consists of a couple of companies or rotes. In the context of the violent conflict in Ukraine, the term “volunteer battalion” pertains to a distinct military unit with a name, a commander, a headquarters and distinct location, which was mobilized

for the specific purpose of enacting or resisting the Russian annexation of Crimea and the separatism in Donbas. Groups were often summarily called battalions, regardless of their size. The term, therefore, has a broad meaning, and at times battalions were relabeled into regiments or brigades. A battalion consisted, as a rule, of infantry rotes, stormtroopers, reconnaissance, artillery, communication units, a medical unit, and logistics. A rote is made up of up to a hundred persons, these rotes were composed in turn of platoons (взвод). The battalions often fought together with brigades, a brigade usually consisting of 1,500 to 5,000 men. Brigades and battalions are characterized by their capability to act flexibly and autonomously.

The key findings of our project can be summarized as follows: The battalions in the Ukrainian conflict were irregular, but by no means non-state – they represented pro-state militias, either for the Russian de facto regimes in Donbas or the Ukrainian state. Among the pro-Ukrainian battalions, we identified three types: Volunteer battalions that built on right-wing paramilitary organizations; battalions created "from above" by state security apparatuses; and battalions created and sponsored by oligarchs. In comparison, the pro-Russian battalions were either continuations of existing nationalist organizations in eastern Ukraine or were established directly by the Russian state and semi-state sponsors in Russia. The irregular battalions on the Russian and Ukrainian sides were predominantly established by state agencies, i.e., they did not emerge autonomously "from below" but were created and maintained for hybrid warfare or to compensate for the weakness of regular forces.

The relative success (or failure) of battalions was determined by the organizational qualities of the commanders, connections to political, economic and social support groups and their ability to include diverse strata. From 2015 onwards, the vast majority of battalions was transferred to (quasi-)state structures in the areas controlled by Russia and those under the control of Ukraine. Only a few radical right-wing battalions in Ukraine remained beyond state control, while Russian "security agents" brought autonomous battalions and their commanders under hierarchical control too.

A novelty of the irregular battalions in the violent conflict in Ukraine was the recruitment, fundraising and legitimization through social media. For several battalion commanders, participation in the war became a source of social capital to launch a career as a politician. In an environment that was and still is permeated by the presence of irregular battalions, the popular interactions with irregular actors of violence are dynamic, complex and characterized by insecurity, fear and opportunism.

The importance of irregular armed groups for Russia has been increasing since it began its war against Ukraine in 2014/15. These irregular armed groups act in coordination with the Russian Ministry of Defense, the Federal Security Service (FSB), the foreign intelligence service and the presidential administration. Russia's mercenaries practice exterminatory warfare and operate as parallel or shadow armies, which can rarely be held accountable.

Russia's infamous Wagner group and its successor organizations are one of the remnants of the war in 2014/15. Its combatants specialize in capturing cities, they provide agile ground forces for reconnaissance, sabotage operations and the indiscriminate liquidation of people attributed to the opposing side. The relationship between regular and irregular groups is strenuous. There are repeated complaints from irregular combatants that Russia's regular army puts them at a disadvantage when providing them with weapons, ammunition, vehicles, food and other supplies or sends them on high-risk missions without support – the main reason for the mutiny of the Wagner group against the Ministry of Defense in Russia.

Beyond the war in Ukraine, Russia's irregular armed groups turned into an instrument of Russia's foreign and security policy. They can be deployed flexibly and covertly and cannot be held accountable for crimes – or only to a limited extent. Within their missions, business interests and military objectives are intertwined. Beyond Ukraine, Russia's military companies serve to destabilize pro-Western and stabilize anti-Western governments, for example, in Syria, Libya, Mali, Sudan or the Central African Republic. They prepare for, support and complement the deployment of regular forces and are likely to operate at a lower overall cost than regular forces.

Deaths and injuries among irregular combatants are officially invisible. The exploitation of lucrative gold, diamond, oil or gas deposits is an expression of the economic and political fusion of oligarchic and military interests that lie behind these private military companies. Russian irregular armed groups interact with the Russian Ministry of Defense, especially the military intelligence (GRU), as well as the FSB, the foreign intelligence service (SVR) and the presidential administration. They complement but do not replace regular security organs.

The term “armed conflict in Donbas” or “war in Donbas” has been common since 2014. However, the region of violent conflict is not identical with “Donbas” – Donbas is linked to the Donetsk coal basin, which includes part of the territory of Donetsk and Luhansk regions, but also parts of Dnipropetrovsk region and Rostov region of Russia. On the other hand, the northern parts of Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts (historically belonging to *Slobozhanshchyna*) and the southern part of Donetsk oblast (Azov region) are not included in Donbas. The label “armed conflict in Donbas”, frequently in use until February 24, 2022, incorrectly excluded Russia’s annexation of Crimea and the later ambition to undermine Ukraine’s existence as an independent nation-state. With Russia’s launch of a war of annihilation of Ukraine as a sovereign state, the term “Donbas conflict” is even more misleading – the war results from Russia’s aggression, not internal strife.

The war in Donbas is part of the overarching Russian-Ukrainian inter-state armed conflict that began with the Russian aggression in Crimea in February 2014. The organized violence shifted from violent clashes between Maidan and anti-Maidan forces in early 2014 to separatism sponsored and conducted by Russian-controlled military from March/April 2014 onwards to an enduring rivalry between February 2015 to 2022 and the resumption of a fully-fledged war by Russia against Ukraine on February 24, 2022. The violence polarized and antagonized identities which in turn provided feedback loops to further violence.

Starting with the war against Ukraine in 2014, the irregular armed groups have become agents of influence of the Russian autocratic regime, war profiteers and auxiliary forces for state security

agencies. Russia's irregular armed groups reflect the Russian regime's aggressive, criminal and oligarchic nature, the privatization and commercialization of organized violence, the coexistence of regular security agencies and state-terrorist shock troops and the competition of various security agencies over resources and access to political power.

No war ends with a return to the status quo ante, each war transforms the role images and the behavior of adversaries. Wars undermine trust in agreements and common goods. Communicative ties dissolve, intermingled societies fracture and split apart. War fosters enmities which were not present in the first place. Latent resentments turn into manifest enmity, and any outlook at future peace and reconciliation will have to take long periods of emotional demobilization and recognition of inflicted pain into account.