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Heroes or Villains? Volunteer Battalions in Post-Maidan Ukraine

by Rosaria Puglisi

ABSTRACT

Surrounded by a halo of confusing information and deliberate propaganda, the appearance of volunteer battalions in post-Maidan Ukraine and their continued engagement in military operations in the Donbas remains contentious. At a time when the US is still considering whether to provide Ukraine with defensive lethal weapons to withstand the offensive in the east, the question as to whether the Ukrainian forces are cohesive, disciplined, law-abiding and loyal to the country's institutions is extremely important. Recognised for their crucial role in the early days of the hostilities, volunteer battalions are equally feared for their increasing politicisation. Yet they represent a massive resource of motivation and commitment that, if properly channelled, has the potential to revitalise and keep in check unreformed military institutions.

Ukraine | Paramilitary forces | Armed forces



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Introduction

The disorderly retreat of Ukrainian troops from Debal'tseve on 18 February 2015 has reopened a debate that was never really exhausted on the discipline and the loyalty of the country's volunteer battalions. Fought two days after the mandated date for the cessation of hostilities, the battle of Debal'tseve took place in "clear violation" of the Minsk II agreement, as a statement of the EU HR/VP Federica Mogherini puts it.¹

Russian-backed separatists had been closing on the Ukrainians for weeks, aiming at gaining control over a pocket of territory that they considered theirs and therefore exempted from the ceasefire prescriptions. Despite OSCE protestations that the Minsk II package of measures was not "a shopping list" from which combatants could pick and choose, shelling continued unremittingly.² In the end Ukrainian President Poroshenko, in his capacity as commander-in-chief, flew to the outskirts of what had become a ghost town to announce that the Ukrainian troops would withdraw. OSCE monitors were prevented from accessing Debal'tseve for another day, while separatist forces cleaned up the town and its surroundings.³

¹ European External Action Service (EEAS), *Statement by High Representative/Vice-President Federica Mogherini on the violation of the ceasefire in Debal'tseve*, 18 February 2015, http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/2015/150218_01_en.htm.

² Andrew E. Kramer and David M. Herszenhorn, "Retreating Soldiers Bring Echoes of War's Chaos to a Ukrainian Town", in *The New York Times*, 19 February 2015, <http://nyti.ms/17YLRM6>.

³ Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), *Latest from OSCE Special Monitoring Mission (SMM) to Ukraine based on information received as of 18:00 (Kyiv time), 22 February 2015*, 23 February 2015, <http://www.osce.org/node/142351>.

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The Ukrainian President's description of the withdrawal as taking place "in a planned and organised way," his denial of a separatist encirclement, and his initial estimation that the number of Ukrainian casualties amounted only to six sparked great controversies back in Kyiv. The military leadership was accused of feeding the commander-in-chief misleading information. Rumours circulated that the Ukrainian retreat had in fact started, before the official orders were given, when a group of officers on the ground had realised that the encircling of the troops might prove fatal.⁴

Commentators alleged that by allowing another massacre of Ukrainian soldiers, the General Staff and possibly the political leadership had wanted to demonstrate the unfeasibility of the Minsk II deal. Allegations of betrayal and military incompetence were echoed in the capital. While reiterating their loyalty to the president and the country's institutions, commanders of 17 volunteer battalions announced the establishment of a shadow General Staff that would coordinate the work of the whole volunteer sector.⁵

Surrounded by a halo of confusing information and deliberate propaganda, the appearance of volunteer battalions in post-Maidan Ukraine and their continued engagement in military operations in the Donbas remains contentious. At a time when the US is still considering whether to provide Ukraine with defensive lethal weapons to withstand the offensive in the east, the question as to whether the Ukrainian forces are cohesive, disciplined, law-abiding and loyal to the country's institutions is extremely important. A commentator in *The Guardian* has hinted that as long as "militias" hang out uncontrolled, Ukraine remains an unreliable partner.⁶ Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov has called upon the EU to shed light on the status and subordination of what Moscow calls illegal military formations.⁷ Furthermore, occasional demonstrations and episodes of street violence in Kyiv have prompted speculations that a military coup by volunteer battalions might be in the making.

⁴ "Debal'tseskii platsdarm gotovoli k sdache. Shaby u nas zhili otdel'no, - voiska otdel'no' - Komandir 25ogo batal'yona 'Kyivskaya Rus' Andreiy (Vysota)", [In the Debal'tsevo bridgehead they were preparing to surrender. Commanders were living on one side, the troops on the other - Commander of the 25th battalion Kyiv Rus Andrey (Height)], in *Censor.net*, 22 February 2015, <http://censor.net.ua/r325755>.

⁵ Semen Semnchenko, "Chast' dobrovol'cheskikh batal'yonov, volonterskikh organizatsiy sozdali koordinatsionniy shab..." [A part of volunteer battalions and volunteer organisations set up a coordination command...], in *Facebook*, 19 February 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/dostali.hvatit/posts/904726896228752>; Roman Romanyuk, "Parallel'naya voennaya real'nost'. Kto i dlya chego sozdaet al'ternativnyi Genshtab" [A parallel military reality. Who and why is setting up an alternative General Staff], in *Ukrainska Pravda*, 19 February 2015, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/articles/2015/02/19/7059155>.

⁶ "The Guardian view on the Ukraine conflict: Swift action needed", in *The Guardian*, 5 February 2015, <http://gu.com/p/45hcv/stw>.

⁷ "Lavrov expects EU mission in Ukraine will decide on status of volunteer battalions", in *TASS*, 12 January 2015, <http://tass.ru/en/world/770766>.

Against the background of a continuously deteriorating economic situation, growing misgivings on the conduct of military operations in the east, and an intense dissatisfaction with the slow pace of reforms, the Ukrainian authorities are very much aware of the potential risks that unchecked paramilitary units can present. Efforts have been ongoing to subsume the battalions under the authority of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) or the Ministry of Interior (MoI), and now, with a few exceptions, all formations are legally registered and included in the chain of command of the Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO).

While the overall situation in the Ukrainian security sector remains fluid, with talks of army reform and police reform legislation having just been approved in the first reading, it would be mistaken to view the Ukrainian forces engaged in military operations in the east as a ragtag army of uncontrolled right-wing extremists. After the initial shock of an unexpected war, the Ukrainian army and law enforcement agencies have re-compacted, thanks as well to the support of volunteer battalions. Formal military structures now conduct the bulk of military operations, while volunteer and reservist formations are entrusted, generally, with key supporting functions.

Recognised for their crucial role in the early days of the hostilities, volunteer battalions are equally feared for their increasing politicisation and their outspoken criticism of the ATO command. Yet they represent a massive resource of motivation and commitment that, if properly channelled, has the potential to revitalise and keep in check unreformed military institutions. Beyond the current emergency and besides the continuing debate on Western weapons provisions, Ukraine already needs now an internal plan and international assistance. Recently-announced US and UK military training to the Ukrainian army is not coming a moment too soon.⁸ Setting in place a modern, professional, effective and loyal security sector is a *conditio sine qua non* to guarantee the country's security and to restore the Ukrainian citizens' trust in their institutions.

In addition to training its military personnel to Western standards, however, the Ukrainian authorities will have to strive to fully integrate those volunteers who want to remain part of the country's defence system while demobilising and rehabilitating those who want to return to a civilian life. When the first wave of mobilisation comes back home in the spring, they will need to find a social security system in place that is ready to heal the wounded, compensate the families of those who die and reward the others. They will also need to find a roadmap of reforms and some indication that the promises of the Maidan "Revolution of Dignity" will be kept. The discontent of disaffected servicemen, be they reservists or volunteers, might rock Ukraine more than a continuing conflict in the east.

⁸ "Ukraine army to be trained by UK troops - Cameron", in *BBC News*, 24 February 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-31610026>.

1. From Maidan to the ATO

The war in Ukraine started unexpectedly. The 2012 Military Doctrine of Ukraine defined as “unlikely” in the medium term the possibility of an “armed aggression that resulted in local or regional war.”⁹ The 2012 National Security Concept listed the “continuing deterioration of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and the defence industry” among the security threats facing the country.¹⁰ When the security situation in the Donbas started worsening in spring 2014 and hostilities degenerated into an armed conflict, the Ukrainian armed forces, plagued by years of underfunding, corruption, patronage and Russian infiltration, were not combat-ready.

According to a US scholar, the total number of usable troops and equipment in the ground forces amounted nominally to 80,000 personnel, 775 tanks, 51 helicopters, fewer than 1,000 artillery pieces and 2,280 armoured personnel carriers. In fact, due to a combination of lack of training and inadequate and poorly maintained equipment, the size of the combat-ready force was only 6,000 troops.¹¹ Ministry of Interior (MoI) special forces, like the Berkut, were dissolved after the shootings in Maidan. Between 25 and 30 percent of police and security forces in the Donbas region had defected to the separatist side, according to a MoI estimate.¹²

On 7 April, acting President Turchynov established the anti-crisis headquarters; on 12 April, separatist forces led by Igor Strelkov took control of Slovyansk; on 15 April, President Turchynov announced the beginning of the Anti-Terrorist Operation. Volunteer battalions started emerging between April and May 2014, building on the experience of the Maidan self-defence groups and gathering primarily Maidan activists. A parliamentary decree on the 1 April had imposed the demobilisation of all armed formations that had emerged as a result of the confrontation and the unrest in Maidan.¹³

Territorial defence battalions (under the Ministry of Defence, or MoD), special police battalions, and reserve battalions of the National Guard (under the MoI) were established at a regional level, on the basis of the 1991 law on the Defence of Ukraine, a 2014 Presidential Decree on Mobilisation, and MoI and MoD instructions.¹⁴

⁹ Philipp Fluri, Marcin Koziel and Andrii Yermolaiev (eds.), *The Security Sector Legislation of Ukraine*, Kyiv, Center for Army, Conversion and Disarmament Studies, 2013, p. 141, <http://www.dcaf.ch/Publications/The-Security-Sector-Legislation-of-Ukraine2>.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 128.

¹¹ Dmitry Gorenburg, “Ukrainian Military Capabilities”, in *Russian Military Reform* blog, 22 December 2014, <http://wp.me/pBeNm-q8>.

¹² Aleksandr Khodakovsky, head of the Ukrainian Security Services in Donetsk, for example, became the commander of the notorious pro-Russian Vostok battalion. See Catherine A. Fitzpatrick, “Russian-Backed Separatist Leader Khodakovsky Changes His Story to Reuters - or Does He?”, in *The Interpreter*, 24 July 2014, <http://www.interpretermag.com/?p=16556>.

¹³ Ukrainian Parliament, Decree No. 1174-18 *On the Immediate Disarmament of Illegal Armed Formations in Ukraine*, Decision of 1 April 2014, <http://zakon4.rada.gov.ua/laws/show/1174-18>.

¹⁴ “V 19 oblastyakh Ukrainy sformirovany dobrovolcheskie otryady- Rechinskiy” [In 19 regions

Battalions reporting to the MoI were placed under the authority of the regional head of police, while those reporting to the MoD were placed under the regional military enlistment offices. Funded nominally through the regional budget, they were armed by the MoI or the MoD and equipped almost exclusively through civil society organisations' donations or the financial support of local business (including local oligarchs). The Dnipro 1 and Dnipro 2 special police battalions, for example, were funded by Dnipropetrovsk governor and oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky. Before deployment, all battalions were trained in MoI or MoD training bases.

By the summer, the MoD had established 32 territorial battalions, including also servicemen recalled as part of the first wave of mobilisation. Of these 32, 10 were volunteer battalions, including, for example, the 20 Dnipropetrovsk, the 11 Kyiv and the 24 Luhansk (Aidar) battalions.¹⁵ In early November, Minister of Defence Stepan Poltorak ordered territorial defence battalions to be absorbed into the formal structures of his ministry and threatened action against those that failed to comply or, alternatively, refused to disband.¹⁶

A militarised police corps akin to European gendarmeries, the National Guard was set up in March 2014 on the basis of the recently dissolved internal troops. It was placed under the MoI. Three volunteer and reservists battalions were initially established under the National Guard, but later transformed into special purpose regiments: the Donbas, the General Kul'tchisky and the Azov. 33 battalions were set up as special police battalions and tasked to maintain law and order in the regions.¹⁷ Dnipro 1 was, for example, originally part of the Dnipropetrovsk police and was later sent to patrol in the ATO zone.¹⁸

The overall number of MoI and MoD volunteer battalions is currently assessed at between 40 and 50. They vary in size, from the hundreds in the Donbas battalion to the dozens in the Kyiv-based Holy Mary battalion, established as late as February 2015.¹⁹ According to military analyst Yurii Butusov, the size of territorial defence battalions has been later standardised to be 426 servicemen, and National Guard

of Ukraine volunteer units are being established - Rechinskiy], in *Censor.net*, 15 April 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n281231>.

¹⁵ "Po vsey Ukraine sozdayut'sya bata'lyony territorialnoi oborony" [Everywhere in Ukraine territorial defence battalions are being established], in *Censor.net*, 30 April 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n283361>.

¹⁶ "Volunteer Battalions to Become Part of Kiev Forces: Defense Ministry", in *Sputnik International*, 11 November 2014, <http://sputniknews.com/military/20141111/1014598603.html>.

¹⁷ "Avakov: Seichas' deystvuyut 34 dobrovolcheskikh battal'yona. Odin rasformirovan v svyazy s neobratimymi protsessami" [Avakov: 34 volunteer battalions are currently working. One was dissolved in connection with irreversible processes], in *Censor.net*, 26 September 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n304387>.

¹⁸ "Flying Drones with the Dnipro Battalion: Russian Roulette (Dispatch 93)", in *VICE News*, 15 February 2015, (video) <https://news.vice.com/video/flying-drones-with-the-dnipro-battalion-russian-roulette-dispatch-93>.

¹⁹ "Dobrovol'cheskoe formirovanye 'Svyataya Mariya' ofitsyal'no stalo podrazdeleniem NVD" [The volunteer formation Holy Mary has officially become a unit of the MoI], in *Ukrainska Pravda*, 3 February 2015, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2015/02/3/7057382>.

battalions to be 460. Police volunteer battalions can include between 33 and 400 individuals.²⁰

With the exception of DUK *Pravy Sektor* and the “International Peacekeeping Djokar Dudaev battalion,” all battalions are regularly registered.²¹ In a 13 February post on his Facebook page, *Pravy Sektor*’s Commander Dmytro Yarosh announced that his formation is conducting negotiations with the Ukrainian authorities regarding its legalisation.²²

Membership in the volunteer formations is socially, linguistically, nationally and politically varied. Battalions comprise primarily Maidan activists with a background as diverse as police or army veterans, small entrepreneurs and students, but also, admittedly, individuals with a criminal record. Volunteer battalions include both Russian-speakers from the east, like the Donbas or the Dnipro 1, for example, and Ukrainian-speakers from the West, like the L’viv battalion. The Crimea battalion includes Muslim Tatars from Crimea who have sworn to retake the peninsula once the war in the Donbass is over.²³ Calls were heard, at one point, for the establishment of an all-Jewish battalion.²⁴

Although the majority of combatants are Ukrainian citizens, unspecified numbers of Georgians, Russians and other European citizens are reported to have joined the battalions.²⁵ The Azov battalion is reputed to be the most international, while the Dudaev battalion is mainly composed of veterans of the Chechen wars who have fought against Moscow. This was the case, for example, for Commander Isa Munayev – Brigadier General of the Republic of Ichkeria, Minister of Interior under

²⁰ “Dobrovol’cheskie Batal’yony: struktura, strakhi, problemy boevogo primeneniya” [Volunteer battalions: structure, concerns, problems of their employment in battle], in *Censor.net*, 29 August 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/r300275>.

²¹ On the Dudaev battalion, see “Running Supplies With the Dudayev Battalion: Russian Roulette (Dispatch 92)”, in *VICE News*, 9 February 2015, (video) <https://news.vice.com/video/running-supplies-with-the-dudayev-battalion-russian-roulette-dispatch-92>; and “Battal’yon im. Dudaeva vozglavil chechenets, obvinyayemyy v pokushenii na Putina” [The Dudaev battalion was run by a Chechen accused of an attack against Putin], in *Ukrainska Pravda*, 3 February 2015, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2015/02/3/7057284>.

²² Dmytro Yarosh, “Bahato khto zaraz prosit’ prokomentuvati...” [Many are now asking to comment on...], in Facebook, 13 February 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/dyastrub/posts/782660468477506>.

²³ “Komandir sotni ‘Krym’: ‘Kadyrovtsy - ne muzhchyny, oni psy’” [Commander of the Hundred ‘Crimea’: Kadyrov fighters are not men, they are dogs], in *Inforesist*, 22 January 2015, <http://inforesist.org/?p=234189>; “Krymchanie ne separatisty i ne predately. Reshim vopros na Donbasse i budem osvobodzhat’ polustrov - Komandir battal’yon Krym” [Crimeans are neither separatists or traitors. We will solve the problem in the Donbas and will free the peninsula- the Commander of the Crimea battalion], in *Censor.net*, 15 January 2015, <http://censor.net.ua/n320068>.

²⁴ “‘Eto nasha strana i eto nash dom’: v Ukraine formiruyet’sya noviy dobrovol’cheskiy evreskiy batal’yon ‘Matilan’” [‘This is our country and this is our home’: in Ukraine the new Jewish battalion Matilan gets established], in *Censor.net*, 14 July 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n293781>.

²⁵ Media reports talk of at least 100 Georgians fighting on the side of the Ukrainian forces in the Donbas. See “Gruziya ne nakazhet svoikh grazhdan za uchastie v boevykh desviyakh za granitsey” [Georgia will not punish its citizens for the participation in military operations abroad], in *Ukrainska Pravda*, 31 January 2015, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2015/01/31/7057012>.

Dudaev, and Grozny military commander – who was killed around Debal'tseve in early February.²⁶ He was replaced by another Chechen leader, Adam Osmaev, who was accused by the Russians to be responsible for a failed terrorist attack against President Putin.²⁷

Volunteers cover a wide spectrum from an ideological point of view as well. Azov battalion commander Andrii Biletsky is a well-known extreme right activist and founder of the organisation Patriot of Ukraine. While Biletsky and the top leadership of the Azov are defined by experts as "biological racists," it is generally excluded that the whole battalion is aligned along the same ideological lines.²⁸ The *Pravy Sektor* battalion was established on the basis of the nationalist party organisation that is its namesake. Its commander Dmytro Yarosh, defined by analysts as a "mainstream Ukrainian nationalist," received 127,000 votes, equivalent to 0.7 percent of the total, in the 25 May 2014 presidential elections.²⁹ In an interview with the Ukrainian TV Hromadske International, Maxim, a left-wing historian from Simferopol volunteering in the Aidar battalion, refers to different political groups within his battalion that are united by the sole objective of fighting against the Russian invasion.³⁰

At least six volunteer battalion commanders were elected to parliament in the October 2014 elections. They are spread among Prime Minister Yatsenyuk's *Narodnyi Front* (Yurii Beryozha from the Dnipro 1 battalion and Andrii Teteryuk from the *Mirotvorcheskii*), the conservative party *Samopomich* (Semen Semenchenko from the Donbas), and *Pravy Sektor* (Dmytro Yarosh). Andrii Biletsky from the Azov and Serhiy Mel'nychuk from the Aidar are currently registered in the Parliament's list as independents.³¹

²⁶ "Battal'yon im. Dudaeva vozglavil chechenets, obvinyaemyy v pokushenii na Putina" [The Dudaev battalion was run by a Chechen accused of an attack against Putin], cit.

²⁷ "Komandyrom batal'yona im. Dzhiokara Dudaeva stalo Adam Osmaev, korotogo rossiyanie podozrevali v podgotovke pokusheniya na Putina" [Adam Osmaev, whom the Russian suspected of plotting an attack against Putin, has become the commander of the Dudaev battalion], in *Censor.net*, 3 February 2015, <http://censor.net.ua/n322894>.

²⁸ "Azov Battalion Is Not Neo-Nazi, But Some People In Battalion Are - Umland", in *Hromadske International*, 15 December 2014, (video) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dvDIluAXjSI>. For an overview of the far right in Ukraine and its overall relations with volunteer battalions, see also Chris Dunnett, "Ukraine's 'Battalion' Army, Explained", in *Hromadske International*, 17 September 2014, <https://medium.com/@Hromadske/ukraines-shadow-army-b04d7a683493>; and Devin Akles, "A Guide to Ukraine's Far Right", in *Hromadske International*, 13 December 2014, <https://medium.com/@Hromadske/ukraines-far-right-explained-438857ec9aae>.

²⁹ Devin Akles, "A Guide to Ukraine's Far Right", cit.

³⁰ Margo Gontar, "How Ukrainian Left Activist 'Goes to Fight Russian Imperialism'", in *Hromadske International*, 26 January 2015, http://int.hromadske.tv/articles/show/ukraine_left_activist_fights_russia_imperialism.

³¹ "Novye litsa: radi chego kombaty idut v bol'shuyu politiku" [New faces: why are volunteer battalions commanders going into big politics], in *Ukrainska Pravda*, 20 October 2014, <http://life.pravda.com.ua/person/2014/10/24/182635>.

More than their political orientation, Ukrainian observers contest volunteer battalions' connections with oligarchic interests and their potential role as their sponsors' private army. Although the Ukrainian media have reported and criticised their occasional engagement in the settlement of oligarchs' business and political disputes,³² rumours are so contradictory that an accurate map of alliances would be, at this stage, impossible to draw.

2. Battalions in combat operations

Despite their differences, what brought the volunteers together in the spring of 2014 was, generally, a high level of motivation and patriotic commitment to fighting what they saw as their country's first war of independence. In the spring and early summer, volunteer battalions took the first blunt of a war that the Ukrainian security was unprepared to sustain. Under-equipped and light-armed, they held the front, thus giving the Ukrainian authorities the time to regroup and organise a defence. Many in Kyiv, including Member of Parliament and former Adviser to the MoI Anton Gerashenko, believe that had it not been for the volunteers, the line of demarcation with the separatists would now run along the Dnipro River.³³

To counter the deterioration of the security situation in the Donbas and the separatists' occupation of Slovyansk, two National Guard battalions composed of Maidan activists were quickly set up and sent to the east together with the Omega police special operation unit.³⁴ As military analyst Yuriy Butusov puts it, these were the only formations that could be deployed rapidly and that were combat-ready at

³² The Ukrainian press has reported allegations that Rinat Akhmetov offered 25 million dollars to the Aidar battalion to gain access to his power plant in Shchastiya. See "U Akhmetova prokomentirovali zavavleie o tom chto yakoby predlagal dengi Aidaru" [Akhmetov's assistants commented on the statement that in a way he gave money to Aidar], in *Inforesist*, 23 January 2015, <http://inforesist.org/?p=246388>. The Azov and Dnipro 1 battalions have been accused of providing active support to different presidential candidates during the May 2014 elections. See "V Donbasse aktivno 'pomogali' provesti vybory dobrovol'cheskie batal'yony" [In the Donbass volunteer battalions helped 'actively' to conduct elections], in *Zerkalo Nedeli*, 2 November 2014, http://zn.ua/VYBORY2014/v-donbasse-dobrovolcheskie-batalony-aktivno-pomogali-provesti-vybory-157753_.html. The Donbas battalion's obstruction to humanitarian assistance from the Rinat Akhmetov foundation to the Donbas has also been presented as part of an intra-oligarchic dispute. Accused of taking the side of Akhmetov's opponent, the battalion claimed it was instead trying to prevent the smuggling of alcohol and other expensive goods across the internal administrative border. See Evgeniy Shibalov, "Gumanitarnaya blokada" [Humanitarian blockade], in *Zerkalo Nedeli*, 19 December 2014, http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/gumanitarnaya-blokada-_.html.

³³ "Esli by ne dobrovol'cheskie batal'yoni, razmezhevanie s rossiskimi terroristami prokhodilo by gde-to po Denpru - Anton Gerashenko" [If it had not been for the volunteer battalions, the line of demarcation with Russian terrorists would be somewhere on the Dnipro River], in *Censor.net*, 9 November 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n311039>.

³⁴ "S nachalo ATO Natsgvardiya ne byla gotova k boyam, k pervye dni rabotal tolko Spertsnaz - Poltorak" [The National Guard was not combat-ready at the beginning of the ATO. In the first days only the special forces worked - Poltorak], in *Censor.net*, 21 October 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n308023>; "Paruby: Srochno komplektuem novy batalyony Natsgvardii i vydvigaemsiya na peredovuyu" [Poruby: We will quickly set up the National Guard battalions and we'll then move forward], in *Censor.net*, 18 April 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n281820>.

that point in time. Nothing else was available. Moved to the east, these units were engaged in activities that would be generally assigned to the army, had the state of war been declared. The Donbas battalion was specifically established to replace the Donetsk police special units that had deserted.³⁵

Following this initial stage, however, the Ukrainian armed forces were deployed in large numbers and account today for the majority of the estimated 65,000 servicemen in the ATO. Among them are the 3rd Special Operations regiment Kirovograd, the 93rd Airmobile brigade Zhytomyr, the 79th Airmobile brigade Mykolayiv, the 80th Airmobile brigade L'viv, the 25th Airborne brigade Guardisk, Dnipropetrovsk district, and the 93rd Mechanised brigade Cherkas'ke, Dnipropetrovsk district.³⁶

The majority of personnel in volunteer battalions are employed in law and order functions, manning the checkpoints and patrolling liberated areas, or are tasked with performing activities in support of the armed forces.³⁷ Some battalions have, however, played a crucial role in a number of direct combat operations, like the Donbas, the Dnipro 1 and the Azov battalions in the Ilovaisk battle and *Pravy Sektor* in the Donetsk airport battle (where Dmytro Yarosh was injured). The Azov battalion was instrumental in launching a major counteroffensive east and northeast of Mariupol on 10 February.³⁸

Initially armed exclusively with light weapons, territorial defence battalions were later provided with armoured vehicles as well.³⁹ Yet, the issue as to whether volunteer battalions in general should receive more substantial equipment has remained a bone of contention. The shift from a police to a fully-fledged military operation, starting in July, justifies for some the battalions' requests for heavy artillery provisions.⁴⁰

Battalions are part of the same chain of command as other MoI or MoD forces and coordinate their operations through the anti-terrorist center in Kyiv and the local anti-terrorist command in the field. This applies also to the *Pravy Sektor* battalion that, although still formally independent, coordinates its activities with

³⁵ "Dobrovol'cheskie Batal'yony: struktura, strakhi, problemy boevogo primeneniya" [Volunteer battalions: structure, concerns, problems of their employment in battle], in *Censor.net*, 29 August 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/r300275>.

³⁶ "Biyna za nezalezhnosti" [Independence war], in *Texty.org.ua*, <http://texty.org.ua/d/static/war01.html>; as well as author's personal interviews.

³⁷ See, for example, James Sprankle's photo essay on L'viv battalion patrolling in Debaltseve: "Defending Debaltseve", in *Foreign Policy*, 5 February 2015, <http://wp.me/p4Osly-3kJ3>.

³⁸ "A glimmer of hope - the Azov counteroffensive", in *Conflict Report* blog, 10 February 2015, <http://wp.me/p5sx0x-9w>.

³⁹ "Dobrovol'cheskiy batal'yon s tankami na voruzhenie sozdayut v Zaporozhskoi oblasti" [A volunteer battalion equipped with tanks is being established in the Zaporozhzhya region], in *Censor.net*, 8 September 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n301738>.

⁴⁰ "Dobrovol'cheskie Batal'yony: struktura, strakhi, problemy boevogo primeneniya" [Volunteer battalions: structure, concerns, problems of their employment in battle], in *Censor.net*, 29 August 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/r300275>.

the ATO combat command, the Ukrainian armed forces brigades and the voluntary battalions of the MoD and the MoI.⁴¹ Commenting on President Poroshenko's order for all Ukrainian troops to implement the 15 February 2015 Minsk II ceasefire, Dmytro Yarosh confirmed *Pravy Sektor's* loyalty towards the president and their determination to respect the commander-in-chief's instruction.⁴²

Contracted by the MoI and the MoD, volunteers are subject to the same legislative provisions and disciplinary regulations as other forces engaged in the ATO.⁴³ In case of alleged violations, they are thus liable to be investigated by the competent prosecutor office: the military prosecutor in the case of MoD battalions, and the civilian prosecutor in the case of MoI battalions.

Human rights abuses allegedly perpetrated by volunteer battalions against individuals suspected of separatism or terrorism and the civilian population in the ATO as well as within the very volunteer formations, have been denounced by human rights organisations and are reported also in the Ukrainian press.⁴⁴ A September Amnesty International report called on the Ukrainian authorities "to bring Aidar and other volunteer battalions under effective lines of command and control, promptly investigate all allegations of abuses, and hold those responsible to account."

"The Ukrainian authorities," the report continued, "cannot afford to replicate in the areas they retake, the lawlessness and abuses that have prevailed in separatist-held areas. The failure to eliminate abuses and possible war crimes by volunteer battalions risks significantly aggravating tensions in the east of the country and undermining the proclaimed intentions of the new Ukrainian authorities to strengthen and uphold the rule of law more broadly."⁴⁵

⁴¹ Dmytro Yarosh, "Bahato khto zaraz prosit' prokomentuvati..." [Many are now asking to comment on...], cit.

⁴² Dmytro Yarosh, "Zv'yazavsya z komandirami boyovykh chastin..." [I got in touch with the commanders of the military units...], in *Facebook*, 15 February 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/dyastrub/posts/783570235053196>; "S'ohodni mene tsiliy den' pitayut..." [They have been asking me for the whole day today...], in *Facebook*, 14 February 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/dyastrub/posts/783173815092838>.

⁴³ "Dobrovolcheskie batal'yony prinyimayushchie uchastie v ATO perekhodyat na kontraktnuyu sluzhbu v Natsgvardiyu i VSU" [Volunteer battalions participating in the ATO take up contract service in the National Guard and the Ukrainian Army], in *Censor.net*, 19 January 2015, <http://censor.net.ua/n320551>.

⁴⁴ Lyudmila Klochko, *Report on the human rights mission to the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts*, Kharkiv, Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group (KhPG), 1 January 2015, <http://khpg.org/en/index.php?id=1420140250>; Artem Chapai, "Sluzhili dve Aidarovtsy. O chom prinyato molchat' na voine" [Two Aidar servicemen. What is generally kept quite during a war], in *The Insider*, 5 January 2015, <http://www.theinsider.ua/politics/54a9af9fa9f76>.

⁴⁵ Amnesty International, *Ukraine: Abuses and war crimes by the Aidar volunteer battalion in the north Luhansk region*, 8 September 2014, <http://bit.ly/1LZsFUL>.

Efforts have subsequently been made by the authorities in Kyiv to also enforce discipline on volunteer formations. The December 2014 Report of the UN Human Rights Monitoring Mission in Ukraine registers the government's commitment to investigate allegations of human rights abuses.⁴⁶ Restored in August 2014, the military prosecutor's office has been dealing also with cases relating to a number of battalions.⁴⁷ With fifty of its members accused of looting and vandalism, the battalion Shakhtarsk was disbanded in October 2014,⁴⁸ when an investigation was also opened against the Prykarpattia battalion, accused of desertion in the battle of Ilovaisk.⁴⁹ A number of criminal investigations have been initiated against Aidar battalion members for illegal deprivation of liberty and a case of murder.⁵⁰

In order to improve discipline, provisions to reintroduce military administrative detention were approved in the first reading in early February, while draft legislation is under preparation to reform the military police.⁵¹ Finally, although the Ukrainian parliament has so far failed to ratify the Rome Statute for the International Criminal Court, the government is considering measures to strengthen criminal responsibility in the case of war crimes.⁵²

⁴⁶ Criminal investigations are ongoing for "violations of article 146 (Illegal deprivation of liberty) of the Criminal Code". See Office of the United Nations Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), *Report on the human rights situation in Ukraine*, 15 December 2014, par. 43, <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=15419&LangID=E>.

⁴⁷ Mariya Zhartovskaya and Pavel Sheremetev, "Glavniy voennyi prokuror: vsegda vynovat to kto komanduet" [The Military chief prosecutor: who commands is always guilty], in *Ukrainska Pravda*, 5 March 2015, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/articles/2015/02/10/7058074>.

⁴⁸ "Avakov raspustil batal'yon Shakhtersk iz-za morodestva" [Avakov dissolved the Shakhtersk battalion because of looting], in *Censor.net*, 17 October 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n307488>.

⁴⁹ "Voennaya prokuratura shchitaet dezertirstvo batal'yona Prikarpat'e pervoprichinoi tragedii pod Ilovaiskom" [The military prosecutor believes the Prekarpat'e battalion desertion is the main reason for the Ilovaisk tragedy], in *Censor.net*, 7 October 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n306001>.

⁵⁰ "Otkrili 57 ugovolnykh del v otnoshenii lits predstavlyavshkhsya boyzami 'Aidara'" [57 criminal cases opened against individuals who present themselves as Aidar battalion combatants], in *LB.ua*, 20 October 2014, http://society.lb.ua/life/2014/10/20/283146_otkriti_57_ugolovnih_del_otnoshenii.html; Olga Zhaldak, "Voennaya prokuratura i SBU opredelyat sudbu dvukh boytsov Aidara, kotorykh zaderzhala militsiya - A. Gerashenko" [The Military prosecutor and the SBU will decide about the two Aidar combatants who were arrested by the police - A. Gerashenko], in *UNN*, 4 October 2014, <http://www.unn.com.ua/ru/news/1392331-viyskova-prokuratura-i-sbu-viznachat-dolyu-dvukh-biytsiv-aydaru-yakikh-zatrimala-militsiya-a-gerashenko>; "Voennaya Prokuratura rassleduet 27 ugovolnykh del protiv 13 boitsov Aidara" [The military prosecutor is investigating 27 criminal cases against 13 Aidar combatants], in *Nezavisimoe byuro novostei*, 22 December 2014, <http://nbnews.com.ua/ru/news/139383>.

⁵¹ "Rada mozhete dat' komandiram rassledovat' voennye prestupleniya" [Parliament will investigate commanders for war crimes], in *Ukrainska Pravda*, 3 February 2015, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2015/02/3/7057299>.

⁵² Mariya Zhartovskaya and Pavel Sheremetev, "Glaivny voennyi prokuror: vsegda vynovat to kto komanduet" [Military chief prosecutor: who commands is always guilty], cit.

3. The politicisation of the volunteer battalions

While their role in combat operations at this point in time is, according to the authorities in Kyiv, “overestimated” and their military strength is believed to be limited, volunteer battalions have acquired a degree of notoriety and levels of popular trust that might turn them into potential kingmakers at home. According to an opinion poll published in December 2014 by the weekly *Zerkalo Nedeli*, volunteer battalions rank second, after civil society organisations, and before the church and the army, among the institutions the Ukrainians trust the most.⁵³

Part of the civil society mobilisation that in Maidan and afterwards has been demanding radical changes in the functioning of the state, volunteer battalions are seen as addressing state institutions’ systemic failures. Having stepped in at a moment when the Ukrainian authorities were unprepared to face the military threat in the east, voluntary formations embody for many Ukrainians today the “heroic spirit of Maidan”. In addition to their military role, society seems to appreciate their tendency to make traditionally closed political processes open to the public, to divulge information that ministries would prefer to keep quiet. Their presence inside the system has the advantage, in the general public’s view, of keeping institutions in check.

Following a number of military setbacks since the Minsk I agreement in September, accusations against the inadequacy of the military leadership and recriminations against the alleged weakness of President Poroshenko as Chief Commander of the Army are raging. Uncertainties deriving from an impending economic default, dissatisfaction with the slow pace of reforms and diverging interpretations as to the costs for Ukraine of the Minsk II agreement might work as powerful catalysts of popular discontent.

Savvy social network users, volunteer battalion commanders have established wide communication platforms and loyal political constituencies. Shifting nonchalantly between the Parliament and the front, between grey suits and military fatigues, most of them seem able to provide the vision and the inspiration that many in society miss at such a difficult time. They have become compelling, although far from always reliable, political actors. Some of the commanders, particularly those who have acquired parliamentary seats, have taken a vocal role in policy debates, promoting at times unreasonable conflict resolution proposals, like the sealing off of the whole Donbas region by the Donbas battalion commander Semen Semenchenko.⁵⁴

⁵³ “Pesnya o Rodine. Slova narodnyye - Narod i vlast” [The song of the Motherland. The words of the people - People and the power], in *Zerkalo Nedeli*, December 2014, <http://opros2014.zn.ua/> authority.

⁵⁴ See, for example, Semenchenko’s participation in the TV show *Shuster*, which aired live on the Ukrainian TV channel *Inter* on 19 December 2014 on “How to save the Donbas from the humanitarian catastrophe”: <http://24tv.ua/v523222>. See also his interview with *Ukrainska Pravda*

Volunteer battalions, reservist battalions and veterans' organisations have been involved in spectacular demonstrations rekindling not-too-distant memories of urban guerrilla warfare that the Kyievites would rather forget. Whether calling for an early de-mobilisation, demanding guarantees for the future of the Aidar battalion or appealing for the introduction of the state of war, the violence of these demonstrations has often prompted conspiracy theories of external intervention and has resulted in criminal investigations.⁵⁵

Physical threats – like the picketing of state institutions and the setting of tyres on fire – or more intangible threats – like statements that volunteers will “bring the fight to Kyiv” – have generated widespread concerns that the battalions might be hatching a military coup.⁵⁶ A *Washington Post* commentator has gone as far as claiming that “warlords and armed groups” are undermining the rebuilding of Ukraine.⁵⁷ According to Ukrainian observers, concerns that the volunteer battalions might represent more a domestic source of instability than a useful element within the framework of the country's security system are also harboured within the presidential administration.⁵⁸

Direct attacks to the president, the government and specific ministries are certainly shaking and undermining an already fragile institutional structure. Conflicting political and economic clan interests are most likely at play in the mobilisation and politicisation of volunteer battalions. Demagogic leaders are undoubtedly trying to take advantage of a unique platform that could further their political ambitions and promote previously unthinkable careers.

on 23 December 2014: <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/articles/2014/12/23/7053033>.

⁵⁵ See, for example, the discussion around the National Guard's strike on 13 October 2014, which was organised, according to Minister of Defence Poltorak as well as Minister of Interior Avakov, by an FSB agent. “Gruppa boytsov Natsghvarii pod AP trebuyut provesti demobilizatsiyu” [A group of National Guard servicemen outside the presidential administration demand demobilisation], in *Censor.net*, 13 October 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n306862>; “Diskreditirovatsk dobrovol'cheskie batal'yony pytayutsya segodnya ili duraki ili vragi Ukrainy. Ob ix rospuske rech ne idiot - Avakov” [Today it is either the idiots or the enemies of Ukraine who are trying to discredit the volunteer battalions. There is no discussion about their disbandment - Avakov], in *Censor.net*, 11 November 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n311356>; “Aktsiya gvardeytsev-srochnikov ne spontanna, no im ochen' khotelos' popast' v televizor, kak kombatam-dobrovol'tsam - zamgenprokurora Matios” [The demonstration of National Guard draftees is not spontaneous, they were dying to appear on TV as volunteer combatants - deputy prosecutor general Matios], in *Censor.net*, 15 October 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n307177>; “Sotrudnitsa rossiskikh spetsluzhnb Yuliya Kharlamova aktivno uchastvovala v 'bunte' Natsghvardii i verbovala soldat” [The Russian special services agent Yuliya Kharlamova was an active participant in the National Guard strike and was recruiting soldiers], in *Censor.net*, 16 October 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n307397>.

⁵⁶ Jamie Dettmer, “Ukraine Militias Warn of Anti-Kiev Coup”, in *The Daily Beast*, 28 November 2014, <http://thebea.st/1xZ12xS>; Shaun Walker, “Azov fighters are Ukraine's greatest weapon and may be its greatest threat”, in *The Guardian*, 10 September 2014, <http://gu.com/p/4xefz/stw>.

⁵⁷ Adrian Karatnycky, “Warlords and armed groups threaten Ukraine's rebuilding”, in *The Washington Post*, 30 December 2014, <http://wpo.st/m8Q70>.

⁵⁸ Sergey Rakhmanin, “Tretiya mirovaya igra” [Third world game], in *Zerkalo Nedeli*, 7 November 2014 http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/tretya-mirovaya-igra-_.html.

Yet, insofar as the lack of sweeping reforms and of tangible results – especially as far as anti-corruption reforms are concerned – is providing “warlords and armed groups” ammunition to challenge the current leadership, the causal relation between the country’s rebuilding and the role of the battalions can be inverted. As a Western diplomat in Kyiv pointed out, Ukraine is currently fighting two wars: the first in the east against the Donbas separatists, and the second in Kyiv against a political leadership and an administrative bureaucracy that has only partially changed and seems unwilling or unable to induce substantial reforms.

In an end-of-year poll conducted by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology (KIIS) and the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation (DI), 32.6 percent of Ukrainians described themselves as disappointed at the lack of reforms: the economic situation had deteriorated in the previous six months, while levels of corruption had remained the same. This data stands against 17.9 percent of respondents who ascribed the country’s current difficulties to the previous government and Putin’s aggressive policy. 14.7 percent of those polled concluded that things would change in Ukraine only with a new political generation in power. 46.8 percent of respondents identified the destruction of networks of corruption in the country as one of the main objectives of the Maidan movement.⁵⁹

Consolidated vested interests and a pervasive system of corruption make it difficult to achieve the necessary level of consensus that would allow the implementation of the reforms the Maidan “Revolution of Dignity” fought for. The volunteer battalions and their commanders have thus become unwittingly part not only of the complicated balancing game between the MoD and the MoI, between President Poroshenko and Prime Minister Yatsenyuk, and between a vision of the country’s security based on the police and one based on the army. They have also been caught in the mechanisms of the Soviet-style, unreformed machinery of decision-making and resources allocation that they thought they had brought down in Maidan.

Some of the street protests involving volunteers, reservists and war veterans appear clearly staged by internal or external actors. They are likely to be an attempt to introduce a powerful variable in the ongoing power struggle between political and oligarchic interests in the country. Although their demonstrations could be politically instrumentalised, veterans nonetheless express some legitimate concerns and must be heard. Most of them have a direct, brutal experience of the inadequacy of the Ukrainian state.

To this day, both volunteers and army servicemen are clothed, equipped and fed thanks to the generosity of friends and family as well as the relentless activism of the wide network of civil society organisations that emerged in the beginning with the hostilities in the Donbas. In the early days of the ATO, life-saving flak jackets and

⁵⁹ Tomasz Piechal, *Disappointment and fear - the public mood in Ukraine*, Warsaw, Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), 14 January 2015, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/node/22935>.

helmets (not to mention night visors or other non-lethal equipment) were in short supply. Summer military uniforms were delivered when it was already snowing. Under the heat of summer, water provisions were brought to the front by support groups rather than by military logistic units. Volunteers mobilised to buy blankets, sleeping bags and basic medicine. US-donated meal-ready-to-eat rations never made it to the front and were instead commercially sold by the superintendent of the food warehouse of one of the military units.⁶⁰

A military commander engaged in the ATO would receive a salary equivalent to 300 euros. National Guard reservists were paid the equivalent of about 150 euros for two months of service and a total of 20 euros as travel allowance for the same period.⁶¹ No provisions were in place to define the status of participants in the ATO, and social security protection provisions remain, at the time of writing, unspecified. This is in spite of President Poroshenko's promises in June that every serviceman involved in military operations in the Donbas would be recognised with such a status and would be granted the relative benefits and privileges.⁶² Coming back from the front, even amputees have had to fight against bureaucracy and red tape to seek healthcare assistance.⁶³

A journalist in *Zerkalo Nedeli* sums up this collective sense of dismay: "They were besieged, saw death and suffered, but they stood for themselves, for Ukraine and for its own people. They – the ATO combatants are heroes because they were not afraid to take up weapons and stand up in defence of their own country. Yet, when they get back home not all of them will be rewarded with medals. The majority will be facing a new war. This time on the administrative front, with the bureaucratic machine of the state apparatus. For the right to receive the status of participant in the military operation."⁶⁴

Although most likely motivated by scepticism towards what they saw as unreliable paramilitary formations, the military leadership's protracted reluctance to provide volunteers with heavy weapons has intensified a mutual sense of distrust. Wild rumours circulate among volunteers and reservists that the military command are deliberately sending them to the front lines unequipped in order to have

⁶⁰ "Criminal Scheme of Commercial Sales of American Rations Donated to Ukrainian Army Uncovered", in *Euromaidan*, 8 June 2014, <http://euromaidanpr.com/?p=11436>.

⁶¹ Dmytri Sinyak, "Kak maidanovtsy srazhayutsya s separatistami i na ch'ei storone okazalos' Minoborony" [How Maidan activists are fighting against separatists and on whose side is the Ministry of Defence], in *Focus.ua*, 10 July 2014, <http://focus.ua/society/309870>.

⁶² "Vse zadeistvovannye v ATO poluchat status uchastnika boevykh deistvii - Prezident" [All those serving in the ATO will receive the status of participants in military operations - the President], in *Censor.net*, 18 June 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n290466>.

⁶³ Anna Nemtsova, "It's Time to Call Ukraine a War", in *The Daily Beast*, 4 February 2015, <http://thebea.st/1zfeb6L>.

⁶⁴ Lesiya Vasilenko, "Uchasnik boevykh deistvii. Nereal'naya mechta uchastnika ATO" [Participant in military operations. The unreal dream of a participant in the ATO], in *Zerkalo Nedeli*, 10 October 2014, http://gazeta.zn.ua/internal/uchastnik-boevyh-deystviy-nerealnaya-mechta-uchastnika-ato-_.html.

them killed in action. This would be part of an unspoken strategy, according to volunteers, for the old, pre-Maidan security structures to rid themselves of the nuisance represented by the battalions.⁶⁵

"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," commented a volunteer who had himself been injured in battle.⁶⁶

4. A roadmap for reforms

Traditionally sceptical towards their authorities, Ukrainians' trust in their country's institutions has not improved since after Maidan. In the same *Zerkalo Nedeli* survey mentioned above, while 24.5 percent of respondents said they have absolute confidence in the volunteer battalions, only 8.3 percent declared to have the same degree of unwavering faith in the president, 7.5 percent in the prime minister, 4 percent in the Cabinet of Ministers and 3 percent in the Parliament.⁶⁷

Authorities in Kyiv are apparently well aware of the risk that popular resentment and dissatisfaction pose in terms of further destabilisation of the country. In the face of an economic contraction of 20 percent since last year, Prime Minister Yatsenyuk has been calling for the whole country to mobilise in a spirit of "unity and solidarity" to face necessary austerity measures and painful reforms.⁶⁸ Attempts have been made also to de-escalate the volunteers' discontent with promises that their individual status would finally be regularised and that a way forward for integration or demobilisation would be defined.

According to MP Gerashenko, now that the Ukrainian forces are back on their feet, inviting foreign combatants to leave the battalions and to depose their weapons would be the first priority. The second step would be setting up provisions for volunteers and reservists who are interested in taking up a permanent position in the army or in the police to become fully integrated into the system. As far as social security is concerned, PM Yatsenyuk announced in late January the creation of a single national register for military personnel in the ATO. A draft law is reportedly under preparation for regional administrations to provide financial resources

⁶⁵ Dmytri Sinyak, "Kak maidanovtsy srazhayutsya s separatistami i na ch'ei storone okazalos' Minoborony" [How Maidan activists are fighting against separatists and on whose side is the Ministry of Defence], cit.

⁶⁶ "Idti v boy i umrat' mozhno, a moshnoe i nadezhnoe oruzhie - ne polozheno - boets dobrovol'tsego batal'yona" [It's possible to go into battle and to die, but to get powerful and useful weapons is not allowed - a combatant of a volunteer battalion], in *Censor.net*, 21 August 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n298995>.

⁶⁷ "Pesnya o Rodine. Slova narodnyye - Narod i vlast" [The song of the Motherland. The words of the people - People and the power], cit.

⁶⁸ Victoria Petrenko, "Yatsenyuk calls for nation to mobilize", in *Kyiv Post*, 11 February 2015, <http://www.kyivpost.com/content/ukraine/yatsenyuk-calls-for-nation-to-mobilize-380297.html>.

going towards accommodation expenses for the families of servicemen killed in action.⁶⁹ Draft laws are also being considered in the Verkhovna Rada on the status of volunteers and social protection for them and their families, according to Dmytro Yarosh.⁷⁰

On 1 February a decree was signed stipulating that servicemen would be paid double when serving in the ATO and would receive a daily compensation of about 40 euros for each day in the area of operations. The decree also lists a range of financial incentives for successful military operations and the capture or the destruction of enemy military equipment.⁷¹ On 17 February, Minister of Interior Avakov handed out medals and apartments to National Guard and police personnel injured in the ATO, including those serving in the Azov, Donbas, *Mirotvorets* and General Kul'chinsky battalions.⁷²

Despite spectacular protests and explicit discontent, however, the chances of a military coup staged by volunteer battalions are realistically slim. Talk about a third Maidan to do away with an unreformable state structure circulated wildly last spring, but it has subsided since the autumn. Most volunteer commanders are painfully aware of the costs that an open confrontation with the authorities, the army and the police might have for the country. Having become members of Parliament, some of them have acquired a stake in the continuation of this system, although they might want to see it substantially reformed.

When asked during a press conference last September whether volunteer battalions would be preparing a putsch against the authorities in Kyiv, commander of the *Mirotvorets* battalion Andrii Teteryuk excluded the possibility emphatically. "You need to understand," he told reporters, "that the volunteer battalions are [composed of] the most patriotic Ukrainians, those who love their motherland the most. In no case would they do anything that would damage the country."⁷³

⁶⁹ "V Ukraine sozhdadut edynyi reestr boitsov pogibshikh v ATO" [In Ukraine a single register of servicemen who died in the ATO is being established], in *Ukrainska Pravda*, 1 February 2015, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2015/02/1/7057085>.

⁷⁰ Dmytro Yarosh, "Bahato khto zaraz prosit' prokomentuvati..." [Many are now asking to comment on...], cit.

⁷¹ "Yatsenyuk: Boitsam v zone ATO zapladyat vdvoe bol'she" [Servicemen in the ATO zone will be paid double], in *Ukrainska Pravda*, 1 February 2015, <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/news/2015/02/1/7057087>.

⁷² "Arsen Avakov, Segodnya vruchal ranenim boitsam nagrody i kvartiry" [Today I handed out to injured servicemen medals and apartments], in *Facebook*, 17 February 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/arsen.avakov.1/posts/787412071348901>.

⁷³ "Rossiskie SMI publikuyut 'vbrosy', chto dobrovol'cheskie batal'yony poidut na Kiev. Etogo nikogda ne budet - kombat 'Mirotvortsya'" [The Russian media publish speculations that the volunteer battalions will march against Kyiv. This will never happen - the Commander of the *Mirotvorets* battalion], in *Censor.net*, 17 September 2014, <http://censor.net.ua/n303114>.

5. Heroes and villains

As with every revolutionary or extraordinarily tragic public event, Maidan and the eruption of hostilities in the Donbas have brought to the fore a mixed bag of eloquent populists, romantic visionaries, cunning adventurers and committed patriots. Populism and demagoguery have proved an easy temptation for many. Yet in the complex, pluralistic and vehemently confrontational Ukrainian political landscape, post-Maidan media and civil society actors have demonstrated themselves to be alert and critical, ready also to challenge and undo unconvincing heroes.⁷⁴

As a product of Maidan, most volunteers have brought to the frontlines the Jacobin attitudes of the "Revolution of Dignity." Generally motivated by patriotism and the urgency for change, most of them are an extraordinary resource for the country today and need to be reassured that their efforts in the battlefield are not being wasted to defend vested interests or to preserve a dysfunctional system. In addition to being properly selected and accurately trained, volunteers need to be fully integrated into a reformed and effective security sector and become the backbone of what many in Ukraine see as a developing people's army.

Despite the limited resources made available by a rapidly deteriorating economic crisis, securing the loyalty of war veterans is key to defuse the risks of their political manipulation. Better communication on the side of the authorities and recognition of the combatants' contribution would also help. Member of Parliament Boris Filatov's protest is very likely to express widely held feelings among volunteers and reservists: "Poroshenko needs to know that our victories are not due to him and the General Staff but to the heroism of soldiers and officers."⁷⁵ Many volunteers would say that they fought in Maidan for a modern, functional, corruption-free country. They are now defending it against a Russian invasion. As their aspirations fail to materialise, they might turn from asset to liability in an unstable political arena.

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⁷⁴ See, for example, the bruising attitude of the journalists who interviewed Donbas battalion Commander Semenchenko for *Ukrainska Pravda* on 23 December 2014: <http://www.pravda.com.ua/rus/articles/2014/12/23/7053033>.

⁷⁵ Borys Filatov, "Skazhu i ya, nakonets" [I will also speak, in the end], in *Facebook*, 30 January 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/borys.filatov/posts/791712780910621>.

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