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Defining Security and the State:  
An Analysis of the Ukrainian Volunteer Battalions and the  
Renegotiation of the Public-Private Divide.



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Submitted: 03-08-2018

A Thesis submitted to  
the Board of Examiners  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of  
Master of Arts in Conflict Studies & Human Rights

Supervisor: dr. Chris van der Borgh

Date of submission: 03-08-2018

Independent research project, 30 ECTS

Word count: 22,584 words

**Cover page picture:** Photo covering a soldier holding a gun with an emblem of the Azov battalion (DONi Press, 2015).

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is a product of my time in Kyiv and the research I conducted there. However, I would not have been able to finish this thesis if it wasn't for the support of many important people. First off, I would like to thank my supervisor Chris van der Borgh who not only provided me with crucial feedback and critiques but also managed to have me leave his office with renewed confidence after every meeting. Furthermore, I would like to thank the many people who provided me with important context knowledge and let me tap into their networks, such as Andriy and Tilia from PAX, Michiel Driebergen and the people from Stabilization Support Services in Kyiv. Specifically, I would like to thank Alex who helped me arrange and translate numerous interviews and who took the time to share with me his personal experiences on Maidan. Furthermore, this thesis would not be written if it wasn't for my friends and family. They kept me sane and supported me in my decision to go to Ukraine ("Why Ukraine?! It's so cold!") but most importantly they stood by me during moments of anxiety, stress and doubt. Mark – thank you for believing in me when I didn't myself and for joining me in Kyiv to drink Georgian wine and eat weird mushroom soup. Lastly, I would like to express my deep gratitude and respect to the former battalion members who were willing to share their stories with me. Their personal stories, of which most have not been included in this thesis, probably touched me the most. These are stories of people who struggled to reintegrate into society after having been through physical and mental trauma yet who, nevertheless, continued to contribute to Ukrainian society by establishing dialogue initiatives and support for other veterans. These are also stories of people who have lost loved-ones at Maidan or have had to leave their homes in Donbas. I am humbled in the knowledge that I will never be able to understand their country as well as they do and impressed by their sophisticated understanding of conflict dynamics. I can only hope that my thesis has done justice to the situation in Ukraine as experienced by these people.

## ABSTRACT

To counter separatist forces in its eastern region Donbas, the Ukrainian government legitimized the mobilization of volunteer battalions in April/May 2014 through a government Decree on Mobilization. However, the anti-government rhetoric and undermining of government policy by some volunteer battalions poses questions about their interaction with the Ukrainian state. To study this contested interaction, this thesis makes use of network analysis as its main analytical framework, as it allows for the analysis of changing relations between a variety of actors within a security field. Through qualitative research, including interviews with a number of former battalion members and local experts, I have come to several conclusions. First, important variations between volunteer battalions' characteristics account for differing interactions with state actors. Second, I argue how control over different types of capital proves to be crucial in the maintenance of a powerful position within the security field. Furthermore, by applying these findings to other analytical frames, such as securitization theory and Migdal's state-in-society approach, it is argued how the emergence of these volunteer battalions and their implicit and explicit claims about security and the state have contributed to a renegotiation of the state's public-private divide.

**Key words:** Ukraine; Donbas; volunteer battalions; militias; hybrid security governance; state; network analysis; state-in-society; securitization theory.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

ATO	Anti-Terrorist Operation
DIYA	Derzhavnytska Initsiatyva Yarosha Governmental Initiative of Yarosh
DUK	Dobrovolchy Ukrayinsky Korpus Ukrainian Volunteer Corps
MoD	Ministry of Defence
MoI	Ministry of Interior
OUN	Orhanizatsiya Ukrayinskykh Natsionalistiv Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists
PGM	Pro-government militia
UAF	Ukrainian Armed Forces
UDA	Ukrayinska Dobrovolcha Armiya Ukrainian Volunteer Army
UNA-UNSO	Ukrayinska Natsionalna Asambleya – Ukrainska Narodna Ukrainian National Assembly – Ukrainian People’s Self-Defence
UPA	Ukrayins’ka Povstans’ka Armiya Ukrainian Insurgent Army

## INTRODUCTION

If anything, Ukraine's recent history has been marked by continuous disturbance of its post-soviet statehood. Euromaidan, the Russian annexation of Crimea and the subsequent conflict in the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk areas (from now on referred to as Donbas) naturally sparked renewed academic attention to the region. The prolonged state of political distress, poses many challenges for policymakers and academics alike. Some scholars warn against the consequences of a continued stand-still of the situation in Crimea and Donbas, drawing similarities with other "frozen" post-soviet disputes (e.g. Legucka, 2017; Tudoroiu, 2016; and Bebler, 2015). Other case studies on these political and violent events add to debates on, for instance, its consequences for EU-Russia relations (e.g. Haukkala 2015; Dragneva-Lewers and Wolczuk 2015; and Sakwa 2014) and the characteristics of Russia's hybrid warfare in Donbas (e.g. Popescu 2015; Raitasalo 2017; and Hunter and Pernik 2015). While these debates often focus on international developments, there is an interesting internal dynamic to the conflict in Donbas as well, namely the high level of civilian participation. When the conflict started in Eastern Ukraine the security apparatus of the Ukrainian government in many ways lacked capacity and unity. To enhance this capacity, the Ukrainian government called for the mobilization of civilians, which stimulated the emergence of many volunteer battalions, or *voluntery*, in April/May 2014 (Klein, 2015).

The emergence of these battalions added an interesting dynamic to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. By stimulating non-state actors to play an active role in the defence of Ukraine's geographical state borders, the Ukrainian government allowed for the blurring of the state – non-state divide. Thus, to protect one state border (that between the state and other states), another border (that between the public and the private) was affected. Furthermore, the emergence of non-controlled armed groups arguably questions the state's capacity to control use of force. In order to re-establish the public-private divide and exercise more direct control over the use of force, the Ukrainian government attempted to officially integrate these battalions into the state security apparatus. However, within academic debates scholars have taken different positions as to whether these integration measures has proven to be a successful tool to control these security actors.

Some authors emphasize that the government has indeed been able to obtain control over almost all of the voluntary forces (Hofman, 2017a). For example, it has been stated that 'the groups' members have become functional parts of the Ukrainian Armed Forces (UAF), preventing the potential for separate, chaotic chains of command' (Mironova and Sergatskova, 2017). Furthermore, some emphasize how the Ukrainian government was able to successfully obtain control over these groups by offering significant benefits and deals. Some authors even



go as far as suggesting it is a success model to be followed by other countries dealing with similar situations (Mironova and Sergatskova, 2017).

At the same time, other scholars state that *de facto* the government barely exercises any effective control over these volunteer battalions. This is exemplified in the way some battalions, both integrated and non-integrated, employ strong anti-state or anti-government rhetoric. An example of this anti-government rhetoric is the 'National Manifest' which was signed in March 2017 by two political parties, which are closely aligned with volunteer battalions, in which they suggested to overthrow the current government and create a system independent from the influence of oligarchs (Hofman, 2017b). Furthermore, it is argued that 'despite official claims that all of the *volontery* are under the direct control of those in charge of the "anti-terrorist operation", the evidence shows that paramilitary battalions obey Kiev's orders as long as these are aligned with the battalions' own goals and objectives' (Aliyev, 2016: 509). Others support this claim and exemplify this by presenting cases in which government policy is undermined by volunteer battalions (or actors closely related to these battalions), such as the Donbas blockade. Interestingly, in this case the government response was not to counteract these practices but to comply and convert them into government policy (Kostanyan and Remizov, 2017: 17). While most volunteer battalions are now under the control of several ministries and security forces and therefore get funding from the government, some state that 'the covert support provided by Ukraine's numerous oligarchs' is actually most decisive (Aliyev, 2016: 508) and allows the battalions to still operate independently from the government.

Thus, while there clearly exists some ambiguity about the extent to which the Ukrainian government managed to control these non-state security actors, there does seem to be a shared understanding that levels of state-control or -embeddedness vary significantly between several volunteer battalions. Even between battalions that have been integrated into the state apparatus, there are key differences in the way and extent to which they are aligned with the state. Furthermore, the practices and discourse employed by some of the battalions that are not integrated implies contradicting understandings of their role within or outside of the Ukrainian state. In this thesis I will take a more in-depth look into the often contentious relationship between the Ukrainian government and the volunteer battalions. Considering the battalions' position as a (non-)state security actor and the strong anti-state rhetoric and practices of some, I will attempt to identify how these battalions cooperate and/or compete with different agencies within the state and what implicit and explicit claims that make about the Ukrainian state as a whole. My main research question thus reads as follows:

How has the volunteer battalions' position within Ukraine's security field shaped the images and practices of the Ukrainian state in the context of the conflict in Donbas from its start in 2014?

Several scholars have approached militia-state interactions by identifying certain types of pro-government militias (PGM's) and their expected influence on or risk for governments and societies, as defined by, for example, Carey and Mitchell (2017). While this debate has provided some interesting hypotheses, it fails to provide a framework through which to study the battalions' diverse and dynamic character. Therefore, I have chosen to take a different approach. Rather than testing the expectations and typologies as defined by authors such as Staniland (2015) or Carey and Mitchell (2017), I prefer to analyse the volunteer battalions in a way that is less linear. In the Ukrainian case it is crucial to consider the vast variety of state / non-state relations and their development over time. Therefore, I have chosen network analysis as my analytical framework. Network analysis provides a useful analytical lens as it allows for an analysis of battalions' position in the security field as it changes and develops through different phases of their existence. Within this analytical framework, several concepts have been defined to describe how various security actors (both state and non-state) operate within a certain security field or network.

In my analysis, I will make use of some of these concepts which will identify not only their behaviour within the security field but also their (implicit and explicit) perception of their role in this field. Additionally, these concepts will help me identify the resources, or capital, they employ in order to obtain or maintain a legitimate position within this field. After identifying the main characteristics of battalions and what similarities and differences exist between them, I will analyse their relation with the Ukrainian state as it develops over time. This analysis will move beyond the battalions' position within the security field. Because of the politicized nature of most volunteer battalions and the political links enjoyed by many groups, I will thus spend some words on how their interaction outside of the security field has been of influence to their position vis-à-vis the state as a whole.

This thesis will be structured in the following way. First, I will elaborate on my analytical framework by discussing some of the key concepts within network analysis. Furthermore, I will identify underlying assumptions and understandings of the state, derived from Migdal's state-in-society approach and securitization theory, which have shaped my research in a fundamental way. Then, in my methodology section, I will explain how this research project was set up and how network analysis as an analytical framework shaped certain aspects of my methodology. Then, I will embed the case in its broader context by providing an account of the recent crises

and the historical narratives used by different actors. Building on the theoretical insights on how to study these non-state security actors and the context knowledge on the Ukrainian crises, I will then conduct my analysis on the volunteer battalions and their relation with the state. This analysis will be two-fold: First, I will first provide an overview of the most important differences and similarities between volunteer battalions in Ukraine. Second, I will follow the development of their relation with the Ukrainian state through different phases. The first phase constitutes the Maidan Revolution. Though the volunteer battalions were not yet created in this phase, it did provide a discourse and ideology, which were key to the volunteer battalions' understanding of the state. Furthermore, I will analyse how some state actors interacted with this discourse. The next phase includes the battalions' emergence as security actors in Spring 2014. I will discuss what their position vis-à-vis the state was from the initial mobilization period until their integration into the state system. It is in this phase that several state – non-state relationships become legitimized and institutionalized. In the third and last phase, I will discuss the politicization of the battalions and the linkages between battalions and political actors. In this phase it will become clear how, again, the state – non-state divide is being challenged and controlled. I will conclude this thesis by highlighting how these volunteer battalions have played a key role in the continuous renegotiation of the Ukrainian state, both in images and practices, and what we can learn from studying such puzzling dynamics.

## 1. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Both within academic and policy circles there have been continuous debates on how to understand the role of non-state security actors. This is understandable considering their substantial involvement in (international) violent conflict and the possible consequences their presence may hold for state building processes. Several questions immediately come to mind. Do non-state security actors inevitably threaten the stability of the state and are they therefore a problem that needs to be contained or suppressed? Or is it possible that they can provide certain security services without it necessarily posing a threat to the state or society? But also, what happens when non-state actors become integrated into state security systems and move beyond state borders, as has happened in the case of Ukraine? How does this affect understandings of the state?

In this chapter I will touch upon several academic debates that attempt to tackle these questions and more. First, I will explain how (pro-government) militias have been defined and how scholars have attempted to estimate the risks they might pose for governments and societies. After identifying important assumptions and limitations shaping these typologies, I will elaborate on understandings of the state in general and how this has informed several approaches to hybrid security governance. As will be explained, my understanding of the state has been largely defined by Migdal's state-in-society approach. However, I will also draw on insights from securitization theory since this provides interesting insights into how volunteer battalions relate to the state in processes of securitization. Lastly, I will argue how I intend to use certain concepts derived from network analysis to operationalise my research on Ukraine's volunteer battalions.

### *1.1. Understanding Militias*

As discussed in the introduction, the relation between the Ukrainian volunteer battalions and the Ukrainian state remains somewhat contested. To shed light on such contested relations, several scholars have suggested approaches through which to define government-militia relations in general. Consequently, a debate has emerged on typologies of pro-government militias (PGM's) and the implications of these typologies on security and the state.

A leading author taking an epistemologically positivist approach is Sabine Carey. Carey et al. (2013) defined their typology based on the link between the state and PGM's. By doing so, they distinguished informal PGM's from semi-official PGM's. Informal PGM's are defined as having 'no formalized link to the state, even if its connection to the government is widely known

within the country' (Carey and Mitchell 2017: 131). Semi-official PGM's are understood as having 'a formalized and official link to the government, though separate from the regular military and police force. The government might have established the group by official decree or law, and members may receive some regular compensation' (Carey and Mitchell 2017: 130). Carey and Mitchell state that 'the militia-government link influences the degree of militia discretion. [This] link suggests specific expectations about the groups' behaviour and their consequences' (Carey and Mitchell 2017: 131). In essence, they expect semi-official PGM's to create less control problems for governments than informal PGM's (Carey and Mitchell 2017: 132).

When applied to the case of Ukraine's volunteer battalions, these battalions arguably could very well be understood as semi-official, considering that they arose after a government decree and receive support by the Ukrainian government. However, by integrating most battalions into state agencies, some have become even more aligned with the state, to an extent that exceeds the semi-official definition, while others still seem to function as independent movements.

To explain these differences, Carey and Mitchell expand on their theory by also estimating the effect of PGM's link with society and their membership characteristics on risk levels to the state and society. They explain how militias with certain membership characteristics pose more risks to the stability of the state than others. The authors distinguish between several categories of militia's membership characteristics, such as: ethnic/religious, ideological/nationalist/political and non-civilians, including (off-duty) police, military and mercenaries. They explain the link between these characteristics and their risk to the state as following:

Membership characteristics influence the probity risk for the state for two reasons. First, PGM's with low potential membership—local or non-civilian militias—pose less risk to state stability than those with the potential of recruiting large parts of society. Ethnoreligious and political militias can potentially draw in much larger numbers and might value loyalty to individual leaders over the stability of the state. Second, the members PGM's attract and the bond between members influence the risk they pose for the state. The exclusionary frame of ethnoreligious and political militias may become a liability for a state. The loyalty of these PGM's is to ethnic, religious, or ideological leaders and their goals, rather than to state institutions per se. This goal variance makes these groups a higher risk to the foundations of a state than local or noncivilian militias are (Carey and Mitchell 2017: 141).

These findings on recruitment potential for political militias could confirm claims made by Aliyev, briefly discussed in the introduction, who states that the political militias in Ukraine enjoy large-scale popular support.

Aliyev furthermore finds that the analysis of state-manipulated paramilitaries, groups that are (covertly) supported by governments to 'do the state's "dirty jobs" of violently eliminating anti-regime opposition' (2016: 501), 'has been at the core of existing studies on paramilitary violence' (2016: 502). In contrast, state-parallel paramilitaries remain 'beyond both the analytical limits and the theoretical grasp of the classical theory of paramilitary violence' of many scholars (Aliyev 2016: 502). He argues that state-parallel PGM's contain three main features: Military strength, political ties and popular support or legitimacy. By defining these features, Aliyev goes further than the more legality-based distinction provided by Carey et al., as it provides a distinction based on power relations between the state and PGM's. While Aliyev's model certainly holds true for some volunteer battalions, he still neglects to discuss the variety of volunteer battalions active in Ukraine.

Lastly, Paul Staniland (2015) approaches the debate on (pro-government) militias from a different angle when discussing his theory on four government strategies towards militias. He claims that the ideological fit of militias with the state and its operational value for the state define militias' political role and, with it, government strategies towards these militias (Staniland, 2015: 779). His basic model is presented in Table 1 below. While incorporation seems to be the main strategy of choice in Ukraine, this does not seem to fit Staniland's model completely, as it would imply that the incorporated volunteer battalions were not operationally valuable to the Ukrainian government. As I will explain further in my empirical chapter, the volunteer battalions in Ukraine are generally considered to have played a vital role in the conflict in Donbas, whereas the regular armed forces lacked capacity. There are thus some crucial problems with the application of Staniland's model to the Ukrainian case.

		Operationally valuable?	
		Yes	No
Ideological fit	Ally	<i>Armed ally</i> Strategy: collusion (deep)	<i>Superfluous supporter</i> Strategy: incorporation
	Gray zone	<i>Business partner</i> Strategy: collusion	<i>Undesirable</i> Strategy: containment
	Enemy	<i>Strange bedfellow</i> Strategy: collusion (thin)	<i>Mortal enemy</i> Strategy: suppression

Table 1: *Armed Group Political Roles and Government Strategies* (Staniland, 2015: 779).

As discussed, much of the literature on (pro-)government militias either focusses on what typology is most suited to study these militias (Carey et al., 2013) and what kind of risks they pose to the state and/or society (Carey and Mitchell, 2017), or on the types of strategies governments employ in order to deal with these otherwise uncontrolled groups (Staniland, 2015). As I have argued, some of the predictions formulated above appear to be more applicable to Ukraine’s volunteer battalions than others. While there is definitely great value in establishing these typologies and attempting to identify possible risks that come with different types of militias, most of these authors seem to base their studies on the assumption that states should obtain and maintain their monopoly on violence in order to be a “successful” state. This Weberian understanding of the state fails to touch upon the different ways involvement with non-state security actors could affect the state as a whole.

### 1.2. *Understanding the State*

Weber’s definition of the ideal state reads: ‘A state is a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory’ (Weber, 1958: 78). It is important to emphasize here that Weber was indeed talking about an *ideal* type of statehood as opposed to the often quite different reality of many states around the world. As Migdal explains:

Even though Weber carefully placed the word “successfully” in parentheses in the last quote above, in practice all sorts of states, both successful in monopolizing violence and not, have appeared in social science scholarship as if they were tight-knit, purposeful organizations, with autonomous goals, using violence and legitimacy as successfully tools in maintaining social control and implementing policy. Weber was much more

exact than many who followed him in his assumptions. He was careful to note how limited the experience of states successfully centralizing and monopolizing violent means actually was. [...] Weber was certainly not referring to all states but was attempting only to create a heuristic, ideal type state' (Migdal, 2001: 14).

However, despite Weber's intention being to create a definition for the ideal state, this definition has become somewhat of a universal reference point used to study states and the extent to which they operate successfully. '[W]ith Weber's definition as the starting point, variation can be conceptualized and measured only as a distance from the ideal type' (Migdal 2001: 15). To study states only in this manner neglects the possibility that there may be other ways that states can function and govern without necessarily having to be classified as failed or weak. Critiquing these assumptions does not mean that the monopoly on violence is completely irrelevant or holds no value in regards to creating and maintaining a stable state. However, the 'assumption that only the state does, or should, create rules and that only it does, or should, maintain the violent means to bend people to obey those rules minimizes and trivializes the rich negotiation, interaction, and resistance that occur in every human society among multiple systems of rules' (Migdal, 2001: 15). Aiming to provide a more inclusive approach through which to study states, Migdal proposes his state in society approach.

### 1.2.1. The state-in-society approach

With his approach, Migdal provided a new lens through which to study the development and changing of states. He defines the state as 'a field of power marked by the use and threat of violence and shaped by (1) the image of a coherent, controlling organization in a territory, which is a representation of the people bounded by that territory, and (2) the actual practices of its multiple parts.' (Migdal, 2001: 15-16) 'In encapsulating both image and practices, the definition of state here uses the concept of "field," adopting it (and adapting it) from Bourdieu' (Migdal, 2001: 22). While taking elements from Weber's definition, Migdal places emphasis on intersection of the images and practices of the state. With the concept of 'image' Migdal refers to the perception of the state as 'a single entity that is fairly autonomous, unified, and centralized' (Migdal, 2001: 16). As Migdal explains, there are two assumed divides underlying this image: the 'territorial boundaries between the state and other states' and the 'social boundaries between the state – its (public) actors and agencies – and those subject to its rules (private)' (Migdal, 2001: 17). In Ukraine, the question on which side of the public-private divide the volunteer battalions are situated seems to be somewhat contested. While most volunteer



battalions seem to be portrayed as formerly non-state actors that have been successfully integrated into state systems, practices by both actors related to volunteer battalions and the Ukrainian government often undermine this image. As Migdal states: '[...] practices may serve to recognize, reinforce, and validate, not only the territorial element of state control, but also the social separation between the state and other social formations (the public-private divide) in numerous ways' (2001: 18). However, as will become clear, practices may just as well undermine these imagined state borders. It is therefore important to keep these sometimes contentious dynamics into consideration when studying the state. In Migdal's words:

[The state] must be thought of at once (1) as the powerful image of a clearly bounded, unified organization that can be spoken of in singular terms [...], as if it were a single, centrally motivated actor performing in an integrated manner to rule a clearly defined territory; and (2) as the practices of a heap of loosely connected parts or fragments, frequently with ill-defined boundaries between them and other groupings inside and outside the official state borders and often promoting conflicting sets of rules with one another and with "official" Law (2001: 22).

Therefore, when studying volunteer battalions which operate in a security field alongside or in coordination with state actors, it is important to consider how they interact not only with the state as a whole but also with different state agencies separately. Considering that the Ukrainian state is in many ways a particularly divided system in itself, encapsulating a variety of actors with different interests, goals and alliances, Migdal's approach provides a framework through which it is possible to analyse such contradicting practices while also understanding their influence on the image of the central state.

Following similar understandings of the state, Helmke and Levitsky (2004) propose four types of interactions between state and non-state security actors. Within their model they account for a variety of possible interactions including both competing and complementary interactions. Boege et al. (2008) take these understandings even further and employ the term 'hybrid political order' to define a new type of state resulting from these state and non-state interactions. By doing this they 'are not only arguing that parallel state and non-state forms of order and governance exist [but also that] as a result of mutual influence, distinct political orders can arise and have arisen' (Baker, 2010: 613).

In sum, Migdal's understanding of the state greatly influences my understanding of the Ukrainian state and how certain practices by both state and non-state actors might affect its

image. Its specific security context, however, calls for understandings from securitization theory that could provide insights into the battalions' role as a security actor. As I will argue, the image and practices of the state are closely aligned with securitization processes.

### *1.3. Understanding Security*

Securitization processes can be of influence to both divides defining the image of the state. Scholars have argued, for example, how processes of securitization, as defined by Balzacq below, are used to reinforce and forge state identities within a given territory (Silva, 2016). However, the influence of securitization processes to the public-private divide is more closely linked to this thesis' puzzle. After all, the overall assumption underlying this research is that state and non-state (security) actors may both execute some of the functions traditionally understood as being specific state functions, such as authorizing and providing security. However, '[w]hat distinguishes the state [from other social organizations] [...] is that state officials seek predominance over those myriad other organizations. That is, they aim for the state to make the binding rules guiding people's behaviour or, at the very least, to authorize particular other organizations to make those rules in certain realms' (Migdal, 2001: 63). When applied to security, this process of authorizing security practices is probably best explained by securitization theory. Balzacq defines securitization as:

[...] an articulated assemblage of practices whereby heuristic artefacts (metaphors, policy tools, image repertoires, analogies, stereotypes, emotions, etc.) are contextually mobilized by a securitizing actor, who works to prompt an audience to build a coherent network of implications (feelings, sensations, thoughts, and intuitions), about the critical vulnerability of a referent object, that concurs with the securitizing actor's reasons for choices and actions, by investing the referent subject with such an aura of unprecedented threatening complexion that a customized policy must be undertaken immediately to block its development (Balzacq, 2010: 3).

With his definition of securitization, Balzacq places great emphasis on the use of discourse. As he explains: 'securitization is satisfied by the acceptance of the empowering audience of a securitizing move' (Balzacq, 2010: 9). However, while it is thus crucial that the audience accepts claims of threat identification and suggested measures, Balzacq rejects the need for an objective state of insecurity. 'The natural tendency of mainstream approaches to international relations, such as Realism or Liberalism, is to explain insecurity by identifying an objective situation as

threatening to an objective entity' (Balzacq, 2010: preface). Nevertheless, 'to persuade the audience (e.g., the public), that is, to achieve a perlocutionary effect, the speaker has to tune his/her language to the audience's experience' (Balzacq, 2010: 9). This understanding is shared by Benford and Snow who state that collective action frames may vary in resonance, dependent on the 'credibility of the proffered frame and its relative salience' (Benford and Snow, 2000: 619-620).

Thus far, however, the role of the Ukrainian volunteer battalions within this process has not been identified. In contrast to the audience, volunteer battalions do not merely accept and empower certain security practices, rather, they execute them. Thus, one of the ways to understand volunteer battalions within securitization processes is as a state-enabled security tool. Balzacq et al. (2010) explain:

Given the thickness of security programs, in which discourses and ideologies are increasingly hard to disentangle and differences between securitizing actors and audiences are blurred, there is growing evidence that securitization might best be understood by focusing on the nature and functions of policy tools used by agents/agencies to cope with public problems, defined as threats (Balzacq et al., 2010).

The authors furthermore distinguish between two types of tools: regulatory instruments and capacity tools. Regulatory instruments 'seek to "normalize" the behavior of target individuals (e.g., policy regulation, constitution, etc.)' and thus 'aim to influence the behaviors of social actors by permitting certain practices to reduce the threat', for example (Balzacq et al., 2010). In contrast, capacity tools 'often call for enablement skills, that is, skills that allow individuals, groups, and agencies to make decisions and carry out activities which have a reasonable probability of success' (Schneider and Ingram 1990: 517 in Balzacq et al., 2010). This is very closely related to how Migdal views the state, as either creating and implementing rules or authorizing other organizations to make those rules (Migdal, 2001: 63). Thus should the Ukrainian volunteer battalions be understood as the subjects of regulatory instruments, simply following government rules, or as capacity tools, being authorized, at least temporarily, to operate as security actors on their own terms? While the latter seems to be the most probable of the two in the sense that it reflects the authorization of volunteer battalion mobilization and practices by the Ukrainian government, both understandings of security tools neglect the understandings of the state and security as expressed by these volunteer battalions themselves.

Therefore, an alternative explanation would be to understand volunteer battalions as (competing) securitizing actors.

An understanding of volunteer battalions as securitizing actors is most logical considering the way some volunteer battalions' claims and practices challenge the Ukrainian government's understandings of threat design and threat management. Following the state in society approach, it is only logical to assume that not only the state can function as a securitizing actor but other entities might be able to do the same (if provided with a certain level of legitimacy or, perhaps, symbolic capital). While the Ukrainian government and the volunteer battalions may share the view that the separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine and with them Russia are the main threats as of right now, they have not always seen eye-to-eye on how to deal with this threat. Furthermore, some volunteer battalions – or at least some of their leaders – have claimed to want to deal with several 'internal threats' as well. This is where Balzacq et al. (2016: 494-495) distinguish between threat design and threat management. While threat design concerns the convincing of the audience of an existential threat, threat management concerns the way in which this threat should be dealt with. As mentioned, the latter especially seems to be contested in Ukraine, with many voluntary forces opting for more repressive approaches towards the Donbas region, for example through the Donbas blockade in 2017. In the case of Ukraine, however, volunteer battalions not only contest government policy but also the position of the government as a legitimate securitizing actor. These contestations make the apparent cooperation with the Ukrainian government even more remarkable and it is therefore relevant to attempt to understand how the interaction between these actors and these claims has affected the Ukrainian state.

In sum, securitization theory allows for certain insights into the way volunteer battalions operate within processes of securitization. In the case of Ukraine, I will argue that, through their security practices and their interaction with other state- and/or security actors, some volunteer battalions have made implicit and explicit claims about the Ukrainian state. Considering themselves and claiming to be a legitimate security actor, the volunteer battalions mainly situated themselves within the Ukrainian security field. However, to map out how these volunteer battalions positioned themselves towards other security actors, we need an approach that more specifically outlines the dynamics within this specific field. Therefore I will argue below why network analysis, which similarly to Migdal's state-in-society approach also partly derives from Bourdieu's insights, is a suitable framework through which to analyse more concrete relationships between state and non-state actors.

#### *1.4. Understanding Networks*

Bruce Baker (2010) is part of the school of scholars using network analysis to understand the often complex relationships between multiple security actors. Where Helmke and Levitsky (2004) identify four types of interactions between state and non-state security actors and Staniland (2015) uses types of interactions to make predictions about government strategies towards militias, network analysis as proposed by Baker rather provides a framework through which to assess the elements shaping these relationships within a certain security field. This approach allows for an understanding of the state that fits Migdal's approach as well. In both network analysis and the state-in-society approach the state is considered to be an 'organization within society that coexists with many other formal and informal social organization' (Migdal, 2001: 63). This framework is thus very applicable to situations where state power or legitimacy is contested and non-state actors act as authorizers and providers of security alongside state agencies (Baker, 2010: 599).

To understand which concepts and frameworks are most relevant to the Ukrainian security sector, it is important to first fully grasp network analysis as a theoretical framework and what it constitutes. Though Baker and Martin differ in the way they use this framework, they share a general understanding of the basic elements constituting a network. To outline this network, I will thus use Martin's explanation of the framework alongside some of Baker's findings.

A network is comprised of actors or nodes which have four main characteristics: mentalities, technologies, resources, and institutional arrangements (Martin, 2013: 149). The first characteristic, mentalities, 'reflect[s] how those within a node conceive of its purpose and role within the broader environment. A nodal mentality may be a political or economic ideology, or it may represent a philosophical approach to a particular nodal function' (Martin, 2013: 149). These mentalities are vital in shaping the actor's technologies, 'which represent the various methods, strategies and tactics employed by nodes' (Martin, 2013: 149). Resources are the necessary components to realize these technologies and include different types of capital. As will be explained further below, different authors have identified different types of capital but Dupont (2006) argues for five main types of capital: economic, social, cultural, political and symbolic capital. How these are defined will be discussed below. The last characteristic is the institutional composition of security nodes. According to Martin, 'a security node may take practically any institutional form as long as it exhibits temporal durability' (Martin, 2013: 150). Besides these characteristics, Baker also argues that the relational ties between security actors consist of the interactions and transactions between them. 'Transactions include transfers of

resources, particularly security intelligence. Interactions include physical interaction because of their assigned power-roles or their presence in the same place at the same time. Ties also include the enrolment by one actor of another; that is, one actor aligns its own objectives to some degree with the direction given by another actor, or possibly a genuine institutional hybridity develops' (Baker, 2010: 599). In my thesis I will focus on the way volunteer battalions position themselves towards state actors. However, not only the relational ties between actors define their position vis-à-vis each other. This is where the different types of capital are also relevant.

#### 1.4.1. Defining capital

To understand the links between certain actors, it is important to not only understand the interactions and transactions between actors but also how they may or may not compete for power. An actors' resources, or capital, does not only define *if* a certain actor has the ability to act but can also define *who* is able to act and *how*. Capital is therefore crucial in understanding the power positions within a certain field. Similarly, Baker explains how the dominant position of actors within a network is determined by various forms of capital, using the types of capital initially defined by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992), namely: symbolic, cultural, economic and social capital. However, these types and their meanings have been contested by various scholars over the years. To avoid ambiguity on the use of certain conceptual understandings of capital, I will now elaborate on the different types of capital and their definitions. While Baker does not elaborate on certain types of capital and their definitions per se, other scholars have argued specifically for different types of capital and what they should, or should not, include. Most often, Bourdieu is used as a starting point for defining different types of capital. While Bourdieu initially referred to capital specifically in relation to the state, scholars within security studies adopted his views on capital and applied it to non-state security actors as well.

The concept of social capital is almost always used and according to Dupont is defined as 'a node's capacity to "initiate and maintain social relationships with other groups or individuals"' (Dupont, 2006: 101 in Martin, 2013: 149). Diphorn and Grassiani define social capital as 'an entire range of social connections such as memberships, social activities, neighbourhood contacts, friendships, colleagues, kinship relations, but also objects that are exchanged between social connections, such as gifts' (Diphorn and Grassiani, 2016: 437). While they do not explicitly include this in their definition, Diphorn and Grassiani also seem to include political connections in their understanding of social capital. They state, for example, that 'the owner of a private security company may know an important *political figure*, but if

he/she never makes use of this *social capital*, it does not influence how security is enacted and understood' (Diphorn and Grassiani, 2016: 441, emphasis added). In contrast, other authors, such as Dupont, define political capital separately as 'the capacity to influence or exploit political processes in order to secure desired outcomes' (Dupont, 2006: 101). It can be assumed that social ties within the political field greatly enhance the ability to influence or exploit political processes but it goes too far to claim that the first is an automatic outcome of the latter. Therefore, I argue that, especially in the case of Ukraine's volunteer battalions and their strong ties within Ukrainian politics, the concept of political capital adds an essential lens through which to assess the position of these actors.

This furthermore relates strongly to Tilly's understanding of political entrepreneurs and specialists of violence. As Tilly argues, political entrepreneurs 'specialize in activation, connection, coordination, and representation' (Tilly, 2003: 34).<sup>1</sup> In the case of Ukraine, the practice of connecting volunteer battalions with broader nationalist movements and political alliances is perhaps one of the most obvious examples. Another, sometimes overlapping and complementing category of actors, is that of violent specialists. Tilly understands violent specialists as 'people who control means of inflicting damage on persons and objects' (Tilly, 2003: 35) both in and outside of governments. As I will argue in my case study, some volunteer battalions' leaders operate at the intersection of both categories as political power is possibly amplified by strong links to volunteer battalions. As Tilly argues: 'Visible ability to inflict damage promotes power over and above anything that damage itself might accomplish' (Tilly, 2003: 36). Effective ties between political actors and volunteer battalions thus might be sufficient in the promotion of power without the actual use of this connection.

The definition of cultural capital also seems to be up for debate. Dupont defines this as the "aggregate of knowledge and expertise" at the individual and collective level' (Dupont, 2004: 86 in Diphorn and Grassiani, 2016: 438) which is somewhat similar to Diphorn and Grassiani's definition which includes 'forms of data, such as crime statistics, but also knowledge and skills, such as training and specialized experiences' (Diphorn and Grassiani, 2016: 438). Bourdieu, however, 'employs a more abstract understanding of culture to include social codes, rituals and values' (Diphorn and Grassiani, 2016: 438). Furthermore, Martin's definition of force capital also includes elements of the above mentioned definitions. Force capital is 'the ability to deploy or threaten to deploy force across space. It combines available physical resources (personnel, weaponry, transportation, communications, etc.) with the non-physical (training, expertise, reputation, psychological capacity, leadership)' (Martin, 2013: 153). While

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<sup>1</sup>For a comprehensive explanation of these practices, please read Tilly's *The Politics of Collective Violence* (2003).

Martin's definition of force capital and the above mentioned definitions of cultural capital pose the risk of slightly overlapping in areas such as intelligence, skills, and training, I argue that it is still useful to employ both concepts. This is because cultural capital, when building on Bourdieu's definition, allows for the inclusion of ideological components – which can be vitally important for the legitimization of security practices – and Martin's force capital allows for physical resources besides the financial resources already covered by economic capital. Both thus add important elements to the scheme of security capital.

Other types of capital include bodily capital, economic capital and symbolic capital. Diphorn (2015) takes insights from Martin's concept of force capital one step further and applies it to individual members within a node. 'According to Monaghan (2002), bodily capital comprises two factors: the body build of an individual, that is, his or her physical appearance, and "techniques of the body" (Mauss, 1973 in Monaghan, 2002: 337)—the ability to use the body' (Diphorn, 2015: 342). While most authors usually include economic capital, it is not as contested as the types of capital mentioned before. Not all authors thoroughly define this concept explicitly but it seems to be usually understood as 'the financial resources or ability of a node to secure funding for its activities' (Dupont 2006 in Martin 2013: 149).

Finally, the last and, according to some, most crucial type of capital is symbolic capital. Symbolic capital is understood by Bourdieu as "'any form of capital whether physical, economic, cultural or social" that is perceived and recognized by social actors as being of value' (Bourdieu, 1999: 62 in Diphorn and Grassiani, 2016: 436) or, more shortly, 'recognized authority' (Diphorn and Grassiani, 2016: 436). Below, I will elaborate on symbolic capital by addressing Diphorn and Grassiani's framework on securitizing capital. In sum, to analyse Ukraine's security sector I recognize six types of capital to ensure a holistic and inclusive assessment: social capital, economic capital, political capital, cultural capital, force capital and symbolic capital.

#### 1.4.2. Securitizing capital

Diphorn and Grassiani (2016) furthermore build on the debate on network analysis by providing their analytical framework on securitizing capital. They define securitizing capital as 'the process whereby different security actors use various forms of capital, both intentionally and unintentionally, to acquire legitimacy and power' (Diphorn and Grassiani, 2016: 431). This process is closely related to the Baker's findings on positions of dominance within security networks but adds to it by providing a framework to assess the possession and mobilization of capital in order to obtain symbolic capital. They thus differentiate between capital such as social,



cultural and economic capital, which are merely types of resources available to security actors, and symbolic capital, which besides it also being part of actors' resources, arguably constitutes the 'ultimate form' of capital (Diphorn and Grassiani, 2016: 436). Diphorn and Grassiani (2016: 441) explain that while actors may possess capital, it is only when this capital is mobilized that it influences the actors' power position within a field or network. While Diphorn and Grassiani do not explicitly emphasize this, I argue for an understanding of the mobilization of capital that includes not only the practice of using capital in an operational way but also refers to the framing or performance of capital. By doing so, it is crucial to understand dynamics of framing and discourse analysis as for example discussed by Benford and Snow (2000).

### *1.5. Conclusion*

In this chapter I have touched upon four important debates that are relevant to the study of non-state security actors. In the first section, I have explained how typologies and predictions on PGM's propose interesting hypotheses but fail to provide a tool through which to study the complexity and variety present in Ukraine and battalions' interaction with the Ukrainian state in a more abstract sense. Therefore, I will build my thesis on the assumptions and core understandings from the following three theoretical frameworks: Migdal's state in society approach, securitization theory, and network analysis. These three frameworks essentially provide insight into the Ukrainian case on three different scales. Network analysis provides insight into how security is practised by a variety of state and non-state actors. Securitization theory allows for the analysis of how security is defined and by who. Through Migdal's state-in-society approach I may then draw conclusions on how these (security) practices affect the image of the state as a unified body. As I will discuss next, my methodology has mainly been defined by concepts derived by network analysis. These concepts include the general characteristics of actors within a security field (mentalities, technologies, resources or capital, and institutional composition) and the relational ties between actors. However, while network analysis thus functions as my main analytical frame, I will also reflect on the practices of volunteer battalions as securitizing actors and how this affects their position vis-à-vis the state as a whole.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

I will now explain how I operationalised the above mentioned analytical frames and conducted my research on volunteer battalions in Ukraine. I will first shortly reflect on my research design and then account for the choices made in terms of my data collection techniques, during which I will also reflect on possible limitations of this thesis.

### *2.1. Research Design and Strategy*

The main analytical framework used to conduct my research is network analysis. However, as explained, I will also draw on insights derived from securitization theory and Migdal's state-in-society approach. These analytical frameworks are epistemologically interpretive as they rely on socially constructed notions of knowledge. Ontologically, these frames – especially in the way they are used in this thesis – mainly take an individualist disposition as I analyse how individuals shape larger structures such as a security field or state. However, while they are not the research focus of this thesis, structural components are not necessarily rejected. As I aim to understand the subjective and social meanings of security and statehood represented and created by the actors studied in this thesis, my research strategy naturally is qualitative as opposed to quantitative. As discussed above quantitative approaches to this case fail to account for the dynamic and varied relations between state and non-state actors in Ukraine. Thus, while this thesis by no means aims to establish generalised explanations, its strength lies in its in-depth analysis of the contextual and social factors contributing to the issue at hand.

### *2.2. Data Collection Techniques*

To understand the volunteer battalion phenomenon, I first conducted a thorough theoretical analysis on the existing data on this case. After identifying gaps of knowledge, I spent two months doing field research in Kyiv, Ukraine, in March-April 2018. As my main data collection tool I conducted semi-structured interviews with former volunteer battalion members and local researchers or experts. The two months spent in Kyiv not only allowed me to conduct these interviews but also contributed significantly to my general understanding of the (political) situation in Ukraine. I chose Kyiv as my main location since there were security constraints in other regions of Ukraine and it contained least access issues. Of course the decision to only research this subject in Kyiv and not in other regions of Ukraine does possibly limit the type of data available. However, considering other factors such as my limited time frame, this location allowed me to get relatively easy access to a variety of actors, such as different types of battalions but also a vast network of academics and civil society actors.

In total I interviewed nine former battalion members from six different battalions, namely Shakhtarsk, the battalion of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN), Azov, Donbas, Right Sector's Ukrainian Volunteer Corps (DUK), and Aidar. Though there are around 40 volunteer battalions in total and my selection of these six does not necessarily represent all of them, they did illustrate the variety between the battalions quite well. I chose these six based on my access to these former members and the variety between them. Those six differed amongst others in their institutional make-up (some were integrated into different sections of the Ukrainian state system, some were not), size, ideology, and political connections. Most former members stated they served as regular fighters with the exception of one paramedic and one founding member. While I would have liked to interview more high-ranking officers in the battalions to gain more insight into the strategic and political dynamics of the volunteer battalions, the interviews conducted with (academic) experts also gave me insight into these dynamics. Furthermore, the interviews conducted with regular battalion members also provided me with key insights into the daily practices "on the ground". All of these interviews were conducted in Kyiv but participants often originated from different regions in Ukraine.

Besides these interviews with (former) battalion members, I interviewed eight civil society members and/or researchers, of which three before my departure to Ukraine and the rest during my stay in Kyiv. These eight interview participants include members of a Kyiv-based NGO assisting internally displaced people from Donbas and of a Dutch NGO working on several conflict-related projects in Ukraine who gave me access to their vast network of (former) battalion members. Others were journalists with a deep understanding of Ukraine, two academic experts on radical right movements in Ukraine working for local Universities, and a member of an international think tank based in Kyiv. I have used these expert interviews in a variety of ways: to gain a general understanding of, and become familiar with the Ukrainian context, to broaden my network and find more interview participants, and to triangulate the data derived from secondary sources or interviews with battalion members.

Most interviews were recorded and transcribed, with the exception of a few exploratory interviews with experts. Since not all participants gave explicit permission to be named in this thesis, I have made the decision to anonymize all participants.

Since I did not speak Russian or Ukrainian, interviews were either conducted in English or with the help of a translator. Though the language barrier furthermore prevented me from accessing non-English publications, the interviews with experts helped me by providing a general understanding of the knowledge out there.

Many of the questions in my semi-structured interviews were based on key concepts within network analysis. By asking participants about the mentalities, technologies, resources

and institutions concerning the volunteer battalions, I attempted to create a broad overview of how the battalions operated within the security field. Furthermore, specific attention was given to the battalions' integration into state structures and their connections to Ukrainian politics. The results were then triangulated by a variety of sources, such as secondary academic sources, news articles or material published by research subjects themselves, such as the book *Volunteer Battalions* co-edited by Artem Shevchenko, the head of the Communications Department of the Ministry of Interior (MoI) of Ukraine, or material from websites from volunteer battalions. These last two sources, though highly subjective, provided interesting insights into the position of some state actors and battalions themselves. My main goal was to combine specific accounts from members with secondary sources to get a more comprehensive understanding of the volunteer battalion phenomenon.

### 3. HISTORICAL RESONANCE OF UKRAINE'S CONTEMPORARY CRISES

The Maidan Revolution and subsequent crises in Crimea and Donbas should be understood in the context of Ukraine's broader political history. This history is relevant not only in identifying some of the political developments leading up to these conflicts, but also, and perhaps more importantly, in the way it has been used as a discourse to legitimize and delegitimize practices and actors. In his opening statement of the first chapter of his book *In Wartime*, Tim Judah states: 'The war in Ukraine is not about history, but without using or, to employ the fashionable term, 'weaponizing' history, the conflict simply could not be fought' (Judah, 2015: 3). Over the last couple of years, much has been written about the importance of national identity and history in Ukraine's contemporary conflicts. While I would like to refrain as much as possible from repeating those who have managed to tell Ukraine's story much more thoroughly than I will be able to now, there are some general understandings of the country's history that should be mentioned before I commence my analysis on the volunteer battalions in Donbas. By outlining recent events and the historical narratives used in these conflicts, I will provide some basic understanding of the context in which the volunteer battalions operate, the historical roots of certain organizations that formed a base for several battalions, and the discourses that some of these battalions have been able to make use of.

When studying Ukraine's history, it's most important to understand that '[d]ifferent historical experiences in various regions of Ukraine have produced very different political cultures and identities. [In essence, e]ach region of Ukraine has a unique history' (Himka, 2015: 129). With many former regimes having resided over different regions of Ukraine – from Moldavian, Romanian and Austrian rule to that of Poland and the USSR – it is unsurprising that these 'regimes have left their traces' (Himka, 2015: 129) on identity matters such as language and religion. Of course, not all of these historical differences have been employed in the current crises. 'The most salient regional division [now] is between Galicia<sup>2</sup> [in the west], on the one hand, and eastern and southern Ukraine, on the other' (Himka, 2015: 130). Lucan Way describes the historical grounds for this division:

In contrast to Belarus and Russia (and most of the rest of the former Soviet Union), Moldova and Ukraine included significant territories where the populations had gained a strong anti-Russian/Soviet national identity prior to their incorporation into the USSR. As a result, populations in these areas developed relatively strong anti-Soviet and pro

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<sup>2</sup>With Galicia Himka refers to three western oblasts of Ukraine: Ivano-Frankivs'k, L'viv, and Ternopil.

“European” conceptions of national identity. At the same time, these countries also contained areas where Soviet identity was highly legitimate at the time of the Soviet dissolution. The resultant contestation has meant that oppositions (both pro and anti Russian/Soviet) were able to mobilize national identities in opposition to incumbent power (Way, 2005: 252).

Indeed, these national identities and related historical narratives have been mobilized significantly in Ukraine’s recent conflicts.

In November 2004, people took to the streets to protest against electoral fraud and corruption by Viktor Yanukovich, who initially won the 2004 presidential elections. These protests, now known as the Orange Revolution, already exemplified some of the regional divisions in Ukraine. The majority of Yanukovich’ supporters were reportedly concentrated in the eastern Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts of Ukraine while most people participating in the Orange Revolution originated from western and central Ukraine (Osipian, 2006: 4; Kuzio, 2010: 293). Furthermore, the continued popular support for Yanukovich in Eastern Ukraine is reflected again by his re-election in 2010. In November 2013, protests started again following the refusal by President Yanukovich to sign an Association Agreement with the European Union. Rather, Yanukovich attempted to tighten relations with Russian President Vladimir Putin who agreed to ‘reduce the price of the gas [Russia] sells to Ukraine and to further assist Ukraine financially’ (Khmelko and Pereguda, 2014: 229). The protests escalated after the Ukrainian government sent in special police units (“*Berkut*”) and over 100 people died as a result of this confrontation (Human Rights Watch, 2015). “These violent clashes with Berkut forces shifted the focus of the Maydan protesters from Ukrainian foreign policy issues and the EU integration process to domestic Ukrainian policies [...]. Specifically, the Maydan discussion moved from arguing about European integration to the discussion of human rights, civil liberties, the right of people to assemble, and the right to express “no confidence” in the government’ (Khmelko and Pereguda, 2014: 230). It is during the Euromaidan Revolution that the east/west divide became even more tangible. Yanukovich, before his ousting in February 2014, had successfully mobilized anti-Maidan protests in Eastern Ukraine and Kyiv (Khmelko and Pereguda, 2014: 230). Consequently, as a response to the escalating protests, Putin decided to send his troops to Crimea (the southern peninsula which had historically been part of Russia but had been transferred to Ukraine by Khrushchev in 1954). To legitimize his actions, Putin stated he had the right to protect ethnic Russian citizens and wanted to return the peninsula to Russia (Hutchings and Szostek, 2016: 180-181). After the annexation of Crimea, anti-government

protests in Donbas escalated even further and, with Russian support to the separatists, turned into an armed conflict between the UAF and the separatist movement.

The discourses used to legitimize practices on both sides contained strong historical narratives. On one hand, Ukrainian nationalism was fuelled by the threat of the “Russian occupation”, while the other side warned against “Nazi extremists” (Hutchings and Szostek, 2016: 181). This reignited Ukrainian nationalism was represented significantly at Maidan. The organizations, symbols and language employed at Maidan and later also used by several volunteer battalions participating in the conflict in Donbas find their roots in an older tradition of Ukrainian nationalism. Ukrainian nationalist movements in parts of western Ukraine, Galicia, experienced significant growth in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After WWI, ‘Poles and Ukrainians went to war over the eastern, largely Ukrainian-inhabited part of the former Austrian crownland. Outnumbered and underequipped, the Ukrainian Galicians were defeated in this struggle’ (Himka, 2015: 131) and subsequently became part of Poland. Veterans of the Polish-Ukrainian war and students who had experienced discrimination in Polish higher education became radicalised and eventually formed the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN). This organization and the national identity formed by Galicians during this period of Ukraine’s history served as an important base for the nationalist movement at Maidan. As Himka explains:

‘Even though persons from all around Ukraine have adopted their viewpoint, it was the Galicians who articulated the vision of Ukrainian identity that informed the Euromaidan Revolution and inflamed heated resentment in the East and South. For example, the greeting popularized by the Euromaidan Revolution - “Glory to Ukraine! Glory to the heroes!” - originated in Galicia in the 1930s as the slogan of the radical right Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUN)’ (Himka, 2015: 131).

However, ‘[t]he biggest memory divide relevant to the Euromaidan and the separatist movement in eastern and southern Ukraine is the memory of World War II and its immediate aftermath’ (Himka 2015: 135). As Himka explains: ‘In most of Ukraine, the grandfathers served in the Red Army. Galician grandfathers also served in the Red Army, but many also fought *against* the Red Army, either in military or police formations in German service (notably the Waffen-SS division Galizien) or in the UPA’ (Himka 2015: 135) When, after the war, the region became part of the Soviet Union, the OUN and its military faction the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPA) engaged in an unsuccessful insurgency against Soviet rule aiming for independence of Ukraine (Himka, 2015: 131). This insurgency, however, also led to the ethnic cleansing of ethnic

Russians and easterners in Ukraine (Himka, 2015: 132). Understandably, '[m]ost people in the South and East have little sympathy for this kind of Ukrainian nationalism, and the presence on the Maidan of a large portrait of OUN leader Stepan Bandera and of numerous black and red flags, the Blut und Boden standards of the OUN, profoundly alienated many' (Himka, 2015: 135). While Ukrainian nationalists today draw upon narratives that emphasize its national identity and heroism, the involvement of OUN members in WWII provided the pro-Russian side of the current conflicts with strong counter-narratives.

As Himka states: 'Maidan's love affair with the heroes of wartime Ukrainian nationalism has been a gift for Russian propaganda, which likes to equate the Maidan activists with their heroes' (Himka, 2015: 135) The contested reputation of these nationalist movements and leaders was used by Russian media and politicians to delegitimize them. Specifically, the role right-wing organization Right Sector, which was active at Maidan but also formed a volunteer battalion later on, was emphasised by pro-Kremlin media outlets (Hutchings and Szostek, 2016: 181) accusing it of neo-Nazi ideologies. Pro-Russian discourse furthermore targeted the post-Yanukovich government, by accusing it of being 'packed with, tolerant of, or manipulated by Nazi extremists' (Hutchings and Szostek, 2016: 181). 'Emotive references to *Banderovtsy* (followers of the Ukrainian war-time Nazi collaborator Stepan Bandera) abounded in the discourse not only of media commentators, but Russian political leaders including Putin himself' (Hutchings and Szostek, 2016: 181). The history of these nationalist organizations has thus been used by both parties in different ways. Nationalist organizations at Maidan refer to struggles of independence, oppression by Russians and symbols of Ukrainian identity while pro-Russian parties refer to the organizations' affiliation with Nazi extremism and ethnic cleansing of Russians.

Another important narrative that Russia and the separatists used extensively was that of their national or ethnic Russian identity. As mentioned before, '[t]he pretext for Russia's actions in Crimea, and later for both its tacit and its explicit support for the separatist rebels in Eastern Ukraine, focused on the protection of its "compatriots" (*sootechestvenniki*)' (Hutchings and Szostek, 2016: 180). The Russian ethnic identity of many eastern and southern Ukrainians have, to some extent, been the result of the USSR's Russification policies in Ukraine. These policies included the spread of the Russian language but also the deportation of ethnic Tatars from – and the importation of ethnic Russians to – Crimea. Furthermore, 'the Holodomor (the death of millions in the famine that followed collectivisation in 1932–1933) [transformed] the ethnic balance by depopulating huge areas of rural east Ukraine, as people were forced to flee to the towns to survive, where they were more subject to subsequent Russification, and by a general influx of Russian-speakers to replace the millions who were lost' (Wilson, 2016: 636). These



policies have thus shaped the Russian identity of many civilians in Ukraine. Furthermore, the historical connection of Crimea with Russia, allows for a discourse in which it is emphasized that the peninsula should be “returned to Russia”.

In this chapter I have attempted to outline some of the historical narratives that provided both sides with crucial discourses in Ukraine’s current crises. These crises and discourses furthermore serve as the context in which the Ukrainian volunteer battalions arose and operate. In my analysis on these battalions I will refer back to some of the narratives discussed above and also elaborate on a few narratives that are more directly related to the battalions and their broader movements. As will become clear in my analysis on the relation between volunteer battalions and the Ukrainian state, these movements too adopted certain historical narratives. The nationalist history discussed above is closely linked to the ideology of some volunteer battalions, but as I will discuss later, the Cossack history of Ukraine also provides a relevant narrative. I realize that the above discussion of Ukraine’s history is inevitably a simplified and generalized version of events. However, at the very least, a general understanding of Ukraine’s past will be of assistance to the upcoming analysis on the relatively specific case of Ukraine’s volunteer battalions.

## 4. CHARACTERISTICS OF UKRAINE'S VOLUNTEER BATTALIONS

In order to understand the relation between the volunteer battalions and the Ukrainian state, one must first understand that within the concept of volunteer battalions there is great variety in the way they operate as security actors and/or political beings. Recognizing this diversity will allow for a more thorough understanding of the battalions' position towards the state. In this chapter I will map and analyse the similarities and differences between several battalions according to three main concepts derived from network analysis: namely mentalities (how battalion members understand the battalions' purpose and role within the security field and/or political arena), resources or capital, and institutional composition. In terms of technologies there were little variations between volunteer battalions and this characteristic is arguably least relevant to my case study. Therefore, I will mainly focus on the three mentioned above. My field research points out that it is on these grounds that battalions often share important characteristics but also differ significantly.

### *4.1. Mentalities*

Volunteer battalions' mentalities have proved to be of great influence on the battalions' position towards the Ukrainian state. The discourse at Maidan largely shaped the ideology of many volunteer battalions. I will explain this ideology more in-depth later, but for now it is important to understand that activists during Maidan employed a strong anti-government and self-defence discourse. Similarly, the base for arguably all volunteer battalions was the understanding that because of the lack of capacity and motivation of the UAF, military support by volunteer battalions was needed in order to protect the Ukrainian state. The volunteer battalions seem to have emerged rather quickly in the first few months after the decree and many participants mentioned experiencing a sense of urgency.<sup>3</sup> This sense of urgency and need for these battalions resonates with the claim made by many scholars that, especially in the first few months, the volunteer battalions were indeed effective tools to counter separatism in the East.<sup>4</sup> In a tactical sense, the volunteer battalions are considered to have been 'effective in fighting separatist guerilla groups in Donbas' (Minakov, 2014). Members of volunteer battalions generally considered themselves to be legitimate defenders of the Ukrainian state. Related to this mentality was the perception of many interview participants that the volunteers were generally more motivated than regular soldiers.<sup>5</sup> However, some considered their role, in Ukraine's larger security and political context, to be larger than just security actors within the

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<sup>3</sup>Author's interview with a former member of the Aidar battalion in Kyiv, on 12 April 2018.

<sup>4</sup>Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>5</sup>Author's interviews with a former paramedic of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 24 April 2017; a former member of the Azov battalion in Kyiv, on 22 March 2018; and a former member of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

conflict in Donbas and generally could be described as having a radical nationalistic ideology. Several volunteer battalions thus enjoyed a more radical far-right/nationalistic ideology, such as Azov, Right Sector's DUK, Shakhtarsk and the OUN battalion, whereas the Donbas battalion, for example, was more moderate. As I will explain later, these more radical battalions are often embedded into larger political or civil society organizations.

In sum, in terms of mentalities, battalions usually share a basic understanding of their role in the conflict in Donbas. However, some battalions' have adopted more specific political views and radical ideologies than others.

#### *4.2. Capital*

In this section I will explain what types of capital was obtained by the volunteer battalions and how the possession of certain types of capital affect others. Arguably, the social capital of volunteer battalions in Ukraine largely determined other types of resources or capital. As I will explain, the battalions' social capital affected the sources and methods of recruitment (force capital), training (cultural capital), financial means and equipment (economic and force capital) and possibly political influence as well (political capital).

##### 4.2.1. Recruitment

In terms of recruitment, the volunteer battalions relied heavily on (in)formal networks of which many were involved in or established during the Maidan Revolution. Specifically, this included the self-defence networks established at Maidan and political activists organizations, such as Right Sector and the Black Men Group, which formed an important base for the Azov battalion (Minakov, 2014). In the next section I will elaborate more thoroughly on the discourse and mentalities of these self-defence networks, but for now it suffices to say that some of these networks were later transformed into volunteer battalions and stimulated individual members to join battalions after Maidan. Of the nationalist political organizations present at Maidan, Right Sector was arguably most well-known. During an interview with a former Azov member, it was said that during Maidan the so called Black Men Group or Black Corps formed an important base for both Right Sector and Azov.<sup>6</sup> Because both groups shared key elements of their ideology it is not surprising that they might tap into the same networks to recruit members, such as right wing political/civil society organizations and sports fan groups – in Ukraine commonly referred to as ultras.<sup>7</sup> This furthermore illustrates how intertwined these organizations were in the beginning stages of the conflict. Furthermore, the OUN battalion of

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<sup>6</sup>Author's interview with a former member of the Azov battalion in Kyiv, on 22 March 2018.

<sup>7</sup>Author's interview with a former member of the Azov battalion in Kyiv, on 22 March 2018.

course finds its roots in a longer tradition of Ukrainian nationalism but it must be noted that its battalion in the current crises is significantly smaller than that of Right Sector and Azov.

While Right Sector may have been intertwined with this Black Men Group, it mainly finds its roots in other pre-existing organizations. These organizations include UNA-UNSO, a far-right political party, the Stepan Bandera All-Ukrainian Organization “Trident”<sup>8</sup> (or: “Tryzub” in Ukrainian) which is a paramilitary organization led by Dmytro Yarosh since 2005, the Social-National Assembly, and White Hammer. ‘Their purpose in banding together was to fight Yanukovich’s regime by force’ (Shekhovtsov and Umland, 2014: 59). However, the organization continued to exist after Yanukovich’s ousting in February 2014 and aspired to gain seats in parliament as a political party and created DUK as its official paramilitary force.

For some of the former volunteers I interviewed, their experience at Maidan and links with self-defence groups, had led them to join volunteer battalions after Maidan. Such was the case of a former volunteer paramedic, who explained how her connection with and loyalty to fellow Right Sector members at Maidan had contributed to her joining the medical team of DUK.

Another reason why I joined the Right Sector is because I knew them from Maidan. I communicated a lot with them, I was on barricades with them, I was fighting shoulder to shoulder with them. So it was a kind of brotherhood in that time.<sup>9</sup>

Besides the networks established at Maidan, the volunteer battalions mostly made use of informal recruitment methods. Except for bigger organizations such as Right Sector and later Azov, battalions usually did not have recruitment centres or headquarters. Phone numbers were distributed on social media or within communities, through which you were able to enrol.<sup>10</sup> This informal strategy meant that battalions’ relied heavily on their media image and the reputation of their leaders.<sup>11</sup>

From the participants I interviewed, the only cases where there seemed to be some kind of critical selection was in the case of two Russian nationals and a woman attempting to join volunteer battalions, but who faced distrust and stigmatization because of their identity characteristics. Nevertheless, most interview participants stressed the fact that, regardless of

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<sup>8</sup>The name of the Stepan Bandera All-Ukrainian Organization “Trident” is ‘meant to combine the memory of a controversial nationalist leader who died in 1959 with the three-pronged heraldic symbol of Ukraine’ (Shekhovtsov and Umland, 2014: 59).

<sup>9</sup>Author’s interview with a former paramedic of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>10</sup>Author’s interview with a former member of the Shakhtarsk battalion in Kyiv, on 29 March 2018.

<sup>11</sup>Author’s interviews with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018; and with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

military experience or health status, it was relatively easy to join a battalion, especially in contrast to the regular army.<sup>12</sup> A former member of DUK explains:

We had to react on aggression quickly. Our army wasn't ready for that. And [in] these groups, like Right Sector or all volunteer formations, nobody asks you "Who are you?", "Why [do you want to join this battalion?]" There were some questions but in [the regular] army everything was very slow. Here you can go, take weapon and [fight].<sup>13</sup>

Other participants told similar stories, such as a former Donbas members, who preferred to join a volunteer battalions because he was afraid that the regular army wouldn't accept him, or a former member of the Aidar battalion, who stated:

Even if I was not able to serve in [the regular] army [because of my] health, it does not mean it is a reason [not to fight]. If I have two feet and two hands, I can fight.<sup>14</sup>

This quick and informal recruitment procedure contributed to chaotic operations and lack of structure and hierarchy. Numbers of fighters often varied greatly<sup>15</sup> and in the first few months there was little oversight.<sup>16</sup> In line with the initial lack of structure and hierarchy, the relationship within battalions and between fighters and commanders was said to often be more informal and less strict than in the regular armed forces. A former volunteer explained how he experienced a sense of autonomy during his time in Azov:

At that time in army it was a big problem. [...] Especially the relationships between commanders and soldiers. It was really another world. In our [battalion] you feel like you're needed and in army you feel like you're nothing. [...] We were in National Guard but we have some autonomy. [...] You feel maybe some freedom in this battalion. You don't feel like a piece of meat to go to die.<sup>17</sup>

This account thus exemplifies the informal structure of many battalions as opposed to that of the regular armed forces and the positive experience by battalion members.

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<sup>12</sup>All of author's interviews with former volunteer battalion members except for the interview with a former paramedic of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018; with a former member of the Shakhtarsk battalion in Kyiv, on 29 March 2018; and with a former member of the Shakhtarsk and OUN battalion in Kyiv, on 31 March 2018.

<sup>13</sup>Author's interview with a former member of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

<sup>14</sup>Author's interview with a former member of the Aidar battalion in Kyiv, on 12 April 2018.

<sup>15</sup>Author's interview with a former member of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

<sup>16</sup>Author's interview with a former paramedic of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>17</sup>Author's interview with a former member of the Azov battalion in Kyiv, on 10 April 2018.

In sum, the social capital enjoyed by many volunteer battalions contributed to their fast, but also chaotic, mobilization. Here social capital, exemplified in battalions' links to several (in)formal networks thus proved to be crucial in the establishment of sufficient force capital. Furthermore, the informal setting within battalions contributed to the maintenance of durable social ties.

#### 4.2.2. Training

The quick mobilization of volunteers naturally required that members could join without going through prolonged training procedures, though training did vary greatly between battalions. When asked about the training and instructions members received when joining a battalion, participants often only mentioned a short introduction at the nearby base.<sup>18</sup> At best, participants would go to short training camps – lasting from 2 weeks to 1 month – during which members were introduced to each other, were able to choose a specialism and were taught the basics on how to use their weapons and equipment.<sup>19</sup> Many battalions relied on volunteers, such as veterans from Ukraine and abroad, to give training to new volunteer fighters.<sup>20</sup> For example, general training camps were set up by former military officers of the Ukrainian special forces to prepare volunteers for their deployment in volunteer battalions:

It was not organized by the government, it was the initiative of people who know how to fight and they were aware that they needed to share this knowledge. We train there and then you come to Aidar battalion.<sup>21</sup>

These initiatives, set up by veterans, thus prepared volunteers before their deployment in Donbas. Other times, however, volunteers would mainly get ad-hoc training whilst already deployed.<sup>22</sup> In some instances this lack of training proved to be insufficient in countering the well-equipped and well-trained separatist forces, such as in the battle of Ilovaisk when large numbers of volunteers died or got wounded.<sup>23</sup>

Again, we thus see a connection between social capital and cultural, as social ties with veterans proved to be beneficial in training volunteers. Shorter training procedures

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<sup>18</sup>Author's interview with a former member of the Azov battalion in Kyiv, on 22 March 2018; and with a former member of the Azov battalion in Kyiv, on 10 April 2018.

<sup>19</sup>Author's interview with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

<sup>20</sup>Author's interview with a former paramedic of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018; with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018; and with a former member of the Aidar battalion in Kyiv, on 12 April 2018.

<sup>21</sup>Author's interview with a former member of the Aidar battalion in Kyiv, on 12 April 2018.

<sup>22</sup>Author's interview with a former paramedic of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>23</sup>Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

furthermore may have contributed to fast mobilization, it did limit military operations in some instances.

#### 4.2.3. Financial means and equipment

Besides training new fighters, voluntary support was given in numerous ways, for example through the donation of resources, food and equipment. This voluntary support was reportedly crucial to the survival of many battalions, especially in the beginning stages. In terms of financial support, the volunteer battalions were mainly dependent on donations from either civilians, politicians or oligarchs. The varying social connections enjoyed by volunteer battalions thus caused great differences between volunteer battalions in terms of their economic- and force capital.<sup>24</sup> A former member of the Donbas battalion explained how, in the beginning period, they had to make use of airsoft guns or other kinds of improvised weaponry.

They had real machine guns but we had [...] airsoft guns. They shoot with plastic balls. We used them to free checkpoints because they didn't know [they were not real weapons].<sup>25</sup>



*Figure 1: Still of Vice News video showing a Donbas member holding an improvised weapon made out of a metal tube (VICE News, 2014).*

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<sup>24</sup>Author's interview with a former member of the Shakhtarsk battalion in Kyiv, on 29 March 2018.

<sup>25</sup>Author's interview with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

However, while some participants stated they had to make use of improvised equipment, other participants mentioned that they often had better supplies, food and guns than the regular army.<sup>26</sup>

In armed forces they have medical team with car which wasn't working so well. It was like an old Soviet Union car and they didn't have tourniquets, only the Soviet tourniquets. It was [made] from rubber. It won't stop blood or if you have half an arm. It will not help you really. So they didn't have equipment or normal cars.<sup>27</sup>

One of the reasons why I came to Azov was because [...] I knew in this battalion [...] all money [is used for] soldiers. You see this really. When you go to [Azov], you have a gym, you have good food, you can choose what you want [to eat]. It's not like an army. We have enough, we have vegetables, we have good armour. We have very good clothes. [...] Volunteers send to us some money, [...] maybe they send to some food. [...] And at that time in army it was a big problem. With guns, with everything.<sup>28</sup>

Thus, the donations volunteer battalions received allowed them to sometimes be better equipped than the regular army. Other important sources of income include financial support by oligarchs. Minakov argues that in order for oligarchs to maintain their power position, they 'changed their methods of dealing with civil society during Maidan. Already by December 2013 there were cases when representatives of oligarchic groups personally joined Maidan and provided unconditional financial support' (Minakov, 2014). This support would later be given to volunteer battalions as well. Perhaps the most well-known example is Igor Kolomoisky, who 'was extremely active in [the] creation and support of several volunteer battalions in the very beginning of the war', such as Dnipro 1 and 2, DUK, Azov, and others.<sup>29</sup> In the book *Volunteer Battalions*, an interview with the Minister of Interior Arsen Avakov states that Kolomoisky 'enthusiastically supported the idea of forming volunteer battalions' and that 'that was when Dnipro-1 battalion was formed' (Shevchenko, 2017: 7). While he has been one of the main sponsors for many battalions, he was not alone. Minakov even suggests a trend in this behaviour when he states the following:

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<sup>26</sup> Author's interview with both former members of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 19 and 20 April 2018.

<sup>27</sup> Author's interview with a former paramedic of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Azov battalion in Kyiv, on 10 April 2018.

<sup>29</sup> Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.



In 2014 oligarchic groups recognized the functionality of civil society and attempted to include public activists and leaders of major civil society. [...] After Maidan those linkages increased due to the urgent need to provide volunteer battalions with ammunition and personal security. Patriotic behavior provided oligarchs with new legitimacy. Today, the usual toolkit of oligarchs' behavior includes support to volunteer or army detachments, as well as some local civic initiative of Self-Defense and/or local lustration committees' (Minakov, 2014).

Minakov furthermore states that oligarchs' involvement with volunteer battalions poses the risk that they will be able to operate independently from legal order (Minakov 2014), as these military forces support their interests. However, others claim that volunteer battalions rarely played a significant role in this sense. In the case of Igor Kolomoisky, he more often used private security companies to support him in economic conflicts.<sup>30</sup>

Again, the evidence above suggests that volunteer battalions were highly dependent on their social capital in terms of force capital and economic capital. Differences in these types of capital was determined by the connections enjoyed by some battalions with oligarchs and battalion leaders' capacity to mobilize popular support. As will be discussed under the Institutional Composition section, choices concerning battalions' integration into state systems also influenced force capital to some extent.

#### 4.2.4. Political connections

Lastly, there is great variety in terms of the political connections enjoyed by volunteer battalions. This has been exemplified in several ways; from former commanders joining political parties, such as Donbas commander Semen Semenchenko, to political parties and battalions operating within one movement or organizations, such as political party National Corps and the Azov battalion. I will elaborate more on the tightness of these political ties in the next chapter, where I will discuss the battalions' connection with numerous bodies of the state.

#### 4.3. Institutional Composition

Lastly, differences in their institutional composition is most evident in the varying levels of embeddedness in the Ukrainian state and if and how they have integration into state systems. Since this integration process is an important illustration of battalions' position and understanding of the state, I will discuss this more in depth in the next section which focusses on the development of this position over time. Whereas I will thus provide more insight into the

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<sup>30</sup>Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

motivations and processes surrounding this integration procedure in the next chapter, I will, for now, provide some insight into the main differences into if, where and how battalions did indeed integrate. This will provide more clarity on the issue before discussing this process in a more detailed manner.

After the battalions' initial mobilization following the government decree, the Ukrainian government attempted to integrate volunteer battalions into several state agencies. These were agencies either residing under the MoI or MoD, such as the National Guard, UAF or border police (Klein, 2015). Usually, the decision as to where battalions would be integrated depended on the social connections enjoyed by the battalions. However, many participants expressed a preference for the MoD since it would provide them with heavier weapons.<sup>31</sup> However, not all battalions did in fact integrate into state systems. Right Sector's DUK and its splinter group the Ukrainian Volunteer Army (UDA) never integrated into the state. Though many sources state that DUK and UDA are the only independent groups left, other sources reported that there are still several smaller groups, such as the OUN battalion, that continue to operate independently. Battalions that did not integrate arguably did this because of specific considerations concerning their battalions' ideology and mentalities. However, I will elaborate more on this in the next chapter. For now, we thus see a link between how battalions' social capital and mentalities affect their institutional composition which in turn influences their force capital and economic capital.

#### *4.4. Conclusion*

In this chapter I have illustrated some of the main differences and similarities between volunteer battalions in Ukraine. The most significant differences in terms of mentalities concerned the battalions' ideology. While some battalions were part of larger nationalistic organizations, others were more moderate and limited their goals and role in Ukraine to that of a security actor in the conflict in Donbas. In terms of social capital, varying social ties resulted in differences between battalions' force capital, cultural capital and economic capital. While all battalions are greatly dependent on (in)formal networks for their recruitment, training, equipment, and financial resources, there are important differences in which specific networks are mobilized. though they all relied to large extent on voluntary donations by the general public. Furthermore, some battalions were closely aligned with political parties while others lacked strong connections in the political sphere. Lastly, battalions varied in whether and how they were integrated into state agencies. What has become most evident through all of these findings, however, is how many of these battalions' characteristics are interdependent. This has become

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<sup>31</sup> Author's interview a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018; and with a former member of the Shakhtarsk battalion in Kyiv, on 29 March 2018.

evident in the way battalions' social capital has determined their force capital, cultural capital and economic capital but also in how battalions' social capital affects their institutional composition which in turn is of influence to their force capital. In this chapter I have discussed some battalion characteristics more in-depth than others as they are directly related to the battalions' position towards the state and will thus be discussed thoroughly in the next chapter. These distinctions include specific mentalities and discourses, political capital and institutional composition. Nevertheless, by outlining the basic differences here, I aimed to provide a general understanding of the volunteer battalion phenomenon in Ukraine which will assist in a proper understanding of my analysis in the next chapter.

## 5. VOLUNTEER BATTALIONS AND THE UKRAINIAN STATE: THREE PHASES OF INTERACTION

The relationship between the volunteer battalions and the Ukrainian government has proven to be dynamic and varied through their development over time. In previous chapters I have already briefly mentioned some of the ways in which volunteer battalions undermine the Ukrainian government as well as benefit from it. In the previous chapter I touched upon some of the differences between battalions in terms of mentalities, capital and institutional composition. In this chapter, these characteristics will be linked to the battalions' relation with and position towards the state and how this has developed over time. As discussed the battalions' mentalities, institutional composition and political capital will be discussed in relation to their position vis-à-vis the Ukrainian state. Furthermore, I will highlight some of the transactions and interactions between various state actors and volunteer battalions throughout three phases: the Maidan Revolution, the battalions' mobilization by and integration in the state, and their politicization.

I will start by discussing how an ideological foundation for the volunteer battalions was established during the Maidan Revolution. Though the volunteer battalions were created after Maidan, it is in this phase that some of the key understandings about the Ukrainian state were negotiated and defined.

The next phase starts with the governmental decree of mobilization and the instructions by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and MoI in Spring 2014. These decrees legitimized the mobilization and employment of volunteer battalions in the so-called Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) and it is at that time that we see an abundance of new groups popping up and existing organizations forming or further recruiting for their already existing military factions. Shortly after the formation of most volunteer battalions, the Ukrainian government started introducing control measures. Most importantly, it started integrating the groups into official state bodies. This phase is thus marked by crucial moments of legitimization and institutionalization of these battalions by state actors.

After a period of quick growth and high intensity battles, the military situation in Donbas stabilizes. Despite daily instances of violence and the continued breaking of the ceasefire first established in 2015 and later renewed in 2017, there have been few significant changes of the contact line between the pro-Russian separatists and pro-Ukrainian troops after the initial heavy battles in 2014 and 2015. Because of the great symbolic capital enjoyed by the volunteer movement, the battalions become politicized in a number of ways. To illustrate the politicization of volunteer battalions and government response to this process in this last phase, I will zoom

into three individual cases of former battalion commanders that have established varying relations with the state.

### *5.1. Mentalities at Maidan*

The Maidan movement formed the base for the volunteer battalions in a variety of ways. As I explained before, it provided networks that formed the member base for many volunteer battalions. Furthermore, the self-defence framework or discourse established during Maidan was also used in the mobilization of the volunteer movement and battalions in particular. This discourse touched upon some of the core questions concerning Ukrainian statehood, namely: Who should be part of the state? Who threatens the state? And who should protect it? Furthermore, during this period of time, important political alliances were established that would affect the position towards the state of some volunteer battalions later on.

#### 5.1.1. Mentalities & discourse

As discussed, the violent escalation of the Maidan Revolution shifted its focus towards a discussion of human rights and ‘the right to express “no confidence” in the government’ (Khmelko and Pereguda, 2014: 230). From this point onwards, the growing distrust of state institutions more and more became an integral part of the movement’s discourse. One of the far right groups active at Maidan, Right Sector, employed the term ‘internal occupation’ to refer to Yanukovich’s presidency<sup>32</sup> (Shuster, 2014). The framing of the Ukrainian government as the internal occupiers, and thus a threat to the Ukrainian people or perhaps even state, also allowed for a framing of the Maidan self-defence networks as its legitimate defenders. As, Avakov, the Minister of Interior stated:

The Maidan defence ideology was complemented with the understanding that the Maidan’s Self-Defense was the only capable power, especially during the transition period (Shevchenko, 2017: 7).

These anti-establishment and self-defence ideas furthermore resonated with certain chapters of Ukraine’s history. In many instances activists refer to themselves or organizations as being part of the Cossack culture or as the descendants of the Cossacks, the self-governing semi-military communities which ruled Ukraine in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century. Explicit references to this part of history were made by Avakov to legitimize Maidan’s self-defence movement:

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<sup>32</sup>Author’s interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

The Maidan of 2013-2014, often called Euromaidan or Revolution of Dignity, demonstrated again and to us, Ukrainians, that we are real patriots. It showed that Ukrainians are true descendants of free and courageous Zaporozhian Cossacks, as well as joyous and cheerful Tripolitans and that they have national dignity and an unconquerable will and readiness to make sacrifices (Shevchenko, 2017: 6).

Furthermore, the use of Cossack history is evident in the use of certain terms within the self-defence movement. 'The structure that ran the day-to-day business of the Maidan called itself the *samooborona maidanu* [the self-defense units of the Maidan]; its leader was known as the commandant and the units comprising the *samooborona* were referred to as *sotnyas*' (Marples and Mills, 2014: 127). *Sotnya* is a military term that is not used in the current UAF and 'has the connotation of a military structure not tainted by the Soviet rule' (Marples and Mills, 2014: 127). This term too finds its roots in the Cossack history of Ukraine. As Marples and Mills explain, the term's 'earliest record use is by the Zaporizhzhyan Cossacks in the sixteenth century. It has since been used by the Sich Riflemen [*Sichovi Striltsi*], the Army of the Ukrainian People's Republic, and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army (UPS)' (Marples and Mills, 2014: 127), which fought for Ukrainian independence during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The use of these terms and narratives support the claim that 'much of the rhetoric of the Maidan, in spite of its overwhelming civilian composition, centered around the militarized symbolism of the "national liberation movement," a concept firmly connected to the state-building attempts of Ukrainians in the first half of the twentieth century' (Marples and Mills, 2014: 127). The Cossack narrative was thus used extensively by far right groups at Maidan. A specific example being the Cossack House. The Cossack House was a key location for (right wing) activists at Maidan, during which it functioned as a base for the Black Men Group. This group is said to have formed an important member base for the Azov battalion.<sup>33</sup> The Cossack House would continue to serve as a civil society organization after Maidan and still enjoys strong connections with the Azov movement and right wing activism in general.

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<sup>33</sup>Author's interview with a former member of the Azov battalion in Kyiv, on 22 March 2018.



Figure 2: Photo taken by author of the Kozatsky Dim (Cossack House) on 24 March 2018.<sup>34</sup>

While there seems to be no discussion about the presence of far right groups and party members at Maidan, scholars disagree on the significance of their role in the protests. This discussion is mainly aimed at Right Sector and the All-Ukrainian Union “Freedom” (Svoboda), which has 37 seats in the 450-member unicameral parliament and a loose association with some marginal extraparliamentary grouplets such as C14 (a play of letters and numbers that can, in Ukrainian, be read as “Sich,” a reference to the historical Cossack military force) and the Ukrainian Insurgent Army’ (Shekhovtsov and Umland, 2014: 59). Most experts argue ‘that both Svoboda party, and the Right Sector were not dominant in Maidan protests and did not play any crucial, not even significant role (Likhachev, 2014; Shekhovtsov, 2014; Umland and Shekhovtsov, 2014)’ (Ischenko, 2016: 454). While Likhachev and Umland thus emphasize the marginality of the groups’ support base, Ischenko argues that ‘in fact, the far right were the most active collective agents among Maidan participants’ and reportedly had the largest share of participation in ‘confrontational and violent events’ (Ischenko, 2016: 468).

In any case, the Maidan Revolution allowed for a redefining of the threats to the state and its legitimate defenders. By making use of Cossack narratives and frames of internal occupation, far right groups legitimized the mobilization of armed groups.

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<sup>34</sup>The two banners on the building say *Chorniy Korpus* which can be translated into ‘Black Corps’.

### 5.1.2. Interactions with state actors

Though Maidan initially was supposed to be a non-political protest movement as representatives of political parties were prevented from taking a prominent position within the movement and addressing the crowds, some opposition politicians did attempt to derive legitimacy through their presence at Maidan and their involvement with self-defence groups (Poltorakov, 2015: 30; Kononczuk and Olszanski, 2014: 2). Poltorakov describes how opposition politicians in Ukraine managed to attach themselves to the Maidan movement. He argues that 'opposition politicians obtained a splendid setting or broad platform for attracting publicity by demonizing the authorities and therefore implicitly extolling themselves' (Poltorakov, 2015: 30). This process is illustrated by the following quotes from the book *Volunteer Battalions*, in which the presence of Avakov and other opposition politicians at Maidan is emphasized:

If you have never been at the Maidan at night, you will never understand this drama... Well, perhaps you shouldn't understand it... But it was at night when it was really scary, when Arsen Avakov and Andriy Levus saw the real bloodshed, and could grasp the situation. And in daylight, the sun was shining, and political rallies were held (Shevchenko, 2017: 10).

Arsen Avakov was the Maidan's Commandant at its last, the hardest stage. He was there every night (Shevchenko, 2017: 10).

In these quotes, the authors claim a certain embeddedness of these political actors in the Maidan movement. Avakov furthermore emphasizes his involvement with the self-defence groups and their potential to be transformed into a (state) security apparatus:

Even back then it was clear that we actually had a prototype of the new defense and security forces. The volunteers were tested with the hardest tasks. Along with Parubiy, two of his deputies, Andriy Levus and Mykola Velychkovich, were in charge. Sometimes I also joined them, as I knew all the guys very well. Brave and courageous they were! [...] Later on, when I was appointed Minister of Internal Affairs, we continued active cooperation, and they were trustworthy and easy to manage (Shevchenko, 2017: 6-7).

By attaching themselves to the Maidan self-defence movement, these opposition politicians not only legitimized their position within the new government but also legitimized new



understandings of who constitutes the Ukrainian state, by what and whom it is threatened and who should protect it. Furthermore, in the last quote above, Avakov suggests that these self-defence groups – who would form an important base for the volunteer battalions after Maidan – were not only legitimate security actors but were also closely aligned with him as a state actor, which implies a certain degree of control or at least coordination.

To understand the volunteer battalion phenomenon, it is important to both understand the discourse, which is closely aligned with their understanding of their role in the security field, and the social and political links enjoyed by the battalions leaders and members. In sum, Maidan provided a platform for the construction of new ideas about the state which were legitimized by historical narratives from Ukrainian history. Furthermore, it allowed for certain alliances to be made between state and non-state actors, legitimizing specific notions of security and the state. These alliances especially proved to be of significance after Maidan, when Avakov, among others, called for the mobilization of volunteer battalions in the conflict in Donbas.

### *5.2. Legalizing Volunteer Battalions*

After the Maidan Revolution resulted in the ousting of president Yanukovich, the political unrest was far from over. The annexation of Crimea and the following conflict in Donbas was more than the UAF were prepared to handle. Therefore, the Ukrainian government allowed for the mobilization of volunteer battalions in their so-called Anti-Terrorist Operation (ATO) in Donbas. In this chapter I will highlight two crucial moments of interaction between the Ukrainian state and the battalions: their initial mobilization and their integration into the state. I will start by discussing how the volunteer battalions were mobilized, specifically looking at the decrees and instructions by the MoI and MoD. These decrees provided a certain legitimization for many groups to mobilize. I will then further describe the initial starting phase of the battalions by explaining how they were set up and how their relation with the Ukrainian state developed in this initial period between the decrees and their official integration into the state system. Furthermore, I will argue how certain differences and similarities between the battalions were vital in determining if, how and where they would be integrated into the state. Lastly, I will touch upon the discrepancy between the framing of volunteer battalions by commanders and political leaders and the practices by battalions and government forces “on the ground”.

### 5.2.1. Mobilization

When the ATO was launched in Eastern Ukraine, the UAF were far from capable to take on these operations. They were said to have structural problems of ‘insufficient financing, training and equipment’, not only in the UAF but also in ‘the armed units of other ministries and agencies participating the ATO’ (Klein, 2015). Furthermore, ‘[d]isloyal behaviour on the part of some police, armed forces and border guards [...] contributed to the advance of the separatists’ (Klein, 2015). Since ‘most of the departments of the MoI proved inefficient at law enforcement’ (Minakov, 2014) and the police was viewed by the general public as corrupt and oppressive, civic self-defence groups originating from Maidan’s self-defence movement ‘attempted to replace law enforcement networks’ (Minakov, 2014). ‘On the basis of the 1991 law On the Defence of Ukraine, a 2014 presidential Decree on Mobilization, and instructions from the MoI and MoD’ (Klein, 2015), legalized the emergence of volunteer battalions in April/May 2014. ‘On March 11 the militant members of the self-defence hundreds [or *sotnyas*] were incorporated into the National Guard or themselves formed volunteer battalions’ (Minakov, 2014). In 2014 there were ‘approximately 38 volunteer battalions with about 13,500 personnel fighting Russian troops and separatists groups in southeastern Ukraine’ (Minakov, 2014). Thus, by issuing the decree the self-defence movement was again mobilized and legitimized to take action. In this sense, the decrees by the MoI and MoD of Ukraine provided the starting signal for many people to mobilize and form volunteer formations. As argued, these battalions were thus largely based on existing networks of Maidan activists and political organizations.

In this stage of the battalions’ existence there were already varying levels of state – non-state interaction and transactions. Some battalions were strongly connected to either the MoI, specifically Avakov, or the MoD from the beginning, while others were, or at least claimed to be, independently operating movements. An example of a battalion that had been involved with the MoI very early on is the Shakhtarsk battalion. The Shakhtarsk battalion was formed off the base of the Ukraine battalion, which was created by politician Oleg Lyashko.<sup>35</sup> Lyashko was the leader of the Ukrainian Radical Party and seemed to have strong connections with the Minister of Interior, Avakov. A former member of the Shakhtarsk battalion furthermore emphasizes that they had been part of the MoI from the beginning<sup>36</sup> not unlike other smaller battalions mobilized by Avakov.<sup>37</sup> Some interview participants even stated that they already received material support, such as weapons, informally before being officially integrated into the MoI.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Author’s interview with a former member of the Shakhtarsk battalion in Kyiv, on 29 March 2018.

<sup>36</sup> Author’s interview with a former member of the Shakhtarsk battalion in Kyiv, on 29 March 2018.

<sup>37</sup> Author’s interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 27 March 2018

<sup>38</sup> Author’s interview with a former member of the Aidar battalion in Kyiv, on 12 April 2018.

Others, such as of course Right Sector's DUK and the OUN battalion had been relatively independent from the start, at least never officially recognizing any state control or alliances with the Ukrainian government. Despite its official status, some interview participants argued that former Right Sector's leader Yarosh has had strong ties with the Ukrainian government from the beginning of the battalions' existence and coordinated its activities accordingly.<sup>39</sup> Furthermore, territorial defence groups, such as the Donbas battalion, were mainly created by people from Luhansk or Donetsk and only later created stronger ties with the state.<sup>40</sup>

### 5.2.2. Integration

Arguably, the existence of these volunteer battalions posed a certain risk for political stability. 'Because these are autonomous militant groups with weak control from government agencies, there is a probability of these groups challenging both public order and national unity' (Minakov, 2014). In order to tackle this issue, the Ukrainian government attempted to control these newly formed volunteer battalions by 'affiliating them to various institutions' (Minakov, 2014). These institutions resided either under the MoD or the MoI (Puglisi 2015: 4). Most battalions complied with this integration measure. Former battalion members stated that, despite lack of trust in the ruling government, they considered themselves to be loyal to the Ukrainian state as a system.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, many participants expressed that integration into state systems allowed for the (legal) acquisition of weapons, equipment and social services (such as pensions for veterans).<sup>42</sup> Furthermore, some participants stated that they preferred to be integrated into the MoD as opposed to the MoI since this would provide them with heavier weapons.<sup>43</sup> However, reportedly, the social connections of volunteer battalion's commanders often determined in which institutions battalions would be integrated.<sup>44</sup> It's hard to assess whether the Ukrainian government indeed managed to control these battalions by integrating them. At the very least, the integration measure did result in more structure within many battalions. Interview participants spoke of regular checks by state officials, strict hierarchy and orders, and

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<sup>39</sup>Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018; and with a former member of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

<sup>40</sup>Author's interview a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

<sup>41</sup>Author's interviews with former members of the Azov battalion in Kyiv, on 22 March and 10 April 2018; and with a former member of the Aidar battalion in Kyiv, on 12 April 2018.

<sup>42</sup>Author's interview with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018; with a former member of the Aidar battalion in Kyiv, on 12 April 2018; with two former members of the Azov battalion in Kyiv, on 22 March and 10 April 2018; and with a former paramedic of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>43</sup>Author's interview a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018; and with a former member of the Shakhtarsk battalion in Kyiv, on 29 March 2018.

<sup>44</sup>Author's interview a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018; and with a former member of the Shakhtarsk battalion in Kyiv, on 29 March 2018.

overall less autonomy.<sup>45</sup> However, some claim that while there is indeed more structure, battalion members will ultimately remain loyal to their own commanders as opposed to the Ukrainian government.<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, since many battalions were not solely dependent on the Ukrainian government for financial support and equipment, this too limits the government's capability to exert control over them (Minakov, 2014).

The only groups that did not officially integrate into state agencies are DUK, UDA (a splinter group of DUK) and some smaller groups such as the OUN battalion. A former member of the OUN battalion stated that they were prevented from integrating because of ideological or political differences. In the case of Right Sector the reason not to be integrated into state systems seems to be specifically related to their discourse of internal occupation. As discussed before, this idea of the internal occupation was first used during the Yanukovich presidency. However, Right Sector's initial leader Yarosh continued to use this term in relation to Poroshenko's government and claimed that the Ukrainian nation or state was being threatened by a political elite which was 'not part of Ukrainian society'.<sup>47</sup> Right Sector's official website states that, besides the threat of the 'Russian invasion', '[a]nother threat has an internal character' (Offitsyynnyy sajt NVR "Pravyy Sektor", 2018b). They explain: 'The Maidan events haven't brought Ukraine truly Ukrainian leadership, in fact Yanucovich's oligarchic clan has been replaced by another one, leaded by Petro Poroshenko' (Offitsyynnyy sajt NVR "Pravyy Sektor", 2018b). By defining the Ukrainian government as an internal threat, they furthermore legitimize their independence and role as irregular security actor:

Volunteer Ukrainian Corps "The Right Sector" is fighting against the external and internal enemy of the Ukrainian people throughout the territory of Ukraine and beyond. The corps acts exclusively in the system of the National Liberation Movement "Right sector". (Offitsyynnyy sajt NVR "Pravyy Sektor", 2018a; translated through Google Translate)

Statements by former DUK members resonate with this anti-government discourse. For example, some interview participants explicitly stated that they had very little trust in the Ukrainian government.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, others emphasized the relative autonomy maintained by DUK compared to other battalions.<sup>49</sup> Government response to Right Sector included limiting

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<sup>45</sup> Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018; with former members of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 19 and 20 April 2018; and with a former member of the Aidar battalion in Kyiv, on 12 April 2018.

<sup>46</sup> Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 27 March 2018

<sup>47</sup> Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>48</sup> Author's interviews with a former member of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018; and with a former paramedic of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>49</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

their access to the front line and taking military action against its battalion, though the latter reportedly did not turn out to be successful.<sup>50</sup>

While this integration measure arguably brought about more structure and provided certain advantages to volunteer battalions, some practices by both volunteers and regular forces undermined this measure. Though non-integrated groups such as Right Sector officially did not receive any support from the Ukrainian government, former members stated that they nevertheless received support from or cooperated with other battalions and government forces informally.<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, some interview participants claimed that even the unofficial battalions operated in coordination with the government and that their unofficial status has actually been beneficial to the government because they can operate illegally without Ukrainian state officials being directly responsible.<sup>52</sup> Lastly, DUK's former commander Yarosh has, since his split with Right Sector obtained better relations with the current government and has even been appointed military advisor (despite the fact that his new battalion UDA was also not integrated), questioning the claims he made before this split on his independence from Ukrainian state officials.

In this section, I have argued that there are not only varying levels of involvement with the Ukrainian government between battalions, even before their integration, but also how the official connection between the Ukrainian government and the volunteer battalions arguably does not necessarily reflect the reality "on the ground". In addition to this process of integration, another measure was employed by the Ukrainian government in order to limit the battalions' political capital. I will therefore shed some more light on the political alliances enjoyed by the volunteer battalions' leaders and how this has affected their position in the security field.

### *5.3. Politicizing Volunteer Battalions*

In previous sections I have already touched upon the political connections of some volunteer battalions and their commanders. While some enjoyed more informal alliances, others were closely aligned with one particular political party. In the first elections after their mobilization, the battalions served as an important political tool for many political parties. Because of the intensive military developments in 2014 and the great legitimacy enjoyed by volunteer battalions, especially in contrast to most state institutions, many political parties tried to derive political support from their alliance with battalions. Vice versa, many (former) battalion leaders started pursuing a political career in this period of time. However, after these elections, the

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<sup>50</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

<sup>51</sup> All of author's interviews with former battalion members.

<sup>52</sup> Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018; and with a former member of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

Ukrainian government denied former commanders the possibility to maintain their position as commander if they were going to pursue a political career, in order to limit battalions' political capital (Minakov, 2014). The extent to which this has been a successful control measure varies significantly. Therefore I will analyse some of the political links enjoyed by volunteer battalions through the cases of three former commanders: Semen Semenchenko, Dmytro Yarosh and Andriy Biletsky. Do former battalion leaders that have pursued political careers still exert effective control over their battalions or have they indeed parted ways?

### 5.3.1. Political capital

Similarly to the strategies adopted by opposition politicians at Maidan, here too politicians attempted to capitalize on the legitimacy obtained by the volunteer battalions. While some parties were more militarized than others, almost all political parties 'tried to involve commanders of volunteer battalions in their electoral list'<sup>53</sup> during the presidential and parliamentary elections of 2014. Examples include the campaign by Oleg Lyashko, who, as discussed, had been involved in the creation of the Shakhtarsk battalion.<sup>54</sup> However, also the People's Front by prime minister Arsenyuk and block Petro Poroshenko 'tried to invite [battalion members and commanders] to be part of the list and used their image during campaign'.<sup>55</sup>

Furthermore, 'many commanders of volunteer battalions made a very successful attempt to convert [the battalions'] social capital to their political positions'.<sup>56</sup> While it's undeniable that there are some strong links between volunteer battalion commanders and political parties, the extent to which former commanders, that have pursued political careers, continued to be involved with battalions seemed to vary significantly. As a control measure, the Ukrainian government forced politicians to sever all official ties with volunteer battalions. However this has proved to be more effective with some than others (Minakov, 2014). A former Aidar member explained for example how their former commander Melnychuk was prevented from maintaining control over the battalion after joining the Lyashko's Radical Party.<sup>57</sup> To illustrate this phenomenon more in-depth, I will discuss three cases in which volunteer battalions' former commanders have maintained different relations with their battalions: Semen Semenchenko (former commander of the Donbas battalion), Yarosh (former leader of Right Sector and thus DUK), and Andriy Biletsky (former commander of the Azov battalion). The battalions of these

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<sup>53</sup> Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>54</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Aidar battalion in Kyiv, on 12 April 2018.

<sup>55</sup> Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>56</sup> Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>57</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Aidar battalion in Kyiv, on 12 April 2018.

former commanders were some of the biggest and well-known, yet varied in their ideology and connection to the state.

Semen Semenchenko's ties with his former battalion Donbas were somewhat complicated. To understand this, it is important to note that while Semenchenko was originally Donbas' leader, the battalion split up into two separate battalions due to some internal disagreements. Semenchenko was elected into parliament as part of the Samopomich Party in September 2014, which of course meant that he would have to give up effective control of the battalion. Not long after, in January 2015, the battalion split into two parts, with one part still loyal to Semenchenko, and the other, which included a majority of Donbas' members, followed Vyacheslav Vlasenko, who was 'their chief of staff and actual field commander' (Petrov and Ponomarenko, 2017).<sup>58</sup> The latter formed the '46th special force battalion "Donbas-Ukraine" under the command of the Ukrainian Armed Forces' (Petrov and Ponomarenko, 2017) which is controlled by the MoD in contrast to the original Donbas battalion, which remained under the control of the MoI. When asked about the reason of the split, former Donbas members mainly suggested that, especially after the failed battle in Ilovaisk, many Donbas members did not respect Semenchenko (anymore) as a military leader.<sup>59</sup> Being an army veteran, Vlasenko on the other hand had good connections with the MoD and thus was able to create a new battalion within that structure.<sup>60</sup> However, ever since there had been conflicts concerning the use of the battalions' name and symbols (Ponomarenko, 2017).

While Semenchenko arguably has lost most of his ties with his former volunteer battalion, he has been accused of falsely using the Donbas brand name and reputation for his political endeavours, including several political rallies and the private security company he created after the split which supported him in the Donbas blockade (Ponomarenko, 2017).<sup>61</sup> Though the actual Donbas battalion as a whole wasn't involved in this operation, it was often framed as such.<sup>62</sup> Semenchenko thus continued to use Donbas' name in order to legitimize certain practices, though he arguably lost most effective control over the battalion. What furthermore sets Donbas apart from the other two cases I am about to discuss next, is its lack of a strong ideology. Though all volunteer battalions were established on ideas of self-defence and had of course a common goal – to defend Ukraine against separatism and Russian aggression – some were more radical than others in their ideology. Donbas' lack of an ideological movement

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<sup>58</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

<sup>59</sup> Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018; with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 19 April 2018; and with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

<sup>60</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 19 April 2018

<sup>61</sup> Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018; with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 19 April 2018; and with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

<sup>62</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

arguably contributed to its disintegration.<sup>63</sup> In sum, it can be argued that while Semenchenko's ties to Donbas has helped him pursue his political career, he maintained little effective influence over the Donbas battalion.

A battalion that, similarly to Donbas, also became divided is Right Sector's DUK. As one of the most well-known and radical movements, Right Sector functioned as a very strong 'brand' name from its initial mobilization at Maidan. Right Sector had always been relatively radical and threatened to overthrow the current government more than once. However, the DUK battalion was quite chaotic and lacked central coordination.<sup>64</sup> Arguably, Right Sector 'seems to have morphed into a "brand name" that is being used by local groups bereft of ties to the initial alliance that made the label popular (Shekhovtsov and Umland, 2014: 58-60). Furthermore, it can be argued that Right Sector became too radical for Yarosh.<sup>65</sup> As one former member stated: 'He was a [...] moderate leader for a [...] radical movement'<sup>66</sup> In 2016, Yarosh stated that Right Sector had fulfilled its role in the revolution and that it was time to focus on state building 'without radicalism'. (Melkozerova, 2016). He left Right Sector and created a new volunteer battalion named the Volunteer Ukrainian Army (UDA) which included two of the most important sections of DUK and started his political organization DIYA (Governmental Initiative of Yarosh). However, according to some participants, this split hurt both parties.<sup>67</sup> Right Sector lost an important leader and a large part of its volunteer fighters while Yarosh 'lost his brand'.<sup>68</sup> Furthermore, while Yarosh obtained stronger ties with the Ukrainian government after becoming a military advisor to the UAF, his newly formed battalion remained independent. Though this independence was a key factor in its collective action framework, it hindered their economic possibilities (Hofman, 2017a). Yarosh' inability to provide better resources or social rights for UDA members and veterans, despite his position within the state, hurt his legitimacy as a leader.<sup>69</sup> Thus, while Yarosh' split with Right Sector might have improved his connections within certain state agencies, he largely seemed to have lost the support of the broader movement.

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<sup>63</sup> Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018; and with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

<sup>64</sup> Author's interview with a former paramedic of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>65</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

<sup>66</sup> Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>67</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018; and with a former paramedic of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>68</sup> Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.

<sup>69</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018; and with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018.





Figure 3: Photo of Azov's National Militia (The Guardian, 2018).

Out of the three cases discussed, Andriy Biletsky might have been the most successful in pursuing both a political career and maintaining strong relations with his battalion Azov. From the beginning and to some extent even before the Maidan Revolution, Biletsky has had some important connections with state actors, such as Avakov. Furthermore, Biletsky has managed to use his position as former Azov commander quite successfully in his political career. Essentially, Azov has become somewhat of a brand or movement that includes the Azov battalion, Biletsky's political party National Corps, many civil society and youth initiatives and, more recently, the National Militia. The National Militia is a type of unofficial policing squad that was supposedly established to patrol Ukrainian cities because of a lack of police capacity. However, it has mainly been seen as a 'PR move'.<sup>70</sup> Through their symbols, uniforms and strong media presence, they have managed to become one of the most visible movements of its sort. Furthermore, Biletsky is one of the few commanders that, according to many interview participants, has maintained strong influence over his battalion and the movement as a whole.<sup>71</sup>

It must be noted that the popular support for far right parties such as Biletsky's National Corps and Right Sector is still quite marginal. Since the number of potential voters for both Biletsky's National Corps and Right Sector (the political party) have been quite low, they,

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<sup>70</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

<sup>71</sup> Author's interview with a former member of the Donbas battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018; with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018; with a former member of the Aidar battalion in Kyiv, on 12 April 2018; with a former paramedic of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018; and with a former member of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018.

together with far right party Svoboda, have created somewhat of an alliance to improve their chances in the parliamentary and presidential elections of 2019.<sup>72</sup> This alliance has been formalized by the so-called National Manifest the three parties signed in the beginning of 2017.

In sum, the volunteer battalions' high symbolic capital is exemplified in the political campaigns of 2014. Almost all political parties involved battalion commanders in their electoral list and many made use of military symbols. Similarly to the way opposition politicians aligned themselves with the Maidan self-defence groups, politicians tried to gain popular support by attaching themselves to volunteer battalions. This not only provided legitimacy to political actor but also vice versa. Furthermore, several commanders of volunteer battalions attempted to pursue a political career based on their involvement with the battalions. Though commanders of volunteer battalions were forced to officially step down when pursuing a political career, this does not always mean these former commanders lost their connection to the battalion or umbrella movement, as has been mainly exemplified by the case of Azov's Biletsky. In other cases, such as that of Semenchenko, despite the usage of his former battalions' name, there are little effective ties left to the volunteer movement. Lastly, we see a different kind of interaction between state and non-state actors in the case of Yarosh, who perhaps lost his brand but managed to pursue a personal career within the state while also leading a non-integrated battalion. In essence, these examples illustrate the contradicting practices of state actors concerning these non-state security actors by both attempting to limit battalions' political capital but nevertheless allowing for certain alliances between battalions and state actors.

#### *5.4. Conclusion*

In this chapter I have analysed how volunteer battalions were mobilized, sustained and evolved from their roots at Maidan until their integration and politicization. During these years, the volunteer battalions and its surrounding movement have been in continuous negotiation with the Ukrainian state as both security actors and political entities.

First of all, I have argued how during Maidan a discourse emerged which connected historical narratives on the Ukrainian state and its Cossack history with the current crises and the general distrust in state agencies, intensified by the violent confrontation with the Berkut. By attaching themselves to this movement, several political actors benefited from the legitimacy obtained by the self-defence movement at Maidan. Vice versa this attachment to state actors also added to the legitimacy of Maidan's self-defence networks. As discussed in the previous chapter, these networks laid the groundwork for many volunteer battalions to come.

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<sup>72</sup>Author's interview with a Ukrainian sociologist in Kyiv, on 24 April 2018; with a former member of the DUK battalion in Kyiv, on 20 April 2018; and with a Ukrainian Sociologist in Kyiv, on 27 March 2018.

Furthermore, these political links would form an important base of some battalions' social and political capital.

The call for the mobilization of volunteer battalions in April/May 2014 furthermore expressed a certain legitimization of these non-state security actors by the Ukrainian state. However, to gain (more) control over these battalions, the Ukrainian government employed two main control strategies. The first involved the integration of volunteer battalions into state systems. This integration measure was largely dependent on volunteer battalions' mentalities and social capital. For example, Right Sector's anti-government rhetoric and understanding of the Ukrainian state and its threats contributed to their reluctance to integrate. In contrast, other battalions emphasized the economic and social benefits and a general respect to the state as a system. However, while these institutional links with the state were of great political importance and did contribute to battalions' economic and force capital, it did not always represent the reality "on the ground" as battalions – both regular and irregular – and the UAF would interact and exchange resources continuously.

The second control measure imposed by the Ukrainian government involved the limitation of the battalions' political capital. Similarly to the politicization of the Maidan movement, the volunteer battalions' "success story" had initially been capitalized by many political actors in the political campaigns of 2014. However, since many volunteer battalions established strong political links, the Ukrainian government then attempted to separate political actors from security actors. Though this has seemingly been successful with most former commanders, Andriy Biletsky managed to build a political movement on the basis of his battalion and continues to exert influence over both his political party and the Azov movement as a whole. In other cases, such as those of Semenchenko and Yarosh, we see other forms of interaction between state agencies or political entities and the volunteer battalions.

Throughout these different phases – the Maidan Revolution, the volunteer battalions' mobilization and integration, and their involvement with politics – it has become clear that through alternating allowance and limitations of certain types of capital, the volunteer battalions and several state agencies have struggled to obtain and maintain a position of power in both the security field and the political arena.

## 6. CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis I conducted a thorough analysis of the volunteer battalions and their interaction with the Ukrainian state. Because of the contested nature of the relation between volunteer battalions and the Ukrainian state, I aimed to answer the question: How has the volunteer battalions' position within Ukraine's security field shaped the images and practices of the Ukrainian state in the context of the conflict in Donbas from its start in 2014? To understand this state/non-state relation properly, I have made use of network analysis as my main analytical frame whilst also drawing upon insights from other theoretical debates. In this final discussion I will once again go back to these four theoretical debates and reflect on what they can tell us about volunteer battalions in Ukraine specifically and understandings about state/non-state relations more broadly.

However, before I articulate my final findings, some words should be spent on both the limitations and the relevance of this thesis. Besides some of the methodological limitations already discussed in my methodology chapter, it is important to identify several elements that are also of great importance but have not been discussed (in-depth) in this thesis. One of which concerns the influence of oligarchs in Ukraine. While I have mentioned the role oligarchs played in financing volunteer battalions and the state in general, this element of Ukrainian society and politics have not been the focus of my research. Nevertheless, they do affect Ukrainian society significantly and more academic attention to these actors could complement research on the Ukrainian state. Furthermore, while I have attempted to outline some of the relevant strategic alliances between political organizations and individuals, this is of course far more complex and includes many more significant actors than I have had the time or space to discuss. Nevertheless, my research has contributed, not only to the academic material on this specific case, but also to an academic debate concerning the influence of non-state actors in times of political instability.

As discussed, this contribution is shaped by the acknowledgement of several theoretical debates. The first theoretical debate attempts to explain militia-state interactions through an epistemologically positivist approach. As discussed, several authors have identified types of pro-government militias and their expected risks to governments and societies. Carey and Mitchell stated for instance that certain membership characteristics posed more risks to governments than others. For example, members of ethnoreligious and political militias were expected to value loyalty to their own commanders over the stability of the state. The Ukrainian volunteer battalions with strong political ideologies have indeed been able to establish broader movements that surpass the battalion as a security actor and several battalions have managed to maintain strong ties with political actors. However, even between battalions with similar

ideologies there are significant differences in the way they position themselves within and towards the state. This is exemplified in the way that Azov and Right Sector both opposed the Poroshenko government but positioned themselves differently within the state as a system. From a government perspective, Staniland established a model that would explain government strategies towards militias. While his findings on collusion and incorporation may corroborate with some of the practices of the Ukrainian government, it has become evident that the government has adopted more than one strategy to deal with the volunteer battalions. Furthermore, Staniland's model does not allow for an analysis of how government strategies change over time and how different state actors may employ varying or even contradicting strategies towards these battalions. In general, the typologies identified by several authors do not account for the diversity of actors found in the Ukrainian case.

In an attempt to overcome these limitations, I have argued how network analysis could function as an effective tool to study practices by volunteer battalions and their interaction with state actors. I have made use of this analytical frame by focussing on how types of capital affect positions of dominance within the security field. By doing so, I have gathered that the volunteer battalions were largely dependent on their social capital, which included their links with Maidan networks, civil society, and political and state actors. Their ability to mobilize quickly, through informal support and recruitment strategies, allowed them to act relatively quickly and effectively in contrast to Ukraine's regular army. The popular support gained from this quick military response also stimulated a politicization of the movement. By attaching themselves to the volunteer movement, politicians not only legitimized the battalions as security actors but also attempted to derive legitimacy from their symbolic capital in eyes of society. In turn, however, the Ukrainian government has attempted to limit their influence by controlling their force capital, limiting their political capital and establishing institutional bonds between the state and the battalions.

The findings derived through network analysis provide for a solid general understanding of concrete dynamics between specific state actors and volunteer battalions. However, what it lacks are tools to analyse how this has affected understandings of security and the state on a more abstract level. This is where a third theoretical debate comes in. It has become evident that many volunteer battalions have fulfilled a function that surpasses the idea of a passive securitization tool. Rather, some volunteer battalions, and their core networks originating from Maidan, have operated as securitizing actors themselves. During the Maidan Revolution the Yanukovich government and several state agencies have been redefined as a threat to the Ukrainian nation or even state. This threat design not only allowed for the ousting of president Yanukovich but also for the legitimate mobilization of non-state security actors to deal with

internal and external threats. The attachment of opposition politicians to this movement and legitimization of their discourse resulted in an internal contestation on threat design and threat management. In terms of threat design, some volunteer battalions and the political entities attached to them continued to define the Poroshenko government as an internal threat as well. Furthermore, in some instances volunteer battalions or individuals related to these groups have undermined Poroshenko's policy towards the conflict in Donbas, as was the case with the Donbas blockade, contesting threat management in addition to threat design.

As discussed the volunteer battalions initially mainly functioned as (non-)state actors within the security field. To analyse their position in this field, I have used concepts and understandings from network analysis and securitization theory. Through this analysis, however, it became clear that the battalions, the organizations they're embedded in and their commanders also interacted within other realms of the state, such as its parliament, and have made implicit and explicit claims concerning the image of the state as a whole. With the term image I refer to the definition Migdal uses for his state-in-society approach. Migdal's approach has informed crucial understandings of the state which have shaped this thesis in a fundamental way. Furthermore, following his understanding of the state, I have come to several conclusions on how the use of volunteer battalions have played a key role in the renegotiation of the Ukrainian state as a whole.

While the political unrest in Ukraine of course finds its roots further back in history than the Maidan Revolution, the political crises in 2013-2014 do mark an important turning point in Ukrainian history. Since the Maidan Revolution, the annexation of Crimea and the conflict in Donbas, the Ukrainian state has been under continuous renegotiation. During these crises several key understandings about the state have been contested and redefined: Who constitutes the Ukrainian state? Who threatens it? And who should protect it? As explained above, the self-defence discourse established at Maidan and continued through the use of volunteer battalions provided a framework in which the Ukrainian government was, at the very least, incapable of defending the Ukrainian state or, at its worst, an internal threat. In contrast, non-state actors were considered to be the defenders of the state. However, what does this tell us about the condition of the Ukrainian state as a whole? I argue that, essentially, by continuing this trend through the legitimized mobilization of volunteer battalions in military operations in Donbas, the divide between the state as a unified body and non-state actors has become more and more blurred. In an effort to re-establish this image of a unified and defined state, the Ukrainian government executed two control measures aimed at limiting the political capital enjoyed by the battalions. Considering the fact that most battalions were indeed integrated into state systems and former commanders have had to give up their position in the battalion if they

wanted to pursue a political career, these measures could be considered as relatively effective. However, the government's inability to integrate all groups, the support enjoyed by battalions from civil society and oligarchs, and some politicians' continued strong ties with their former battalion and its overlapping movement, speaks otherwise. In essence, the Ukrainian state has become more negotiated in the sense that it has had to redefine its position within society and adjust its state/non-state boundaries. This negotiation perhaps is not that of a state/non-state dispute but rather a symptom of divisions within the state. The different interests and strategies adopted by competing state actors perhaps poses more risks to the stability of the state as a system than the mobilization of volunteer battalions does. These findings thus argue for a shift of analytical focus from the involvement of non-state actors in security matters to the internal functioning of states themselves.

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Figure 2: Photo taken by author in Kyiv, on 24 March 2018.

Figure 3: *The Guardian (2018). National Militia members include veterans of Ukraine's four-year war against Russian-led separatists. Photograph: Pierre Crom/Getty Images.* [image] Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/13/ukraine-far-right-national-militia-takes-law-into-own-hands-neo-nazi-links> [Accessed 2 Aug. 2018].