Crowdsourced War: The Political and Military Implications of Ukraine's Volunteer Battalions 2014-2015

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Introduction

The Ukrainian phenomenon consists in the fact that the war is conducted by a people's army, where the majority of individuals are either volunteers or patriots of Ukraine, and this also includes professional military staff.

Yuri Butusov – Ukrainian Military Analyst[1]

The Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF) were an ineffective military force in 2014 when Russian-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region began their attempt to establish independent republics. In an attempt to stabilise the situation in the Donbas, volunteer formations rose up spontaneously and shortly thereafter the Ukrainian Government turned to the citizens of Ukraine, putting out a call for volunteer-fighters and civilian support. This open call by the Ukrainian government to a broad network of potential labourers was, in effect, a call to crowdsource Ukraine's

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[1] Rosaria Puglisi, "A People's Army: Civil Society as a Security Actor in Post-Maidan Ukraine," *IAI Working Papers* 15 (23 July 2015): p. 1.

response to Russian aggression. The formations established by this call, later known as volunteer battalions, played a significant role in combat operations during the first six months of the conflict, yet they have received little academic attention. During 2014 and 2015, over forty volunteer battalions, with an on-paper total strength of between 33 and 460 fighters each, were involved in combat operations in the Donbas. Their operations were key to the UAF's success during the initial months of the conflict with the separatists. These volunteer-fighters, largely supported by their own funds and donations from the public, provided an essential stop-gap while the UAF re-mobilised for war. The UAF in turn, were supported by similar volunteer efforts from civil-society groups both inside and outside of Ukraine.

This article discusses how crowdsourcing techniques and volunteer movements affected the pro-Ukrainian side of the conflict during 2014-2015. It examines the background events that led to the major role crowdsourcing played in the conflict, the impact of crowdsourcing on the war itself, and the political and military consequences it had on the Ukrainian state. It argues that support from Ukrainian civil-society to the UAF through the use of crowdsourcing provided the necessary emergency military force needed to stabilise the country in the face of Russian-backed separatist military forces in 2014. Crowdsourcing the war, however, also resulted in numerous negative consequences which have yet to be fully dealt with by the Ukrainian government. [2]

Methodology and Literature

Significant scholarship does exists on civil-society during the 2013-2014 Maidan revolution which laid the groundwork for the emergence of the volunteer-fighters in Ukraine,[3] however, there is extremely limited quantitative and qualitative scholarship on the volunteer battalions. This is due to a lack of field work and to the difficulty of

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[2] I am indebted to those who consented to be interviewed during the summer of 2015 as well as the academics and journalists who have previously undertaken field work within Ukraine. Without the consent of the interviewees or the contributions of experts in the field this article could not have been written. Unless otherwise noted translations are by the author.

[3] See Tetyana Bohdanova, "Unexpected Revolution: The Role of Social Media in Ukraine's Euromaidan Uprising," *European View* 13, no. 1 (3 June 2014); Sergii Leshchenko, "The Media's Role," *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 3 (2014); and Olga Onuch, "EuroMaidan Protests in Ukraine: Social Media versus Social Networks," *Problems of Post-Communism* 62, no. 4 (15 June 2015): pp. 217–35, among many others.

qualitatively assessing organisations that, often intentionally, kept limited official records. Research on the battalions was pioneered by Dr. Rosaria Puglisi who conducted field work in Ukraine in 2014 and 2015. Puglisi wrote three papers on civil-society and the volunteer battalions. Additional scholarship was provided by a case study which placed the volunteer battalions in context within the broader theoretical literature on paramilitary organisations.[4] Specific research on aspects of the volunteer-fighters through a political analysis of the Azov Battalions[5] and military reform in the UAF[6] further developed the existing body of literature.

I am indebted to Dr. Huseyn Aliyev for the theoretical background to this article, provided by his study of state-parallel paramilitaries and included a case study on the Ukrainian volunteer battalions. Aliyev notes the existence of a large existing body of literature on paramilitaries, however, he argues that the study of state-parallel armed forces, a term he coined, is undertheorized and largely academically unrecognised.[7] State-parallel paramilitaries are a distinctly separate category from either anti-state or state-manipulated militias. These groups rarely exist in their original form prior to the start of a conflict.[8] They arise largely in the absence of a strong-state and while they often fight alongside the armed forces of a state they rarely leave their organisations in order to join those of a state.[9]

Also critical to this paper is the existing theories and analysis of the modern far-right. The far-right in Ukraine has received in-depth academic attention thanks to the contributions of Dr. Andreas Umland and Dr. Anton Shekhovtsov among others. Umland has conducted extensive quantitative research on far-right groups in Europe and Russia and his research is critical to understanding the relationship between far-

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[4] Huseyn Aliyev, "Strong Militias, Weak States, and Armed Violence: Towards a Theory of 'State-Parallel' Paramilitaries," *Security Dialogue*, no. 47 (2016).

[5] Andreas Umland and Tatjana Bezruk, "Der Fall Azov Freiwilligenbataillone in der Ukraine (The Case of Azov: Volunteer Battalions in Ukraine)," Translated by Anna Njuyen, *Osteuropa* 65, no. 1 (20 January 2015).

[6] Deborah Sanders, "The War We Want; The War That We Get: Ukraine's Military Reform and the Conflict in the East," *The Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 30, no. 1 (23 January 2017): pp. 30-49.

[7] Aliyev, "Strong Militias," p. 500.

[8] Aliyev, "Strong Militias," p. 503.

[9] Aliyev, "Strong Militias," p. 503.

right groups and volunteer-fighters in Ukraine. His work builds on the important theoretical foundations laid by Roger Griffon on far-right groups and fascism.

This article focuses on the role of crowdsourcing in the development of Ukraine's volunteer battalions, their combat operations, and the political fallout of their involvement on the frontlines between 2014 and 2015. Interviews were conducted in Kyiv by the author in the summer of 2015 in Russian, Ukrainian, and English. Interviewees included 14 fighters and officers of the volunteer battalions, 5 civil-society organisers, 3 frontline journalists, a military intelligence officer from the UAF, and a member of the Ukrainian Parliament. The goal was not an empirical study of the volunteer battalions as a whole, but to contribute detailed qualitative research to the growing literature on the volunteer battalions. Most interviewees were comfortable having their identities shared. however, some were interviewed on the condition of anonymity. Interviewees were selected due to their organisational knowledge and experience in combat operations. The interviews were unstructured and lasted between 60 and 150 minutes. Interviews were then cross-referenced with each other, as well as written accounts and available scholarship.

Due to the contemporary nature of this topic, I have at times relied heavily on unconventional scholarly sources. While there are numerous questionable accounts or highly biased articles on this topic, I have focused on citing reputable sources. I also cite a selection of blogs. To ascertain their accuracy, I conducted additional research on the writers themselves, checking their individual backgrounds and cross-referencing their writing on Ukraine with their research on other topics. The blogs I cite are those of academics, individuals directly connected to volunteer organisations, or the official websites of the organisations themselves. For example, I source the writing of Ukrainian journalist and military expert Yuri Butusov a number of times throughout this article. Butusov is considered by many of my sources and interviewees as the most knowledgeable individual regarding the military aspects of the conflict. Butusov's writing is not academic in nature, but his detailed knowledge regarding the events of the conflict and the forces involved has not, to this date, been surpassed in quality and detail.

While crowdsourcing methods were utilised by both the Government and separatist forces, I have chosen to focus specifically on their use by supporters of the

Ukrainian State.[10] This decision was motivated by a lack of currently available sources regarding the crowdsourcing operations of the separatists and the danger of accessing the Donbas, which limited my ability to conduct fieldwork in the region. Further comparative study would be a significant contribution to scholarship on the military uses of crowdsourcing and paramilitary groups.

This article seeks to address gaps in existing research on the conflict in Ukraine by analysing the volunteer battalions, crowdsourcing efforts, and the long-term implications of these issues. This article is not an attempt to discuss the implications of crowdsourcing for military or strategic studies on a broad or theoretical level. The conflict in Ukraine is not unique in its use of crowdsourcing nor in its use of state-parallel armed forces. Numerous other past and current conflicts could be analysed through a similar lens.

Crowdsourcing

Crowdsourcing, a term coined in 2006 by Jeff Howe, is described as the:

> act of a company or institution taking a function once performed by employees and outsourcing it to an undefined (and generally large) network of people in the form of an open call. This can take the form of peer-production (when the job is performed collaboratively), but is also often undertaken by sole individuals. The crucial prerequisite is the use of the open call format and the large network of potential laborers'[11]

While initially used to describe a business practice, the term has now expanded into the socio-political sphere. Definitions of crowdsourcing are still evolving, with top-tier academic journals only recently publishing on the topic. Significant debate exists over whether crowdsourcing is a new tool, or an emerging term for approaches used throughout history which are being made increasingly accessible by technological development. Some argue that crowdsourcing relies on the existence social media,

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[10] Jo Becker, and Steven Lee Myers, "Russian Groups Crowdfund the War in Ukraine," *The New York Times*, 12 June 2015.

[11] Jeff Howe, "The Rise of Crowdsourcing," *Wired*, 1 June 2006. Accessed 22 July 2016. http://www.wired.com/2006/06/crowds/.

while others believe that its use only accelerates the speed at which crowdsourcing can be conducted. There is no accepted consensus on the core features of crowdsourcing that indicates that the concept is still evolving. Conceptualising crowdsourcing is further complicated by its numerous sub-categories which include among others:

- Idea generation - a public call for individuals to submit new ideas,

- Public participation - active participation of crowds in public events,

- Crowdfunding - public fundraising for projects or organisations commonly utilising social-media,

- Crowd labour - unstructured or non-routine tasks conducted by the public,

- Citizen journalism - information and financial support from the public to journalists.

These sub-categories are examined in some of the emerging systematic studies of crowdsourcing literature.[12]

Keeping in mind the numerous existing definitions of crowdsourcing and building on Howe's initial definition, I argue that crowdsourcing in response to Russian-backed aggression in the Donbas region is: the act of an institution (the Ukrainian government), taking a function once performed by an organisation (the UAF), and outsourcing it to an undefined network of people (Ukrainian civil-society) in the form of an open call. The utilisation of crowdsourcing in Ukraine fulfills both of Howe's initial crucial prerequisites – an open call format and a large network of potential labourers.

Civil-society and volunteer battalions in Ukraine utilised many of the above mentioned concepts including: public participation, crowdfunding, crowd labour, and citizen journalism. Crowdsourcing by volunteers in the conflict went beyond the use of

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[12] See Enrique Estelles-Arolas and Fernando Gonzalez-Ladron-de-Guevara, "Towards an Integrated Crowdsourcing Definition," *Journal of Information Science* 38, no. 2 (9 March 2012): p. 3. Pederson et al. "Conceptual Foundations of Crowdsourcing: A Review of IS Research," *46th Hawaii International Conference on System Science* (2013); Mokter Hossain, and Ilkka Kauranen, "Crowdsourcing: A Systematic Literature Review," forthcoming in *Strategic Outsourcing* (4 May 2015); and Mahmood Hosseini, "Crowdsourcing Definitions and Its Features: An Academic Technical Report." (2015). Accessed 30 March 2018. http://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/21173/.

well-known websites such as *Kickstarter* and *Paypal* (though both were utilised). It was evident in the public participation of individuals across Ukraine in the volunteer battalions and the crowd labour undertaken by civil-society to feed, equip, and organise these fighters. The importance of crowdsourcing to Ukrainian forces in the Donbas is supported by much of the existing literature on the volunteer-fighters, though no specific study has been conducted prior to this paper.[13] The speed and the extent of civil-society involvement and support for volunteer-fighters and the UAF would not have been possible without the use crowdsourcing techniques. It was a national cultural phenomena which influenced the actions of most individuals the author interviewed and provided critical resources to the volunteer battalions.

Terminology

I use the term *volunteer battalions* to describe the volunteer formations which came into existence following the Ukrainian Government's 2014 call for aid from the general population of Ukraine. When using this term, I refer primarily to the non-governmental fighting forces brought together in the Territorial Defence Battalions and Special Police Battalions formed since March 2014 (though other groups such as Right-Sector maintained a volunteer battalion while operating outside of any official framework).

When using the term *civil-society*, I am using Lucian Way's definition: "the network of voluntary and autonomous organizations and institutions that exist outside the state, market, and family, and which are difficult for state leaders to eliminate or control."[14]

Far-right is a general term applied to individuals or groups with an ultra-nationalistic, conservative, and often racist political ideology. The term far-right is an appropriate blanket description for the numerous and varied far-right, nationalist

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[13] The use of crowdsourcing by volunteer fighters is specifically mentioned by both Puglisi and Sanders while Aliyev raises the significant support these groups received from civil-society through the utilisation of social-media.

[14] Lucan Way, "Civil Society and Democratization," *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 3 (2014): pp. 35–43, 21.

political organisations that exist in Ukraine such as Svoboda, Right-Sector, and Sich (C14).

Fascist is a term used by numerous parties in the conflict. The Kremlin and separatists use it to describe the Government in Kyiv while pro-Ukrainian forces use it to describe the separatists, and journalists in the West and Russia use it somewhat indiscriminately in describing elements of the volunteer battalions. The term is rarely defined and instead is often used to describe groups that, while nationalist in ideology, are almost certainly not fascist. I am, therefore, limiting my use of the word fascist to groups or individuals who fit the definition of fascism developed by Roger Griffon, as "a genus of political ideology whose mythic core in its various permutations is a palingenetic form of populist ultranationalism."[15]

Finally, by *separatists*, I refer to Russian-backed political groups in the breakaway regions of Donetsk and Luhansk. While each region is a self-described autonomous republic, for simplicity's sake I combine them under the terms separatists or separatist regions.

Kickstarting: Maidan and the Rise of Volunteerism

The power of crowdsourcing always remains with the crowd, not the technological implementation

Jay Samit.[16]

The use of crowdsourcing by Ukraine's volunteer battalions was intimately connected to Ukraine's history of civil-society activism and the weakness of the UAF. The social movements in Ukraine that set the stage for major civil-society participation in the conflict arose in 2014 out of the Maidan protests and the fragility of the Government and UAF. Major protests were not unprecedented in Ukrainian history. Four chief government executives have been overthrown by popular protests occurring

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[15] Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), pp. 52-87.

[16] Jay Samit, *Disrupt You!: Master Personal Transformation, Seize Opportunity, and Thrive in the Era of Endless Innovation* (United States: Flatiron Books, 2015), p. 209.

in 1990, 1993, 2004, and most recently in 2014.[17] What distinguished the recent Maidan protests from preceding popular uprisings is the vast level of popular engagement during and after the initial protests.[18] From late November 2013 to February 2014, the Maidan protests, in effect, generated their own grassroots governance structure capable of coordinating the vast number of individuals involved in the protests. This infrastructure included volunteer coordinators, cooks, accountants, border-guards, entertainers, and medics, among many others.[19] While political parties, student organisations, far-right groups, soccer hooligans, and organised religious groups were involved, studies, such as those conducted by Olga Onuch, demonstrate that the majority of those who participated in the political and social aspects of the Maidan protests were self-described "ordinary citizens," many of whom had no previous history of political activism.[20] In contrast, those involved in violent aspects of the Maidan protests were more likely to have had a history of political activity.[21]

Maidan Protestors formed the foundation for some of the volunteer battalions. This was particularly the case for members of the Maidan Self-Defense Units (the *Samooborona*) and far-right political groups such as *Right-Sector*. The *Samooborona* were first organised on 01 December 2013 to protect protestors from police violence and maintain security on the Maidan.[22] They were divided into numerous companies, or "hundreds" (*Sotnia*), whose participants ranged from far-right fighters, to members of soccer clubs and women's groups.[23] By February 2014, forty two *Sotnia* were established, many of whom played a key role in violent clashes with the police on 18-19 February.[24] For a period of time after the Yanukovych government collapsed, police almost completely disappeared from the streets. Fearing for their safety, police officers in Kyiv abandoned their duties policing, and left their stations empty.[25] Volunteers from

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[17] Lucian Way's "Civil Society and Democratization," *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 3 (2014): pp. 35–43, 35.

[18] Puglisi, "A People's Army," p. 3.

[19] Way, "Civil Society and Democratization," p. 37.

[20] Onuch, "EuroMaidan Protests," p. 221.

[21] Ibid., p. 221.

[22] Mykhailo Minakov, "Changing Civil Society after Maidan," Ottawa: *Danyliw Seminar*, 2014, accessed on August 15, 2016, 4. https://www.academia.edu/9050237/Changing_Civil_Society_after_Maidan_-_2014,

[23] Author's Interview with Daniel Kovzhun.

[24] Minakov, "Changing Civil Society after Maidan," p, 4. https://www.academia.edu/9050237/Changing_Civil_Society_after_Maidan_-_2014.

[25] Puglisi, "A People's Army," p. 10.

the Maidan, in particular those involved in the *Sotnia*, took on the role of policing the streets of Kyiv.[26] Later, when the police force returned to active duty, activists from Maidan assumed the further responsibility of policing the police—following them to ensure they were not taking bribes, recording incidents of corruption or violence using camera phones, and presenting any incidents to the Chief Prosecutor's Office.[27] Even after police resumed their duties with the establishment of a new provisional government, citizens continued to monitor them out of concerns over corruption. In accordance with a law from 2000, "On Citizens' Participation in the Protection of Public Order and State Border," volunteers even worked with the police in anti-corruption and drug trafficking operations.[28] Without government instigation, civil-society had begun to extend itself in support of official institutions and at times took on the responsibilities of both police and investigators in the fight against corruption.

Far-right groups were also involved in the Maidan protests. Many individuals connected to far-right parties took part, including Oleh Tyahnybok, the leader of *Svoboda* (Freedom), the largest far-right party in Ukraine.[29] *Svoboda* as a party, however, did not officially participate in the Maidan.[30] A more influential group on the Maidan was *Right-Sector*, an ad-hoc coalition of far-right individuals formed during the protests.[31] The group started with only a few dozen members in November 2013, but by January 2014, it had expanded to a few hundred individuals.[32] Many of the Right-Sector members had previous protest experience and were influential in the process of training

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[26] Author's Interview with Kovzhun.

[27] Author's Interviews with Kovzhun, Tymur Bedernichek, and Anna Pyatskaya.

[28] "On Citizens' Participation in the Protection of Public Order and State Border," 2000, http://zakon4.rada.gov.ua/laws/anot/en/1835-14, accessed on 15 August 2016, and Puglisi, "A People's Army," p. 10.

[29] Far-right is a general term applied to individuals or groups with an ultra-nationalistic, conservative, and often racist political ideology. The term is an appropriate blanket description for the numerous and varied extremist nationalist political organisations that exist in Ukraine such as Svoboda, Right-Sector, and Sich (C14). Far-right is often used.

[30] Anton Shekhovtsov and Andreas Umland, "Ukraine's Radical Right," *Journal of Democracy* 25, no. 3 (2014): pp. 58–63, 59.

[31] Vyacheslav Likhachev, "The 'Right Sector' and Others: The Behavior and Role of Radical Nationalists in the Ukrainian Political Crisis of Late 2013 – Early 2014," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 48, no. 2-3 (June 2015): pp. 257–71, 258.

[32] Likhachev, "The 'Right Sector' and Others," p. 263; and Shekhovtsov and Umland, "Ukraine's Radical Right," p. 59.

and equipping some of the *Sotnia*. [33] As the target of extreme violence from the Yanukovych Government, protestors on the Maidan from both a liberal-intellectual background and those from far-right groups became increasingly organised and willing to engage in violent action. [34] This created a core of engaged individuals who went on to help organise the volunteer battalions.

The State of the Ukrainian Armed Forces in 2014

The UAF in 2014 were unprepared to fight a war, although in 1991 they were, on paper, the fourth strongest military in the world, having inherited 780,000 soldiers from the collapse of the Soviet Union as well as the planet's third largest nuclear arsenal. [35] While the UAF in 1991 was large in number, it had operated as only one component within a larger Soviet military and lacked the capabilities to function effectively on its own. [36] Still seeing potential threats as arriving from the west rather than the east, most units were positioned far away from the conflict zone in eastern Ukraine. [37] The inherited armed forces were top-heavy – handicapped with excessive organisational hierarchies and multiple, separate power structures which each had developed on its own. [38] Ukraine's military also suffered from severe underfunding. The Ukrainian Government, safe in their belief that they would not be involved in future major wars due to treaties signed with Russia and the US, reduced funding, and through neglect, allowed corruption to blossom. [39] By 2013, the Armed Forces were a skeleton of their former self; 70% of weapons required capital repairs, 45% of their equipment was obsolete, and the officer corps was undertrained and underfunded. [40] Military funding

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[33] Likhachev, "The 'Right Sector' and Others," p. 264.

[34] Ibid., p. 265.

[35] "Ukrainian Military Personnel," http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/ukraine/personnel.htm, accessed July 27, 2016, and Rosaria Puglisi, "General Zhukov and the Cyborgs: A Clash of Civilisation within the Ukrainian Armed Forces," *IAI Working Papers* 15 (17 May 2015), p. 4.

[36] Puglisi, "General Zhukov and the Cyborgs," p. 5.

[37] Author's Interview with Oleksiy Arestovych.

[38] Anatoliy Grytsenko, "Civil-Military Relations in Ukraine: On the Way from Form to Substance," Kiev: *NATO Fellowship Programme*, 2000, http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/98-00/grytsenko.pdf, p. 6.

[39] Grytsenko, "Civil-Military Relations in Ukraine," http://www.nato.int/acad/fellow/98-00/grytsenko.pdf, p. 6.

[40] Ibid.

was additionally split between the Army and elite police formations, with the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU)—successor to Ukraine's KGB—far better funded than the Army.[41] Reforms of the Armed Forces were attempted, but were ineffective. Critics even went so far as to describe the reforms as "lacking an economic basis, ignoring reliable economic, political, and organisational provisions".[42] By 2013, although the UAF numbered 165,000 on paper, 120,000 of these troops were part-time reservists.[43] Of the full-time soldiers, only the Special Forces and elements of the Airborne could be relied on for any form of active combat role.[44]

At the start of the combat operations in the Donbas the UAF were overstretched. Of the 165,000 soldiers in the Army, only approximately 6,000 were capable of engaging in combat operations.[45] These 6,000 soldiers were distributed along both the Southern Coast, due to fears of further Russian aggression, and throughout the Donetsk and Luhansk regions.[46] They were supported by limited mechanised and artillery support, and even when artillery units were present, they often lacked the correct shells for their guns.[47] To further complicate their efforts, almost 16,000 members of the Armed Forces defected to Russia during the first six months of the conflict, including a significant portion of the Ukrainian Navy.[48] Separatist forces capitalised on the weakness of the UAF and swiftly expanded from their initial positions in the regional capitals of Donetsk and Luhansk and occupied the strategic port city of Mariupol.

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[41] Anatoliy Grytsenko, Leonid Polyakov, and Mykola Sunhurovskyi, "Military Reform in Ukraine: Expert Opinion Poll," Kiev: *Ukrainian Center for Economic and Political Studies*, n.d.
http://pdc.ceu.hu/archive/00005468/01/article_grytsenko_polyakov_sungurovsky_NSD2_eng.pdf, p. 32.
[42] Natalie Mychajlyszyn, "Civil-Military Relations in Post-Soviet Ukraine: Implications for Domestic and Regional Stability," *Armed Forces & Society* 28, no. 3 (1 April 2002): pp. 455–79, 466.
[43] Bila Kniga, *2013: Zbroini Sili Ukriany* (*The White Book 2013: The Armed Forced of Ukraine*). Kiev: Ministry of Defence of Ukraine, 2014, p. 66.
[44] Author's Interview with Arestovych.
[45] Author's Interview with Arestovych; and Margarete Klein, "Ukraine's Volunteer Battalions – Advantages and Challenges," Stockholm: Swedish Defence Research Agency, 2015.
http://www.foi.se/Documents/RUFS%20Briefing%20No.%2027%20.pdf .
[46] Author's Interview with Arestovych.
[47] Puglisi, "General Zhukov and the Cyborgs," p. 7, and Author's Interview with Arestovych
[48] "Ukrainian Military Personnel," accessed 27 July 2016.
http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/ukraine/personnel.htm,

Citizen Soldiers

In March of 2014, in response to the separatist threat, members of Ukrainian civil-society began to spontaneously organise themselves into pro-government paramilitary groups.[49] On 13 March 2014, an official presidential decree was issued by acting President Oleksandre Turchynov to create paramilitary formations in support of the state that utilised these informal volunteer groups. [50] The Territorial Defence Battalions and Special Police Battalions (commonly known as volunteer battalions) were registered with the Ukrainian government, however, they initially received little to no funding from the State, were supported almost exclusively by private donations, and operated independently from official state control. [51] The volunteer battalions were authorised by the Ukrainian Government to draw recruits from local regions, using men of 18-50 years of age without criminal records. [52] These official regulations, however, were ignored by the volunteer battalions, who not only recruited numerous individuals who did not fit these criteria, but provided an officially unsanctioned option for those individuals to participate in combat operations. [53] The Ukrainian population's swift response to the Government's call to crowdsource war led to the effective establishment of almost 50 volunteer battalions integral to the Government's early combat operations against the separatists.[54]

Donbas Battalion was founded from the social networks developed during the Maidan protests. Their recruitment processes, communications, and donation systems relied on the internet. The Battalion initially consisted of a group of pro-government protestors concerned over the safety of their fellow protestors at the Maidan in

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[49] Author's interview with Olesya Tsybulko.

[50] Верховна Рада України, "Pro Nationalny Gvardyo Ukrainy (About the National Guard of Ukraine)," March 03, 2014. Accessed April 04, 2018. http://zakon4.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/876-18

[51] Puglisi, "A People's Army," p. 11; and Authors Interviews with Arestovych, Tsybulko, and Natalia Veselova.

[52] "V 19 Oblactiakh Ukrainy Cformerovany Dobrovol'checke Otriady (In 19 Regions of Ukraine Volunteer Battalions Are Being Established)," 15 April 2014. Accessed 29 July 2016. http://censor.net.ua/news/281231/v_19_oblastyah_ukrainy_sformirovany_dobrovolcheskie_otryady_rechinskiyi.

[53] Author's interview with Tsybulko.

[54] "Ukraine's 'Battalion' Army, Explained," *Medium*, 17 September 2014, accessed 17 August 2016, https://medium.com/@Hromadske/ukraines-shadow-army-b04d7a683493#.jcws2yy2p.

Donetsk.[55] It was formed entirely of residents from the Donbas region, mostly from the city of Donetsk.[56] The founders of this battalion, Semen Semenchenko and Natalia Veselova, initially connected on Facebook over discussions about the inability of the Government in Kyiv to protect its citizens in eastern Ukraine.[57] Initially Semenchenko formed a Self-Defence Group in Donetsk on 5 March 2014 similar to the *Samooberona* in Kyiv. Violence in the east of Ukraine quickly escalated. Many members of Semenchenko's Self-Defence Group were beaten, and one killed, in clashes in Donetsk on 13 March 2014. Semenchenko determined that more force was needed for the Self-Defence Group's effort to be effective. Following the March 2014 Government call for volunteer-fighters, Semenchenko contacted Veselova, an experienced fundraiser. Together they put out a call for the creation of a volunteer battalion.[58] On 12 April 2014 the Donbas Battalion was founded.[59] As pro-separatist sentiments grew in Donetsk, Semenchenko moved the initial volunteer-fighters out of the city and into a newly established training facility near Dnipro.[60]

Donbas Battalion was initially formed with only a handful of fighters but within its first month of operation, it had grown in number to hundreds of individuals. Further growth wasn't due to a lack of willing volunteers, rather it was because of the Battalion's limited capacity to train and equip all of its fighters.[61] Only a handful of the members of Donbas Battalion had previous military experience and they were assigned to train new recruits.[62] Additionally, as the Battalion initially had very poor equipment, recruits were tasked with supplying their own weapons and armour, and the unit was funded by public donations.[63] Initially volunteer-fighters in the Donbas Battalion were

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[55] Ibid.
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.
[58] Ibid.
[59] Author's interview with Veselova.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Author's interview with Tsybulko.
[62] Author's interview with Alexander Martenenko.
[63] Author's interview with Martenenko.

unpaid.[64] Eventually, as the Battalion gained more public attention, donations increased and allowed provision of stipends to some fighters.[65]

Donbas Battalion received public donations in numerous ways. Most donations arrived as small monetary sums sent directly to its bank account. This direct deposit method enabled the Battalion to avoid fees from websites such as PayPal and to fund their Battalion more swiftly than via online crowdfunding methods such as Kickstarter.[66] It also received donations of food, towels, construction equipment, and later, even vehicles.[67] By 01 June 2014, less than two months after the Donbas Battalion was initially formed, it commenced its first combat operation. At that time, the Battalion numbered around 350 fighters with approximately 200 more training in its reserves.[68]

Unlike Donbas, Dnipro Battalion (based near the city of Dnipro) was formed and funded largely by a businessman, rather than by the efforts of a collective. Ukrainian oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky was appointed Governor of the Dnipropetrovsk Region on 02 March 2014, just after the start of the conflict. Like many other Ukrainian oligarchs, Kolomoisky feared losing some of his business interests if the separatists succeeded in breaking away from Ukraine.[69] Thus, when fighting in the East of Ukraine began in 2014, Kolomoisky was firmly in favour of the Maidan movement and the subsequent interim government.[70] Concerned over both the emerging separatist movement in neighbouring Donetsk and pro-Russian sentiments in his own Dnipro, Kolomoisky personally organised and bankrolled the Dnipro Battalion, spending a rumoured USD 10 million on training, equipment, and support.[71] While many news sources estimated the size of the battalion at around 2,000 fighters, Vasilisa Trofimovich (Dnipro

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[64] Author's interview with Tsybulko.

[65] The majority of fighters from volunteer battalions received either no remuneration for their services or a small stipend. Like most practices related to the volunteer battalions, this was not consistent as some battalions, such as Dnipro, received significantly higher funding, and were able and willing to provide their 'volunteers' with a relatively decent wage. Author's interview with Veselova.

[66] Author's interview with Veselova and Tsybulko.

[67] Author's interview with Veselova and Martenenko.

[68] Author's interview with Martenenko.

[69] Kudelia, "The House That Yanukovych Built," p. 29.

[70] Richard Sakwa, *Frontline Ukraine: Crisis in the Borderlands*, (United Kingdom: I.B.Tauris, 2014), p. 128.

[71] Alan Cullison, "Ukraine's Secret Weapon: Feisty Oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky," *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 June 2014, http://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraines-secret-weapon-feisty-oligarch-ihor-kolomoisky-1403886665.

Battalion's Press Secretary), believes that Dnipro contained only around 500 fighters, a figure much more in line with the size of other Ukrainian volunteer battalions.[72] Kolomoisky's extensive funding was also evident in the higher wages received by Dnipro members.[73] Dnipro Battalion fighters received UAH 4,200 per month—nearly five times more than the UAH 900 a month that was not even consistently provided to members of the Donbas Battalion.[74]

While the Dnipro Battalion was the main recipient of funding from Kolomoisky, the oligarch extended his support to other battalions too, helping to fund as many as eight to ten different ones across Ukraine.[75] Dnipro Battalion encapsulates a number of the paradoxes of the conflict. The Government, unable to fund its own war, looked to this recently elected businessman-turned-Governor in order to provide the necessary funds. Yet even with all the private financial support provided by Kolomoisky, Dnipro still partially relied on crowdsourced funding for weapons, food, and equipment. Dnipro Battalion functioned in its organisation and command structures more like other volunteer battalions than a regular Ukrainian Army battalion. Moreover, both Dnipro Battalion's fighters and volunteers from other battalions identified Dnipro not as a private army, but as a volunteer battalion.[76] Although fighters in Dnipro Battalion may have been paid more than those in most other battalions, accounts from inside and outside of the Battalion indicate that its members were motivated to fight based on patriotism rather than by monetary compensation.[77]

Furthermore, volunteer battalions throughout Ukraine were formed of fighters of various backgrounds. Aidar Battalion was largely composed of Ukrainian veterans from the Soviet War in Afghanistan, many of whom were residents in the Luhansk

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[72] Cullison, "Ukraine's Secret Weapon,"http://www.wsj.com/articles/ukraines-secret-weapon-feisty-oligarch-ihor-kolomoisky-1403886665, Carol Morello, "The Secret of Eastern Ukraine's One Rebel-Free Region," *Toronto Star*, 5 July 2014, https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2014/07/05/the_secret_of_eastern_ukraines_one_rebelfree_region.html, and Author's Interview with Vasilisa Trofimovich.

[73] Author's Interview with Trofimovich.

[74] Ibid.

[75] Umland and Bezruk, "Der Fall Azov (The Case of Azov)," p. 2.

[76] Author's Interview with Trofimovich, Martenenko, and Lermontov.

[77] Author's Interview with Trofimovich, Martenenko, and Lermontov.

Region where the Battalion conducted the majority of its operations.[78] Unlike many other battalions, Aidar received most of its weapons directly from the Ukrainian Army, perhaps because of the close-knit connections established between former veterans.[79]

Other volunteer battalions received significant amounts of support from political organisations. For instance, Azov Battalion received much of its financial support and recruits from a combination of far-right nationalist groups and even soccer hooligans (the name given to the well organised and extremely aggressive soccer fan groups in Ukraine). While Azov is not the only volunteer battalion with far-right connections, it is the largest, most visible, and most politically active. Many of the officers of Azov have stood out for their racist comments.[80] Furthermore, Azov Battalion originated from participants involved in a violent street battle between separatists and pro-Ukrainian groups, which took place on 14 March 2014 in Kharkiv.[81] Many of the members of Azov are 0former members of nationalist organisations such as the Social-National Assembly (SNA) or the political party Svoboda, both based in Kyiv.[82] Despite its western Ukrainian connections, a majority of Azov's volunteers come from the east and the unit uses Russian as its primary language.[83]

Hence, during the initial stages of the conflict, recruits for the volunteer battalions came primarily from three broad groups: pro-government Ukrainians in the Donbas Region, Maidan activists, and far-right nationalists. The majority of the initial fighters were recruited from regions of eastern Ukraine, though as the war continued, more western Ukrainian recruits joined them.[84] The funding of the battalions was provided largely by volunteer donations, through individuals such as Kolomoisky, the

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[78] Authors interviews with Kovzhun and Arestovych.

[79] Anastasia Vlasova, "Volunteer Aidar Battalion Fights on Front Lines in Luhansk Oblast," *Kyivpost*, 21 July 2014, accessed 25 July 2016. http://www.kyivpost.com/multimedia/photo/volunteer-aidar-battalion-fights-on-front-lines-in-luhansk-oblast-357129.html.

[80] For more information on the political and ideological background of Azov, see Umland and Bezruk, "Der Fall Azov Freiwilligenbataillone in der Ukraine (The Case of Azov: Volunteer Battalions in Ukraine)."

[81] Umland and Bezruk. "Der Fall Azov (The Case of Azov)," p. 4.

[82] Umland and Bezruk. "Der Fall Azov (The Case of Azov)," p. 5.

[83] Author's Interview with Arestovych, and Shaun Walker, "Azov Fighters Are Ukraine's Greatest Weapon and May Be Its Greatest Threat," *The Guardian*, 12 September 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/10/azov-far-right-fighters-ukraine-neo-nazis.

[84] Author's Interview with Tsybulko.

Samooborona, or political organisations. These developments are consistent with theories of crowdsourcing practiced in other contexts, which typically involve donations from broad spectrums of society following an initial call from a large organisation or business - in this case requested by the Ukrainian Government and businessmen such as Kolomoisky. Even battalions such as Dnipro, which received significant funding from an oligarch, and Azov, which benefited from existing political organisations, looked to crowdsourcing in order to support its operations.

Civil-Society at War: Volunteer-Fighters in Combat Operations

> *Euromaidan and the ensuing hostilities in the Donbas have produced a protracted, widespread social mobilisation and have resulted in a sort of "permanent revolution" that has extended beyond the protests. The weakness of state institutions and their temporary failure in the provision of security and defence, functions generally seen as prerogatives of the state, have created an urgency for assistance… Civil society has become de facto a security actor.*

> *Rosaria Puglisi*[85]

On 13 April 2014, the Ukrainian Government, under Acting President Oleksandr Turchynov, officially launched its Anti-Terrorist Operations (ATO) and dispatched military forces to contain the separatist protestors.[86] The first six months of the conflict, between April and September 2014, were critical to the course of the war because the fluid and often ramshackle combat operations which occurred across the Donbas region established the line of control dividing the Government of Ukraine-held areas from those under separatist control. With the support of civil-society, the newly formed volunteer battalions provided a stop-gap for the UAF to regain their footing, swiftly establishing the significance of crowdsourcing in the conflict. Ukrainian Army Officers such as Oleksiy Arestovych, journalists such as Chris Allen, and officers and fighters

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[85] Puglisi, "A People's Army," p. 3.
[86] "Ukraine Launches 'Anti-Terrorist' Operation," *Al Jazeera*, 13 April 2014. http://www.aljazeera.com/news/europe/2014/04/ukraine-launches-anti-terrorist-operation-201441363951423315.html.

from the volunteer battalions such as Mikhail Lermontov and Alexander Martenenko have all agreed that without Ukraine's crowdsourced volunteer battalions, the line of control separating government-controlled from separatist-controlled areas would have been significantly differently than what was agreed to under Minsk II accord, and would likely have included the cities of Mariupol, Kharkiv, and even Dnipro.[87]

Civil-society utilised subcategories of crowdsourcing such as crowdfunding and citizen journalism to support both civilian and military projects. One, for example, appeared on the crowdfunding website *biggggIdea* and generated funds to repair damaged apartments for those who had been affected by the war.[88] As is common practice with many crowdfunding websites, individuals could receive gifts as an incentive to donate.[89] The website *People's Project.com* took the concept of crowdfunding Ukrainian forces and volunteer battalions even further. It allowed individuals to donate funds for the purchase of sniper rifles, entrenching tools, and even ten Sabre remotely-operated heavy machine guns.[90] *People's Project.com* and *biggggidea* share a similar format with sections that include descriptions of each project, actions taken so far, videos of the organisers discussing their projects, donations received to date, and how close the projects are to achieving their objectives.[91] Citizen journalists were also active gathering information, translating documents, and conducting open-source research on Russian involvement in the Donbas. InformNapalm brought together volunteer fighters, translators, activists and analysts to report on events in the Donbas and track the involvement of Russian forces.[92] Even the UAF harnessed the power of crowdfunding—it set up a programme whereby citizens could text a phone number to

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[87] Author's Interview with Arestovych, Chris Allen, Martenenko, and Lermontov.

[88] Anastasia Rozlutska, "Tabir na Donbaci 'Bodimo Ukrainy Razom' (Camp in the Donbas: Building Ukraine Together)," October 2014. Accessed 5 August 2016. https://biggggidea.com/project/803/.

[89] Ibid.

[90] "Sabre Remote Weapon Station," *People's Project*, accessed 5 August 2016, http://www.peoplesproject.com/en/sabre-remote-weapon-station/.

[91] "Ukrainian Nationwide Volunteer Center," The People's Project, accessed 5 August 2016. http://www.peoplesproject.com/en/#military-en.

[92] "About Us," *InformNapalm*, accessed 30 March 2018. https://informnapalm.org/en/about/

donate USD $0.51 to the war effort.[93] The programme was effective, raising USD three million in the first three days alone.[94]

Like much of the crowdsourced volunteer support provided to the volunteer battalions and the UAF, organisers with *People's Project.com* personally delivered equipment directly to the combat units. The organisation required official documents from the units it supported to prove to the funders that their donations were spent on the promised projects, delivered to the correct recipients, and not lost to corruption.[95] At the start of the conflict corruption was a particular concern. Thus, many volunteers chose to bring supplies straight to the formations fighting at the front, preferring not to risk donating money to the government, the military, or another third party.[96]

Donor individuals and organisations also directly supported fighters on the front lines. Both the Ukrainian Army and the volunteer battalions had extremely limited access to effective medical equipment—the Army even lacked basic necessities such as food or bottled water. Civilian volunteers both inside and outside of Ukraine identified delivery of medical expertise and equipment to the frontline as a central priority. One Ukrainian volunteer used the crowdfunding website *Indiegogo.com* to fund the purchase of bandages and blood coagulants for Ukrainian fighters.[97] He raised USD $2,000 in ten days, mostly from small donations which ranged from USD $20 to $50.[98] Significant amounts of medical assistance came from the Ukrainian diaspora. For instance, *Patriot Defence*, a Canadian organisation with Ukrainian diaspora support, crowdfunded the purchase of over 17,000 "Improved First Aid Kits" and trained over 21,000 Ukrainian fighters in NATO-standard tactical medicine training.[99] When Ukrainian civilians heard

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[93] "Text 565 to Donate to the Ukrainian Military," *WarisBoring*, 17 March 2014, accessed 24 July 2016, https://warisboring.com/text-565-to-donate-to-the-ukrainian-military-4ced66f6b80#.b6b5s142i.
[94] "Ukraine Is Crowdfunding Its Army," *WarisBoring*, 14 July 2014, accessed 24 July 2016, https://warisboring.com/ukraine-is-crowdfunding-its-army-f819fa24353#.oo3dxz21w.
[95] "I Heard No One Say 'what you are doing is bullshit,'" *People's Project*, 1 September 2015, accessed 5 August 2016. http://www.peoplesproject.com/en/articles/people-project-auditor-i-heard-no-one-say-what-you-are-doing-is-bullshit/.
[96] Author's interview with Kovzhun.
[97] "Crowdsourced War," *TechCrunch*, 23 November 2014, accessed 24 July 2016, https://techcrunch.com/2014/11/23/crowdsourced-war/.
[98] Ibid.
[99] "Patriot Defence," *Ukraine Appeal*, accessed 5 August 2016, http://ukraineappeal.ucc.ca/patriot-defence/.

that soldiers at the front were going hungry from lack of supplies, they organised civilians *Sotnias* to cook, and deliver food and bottled water to the front line.[100]

Trial by Fire

During the first few months of the conflict, the volunteer battalions acted as "shock troops," taking the brunt of a war that the UAF were inadequately prepared to fight. This was partially due to poor training and the gradual decline of the UAF since 1991, but equally significant was their shaky morale. Most soldiers who had joined the Ukrainian Army prior to April 2014 never expected to fight a war, least of all a war against aggression from their own countrymen and Russia.[101] Many soldiers were reluctant to enter into dangerous or politically volatile situations, severely limiting the capacity of the Army to carry out operations. Ukraine took three months for the UAF to train a new set of recruits following the split of Donetsk and Luhansk into Ukrainian government-controlled and separatist-controlled areas, and a further two to three months for these recruits to gain enough combat experience and confidence in their abilities to operate as an effective force.[102]

Most of the volunteers in the initial months of the conflict had only two weeks of training (or occasionally less) before being sent into combat.[103] Some of the battalions, such as Aidar, benefited from the previous military experience of its fighters. Also, due to their more active roles, many of these veterans suffered higher casualty rates.[104] Moreover, the volunteer battalions also had extremely limited equipment; one volunteer described how, during his first combat operation, only four out of 12 men in his squad had rifles.[105] Other volunteer-fighters described their severe lack of transportation. Civilians donated cars, crowdfunded resources to purchase and repair old armoured vehicles, or (due to high customs fees) smuggled in cars from outside Ukraine.[106] Border guards would often turn a blind eye to imports if they heard the

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[100] Puglisi, "A People's Army," p. 13.

[101] Author's interview with Arestovych.

[102] Author's interviews with Arestovych and Kovzhun.

[103] Authors interviews with Martenenko and Lermontov.

[104] Author's interview with Kovzhun.

[105] Author's interview with Martenenko.

[106] Author's interview with Kovzun.

equipment would be used for the war effort. [107] Some fighters, desperate for transportation or unconcerned about the impact on the civilian population, stole vehicles on the streets and co-opted them for the war effort.[108] Volunteer-fighters also traded with the Ukrainian Army for equipment they required. Often, they exchanged domestic products such as food, fuel, or water which volunteers tended to have in excess, for military equipment such as guns, grenades, and ammunition.[109] Although the volunteers often lacked necessary military equipment, they were generally well supplied with food, unlike the regular army units who suffered from a lack of access to basic necessities due to serious logistical problems.[110]

Despite their lack of training or equipment, the volunteer battalions were initially more effective than their counterparts in the UAF. This was partially due to both their capacity to rapidly respond and their adaptability. The volunteers mobilised much more quickly than the UAF, and reacted swiftly to the movement of separatist formations in situations where the UAF would be slow to respond.[111] This reaction speed was particularly evident in the early battles for the strategically important coastal city of Mariupol. Mariupol changed hands numerous times during May and June 2014 before finally being recaptured by Dnipro and Azov Battalions on 13 June 2014.[112] The volunteer-fighter's command structures and varied skill sets also proved to be an advantage. One volunteer-officer described a situation where his company entrenched alongside a government formation. While the volunteers dug in to avoid enemy fire, the neighbouring army formation preferred to wait numerous days for engineering specialists to arrive and dig for them, all the while taking fire from separatist artillery.[113] This pattern was indicative of numerous situations described to the author during interviews where the adaptability of the volunteer-fighters and an informal command structure worked to their advantage.[114]

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[107] Ibid.

[108] Author's interview with Martenenko.

[109] Author's interview with Kovzhun.

[110] Author's Interview with Arestovych.

[111] Author's Interview with Lermontov.

[112] Aleksandar Vasovic, "Ukrainian Forces Reclaim Port City from Rebels," *Reuters*, 13 June 2014, accessed 3 August 2016. http://www.reuters.com/article/us-urkaine-crisis-mariupol-idUSKBN0EO0KP20140613.

[113] Author's Interview with Petro Koesyk.

[114] Author's Interviews with Koesyk, Arestovych, and Martenenko.

Even more important than the volunteer battalions' ability to react swiftly and adaptively, was their high morale and willingness to fight. During the first six months of the war, the UAF were quick to abandon positions and equipment, preferring to retreat or surrender when confronted with serious resistance.[115] By contrast, fighters from the volunteer battalions would often take unusual risks that professional soldiers from the UAF would customarily avoid due to the danger involved. This risk-taking, along with a reputation for brutality, led to the development of the volunteer battalions' deadly reputation which intimidated separatist forces.[116] During the early months of the war, this formidable reputation was a further boon to the volunteer-fighters' combat effectiveness. Separatist forces would sometimes flee from facing the volunteer battalions rather than commit to the defensive operations they would ordinarily undertake when attacked by the Ukrainian Army.[117] This intimidating reputation, however, proved dangerous for volunteer-fighters, as separatists specifically targeted them during combat and treated them poorly during captivity.[118]

During the first half-year of the war, volunteer-fighters were consistently at the forefront of combat operations. Volunteer battalions often worked closely with nearby Ukrainian Army formations. Volunteers commonly spearheaded an advance as the Army provided support in the form of artillery or mechanised vehicles.[119] These initial operations were small, normally involving dozens or hundreds of individuals, and usually centred on securing government buildings, police stations, military armories, supply dumps, and the capture and defence of roadblocks and checkpoints.[120] The securing of these key positions provided military equipment and supplies to whomever held them, or worked as centres of government control or authority.

Despite being poorly armed and equipped, the volunteer battalions' swift creation, adaptability, fervor, and reputation gave them the ability to function effectively. The chaos of the opening months of combat operations in the Donbas provided an excellent environment within which the volunteer-fighters could operate.

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[115] Author's Interview with Arestovych.
[116] Author's Interview with Lermontov.
[117] Author's Interview with Arestovych.
[118] Author's Interview with Lermontov.
[119] Author's Interviews with Arestovych and Martenenko.
[120] Author's Interviews with Koesyk, Arestovych, Lermontov, and Martenenko.

Both pro-and-anti-government forces were disorganised and fought in small groups, with combatants numbering only dozens or hundreds, bypassing the necessity for large scale organisation and planning.

The Turning Point

The battle for the operationally critical city of Ilovaisk proved to be a turning point for both the course of the war and the future of the volunteer battalions. Following the Battle for Ilovaisk, the scale of Ukraine's conflict escalated. Heavy weapons and mechanised vehicles were increasingly used by combatants from both sides; the UAF began to find its footing while the separatists received modern tanks, artillery, and regular and irregular forces from Russia.[121] In Ilovaisk, combat operations shifted to large set-piece battles with hundreds, even thousands of fighters.

Whereas the first six months of the conflict demonstrated the effectiveness of the crowdsourced support provided to the war effort by Ukrainian civil-society, the Battle of Ilovaisk demonstrated the limitations of its practice. An influx of Russian troops and equipment combined with poor command and control among the volunteer fighters and the UAF ultimately led to the Ukrainian defeat. While the volunteer-fighters were sufficiently well armed to combat the initial separatist forces, the infusion of significant amounts of modern artillery, armour, and well-trained Russian combat and irregular groups into their opponents' ranks left the volunteer battalions militarily outmatched. Rifles, machine guns, civilian vehicles for transport, and even grenades were relatively easy for civilians to acquire; it was much more difficult for the volunteer-fighters to assemble the resources or even gain access to the anti-tank weapons, artillery, and armoured vehicles required to fight a conventional battle against opponents equipped

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[121] There have been numerous academically rigorous accounts of Russian Military Forces in action in Ukraine. Some examples include those reports by the Royal United Service Institute (RUSI), and from Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) monitors.
Igor Sutyagin, "Russian Forces in Ukraine," (London: Royal United Services Institute, 2015), https://rusi.org/sites/default/files/201503_bp_russian_forces_in_ukraine.pdf, and Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, "Russia's Armed Aggression Against Ukraine: Further Evidence of GRU Mlitary's Participation in Military Operations on the Territory of Ukraine," (Ukraine: Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, 2016), http://www.osce.org/fsc/220141?download=true.

with modern weapons.[122] Although the Ukrainian Army had access to these kinds of equipment, concerns over the battalions' reliability ensured that the Army kept this sort of heavy equipment for its own use.[123]

The army and volunteer battalions cooperated effectively when jointly coordinating local actions, however, distrust and poor communication between the volunteer battalions and the commanding officers of the Ukrainian Army limited their ability to coordinate large scale operations. In the words of Ukrainian Deputy Minister of Defence Ivan Rusnak, the extent of the Ukrainian defeat at Ilovaisk was caused largely by "the independence of the volunteer battalions and the lack of coordination with the military".[124] Poor command and control within the Ukrainian forces at Iloviask created confusion and distrust within the Ukrainian command structure while the escalation of the conflict left the "shock troops" of the initial six months of the war heavily outgunned by their separatist opponents.

Following its defeat at Ilovaisk, the Ukrainian Government started to reconsider the role of the battalions. The UAF began to provide some heavy equipment and armoured vehicles to the volunteer battalions. Furthermore, in November 2014, the Government determined to formally incorporate the volunteer battalions into the regular UAF, a process not completed until after the signing of the Minsk II ceasefire agreement on 12 February 2015.[125] After their amalgamation into the UAF, volunteer battalions operated under the same organisational, funding, and leadership standards as the rest of the UAF.[126] The incorporation of the battalions into the regular UAF occurred concurrently with a weakening of the Ukrainian economy, limiting the ability of individual volunteers or civil-society at large to provide financial support to the battalions or the government.[127]

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[122] Author's interview with Kovzhun.

[123] Author's interviews with Arestovych and Lermontov.

[124] Puglisi, "General Zhukov and the Cyborgs," pp. 8-9.

[125] "Volunteer Battalions to Become Part of Ukrainian Army - Poltorak," *Censor.net*, 11 November 2014, accessed 23 August 2016, http://en.censor.net.ua/news/311287/volunteer_battalions_to_become_part_of_ukrainian_army_poltorak.

[126] Author's interviews with Arestovych.

[127] Author's interview with Kovzhun.

From the Frontline to the Ballot Boxes: Military and Political Consequences for Ukraine

Crowdsourcing the initial response to Russian-backed separatists resulted in major consequences for Ukraine that went beyond battlefield operations. Many individual volunteers were catapulted into influential political positions, a concerning development given many of their controversial, often far-right, political views. Evidence suggests, however, that far-right members of the volunteer battalions have gained influence despite of, rather than because of, their extreme political views. In fact, given the post-Maidan electoral failures of far-right parties, it seems that the Maidan protests weakened the overall influence of extremist views in Ukraine.

Of far more concern are human rights abuses occurring in the ATO areas due to a lack of governmental oversight and control, and the significant influence of oligarchs over the volunteer battalions. This combination of human rights abuses, far-right political connections, and oligarch influence over the volunteer battalions transformed them into a liability for the Ukrainian Government both locally and in the eyes of the international community. Crowdsourcing may have given Ukraine the motivated forces it needed to function militarily during the first six months of the war, but the consequences of this approach have haunted the Ukrainian Government.

Numerous fighters and organisers from volunteer battalions went on to become involved in politics. The sacrifices of volunteer-fighters who left jobs, devoted significant amounts of their personal resources to the war effort, and risked their lives for their country, made the volunteer battalions some of the most trusted institutions in Ukraine.[128] A December 2014 poll, published by the news organisation *Zerkalo Nedeli*, identified volunteer battalions as the second most trusted group in Ukraine, ahead of the government, military , and Church (and behind civil-society organisations).[129] This popularity has boosted many of those involved in the battalions, in particular their social-media savvy commanders and organisers, into elected positions within the Ukrainian Government.[130] These include the commander of Donbas Battalion Semen

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[128] Puglisi, "Heroes or Villains?" p. 13.

[129] "Narod e Vlact' (People and Power)," Zerkalo Nedeli (Mirror of the Week), December 2014, accessed 10 August 2016, http://opros2014.zn.ua/authority.

[130] Puglisi, "Heroes or Villains?" p. 13.

Semenchenko, commander of the Azov Battalion Andriey Blitzsky, and the leader of Right-Sector Dmytro Yarosh, among others.[131] The volunteer battalions' popularity has improved political legitimacy for all those connected with them, from the commanders to individuals involved in the organisational and logistical operations of the battalions, such as Natalia Veselova or Yaroslav Markevych.[132] Given the remarkable popular support received by volunteer battalions and the low popularity of traditional politicians, such as Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko, it is not surprising that some members of the volunteer battalions have achieved political success,[133] propelling a number of them into the political spotlight with ideologies ranging from nationalist to far-right to "fascist."

Many members of the volunteer battalions have associations with current or former far-right organisations in Ukraine. Andriey Blitzsky, commander of the Azov Battalion and current MP in the Ukrainian Parliament, has been unapologetic in his extremely racist views which have included statements such as:

> Migration is clearly damaging to our people and our country. It undermines our biological, economical and civilizational basis of the existence of our people… Our credo is: destroy everything that destroys our people. As you know, one can restore everything: the national economy, the order in the streets, the demography, a strong army and a navy, the atomic bomb. The only thing one cannot restore is the purity of the blood.[134]

Some of these political organisations can be rightly termed far-right nationalist while others are more extreme and can appropriately be categorised as fascist. For example, the leadership of Azov Battalion has close ties to both the far-right organisations *Patriot Ukraïny* (Patriots of Ukraine) and *Bratstvo* (Brotherhood), who often use ultranationalist

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[131] "The New and Old Faces of Ukraine's Next Parliament, Explained," *Hromadske International*, 5 November 2014, accessed August 10, 2016, https://medium.com/@Hromadske/the-new-and-old-faces-of-ukraines-next-parliament-explained-48dea72f31ff#.1f72n0hmd.

[132] Author's Interview with Tsybulko.

[133] Shortly after his election, Poroshenko had a popular approval rating of 47%, two years later his approval rating had dropped to a low of 17%. Statistics from:
Gallup Inc. "Ukrainians Disillusioned with Leadership," 23 December 2015, accessed 10 August 2016, http://www.gallup.com/poll/187931/ukrainians-disillusioned-leadership.aspx.

[134] Umland and Bezruk, "Der Fall Azov (The Case of Azov)," p. 2.

revolutionary rhetoric. [135] Right-Sector is, in turn, closely connected to groups such as the Social-National Assembly (SNA), described by the scholar of far-right movements Vyacheslav Likhachev, as "'neo-Nazi' in the full sense of the word".[136]

Although connections between volunteer battalions and far-right organisations are undeniable and of concern, Rosaria Puglisi (one of the few researchers actively studying the volunteer battalions), notes that while some volunteer battalion members may espouse far-right ideologies, these ideologies are not held by most of them.[137] Umland supports this position by arguing that while some members of those battalions who hold extreme, often far-right, political views can be accurately described as "neo-Nazi" or fascist (using Roger Griffin's palingenetic definition of fascism), they are not representative of the battalions as a whole.[138]

While a number of volunteer-fighters with far-right views were elected during the September 2014 parliamentary elections, some with blatantly far-right views were negatively impacted by their extreme ideologies during the election. Furthermore, far-right parties as a whole performed worse in the 2014 election than they had done before the Maidan protests. Blitzsky was initially posted as a member of Prime Minister Arsenyi Yatsenyuk's People's Front's self-described "military council" and included on the list of People's Front of MPs up for election.[139] Yet after a significant outcry from human rights organisations, Blitzsky's name was removed from both lists by Yatsenyuk.[140] Ukrainian media also condemned violent actions by members of Right-Sector leading up to the elections, including a symbolic attack on the Ukrainian

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[135] Likhachev, "The 'Right Sector' and Others," p. 261.

[136] Umland and Bezruk, "Der Fall Azov (The Case of Azov)," p. 3 and Vyacheslav Likhachev, "The 'Right Sector' and Others: The Behavior and Role of Radical Nationalists in the Ukrainian Political Crisis of Late 2013 – Early 2014," *Communist and Post-Communist Studies* 48, no. 2-3 (June 2015): pp. 261.

[137] Puglisi, "Heroes or Villains?," p. 4.

[138] Andreas Umland, "Azov Battalion Is Not Neo-Nazi, But Some People In Battalion Are," Hromadske TV, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvDlIuAXjSI, and Roger Griffin, *The Nature of Fascism*, pp. 52-87.

[139] In Ukrainian elections half of the MPs elected to the Rada (parliament) come from closed party lists distributed between the participating political parties using the Hara quota with a 5% electoral threshold. The other half of the seats are filled from single constituent seats not officially associated with any party using the first past the post system. "Q&A: Ukrainian Parliamentary Election," *BBC News*, 23 October 2012, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-20031821.

[140] Umland and Bezruk, "Der Fall Azov (The Case of Azov)," p. 5.

parliament on 28 March 2014.[141] During the subsequent presidential elections, Dmytro Yarosh, the leader of Right-Sector, received a mere 0.7% of the popular vote, evidence of his weak popular support.[142] Even the far-right party Svoboda, which had received 10.4% of the proportional representation vote in the 2012 elections, received only 4.7% of the vote in the October 2014 elections. Right-Sector received only 1.8% of the vote. Neither Svoboda nor Right-Sector received enough votes to pass the 5% threshold necessary to receive seats in Parliament from the proportional vote.[143]

Despite the recent electoral failure of their parties, individual members of far-right groups, including both Blitzsky and Yarosh, were elected to the Ukrainian Parliament in single-seat electoral districts.[144] As noted by Likhachev, their electoral success was mostly based on their popular perception as heroes for fighting against Russian aggression, rather than for their far-right ideology.[145] Groups such as Azov and Right-Sector remain a potential threat to Ukraine due to their discontent with the government. However, unless Ukraine's circumstances significantly deteriorate, prompting the population consider extremist alternatives to the government, it seems unlikely that they would pose a serious threat to Ukraine's political system. Thus, given the recent electoral failures of far-right parties in Ukraine, it is reasonable to assume that their visibility in the media is not currently indicative of a widespread support of far-right extremism.[146]

Human Rights Abuses and Oligarchs

Of greater concern to security experts on Ukraine are the numerous accounts of volunteer-fighters (or even entire volunteer battalions), who have committed human rights abuses. Amnesty International investigated the Aidar Battalion in 2014, releasing a damning report that described how "the Aidar battalion has acquired locally a

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[141] Likhachev, "The 'Right Sector' and Others," p. 269.

[142] Ibid.

[143] Shekhovtsov and Umland, "Ukraine's Radical Right," pp. 62-63, and Likhachev, "The 'Right Sector' and Others," p. 269.

[144] Likhachev, "The 'Right Sector' and Others," p. 270.

[145] Ibid.

[146] Umland and Bezruk, "Der Fall Azov (The Case of Azov)," pp. 5-6.

reputation for brutal reprisals, robbery, beatings and extortion".[147] The report indicated that local law enforcement was either unable or unwilling to stop the abuses and that the commanders of Aidar should potentially bear responsibility under national and international law.[148] The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights has also released numerous reports which indicate the culpability of a number of volunteer battalions in human rights abuses. Abuses reported during the first year of the conflict included summary executions, arbitrary detention, and torture.[149] Human rights abuses committed by volunteer battalions were difficult to prosecute due to the informal nature of their command structures, lack of official insignias or uniforms, and the refusal of the Military Prosecutor's Office to pursue cases without additional proof from civilian prosecutors that servicemen were involved in crimes.[150] Added to these abuses are numerous reports of individuals in the volunteer battalions stealing, looting, and illegally occupying property.[151] These abuses were somewhat reined in by the disbandment of some of the worst culprits such as the Aidar Battalion, and by the incorporation of the volunteer battalions into the regular army.[152] However, human rights abuses remain a serious concern as many of them have gone unprosecuted.[153]

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[147] Amnesty International, "Abuses and War Crimes by the Aidar Volunteer Battalion in the North Luhansk Region," in Document (Amnesty International, 2014),
https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/EUR50/040/2014/en/, p. 2.

[148] Ibid.

[149] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine: 16 February to 15 May 2016," (United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2016), http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/Ukraine_14th_HRMMU_Report.pdf, p. 14.

[150] Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Report on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine,"
http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/Ukraine_14th_HRMMU_Report.pdf, p. 18.

[151] "Ukraine Struggles to Control Maverick Battalions," *Reuters*, 29 July 2015,
http://www.reuters.com/article/us-ukraine-crisis-battalions-special-rep-idUSKCN0Q30YT20150729.

[152] "Volunteer Battalions to Become Part of Ukrainian Army - Poltorak," *Censor.net*, 11 November 2014, accessed 23 August 2016,
http://en.censor.net.ua/news/311287/volunteer_battalions_to_become_part_of_ukrainian_army_poltorak; and Author's interviews with Arestovych.

[153] "Nationalist Aidar Unit Reorganized as Assault Battalion of Ukraine's Army," *Sputnik News*, 9 March 2015, accessed 11 August 2016,
http://sputniknews.com/europe/20150302/1018960475.html#ixzz43Zf0ElUm, and United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Reports on the Human Rights Situation in Ukraine,"
http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/9thOHCHRreportUkraine.pdf, p. 14.

Equally concerning to security experts within Ukraine are threats to the stability of the state arising from the funding of volunteer battalions by oligarchs for their personal agendas and the involvement of battalions in power struggles between the richest individuals in the country. [154] During a major dispute between President Poroshenko and oligarch Igor Kolomoisky, the latter appeared at the gates of the UkrTransNafta Oil Company flanked by 50 armed men.[155] Dressed in military fatigues, these armed men arrived at the location on bulletproof trucks, and at the time declared that they were part of the Dnipro Battalion.[156] Kolomoisky later claimed that the armed men were private security contractors. In response, Arsen Avakov - the Interior Minister responsible for many of the volunteer battalions - gave private security companies twenty-four hours to surrender their arms to the Government.[157] President Poroshenko then fired Kolomoisky from his position as Governor of Dnipropetrovsk, demonstrating the President's wariness of the influence of oligarchs in this regard.[158] Other security experts claimed that military marches conducted in Ukraine by some volunteer battalions were a "public show aimed at attracting oligarchs" interest towards manpower available to be hired for the 'anti-establishment, populist' fight the oligarchs were engaging in against Ukrainian authorities". [159] Crowdsourcing resulted in individuals who had donated significant funds to the volunteer battalions holding a level of influence over the volunteer battalions that sometimes surpassed that of the government they technically serve.

International and Domestic Concerns

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[154] Puglisi, "A People's Army," p. 11.

[155] Sophie Pinkham, "Watching the Ukrainian Oligarchs," *The New Yorker*, 2 April 2015, http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/watching-the-ukrainian-oligarchs.

[156] "How Kolomoisky's Private Army Barricaded Ukrnafta Headquarters in Kyiv," *Kyiv Post*, 23 March 2015, accessed 11 August 2016, http://www.kyivpost.com/photo/?id=384177.

[157] Pinkham, "Watching the Ukrainian Oligarchs," *The New Yorker*, http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/watching-the-ukrainian-oligarchs.

[158] Shaun Walker, "Ukraine's President Sacks Olgarch from Post as Regional Governor," *The Guardian*, 26 March 2015, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/mar/25/ukraines-president-sacks-oligarch-from-post-as-regional-governor.

[159] Anton Shekhovtsov, in Puglisi, "A People's Army," p. 11.

The volunteer battalions also proved to be a liability for Ukraine's global standing, providing fuel for Russia's information war and raising concerns in the West about its support to potentially "fascist" militias operating outside of the government's control. Russia has carefully blended fact and fiction during the conflict, using its national and international media to undermine Ukraine.[160] For example, Russian media presented numerous fake stories of atrocities committed by the "fascists", including an incident in which a child was allegedly crucified, that subsequently were proved to be untrue by the news and journalism organisation *The Interpreter*.[161] Russian media also propagated stories that the war was being waged primarily by "so-called nationalist volunteer battalions" whom they describe as a "foreign NATO legion, which of course is not pursuing the national interests of Ukraine".[162] Misinformation and stories such as these have increased support within Russia for the separatists, and fueled anger against Kyiv within the separatist regions.

Concerns over the extremist views of some volunteer-fighters also limited Western support for them as it could tarnish Ukraine's international image. After previously denying lethal aid to Ukraine, the US Government withheld both non-lethal aid and military training to battalions with far-right connections, such as Azov Battalion.[163] The inability of Ukraine's government to regulate nationalists within the volunteer battalions or human rights abuses committed by them has provided fuel for Russia's media war and limited the ability of some of the most effective Ukrainian volunteer battalions to access important training and non-lethal military aid.

The lack of government oversight over Ukraine's crowdsourced fighters and their susceptibility to influence by oligarchs and far-right extremists raises the question of whether the battalions have become, or may become, a threat to the Ukrainian government. Clashes have occurred between the volunteer battalions and official

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[160] Peter Pomerantsev and Michael Weis, *The Menace of Unreality: How the Kremlin Weaponizes Information, Culture and Money"* (New York: The Institute of Modern Russia, 2014), http://www.interpretermag.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/The_Menace_of_Unreality_Final.pdf, p. 10.

[161] Ibid., p. 11.

[162] Daniel McLaughlin, "Ukraine's Volunteer Battalions a 'NATO legion', Putin Claims," *The Irish Times*, 27 January 2015, http://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/ukraine-s-volunteer-battalions-a-nato-legion-putin-claims-1.2080290.

[163] Leonid Bershidsky, "Ukraine's Neo-Nazis Won't Get U.S. Money," *Bloomberg View*, 12 June 2015, https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2015-06-12/ukraine-s-neo-nazis-won-t-get-u-s-money.

government structures. On 11 July 2015, Right-Sector volunteers clashed with police and the security detail of a local politician; the firefight that ensued left three people dead and thirteen wounded.[164] Another clash between volunteer-fighters and the Ukrainian government occurred on 01 September 2015, when a volunteer-fighter who attended an anti-government protest in Kyiv threw a grenade into a group of Ukrainian National Guardsmen, causing three deaths and over fifty injuries.[165] The ongoing frustration of many volunteer-fighters with the Ukrainian government has been exacerbated by the unwillingness of the government to provide them with heavy weapons or protective gear. One volunteer expressed his frustration with the government by stating that, "we can go into battle, defend the motherland, get injured and even die, but we are not authorised to receive weapons through which we can defeat the enemy and escape death".[166] Following the Ukrainian defeat at Ilovaisk, Mikhail Lermontov, commander of the "Grenade Company" from Donbas Battalion, labeled the battle a 'conspiracy by the government' and insisted that "once the enemy in the east is defeated [the volunteer-fighters] would march against the traitors in Kyiv".[167] These incidents corroborate numerous reports of anger within the volunteer battalions towards the government.[168]

Experts, such as Puglisi, believe that the frustration felt by many in the volunteer battalions is not significant enough to pose a major threat to the government in Kyiv.[169] The move to incorporate the volunteer battalions into the regular UAF defused a significant amount of their threat. While individual members of the volunteer battalions may resort to further violent action against the government, the majority of volunteer-fighters realise that the cost of a violent confrontation with the government would be counterproductive for Ukraine as a whole.[170] In fact, the increasing involvement of battalion commanders and organisers in politics has increased popular respect for the

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[164] David Stern, "Ukraine Clashes Raise Questions over Right Sector Militia," *BBC News*, 15 July 2015, http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-33523869.

[165] Laura Mills, "Death Toll Rises after Blast outside Ukrainian Parliament," *The Wall Street Journal*, 1 September 2015, http://www.wsj.com/articles/kiev-death-toll-rises-after-mondays-clashes-between-security-forces-protestors-1441113264.

[166] Puglisi, "Heroes or Villains?" p. 17.

[167] Author's interview with Lermontov.

[168] Author's interviews with Lermontov and Tsybulko.

[169] Puglisi, "Heroes or Villains?" p. 17.

[170] Ibid., p. 18.

government in Kyiv. [171] Despite the undeniable level of frustration expressed by volunteer-fighters towards Kyiv, only minor clashes between volunteers and the government have occurred. The frustration felt through the fall of 2014 and the spring of 2015 has dulled with time after the integration of the volunteer battalions into the regular army.[172]

The Result of War is Never Final

The crowdsourcing of Ukraine's forces –both regular and volunteer—was possible due to the unique situation of the country in the spring of 2014. When a military crisis arose in the Donbas, the weakness of the UAF drove the Ukrainian government to call for help from its citizens. Ukrainian civil-society, strengthening over the years since the 2004 Orange Revolution, provided additional resources to heed this call. The volunteer battalions, supported by civil-society and individual donations, proved adept at the low-intensity combat that characterised the first six months of the conflict, while civil-society and the Ukrainian diaspora provided much needed crowdsourced resources for the combatants at the front. As the conflict escalated, the drawbacks of crowdsourcing a war became increasingly evident, as demonstrated by the Battle of Ilovaisk where volunteer battalions were too poorly equipped or coordinated to effectively combat modern weaponry and trained Russian soldiers. While crowdsourcing continues to support Ukraine's defence, since February 2015 the effect and the extent of voluntary financial contributions to the war significantly decreased because of the integration of the volunteer battalions in the UAF, the increasing intensity of the conflict, and the contraction of Ukraine's economy.

Crowdsourcing proved to be an effective short-term solution to the challenges posed by the weakness of the Ukrainian government and its military. Crowdsourcing, however, also resulted in numerous unforeseen political repercussions which included:

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[171] Ibid.

[172] "Volunteer Battalions to Become Part of Ukrainian Army - Poltorak," *Censor.net*, 11 November 2014, accessed 23 August 2016,
http://en.censor.net.ua/news/311287/volunteer_battalions_to_become_part_of_ukrainian_army_poltorak.

human rights abuses, ongoing connections between volunteer-fighters and far-right groups, oligarchs' financial influence over volunteer battalions, and the mounting frustration of volunteer-fighters with the Ukrainian government. The volunteer battalions were key to Ukraine's ability to resist Russian-backed aggression in the Donbas, however, unintended consequences from the operation of state-parallel paramilitaries remains to this day. Human rights abuses committed by volunteer battalions still remain unprosecuted, the Right-Sector volunteer battalion has refused to incorporate itself into the regular military, and many volunteer-fighters still harbour resentment towards the Ukrainian government.

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