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Pro-government anti-government armed groups?

Toward theorizing pro-government "government challengers"

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Abstract: This study challenges the presentation of non-state armed groups as divided into anti-government rebels and pro-government proxies and proposes that some pro-government armed groups maintain explicit anti-government rhetoric. It is this anti-government agenda that enables "pro-government" groups to successfully recruit their members and to advance their interests. From Iraq's Shiite militias to Lebanon's Hezbollah and Afghan Uzbek warlords, there are numerous armed groups which, on the one hand, officially maintain pro-government stance and, on the other hand, explicitly criticize, oppose and challenge the state. On theoretical level, this study seeks to demonstrate that a "pro-government anti-government" group is a distinct category of non-state armed groups that neither directly engages in armed confrontation with the state nor complies with its agenda, policies or fully accepts its legitimacy. On empirical level, this paper explores why individuals mobilize for pro-government anti-government armed groups. Unique micro-level interview data with members of volunteer militia battalions in Ukraine is employed to provide insights into the functioning of pro-government anti-government militants. Drawing upon its empirical findings, this study proposes that pro-government "government challengers" emerge and persist because these groups are more efficient than the government in the provision of security and in promoting the incumbent's ideology.

Introduction

The existing theories of armed groups tend to differentiate between anti-government rebels, pro-government militias, or paramilitaries, and warlords.[1] Other armed actors involved in intrastate conflicts are described in the literature as criminal gangs,[2] armed wings of political parties,[3] and civilian self-defense or vigilante groups.[4] All of these armed actors are commonly divided into pro- or anti-government camps. Scholars provide evidence of anti-government rebels switching their allegiances and joining the state, and pro-government militias transforming into criminal gangs, or defecting to the rebel side.[5] There is also no deficit in research on political opposition groups,[6] their participation in anti-government coups, or their development into armed anti-government groups.[7] However, few efforts were made to explore whether armed groups explicitly aligned with either government or rebels are uniform in their commitments. Are all pro-government armed groups loyal to their state patrons? The very term "pro-government" seems to provide an answer to the above question. Yet, not all armed groups described as "pro-government" in reality support the government that they are aligned with. Iraq's Popular Mobilization Forces PMF (*al-hash al-sha'abi*) – an umbrella group of over 50 Shiite pro-government militias – is one of the examples of a pro-government group that criticizes, challenges and disregards the state. Not only the PMF militias contest the state's monopoly on violence, but also their leaders engage in public critique of the Iraqi government, challenging its legitimacy and defying its underlying principles. Lebanon's Hezbollah, Libya's post-Gaddafi revolutionary "Brigades", Yemen's Sunni Popular Committees, CAR's Seleka, Iraq's Peshmerga, Somalia's Somali National Front, and Georgia's Mkhedrioni are among other examples of pro-government "government challengers." These and other similar groups, notwithstanding their differences, share three major characteristics: **(1)** they function as pro-government groups, some of them even with

an official status within government security forces, yet **(2)** they criticize, challenge and delegitimize the government through open statements, ideological radicalism, as well as by compromising government security, credibility and the strength of its institutions, but **(3)** without openly engaging in military confrontation with the government. For the purpose of this study, such groups are defined as pro-government "government challengers."

"Government challengers" are organized armed groups formally aligned with the government, and, which often share similar ideology and objectives with the incumbent. Most, but not all, "government challenger" groups emerge in response to intrastate armed conflict or political violence. Much in contrast to typical pro-government militias (PGMs),[8] depicted in the literature as pro-government enforcers, government challengers are not always created or fully controlled by governments. Instead, the challenger groups often appear bottom-up. They are funded and armed independently, and they only accept nominal control of the incumbent.

This study pursues two main theoretical objectives. *Firstly*, it seeks to theorize "government challengers" as a distinct category of armed groups that stands apart from other types of pro-government armed actors as their alliance with the government is coupled with their deliberate efforts to undermine and weaken the government. *Secondly*, this paper explains the emergence, persistence and survival of government challengers as due to their ability to function as better and more efficient security providers than the incumbent. These groups are also more effective and successful at promoting and protecting the government's ideology, which in many cases, is also the ideology of their own ethnic or sectarian group.

Empirically, this study draws on unique qualitative interview data with former and active members of pro-government militia groups in Ukraine. In-depth semi-structured interviews with individuals who volunteered to serve in pro-government battalions during the East Ukraine conflict (2014-15) provide unprecedented micro-level insights into the functioning

of "government challenger" armed groups. The empirical findings reveal that members of Ukraine's volunteer battalions exhibit deep-seated distrust of the incumbent fused with confidence that their armed groups are far more efficient defenders of the Ukrainian nation and state. These causes emerged as fundamental in their decisions to mobilize into militia battalions rather than joining the army or other state security forces.

Introducing pro-government "government challengers"

The bulk of research on pro-government groups is dominated by the delegation of violence and principal-agent paradigms, which assume almost by default that pro-government armed groups are assembled, armed, financed and controlled by governments, which rely on these groups to avoid accountability for civilian persecution, human rights violations, and to conduct counterinsurgency.[9] It is almost taken for granted in the extant literature on pro-government armed groups that these groups are nothing more than the tools employed by governments to achieve their objectives. Although goal conflict between principal and agent is central to the theory, agent is never expected to challenge and undermine the principal. A growing body of literature that examines relationship between the state-sponsors and pro-government armed organizations has often portrayed such a relationship as incrementally vertical in favor of the state.[10] Although scholars tend to agree that some pro-government "organizations may form independently",[11] the role of the state in funding and supporting these groups is still presented as essential and indispensable.[12] The armed groups' loyalty to the state and their relationship with incumbent were proposed as crucial elements defining the existence of pro-government groups.[13] For instance, Mitchell et al.[14] argued that they "expect that informal groups with no formal or official link to the government will have greater recruitment and operational discretion and less monitoring." This statement suggests that the

greater is the distance from the state – defined by the existence, or the lack thereof, of official status or state's acknowledgment of the group – the higher is the likelihood of a pro-government group to become rogue. While some studies mentioned that pro-government armed groups may have divergent agendas with incumbent,[15] independence of pro-government groups is considered relative and conditional. Empirical examples from Colombia, Peru, Turkey, Iraq and former Yugoslavia[16] provide further evidence to support the argument that the government's control over its proxies is firm, and that the government can decide to demobilize or outlaw those pro-government groups which have fulfilled their purpose, or simply fell out of favor. Indeed the case of Colombia's AUC paramilitaries, detailed by Mazzei,[17] demonstrates how the incumbents dissolve unwanted pro-government groups.

That said, there were few efforts to demonstrate that not all pro-government armed groups are controlled and sponsored by the state, and that the presence of an official status or explicit links to government may not be decisive at all when it comes to the armed group's loyalty and compliance with the government.[18] This article argues that, much in contrast to the existing theory of pro-government groups, the closer the group is to the government, more likely it is to challenge its state patrons. Embeddedness in official structures and proximity to the state will provide an armed group with further legitimacy and opportunity to challenge the government. The armed group's strength vis-à-vis the government and its embeddedness into the state apparatus, which may exist through an official status or through the group's representation in executive or legislative branches, are quintessential preconditions for the emergence of "government challengers."[19] In contrast to principal-agent framework that has been used extensively in recent studies on pro-government groups and, which posits that the relationship between government and a pro-government armed group is always vertical,[20] the "government challengers' " relationship with the state is based on their

capacity to yield either military or political strength that they can employ as leverage. The strength of challenger armed groups may not only derive from their military capacity, which was the case with Iraq's Peshmerga, Lebanese Hezbollah, Rwandan Interahamwe, and numerous other "government challengers," but also from their ability to garner popular support of a titular ethnic or sectarian group, political elites, clans or tribes, and other local or foreign power centers. The examples of Iraqi Shiite PMF, which include numerous Iranian-supported militias, or the Yemeni Saudi-backed Sunni Popular Committees, illustrate that "government challengers" may also draw their support from abroad. Nevertheless, the challenger groups are primarily local actors, which gain their legitimacy through ethnic, tribal or sectarian ties with the local population.

The emergence of "government challengers" may either be directly associated with the government or may occur independently of the government's actions. Iraqi PMF were partly assembled from previously existing militias, and partly mobilized following the calls for arms from the prominent Shiite clerics. Ukraine's volunteer battalions were assembled following the call from the government, but many were created by non-state actors, including oligarchs.[21] Even those "government challenger" groups which were created by the incumbent, or which emerge as offshoots of a ruling political party, tend to become more autonomous in terms of decision-making, regardless of their official status, as was the case with the Rwandan Iterahamwe. Instead of integrating challenger armed groups into the state, embeddedness in security structures enables these groups to expand and grow stronger. Thus, the appointment of the Azerbaijani pro-government warlord, Surret Huseynov, as the Minister of Defense enabled him to increase the numbers of his militias and to acquire more sophisticated weapons. In the same vein, integration of Badr brigades in Iraq into the Ministry of Interior resulted in Badr fighters taking control over the federal police.[22] The

inclusion of PMF into the National Security Council of Iraq allowed their leaders to campaign against the merger with formal security forces.[23]

The rise to prominence of "government challengers" is irrevocably associated with an intrastate armed conflict. Similarly to many other armed groups, "government challengers" are by-products of civil wars or political violence. For many challenger groups, civil violence provided critical opportunities to recruit combatants, access funding and take control over territory. Unlike anti-government rebels, pro-government groups do not always emerge at the immediate onset or during the armed conflict. Some "government challengers" may exist prior to the conflict, or they might be remnants of armed groups from preceding conflicts, as is the case with the Iraqi PMF and Kurdish Peshmerga. Nevertheless, it is the rise of rebels and the significance of an existential threat that they pose to the government that often boosts the emergence and consolidation of challenger groups. The presence of powerful rebel organizations, such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Levant (ISIL) in Syria, Iraq and Libya, pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine, Abkhaz rebels in Georgia, Houthis in Yemen, al-Shabaab in Somalia, justified the emergence of powerful pro-government groups capable to protect the incumbent and its ideology from the rebels. Ironically, it is the monopoly of violence, access to resources and popular support of "government-protectors" that also enable these armed groups to position themselves as "government challengers".

Another major difference between the "government challengers" theory and the principal-agent framework is that proximity to government instead of legitimizing and institutionalizing an armed group, as assumed by scholars of the principal-agent school,[24] increases its "challenger" opportunities by enabling it to channel resources and popular support away from the incumbent. For example, the embeddedness of Iraqi PMF into Nouri al-Maliki's government, cemented among other things by the PMF's legislative representation, enabled Shiite militias to draw funds from the state budget and to use state

infrastructure toward their own goals.[25] In a similar vein, Congolese Ninja militias capitalized on their close relationship with President Pascal Lissouba to gain popular support from Bakongo ethnicity. Hence, many "government challengers" gain access to state resources not through sponsorship-type of relationships, typically envisioned by the principal-agent paradigm,[26] but through their position of power which enables them to draw from the incumbent's resources.[27] Notwithstanding their capacity to access state funds through representation in executive and legislative offices, "government challengers" are often self-sufficient. Thus, the Iraqi Peace Companies (formerly the Mahdi Army) are known to fund their activity, apart from the Iranian support and the government funds, from private donations and local taxation.[28] In fact, the "government challengers'" ability to raise their own funds is fundamental toward their ability to challenge the government. Unlike many typical pro-government armed groups, such as Colombia's right-wing AUC paramilitaries, Northern Ireland's UVF or Syrian Shabihha, which were known to supplement the state funding with criminal activities, "government challengers" often seek to channel their income from somewhat "cleaner" sources, such as the protection of businesses and individuals, taxes, tariffs, donations, post-conflict reconstruction, and investments in lucrative businesses.

How do the "government challengers" actually challenge governments? Most "government challengers" rely on both "soft" and "hard" forms of challenge. The "soft" approach to government challenging is engendered in criticism and accusations in weakness, corruption, nepotism, inaction, promotion of foreign interests and authoritarianism. This form of challenge was widely practiced by the Iraqi PMF, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Uzbek and Tajik militias in Afghanistan, and many others.[29] Portraying the government in a negative light could be employed by the challenger groups to compete during electoral processes, or to recruit new members. Criticizing the incumbent may attract those segments of the population that are disillusioned by the government, but remain unwilling to support the rebels. The

"soft" challenge strategy will also enable pro-government armed groups to construct the image of "watchdogs", providing checks and balances and keeping the incumbent accountable to the population. Accusing the incumbent of corruption, malpractices and abuse of power has been an oft-tested electoral practice employed by leaders of "government challenger" groups running for political offices.[30] More recently, a broad-ranging critique of government has been a major electoral campaign strategy by the leaders of Iraqi Shiite paramilitaries, including the powerful Shia cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr.[31] A similar strategy had been employed by Abdul Rashid Dostum in Afghanistan, and the leader of Georgian Mkhedrioni ("Horsemen") paramilitaries, Jaba Ioseliani.

The "hard" approach is based on interfering with the rule of law, obstructing workings of government institutions, officials, and seizing physical control over government facilities, territory or property. Bearing in mind that many "government challengers" are embedded in government structures, their use of hard challenging strategy may be disguised or excused by their official status and the access to power. In some cases, challengers use "hard" tactics to secure more power and influence, which is done through intimidation of government officials, judges, politicians and other government employees. In other cases, "hard" challenging is used to achieve more practical goals, including accessing material resources, seizing territory or protecting their own assets and people. Imposing taxes on population, tariffs on trade, employing physical threats, blackmailing and seizing assets from the population are other forms of "hard" challenge. Most "government challengers" have used such "hard" tactics as taxes, tariffs, protection and intimidation alongside "soft" strategies. Among others, the Iraqi PMF militias, Libya's "revolutionary" brigades, Somalia's warlord militias, Sudan's Janjaweed, Lebanon's Hezbollah are notorious for taking physical control over territories irrespectively of the incumbent's approval. Notwithstanding the use of "hard" tactics, few "government challengers" dare to military oppose the government should it ever

decide to use force against armed groups. For example, Muqtada al-Sadr ordered his Mahdi Army to stand down when Iraqi troops launched military crackdown on Shiite militias in May 2008.

By contrast to pro-government actors theorized by the principal-agent framework, "government challengers" seize government's monopoly on violence at will, rather than temporarily receiving such a prerogative from the incumbent. Even in situations when incumbents allocate more power and monopoly on violence to "government challengers" in order to deploy them against anti-government rebels, as was the case with the Iraqi government relying on PMF in their fight against ISIL, few governments are able to re-take their monopoly back. More often, "government challengers" simply seize the monopoly on violence from incumbents without consenting or consulting the government. Some "government challengers" proceed as far as declaring wars and attacking their enemies or even other sovereign states with little concern for the incumbent. Thus, Hezbollah engaged in the 2006 July War with Israel without considering the position of Lebanese government, and the Chechen warlord Shamil Basayev launched the invasion of Russia's republic of Dagestan in 1999 without even consulting the then-president of Chechnya, Aslan Maskhadov.

Why do pro-government armed groups become "government challengers"? To start with, "government challengers," above all, position themselves as aligned with the incumbent. They share similar ideology, objectives and are similarly opposed to anti-government rebels. The key objective of many challenger groups is to protect the incumbent, along with its ideology and political order, from succumbing to rebels. Often the very survival of "government challengers" depends on the survival of government. Notwithstanding all of the above, "government challengers" define themselves as incrementally autonomous (albeit not in opposition to) from the incumbent. Some challenger groups pursue political objectives in challenging the incumbent, such as running for political offices, competing for ministerial

positions or legislative seats. Others seek socio-economic benefits, which include land control and land rights, access to financial resources or control over natural resources. Although most "government challengers" do not pursue overthrowing the incumbent and replacing the government with their own leaders, they are keen to utilize their strength to obtain various benefits from the incumbent. For many political opposition parties and groups, access to political offices, financial assets, territorial control, and popular ethno-sectarian support could be secured without directly challenging the government. However, the position of power that "government challengers" tend to enjoy provides them with increased opportunities to access the resources without dependence on the incumbent and without the need to remain accountable. Bearing in mind that most "government challengers" exist and thrive in non-democratic or semi-democratic political contexts, relationship between control over the monopoly of violence and political contestation or access to financial resources become intertwined.[32]

Much of the above discussion suggests that state weakness or failure are quintessential conditions in order for "government challengers" to emerge and flourish. Indeed, most of challenger groups exist and thrive in the context of failed or weak states, where poor governance, systemic corruption and inefficient state institutions, in conjunction with ongoing insurgency, cripple the government. Despite close connections between state failure or weakness and the emergence of "government challengers", not all failed or weak states with ongoing civil wars are hosting challenger armed groups. Similarly not all challenger groups emerge in the context of poor governance and the lack of efficient state institutions. The presence of weak incumbents burdened by civil wars and unable to reign in pro-government armed groups is clearly just one of the preconditions for the existence of "government challengers." While structural factors, such as weak or failed governments, poor economy and the presence of armed violence, lay out the necessary foundations for the

emergence and persistence of "government challengers," there are also other causes behind the rise of challenger armed groups that are far less notable. This raises a question of how do pro-government armed groups manage to become "government challengers"? What drives individuals to mobilize for "government challenger" groups? In fact, little is known as to why people enlist in pro-government armed groups, when they may join formal security forces instead. As observed by Carey and Mitchell,[33] "we know little about what motivates anyone to join a PGM [pro-government militia]." This study posits that "government challenger" groups succeed at contesting the government, galvanizing popular support and recruiting their members because (1) they are more efficient security providers than the incumbent, and (2) they are more successful than the government at promoting and protecting the incumbent's ideology.

Superior security providers

Since most "government challengers" are borne out of the government's inability to tackle political crisis and insurgency, security provision becomes a major occupation for the pro-government armed groups. Many "government challengers" emerge as self-defense forces, assembled to protect the population from rebels. The rise of ISIL was the key reason behind the mobilization of Shiite PMFs in Iraq. Unlike typical pro-government enforcers, or civilian self-defense units,[34] challenger groups are deployed in counterinsurgency not because they perform "dirty jobs", but because they emerge as more efficient security providers than the formal security forces. Although few "government challengers" manage to gain access to sophisticated weapons, they commonly have at their disposal heavy artillery, tanks and armored vehicles. When it comes to small arms and artillery, challenger groups are often far better supplied that the incumbent's armed forces.[35] The "government challengers'"

reputation on the battlefield is crucial toward their success as government opponents. Where they lack in weapons and training, these armed groups supplement with motivation and popular support. For example, the Shiite PMF were used as the key Iraqi counterinsurgency forces throughout the entire campaign against ISIL not necessarily due to their superiority in weapons or training, but due to their high levels of preparedness and motivation.[36]

In contrast to conscript- or mercenary-staffed government's forces, challenger groups tend to rely on population for voluntary recruitment. This means that their effectiveness as security providers to the population – and particularly to pro-government ethnic or sectarian groups – is the main guarantee of their ability to recruit committed members. Volunteers are drawn into challenger groups due to their reputation of trustworthy security providers, which enables these groups to mobilize large numbers of motivated and committed to the group's cause recruits.[37] Ethno-sectarian embeddedness is another factor contributing toward both the challenger groups' pressure to provide security to their co-ethnics and to their capacity to recruit. The "people's army" image that many challenger groups maintain is often sustained by accusing the government security officials of corruption and malpractice. As long as the regular security forces are popularly perceived as corrupt and inefficient, challenger groups enjoy the opportunity to attract the best recruits and even to encourage active government security personnel to join their ranks. For example, hundreds of the former Ba'ath regime Shiite military personnel in Iraq joined the Shiite militias instead of re-enlisting into the Iraqi security forces.[38] Similar processes occured in Sudan, Yemen and Ukraine.

The image of efficient security providers is closely associated with the access to material resources. Presenting themselves as guarantors of security, "government challengers" attract investment from population (often in form of taxes), businesses, Diasporas and even foreign actors. Protection of businesses and communities enables challenger groups to tax them, or to engage in popular fundraising campaigns.[39] Along with various opportunities to raise

revenues domestically, challenger groups may be seen by foreign governments and international organizations as relatively independent and powerful stake-holders. Thus, the Iraqi Shiite PMF, similarly to Lebanon's Hezbollah, receives funds from Iran. Saudi financing of Yemen's Popular Committees and Sudan's financial support for Libya's armed groups are other examples of the "government challengers" attractiveness for foreign governments.[40] Financial security that challenger groups achieve owing to their status, allows them to purchase better weapons and, often through corruption, achieve more benefits from governments.

Defenders of ideology

Along with their status of security providers, "government challengers" also succeed in contesting governments due to their capacity to promote and protect the incumbent's ideology, which, in many cases, also resonates with the ideology of a major pro-government ethno-sectarian group. The role of ideology becomes particularly salient if the intrastate conflict is centered on ideological grievances. It is not uncommon for the challenger groups to adopt more orthodox or traditionalist brands of state's ideology that would enable them to distinguish themselves from the government. The Serb "Arkan's Tigers" and "White Eagles" promoted the image of the defenders of Christian Orthodox faith. Iraq's PMF and the Mahdi Army, along with Lebanon's Hezbollah, position themselves as protectors of Shiite holy sites. Libya's Zintan brigades continuously present themselves as defenders of anti-Gaddafi revolution. Although very often "government challengers" share the same ideology with the government, it is crucial for the challenger groups to represent the purist form of the same ideology. Thus, legitimizing their ideological stance is crucial for the "government challengers." For example, the Iraqi PMF have drawn their legitimacy of ideological

protectors from Shiite clerics, and Sierra Leone's Kamajors relied on tribal shamans to emphasize their connections with ethnic Mende values.

Adopting the image of ideological defenders enables challenger groups to strengthen their position vis-à-vis the incumbent by indicating that their armed groups embody ethno-nationalist or sectarian values. It is in their capacity of ideology defenders that challengers can succeed in securing access to material resources, which often remain beyond the reach of other armed groups, or political parties. As ideological protectors, "government challengers" have higher chances of receiving private donations, collecting religious taxes, and working with Diasporas. The ideology-defenders' role also serves as an insurance against incumbent's possible efforts to dismantle the armed group. For instance, the Iraqi government's efforts to dissolve the Mahdi Army in 2008 resulted in popular discontent among Shia population, that has swollen the ranks of al-Sadr's supporters and prevented security forces from arresting the group's leadership.[41] Similar benefits were enjoyed by the Serb right-wing paramilitary groups, which managed to avoid demobilization until the collapse of Milosevic's regime by harnessing their image of the defenders of Serb nationalist values.

"Government challengers" have even more opportunities to present themselves as ideology defenders when the ethno-sectarian group that provides the majority of recruits for a challenger group adheres to ideology that differs from the one supported by the incumbent. Although such cases are uncommon, ideological differences allow the challengers to monopolize ethno-sectarian mobilization in their favor. The cases of Kurdish Peshmerga in Iraq, Lebanon's Hezbollah and Afghan Uzbek and Tajik warlords demonstrate that ideological disparities with the government strengthen the "government challengers'" position of sole or unchallenged ideological protectors of their ethno-sectarian group. On the eve of the 1982 Lebanon War, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), as the defender of nationalist ideology, enjoyed widespread support among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

Regardless of ideological differences, military strength of a challenger group and its support among one of the major ethno-sectarian groups in the country are likely to prevent incumbents engaged in a civil war, or in confrontation with a neighboring state, from countering the "government challengers."

Research Design

This study draws its empirical insights from 92 in-depth face-to-face interviews with former and active members of Ukraine's pro-government volunteer battalions (n=76), employees of volunteer recruitment centers (n=9), and civil society groups affiliated with volunteer battalions (n=7). All interviews were conducted in Kyiv and Dnipro between July 2015 and October 2017. The informants pool consists of members of "Azov" (n=11), "Donbas" (n=15), "Aydar" (n=7), "Sich" (n=9), "Dnipro-1" (n=16), "Volunteer Corps of Ukraine (DUK)" (n=6) battalions, as well as Kyiv Territorial Defense (n=9) and Ternopil Territorial Defense (n=3) battalions. The sample includes 47 demobilized and 29 active members of armed groups. To ensure sample randomness, no more than two informants belonging to the same platoon were selected. With regards to military ranks, 1 battalion commander (*kombat*), 7 platoon commanders, 5 lieutenants, and 8 mid-ranking officers were interviewed. The rest of the sample consists of soldier rank combatants. Each interviewee was selected as based on his/her service in a pro-Kyiv volunteer battalion for at least 30 consecutive days. With the exception of two females, all other informants were males aged between 17 and 45 years. Less than half of participants (n=32) were university educated and some (n=9) completed professional education. In terms of geographical origins, 41 respondents identified themselves as natives of eastern regions of Ukraine, 23 were from central regions, and 12 from the western part. Over 60% of informants were recruited through 5 volunteer

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recruitment centers in Kyiv and 3 similar centers in Dnipro. Additional contacts were obtained through the All-Ukraine Union of ATO(anti-terrorism operation) veterans, Ukraine's Ministry of Interior, National Guard Press Service, as well as from the battalions' press services.

All interviews with members of volunteer battalions were semi-structured and lasted between 20 minutes and two hours. Informants were asked to express their views about the Ukrainian government, their perceptions of the situation in their country, their opinions about their battalion, and reasons for mobilizing. Interviews were conducted in Russian and Ukrainian languages. Due to security concerns, digital recording of interviews was not possible, and interview transcripts were recorded in form of field notes. The interview data was coded as narrative analysis. Since all interviews were conducted under the condition of strict anonymity, the interviewees' names/identifiers were replaced by code names.

A group of employees (n=9) from 3 volunteer recruitment centers in Kyiv and 2 in Dnipro were interviewed because all of these centers are to various degrees associated with volunteer battalions in terms of their funding sources and organizational links. Out of 9 informants from this category, 6 were former members of the battalions for which they recruited. Since these organizations are registered as civil society groups and they actively engage in public awareness raising activities and fundraising for the battalions, they represent a link between armed groups and the population. Additionally, representatives of 4 battalion-affiliated civil society groups – which insisted that their groups are not named in publications – were interviewed. Similarly to volunteer recruitment centers, these civil groups function as the battalions' links to the public. Their status of civil society organizations is often employed by the armed groups to channel funding from donors and the government, and to advocate the battalions' ideology.

The making of Ukraine's "government challengers"

The annexation of Crimea by Russia and the start of pro-Russian rebellion in the Eastern Ukrainian region of Donbas in March 2014 signaled the emergence of volunteer battalions across Ukraine. Although most battalions were assembled from scratch following the decree on mobilization of the Territorial Defense Battalions (*Bataliony Territorialnoi Oborony*) on March 17th by the acting President Oleksandr Turchinov, some – particularly "Azov", DUK and the OUN (Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists) battalions – were created on the basis of previously existent ultranationalist or neo-Nazi groups. By the start of Anti-Terrorism Operation (ATO), approximately 30 volunteer battalions were active in Ukraine. While some volunteer battalions only consisted of less than 100 combatants, others succeeded in recruiting thousands of fighters. The volunteer battalions were created and funded by private individuals rather than the government. For example, "Dnipro-1" battalion was assembled and financed by the notorious Ukrainian-Jewish oligarch, Ihor Kolomoisky. Both "Azov" and the DUK battalions allegedly received funding from Kolomoisky and another famous oligarch, Rinat Akhmetov. However, to gain access to ATO areas in Donbas, battalions often had to cooperate with the Army and the National Guard. With the exception of the DUK and OUN battalions, which fiercely resisted legalization, other volunteer armed groups were keen to obtain formal status of "special purpose" regiments within either Ministry of Interior or the National Guard. By the mid-2015, the bulk of volunteer battalions were formally incorporated into various parts of the Ukraine's security forces. Notwithstanding legalization, many larger battalions, including "Azov", "Donbas", and "Dnipro-1," retained their independence from the state, maintaining their own sources of funding and independent operational structure. The battalions' independence from the incumbent was further strengthened after several prominent battalion commanders and founders were elected

members of the Ukrainian Parliament. For instance, Andriy Biletsky of "Azov," Dmitro Yarosh from "Right Sector (DUK)," "Aydar"'s Serhiy Melnichuk and Semen Semenchenko of "Donbas" were elected as MPs during the 2014 parliamentary elections. The battalion members also succeeded in penetrating government's security agencies.[42] Despite formal affiliation with the government, battalions maintain their own independent recruitment and procurement functions,[43] which enable them to both mobilize fighters irrespectively of the official draft and to order weapons and equipment from government suppliers at their own convenience. Volunteer battalions were also known to use their official affiliation with the incumbent to stockpile weapons and to distribute them to their regional branches in regions unaffected by the ATO.[44] To expand their recruitment and fundraising activities, larger battalions – such as "Azov", DUK, and "Aydar" – established a network of volunteer recruitment centers coordinated through civil society organizations directly controlled by and affiliated with the battalions. A network of registered civil society organizations enables the battalions to engage in awareness raising campaigns, maintain active presence on social media, collect donations from private citizens and businesses, as well as to organize online fundraising campaigns.

Since their inception in the mid-2014, volunteer battalions continuously challenge the government employing both "soft" and "hard" tactics. One of the main "soft" methods, practiced by the battalions, is accusations of corruption, nepotism and inefficiency. Indeed, the battalion leaders, Dmitro Yarosh and Andriy Biletsky had both actively used anti-corruption agendas in their electoral campaigns during the 2014 parliamentary elections. For instance, Biletsky openly accused the government of corruption on a number of occasions. Another MP and a former commander of "Azov", Oleh Petrenko, went even further accusing the National Guard of collaboration with pro-Russian separatists.[45] The founder and former leader of the "Right Sector", Dmitro Yarosh had also publicly accused the Ukraine's

incumbent President Petro Poroshenko of corruption.[46] A similar opinion was voiced by the founder of "Donbas" battalion, the MP Semen Semenchenko, who in a televised interview claimed that "the actions and policies of the [incumbent] government and the President are threatening national security [of Ukraine]."[47] The views and opinions of battalion commanders are reflected in how the incumbent is perceived by the rank-and-file volunteer combatants. As explained by a "Dnipro-1" member, "we all know that they [government] is drenched in corruption. They cannot protect the people. That's why we are here. We cannot trust them" (Slava, Dnipro, Summer 2015). A similar opinion was echoed by a former "Azov" combatant: "We [in the battalion] never trusted the government, we know they will sell anyone and anything for cash. We only trusted ourselves. Even army generals are all corrupt. That's why we lost men and equipment [to separatists] all the time. They simply sold it to *separy* [separatists]" (Anton, Kyiv, Winter 2016). In fact, the army losses during the battles of Slovyansk and Ilovaysk in 2014 were widely attributed to the wide-spread corruption among the government and army officials in charge of the counter-terrorism operations. In the words of a participant of Ilovaysk battle, "These people [government officials] were worse than *separy* and worse than Russians … they simply sold out our positions to the enemy. They sold tanks, ammo, artillery pieces … anything they could sell. I have seen [government army] soldiers who did not trust their commanders. There were entire divisions which refused to reveal their coordinates to superiors fearing that they [commanders] will sell them to separatists" (Viktor, Kyiv, Winter 2015). A former battalion commander revealed that: "when we needed artillery support, we would never ask the top army command … they are all corrupt… we would only ask trusted artillery officers … never using official channels, but through private mobile phones" (Sergey, Kyiv, Summer 2015). Along with the criticism of the government's corruption during the ATO campaign, volunteer fighters demonstrated similarly high levels of distrust toward the incumbent's ability to

provide the population with public goods. A "Donbas" combatant has thought that "this government is absolutely incapable to provide citizens with services and security. I am here, because I know that it is up to us to change things" (Herasim, Dnipro, Summer 2015). A former member of "Aydar" explained his refusal to join the National Guard because "these people [army officials] would sell their country for money. I will never serve them. We might be on the same side [of the frontline], but we are different … they are *korruptsionery* [corrupt] and we are not. I am here not for money, but to defend my country, they are here for the money" (Anton, Kyiv, Summer 2016). Even more vocally the battalions objected the government efforts to negotiate with pro-Russian separatists or even to implement reforms which might provide the rebel enclaves with autonomy. While most battalions' leaders have spoken against any concessions to rebels, some have called government politicians who favored peace talks with rebels as "traitors." In August 2015, the government's botched efforts to pass controversial legislation granting a degree of autonomy to the rebel republics erupted in violence as hundreds of members of "Sich" battalion and the radical "Svoboda" party clashed with the riot police, injuring over a hundred members of security forces and killing four of them.

The above described confrontation between the battalions' members and security forces in front of the Parliament is yet one of the many examples of the volunteers' use of "hard" government challenging methods. Street protests became a weapon of choice for several influential volunteer battalions, including "Azov," "Sich," "Aydar," and the "Right Sector." For example, only "Azov" organized at least 30 street protests and rallies only in 2016, challenging the government on issues ranging from the export of wood and Russian SberBank operation in Ukraine to allegedly anti-Ukrainian propaganda on a state-owned TV channel. More sensitive issues, such as the discussion of the status of rebel-controlled territories and decentralization reforms, often gather thousands of protesters from as many as

20 battalions. Thus, in October 2017, over ten thousand battalion members have gathered in front of the parliament building forcing the parliament to lift immunity for the MPs, as well as demanding a number of other constitutional changes.[48] Since 2014, anti-government protests staged by the battalions' members are a frequent occurrence in major Ukrainian cities. During some of them, for example at the "Aydar"-staged protest in November 2014, volunteer combatants participated fully armed. As observed by an "Azov" member, "street demonstrations are our way to say that we disagree with them [government], … that we want change" (Ivan, Kyiv, Summer 2016). Another battalion member explained that: "although we come in uniforms and sometimes armed. We do not want violence. We seek to protest peacefully. Unless attacked first, we won't use force" (Stepan1, Kyiv, Summer 2017). A battalion commander emphasized the logic behind street protests: "We have weapons … we can use them to bring about changes, but instead we want to use every single peaceful opportunity that we have. Also, we protest to show people that there is a force to check on the government and to keep it accountable to the people" (Artem, Kyiv, Winter 2016).

Along with street protests, the battalions have militarily challenged the government by confronting and discrediting the state security forces. A shootout between security forces and the DUK ("Right Sector") members in Mukachevo in July 2015 resulted in casualties on both sides. Not only the government has failed to detain the battalion fighters responsible for the incident, but also at a DUK rally held in Kyiv in the aftermath of shootout and attended by thousands of the battalion supporters, the "Right Sector" leaders pledged to continue confronting the regime to "bring the war to corrupt officials."[49] The leader of "Donbas" battalion, Semenchenko made similar threats, promising to raid the government offices in order to "weed out corrupt politicians."[50] The DUK was also accused of relying on their connections within the National Guard and their access to military warehouses in order to channel weapons and ammunition from the ATO areas to its bases in other parts of Ukraine.

Some battalions went as far as raiding government-associated businesses. In March 2015, fighters of "Dnipro-1" barricaded offices of the UkrTransNafta Bank in Dnipro and Kyiv after the bank's chief executive officer and the associate of the battalion's key funder was removed from his job. In the ATO region, battalions asserted control over territory and contested local governments for power and influence. The government's failed efforts to dislodge "Azov" from its Mariupol stronghold were interpreted by the battalion, "so that 'Azov' fighters could not prevent the government and 'pro-Russian' National Guard to surrender [to separatists] more positions and entire cities."[51] In April 2015, "Azov" unit stationed in the village of Shirokino refused to leave ignoring the government orders. The unit withdrew only after the "Azov" leadership has ordered it to leave. The same year, "Tornado" battalion went as far as taking full control of several villages in Luhansk region and preventing the region's governor from performing his duties. As soon as the "Tornado" was disbanded by the Interior Minister following the formal complaint from Luhansk governor, most of its members joined other volunteer battalions stationed in the same region. Noteworthy is the participation of several major battalions ("Azov," DUK/UDA and "Aydar") in the unsanctioned economic blockade of Crimean peninsula, which included construction of military embankments, trenches and the blocking of motorways and train connections between Ukraine and the Russian-controlled Crimea.

For almost five years, Ukraine's volunteer battalions positioned themselves as active "government challengers", contesting the incumbent's on the monopoly of violence, territorial control, legislative powers and institutional reforms. Their ability to function as "government challengers" is engendered in their capacity to provide security more efficiently than the government and to protect and advance nationalist ideology that lies at the heart of Ukraine's post-Euromaidan political order.

Better security providers

The volunteer battalions acquired their fame during the Spring-Summer 2014 heavy fighting between pro-Ukrainian forces and the Russian-backed separatists in the Donbas War. The rise of the battalions is closely associated with Ukrainian army's inability to hold rebel offences in and around Donetsk and Luhansk areas.[52] Following a series of debacles suffered by the armed forces from the late April to the mid-June, many counterinsurgency tasks were delegated to pro-government battalions, which bore the brunt of heavy fighting in Donetsk airport, Slovyansk, Ilovaysk and Debaltseve. The Ukraine's ability to launch counter-offensives and to retake large areas of rebel-occupied Donbas region by the signing of Minsk I ceasefire agreement in September 2014 was largely attributed to the military strength of volunteer battalions.[53] "Azov," "Donbas," "Dnipro-1" and DUK/UDA spearheaded the Ukrainian offensives in summer 2014 and significantly contributed to dislodging the rebels from Slovyansk, Mariupol and a number of towns and villages around Donetsk. Volunteers had also played an important role at the battle of Ilovaysk in August'14, and during the defense of Debaltseve in January 2015.

An opinion that if not for volunteers "the war would have been lost" is widespread among the volunteer combatants. This opinion also echoes among the general public. According to a representative survey conducted by the Razumkov Center in October 2017, 54%[54] of respondents expressed their trust in volunteer battalions, and another 55% of the survey participants confirmed that they trust civil society organizations assisting volunteer battalions.[55] As described by a "Donbas" veteran, "most of our guys went to fight the war to protect the people and the country, and not for money [as the National Guard], or fame and glory, as army generals" (Alexander, Dnipro, Summer 2017). Indeed, the image of volunteers as "national heroes" and "patriots" is well-engraved in the perception of young people, some

of whom joined the battalions exclusively attracted by their "glorious" and "heroic" reputation. In the words of a recent volunteer recruit, his decision was motivated "by how organized, corruption-free and effective the battalions are, as compared to the army. Since as future conscripts we have to choose between the two, it was not hard for me to make my choice" (Nikolay, Kyiv, Winter 2016).

By contrast to corrupt, neglected, poorly equipped and low paid formal security forces, the battalions are well organized, privately funded and armed with sophisticated weapons and equipment. Unlike the government army, dependent on conscription and increasingly unpopular, the battalions were staffed by volunteers, many with military or security service experience. Although in the mid-2014, most battalions have paid their fighters as low as USD36 (980 UAH) per month,[56] from 2015, salary of a volunteer soldier was raised to USD440 (12,000 UAH), which well exceeds an average Ukrainian salary in the private sector. However, many volunteers admitted that financial rewards were of secondary importance in their decisions to join the battalions. "The pay was so low when I joined, so we had to pay ourselves for food, clothing, equipment and ammunition"(Dmitro, Kyiv, Summer 2017), said a "Sich" veteran. Another battalion combatant echoes that opinion adding that "my key considerations were that there is no corruption, hazing, backstabbing and betrayals here [in the battalion] unlike in the army" (Wadim, Kyiv, Summer 2017). All of the above conditions also facilitated "defection" of army conscripts and even officers into the battalions' ranks. As explained by a former army contract serviceman who left his unit to join the DUK in August 2015, "I knew that they [the battalion] had better everything, better weapons, better equipment. The entire nation helped them with food, clothes, money. They were our only hope to fight this war and win it. As a military person, I could see that. Spetsnaz [Special Forces] were just a rag-tag gang in comparison to them" (Petro, Kyiv, Summer 2015.).

The battalions' superior weapons, equipment and training are not only acknowledged by the battalion leaders,[57] but are regularly displayed at frequent military parades held by the battalions. For example, "Azov" battalion, alongside infantry divisions, consisted of a mechanized tank division armed with heavy battle tanks and armored personnel carriers.[58] It also had a heavy artillery battery and a long-range mortar division.[59] It was acknowledged that volunteer battalions have even developed new weapon systems, in particular hi-tech geo-location systems, drones, and radio-intelligence, which were later adopted by the Ukrainian army.[60] Another former National Guard member who "switched sides" to join "Azov" revealed that, "the battalion not only has better weapons and order-made equipment than any army or security forces unit, but it also has much higher morale and superior and more rigorous training"(Grigor, Kyiv, Summer 2017).

Military strength of volunteer battalions is engrained in the image of volunteers as "national saviors" in case of likely future confrontations with pro-Russian separatists.[61] As assumed by a battalion commander, "when a war with Russia and their lackeys breaks out again, … it is us who will fight it. Not the army. The army had four years [since Minsk I ceasefire] to rebuild, but they have pocketed all the international aid money, as they always did. Who will fight the war?" (Yevhen, Dnipro, Summer 2015). The answer to the question of "who will fight the war?" seems obvious not only to the battalions, but also to the population, which perceives the volunteers as the main security providers in the country. In May 2018, 60% (53% in September 2017) of respondents to a public opinion survey conducted by the Ilko Kucheriv Democratic Initiatives Foundation expressed their trust to volunteers.

In the mid-2017, a civilian wing of "Azov" battalion the "National Corps" created the so-called National Militia. The militia is a 1,000-strong division tasked with patrolling the streets of major Ukrainian cities. An obvious challenger of the recently reformed police force,

the National Militia has been entrusted with preventing street crime, drug trade, alcoholism and illegal logging. In the words of an ex-"Azov" member who has served in the National Militia, "the main goal of the militia is basically to do the job of police, because the police is unable to do their job. They are corrupt and ignorant. They don't care about the crime" (Robert, Kyiv, Summer 2017). The establishment of the National Militia is yet another example of the battalions' efforts to challenge the government as the provider of security.

Better ideology defenders

The battalions' military strength is imbued with their carefully cultivated ideological base. The victory of Maidan protests in February 2014 and the overthrow of President Viktor Yanukovich coincided with the rise of Ukrainian nationalism and patriotism. Some of the most influential volunteer battalions emerged on the basis of pre-Maidan ultranationalist (*ultras*) and right-wing groups, parties and associations.[62] Although when first assembled in April-May 2014 the DUK/UDA, "Azov," "Aydar" and many other battalions promoted ultranationalist and even neo-Nazi views, as the battalions became more ideologically mature their radical right-wing ideology gradually toned down. As explained by a battalion recruiter, "the first wave of recruits had many neo-Nazis, football hooligans and other radicals, but most of them either died on the frontlines, ended up in prisons on both sides of the frontline, or self-transformed into moderate [Ukrainian] nationalists" (Aleksiy, Kyiv, Summer 2017). Thus, by the start of 2015, the battalions adopted a nearly uniform nationalist-patriotic ideology that promotes Ukrainian national values and Eastern Slavic self-identity distinct from Russia. Territorial integrity of Ukraine, its political, economic and cultural independence from Russia, in conjunction with adherence to a mixture of Orthodox Christian and traditionalist Eastern Slavic religious beliefs are at the core of the battalions' ideology.

These "greater" ideological values are embedded into more specific "Maidan values," which encompass anti-corruption, economic prosperity and government accountability. While the views on democracy, reforms and European integration differ among and even within battalions, many battalion leaders tend to shift their opinions on these issues in accordance with popular attitudes.

Notwithstanding their ideological disagreements with the government – embodied in the incumbent's reluctance to reconcile with the battalions' nationalist tenets – volunteers succeed in positioning themselves as defenders of the Ukrainian nationalism and as a patriotic movement mobilized to protect Ukraine from Russian expansionism. Owing to their diverse and multifaceted ideological base, the battalions effectively attracted recruits along nationalist, religious, patriotic, and ethno-territorial lines. A number of informants identified nationalism as one of the key causes of their mobilization into the battalions. For Ukrainian nationalists, the battalions represent nearly everything that the government fails to deliver. These qualities include, the emphasis on the "Ukraine-first" foreign policy, rejection of all concessions to pro-Russian separatists, priority of the war effort over all other political agendas, Ukrainization and de-Russification of Ukraine and the lustration and persecution of the former regime's officials and politicians. As per explanation of a battalion member:

the government sees nationalism and the idea of great Ukraine as something of lesser importance, or even something unnecessary. [After Maidan] the government has pledged to uphold its values, … but they lied to us. They simply hijacked nationalist ideas to come to power, then they tossed them [nationalist ideas] away and forgot about them. In such a situation, volunteers are the only force that believes in Ukrainian nationalism and that follows and protects its values (Mikhaylo, Kyiv, Winter 2016).

Another volunteer added that: "Poroshenko's government does not care about Ukrainian nationalist values. They only use them during elections, that's it. If not for us [volunteers], Ukraine would fall apart. It will be torn into pieces by those greedy government entrepreneurs who only seek profits" (Oleh, Kyiv, Summer 2017). The perception of the battalions as defenders of national ideology is also reflected in public surveys. For example, a public opinion poll carried out by the Kyiv Institute of Sociology (KIS) in December 2014 has found that about 30% of survey respondents believed that the battalions are the "patriotic elite" of Ukraine.

Some battalions have succeeded in combining radical ideologies with mainstream nationalist ideas.[63] The battalions' "government challenger" stance enabled them to attract into their ranks government critiques and political opponents of the incumbent. A former member of "Azov" confessed that he joined the battalion "because I thought that they [the battalion] were simply more honest, sincere and straightforward than the government and its politicians … who always lie to the people" (Bohdan, Kyiv, Winter 2016). Despite their challenger position, the battalions managed to gain support of some government ministers and politicians even from within the president Poroshenko's own political party. A battalion commander revealed "that it is no secret that [Arsen] Avakov, the Minister of Internal Affairs, supports the battalions both financially and otherwise, because he knows that we are the future of Ukraine and we can protect it, unlike [President] Poroshenko, who only cares about himself and his businesses" (Mikhail, Kyiv, Summer 2017). The battalions' emphasis on protecting and promoting the Ukrainian national identity allowed them to target broader segments of the population, including apolitical and non-nationalist circles. An active battalion member recalls: "When I enlisted, I didn't care about politics and I wasn't a nationalist, but I was fearful that my country won't survive this conflict [Donbas War]. I was

never a patriot, simply I care about the people and the country" (Stepan2, Kyiv, Summer 2017). All of the above demonstrates that the battalions' ability to exploit the popular ideological trends in the country enables them to position themselves vis-à-vis the incumbent as more effective ideology defenders.

Conclusion

This paper advances our understanding of non-state armed groups not only as pro-government proxies, but also as of "government challengers" that irrespectively of their efforts to undermine the incumbent, remain loyal to the government and are keen to protect it from anti-government rebels. This study has argued that not all pro-government armed groups support the incumbent and that "government challenger" groups, which both criticize and oppose the government from within, derive their strength and legitimacy from their security provision and ideology promotion capacities. Although challenger groups are often the by-products of intrastate conflicts, many emerge independently from the government, maintain their own sources of funding and, regardless of their official status, retain their organizational structure. Pro-government anti-government armed groups are not a new phenomenon, but they remain critically under-researched as a distinct category of armed actors in conflict-affected states.

Drawing empirical insights from the unique interview data with former and active members of pro-government volunteer battalions in Ukraine, this paper provides an illustrious example of a powerful and popular pro-government armed organization, that emerged to protect the incumbent from separatist rebels, but from the start has harbored its own agendas. The Ukraine's "government challengers" were incorporated into the formal security forces, but, nonetheless, they retain a remarkable level of independence from the

incumbent. With their leaders elected to parliament, the battalions succeed in securing their own funding and recruitment. The volunteer battalions' ability to excel the government in security provision and in advocacy of the nationalist ideology enables them to gain popular support, which secured their position of "government challengers." Similarly to many other challenger groups in other conflict-affected societies, Ukraine's battalions challenge the government in order to gain access to power and resources, which remain out of reach for both pro- and anti-government actors. This study underscores some general characteristics of "government challengers", including their military strength, popular support and the emphasis on ideology, that could potentially apply to other cases, and can improve our understanding of pro-government armed groups in the context of armed conflict. Future research could examine the fate of "government challengers" after the conflict termination and whether their official inclusion into the formal security forces has a notable effect on the armed groups' capacity and willingness to challenge the incumbent.

Notes

[1] Anthony Vinci, *Armed groups and the balance of power* (New York: Routledge, 2009); Tobias Böhmelt and Govinda Clayton, "Auxiliary force structure: Paramilitary forces and progovernment militias," *Comparative Political Studies* 51, no. 2 (2018): 197-237; Kimberly Marten, "Warlordism in comparative perspective," *International Security* 31, no. 3 (2007): 41-73.

[2] Paul Collier, "Rebellion as a quasi-criminal activity," *Journal of Conflict resolution* 44, no. 6 (2000): 839-853.

[3] Ami Pedahzur, Leonard Weinberg and Arie Perliger, *Political parties and terrorist groups* (London: Routledge, 2000); Richard English, *Irish freedom: A history of nationalism in*

Ireland (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2008); Diego Muro, *Ethnicity and violence: The case of radical Basque nationalism* (London: Routledge, 2013).

[4] Govinda Clayton and Andrew Thomson, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend… The dynamics of self-defense forces in irregular war: the case of the sons of Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 37, no. 11 (2014): 920-935.

[5] Shane Barter, "State proxy or security dilemma? Understanding anti-rebel militias in civil war," *Asian Security* 9, no. 2 (2013): 75-92.

[6] Ellen Lust-Okar, "Divided they rule: The management and manipulation of political opposition," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2 (2004): 159-179; Kay B. Warren, *The violence within: Cultural and political opposition in divided nations* (London: Routledge, 2018).

[7] Stephen M. Saideman, "When conflict spreads: Arab spring and the limits of diffusion," *International Interactions* 38, no. 5 (2012): 713-722.

[8] This study distinguishes "government challengers" as a broader category than PGMs, which includes, but not limited to, all organized armed groups that at least temporarily maintain pro-government position. Examples of such groups, along with militias, are pro-government warlords, armed wings of political parties, tribal factions and ethno-sectarian activist groups.

[9] Bohmelt and Clayton (see note); Neil J. Mitchell and Sabine C. Carey, "Pro-Government Militias and Conflict," in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Politics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016); Sabine C. Carey, Michael P. Colaresi and Neil J. Mitchell, "Governments, informal links to militias, and accountability," *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 59, no. 5 (2015): 850-876.

[10] Bohmelt and Clayton (see note 1); Carey et al. (see note 9).

[11] Mitchell and Carey (see note 9), 8.

[12] Carey et al. (see note 9), 851.

[13] Mitchell and Carey (see note 9), 4.

[14] Ibid., 817.

[15] Geraint Hughes and Christian Tripodi, "Anatomy of a surrogate: historical precedents and implications for contemporary counter-insurgency and counter-terrorism," *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 20, no. 1 (2009): 1-35.

[16] Ana Arjona and Stathis N. Kalyvas, "Recruitment into armed groups in Colombia: A survey of demobilized fighters," in *Understanding collective political violence* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 143-171; Clayton and Thomson (see note 4); Metin Gurcan,

"Arming civilians as a counterterror strategy: The case of the village guard system in Turkey," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 8, no. 1 (2015): 1-22; Mario Fumerton, "Rondas Campesinas in the Peruvian Civil War: Peasant Self defence Organisations in Ayacucho," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 20, no. 4 (2001): 470-497.

[17] Julie Mazzei, *Death squads or self-defense forces?: how paramilitary groups emerge and challenge democracy in Latin America* (Chapel Hill: Univ of NC Press, 2009), 99-125.

[18] An edited volume by Berman and Lake is one of the few studies to demonstrate the complexity of relations between principals and local proxies. See Eli Berman and David A. Lake, *Proxy wars: suppressing violence through local agents* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2019).

[19] It must be noted that incompatibility between the "government challengers" and government often emerge not at the level of governmental institutions' structure, but against individuals leading these institutions. If this is the case, and if new governmental leadership emerged that was more closely aligned with the political interests of the challenger groups, and resulted in a lower willingness by the "government challengers" to criticize and delegitimize it, then the group could be expected to cease functioning as a "government challenger."

[20] Bohmelt and Clayton (see note 1).

[21] Yet not all "government challengers" are bottom-up groups. For example, in contrast to the Ukrainian battalions, Hezbollah challenges the basic distribution of power in the confessional Lebanese regime that discriminates against Shiite Muslims who make at least a plurality of the population, but only entitled to the third most powerful position in the country. In this regard, it is qualitatively different from the PMF in Iraq which serves to protect the status quo (i.e., the political supremacy of the Shiite majority). Nevertheless, all of these and many other similar armed organizations, share similar "government challenger" characteristics.

[22] Susannah George, "Breaking Badr," *Foreign Policy*, November 6, 2014.

[23] See (in Arabic): https://nsa.gov.iq/page/1/about-us.

[24] Carey et al. (see note 9).

[25] Andrew England, "Iraq's Shia militias: Capturing the state," *Financial Times*, July 31, 2018.

[26] Mitchell and Carey (see note 9).

[27] Similar dynamics within principal-agent model were identified by Max Abrahms in relations between leader and rank-and-file members of insurgent groups. See Max Abrahms, *Rules for Rebels: The science of victory in militant history* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2018).

[28] Isabel Coles and Ghassan Adnan, "Iraq Kingmaker's daunting task: Lift the poor of Sadr city," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 03, 2018.

[29] Rhys Dubin, "Iraq's militias set their sights on political power," *Foreign Policy*, January 30, 2018; Tamer El-Ghobashy and Mustafa Salim, "Iraqi election seen as a contest between Iran's challenger and America's incumbent," *The Washington Post*, May 11, 2018.

[30] El-Ghobashy and Salim (see note).

[31] Mona Alami, "Iraq's Shiite militias hope battlefield wins secure electoral victory," *Al-Monitor,* April 27, 2018; TheNewArab, "Iraq Report: Elections without participation is no democracy," *The New Arab*, May 10, 2018.

[32] See Berman and Lake (see note 18).

[33] Mitchell and Carey (see note 9), 9.

[34] Clayton and Thomson (see note 4).

[35] Al-Jazeera, "Shia militias using arms from 16 countries: Amnesty," *Al-Jazeera*. January 05, 2017.

[36] Priyanka Boghani, "Iraq's Shia militias: The double-edged sword against ISIS," PBS.org. March 21, 2017.

[37] Coles and Adnan (see note 28).

[38] Lionel Beehner, "Shiite militias and Iraq's security forces," *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 30, 2005.

[39] Montana Hunter, "Crowdsourced War: The Political and Military Implications of Ukraine's Volunteer Battalions 2014-2015," *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies* 18, no. 3 (2018): 96-97.

[40] Thomas Howes-Ward, "Libya's Foreign Militias," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, April 10, 2018.

[41] Patrick Cockburn, "Violence erupts in Basra as Iraqi forces battle Mehdi Army," *The Independent*, March 26, 2008.

[42] A former "Azov" commander, Serhiy Korotkykh, is a top-ranking official in the Police Department. Another former "Azov" colonel, Wadim Troyan, served as the chief of Kyiv police.

[43] See for example (in Ukrainian): http://azov.org.ua/karyera/.

[44] See (in Russian): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aYvoPs8-uCg&list=WL&t=1s&index=127.

[45] Natsionalny Korrespondent, "Zayava Andiya Biletskogo z privodu Natsionalnoi Gvardii," *Natsionalny Korrespondent*, January 01, 2017.

[46] See (in Russian): https://www.politnavigator.net/glavnyjj-pravosek-obvinil-poroshenko-voruet-eshhe-bolshe-yanukovicha.html.

[47] See (in Russian): https://newsone.ua/news/politics/semenchenko-obvinil-poroshenko-grojsmana-i-gricaka-v-finansirovanii-terrorizma.html

[48] See (in Russian): https://ria.ru/world/20171027/1507661431.html.

[49] Dmytro Yarosh at the "Right Sector" rally on Kyiv Maidan square on 21st of July 2015.

[50] Semen Semenchenko's interview with *Kyiv Post* on 24 August 2014.

[51] "Azov" spokesperson in interview to *Ukrainskaia Pravda* on August 27, 2016.

[52] Hunter (see note 39), 89.

[53] Huseyn Aliyev, "The logic of ethnic responsibility and progovernment mobilization in East Ukraine conflict," *Comparative Political Studies* 52, no. 8 (2019): 1200-1231.

[54] By contrast only 25% of the survey respondents indicated that they trust President Petro Poroshenko (68% distrust) and only 20% (73% distrust) of the public expressed their trust to the government.

[55] See (in Russian): https://censor.net.ua/news/460202/prezidentu_doveryayut_248_ukraintsev_pravitelstvu_198_verhovnoyi_rade_138_opros.

[56] See (in Russian): https://nv.ua/publications/malorossija-protiv-ukrainy-semenchenko-rasskazal-ob-arestah-dobrovoltsev-i-o-tom-pochemu-prodolzhaetsja-vojna-96484.html.

[57] The founder of "Azov" stated in an interview to Liga.net on 12th of August 2015, that: "the regiment ["Azov"] now looks like an army of some Baltic country, or Germany, certainly not like the Ukrainian army."

[58] See (in Russian): https://focus.ua/long/377902/.

[59] Stepan Bayda, "Azov" spokesman in interview to "112" TV channel on August 31st, 2015.

[60] See (in Russian): https://www.epravda.com.ua/rus/publications/2018/08/2/639236/.

[61] Huseyn Aliyev, "Strong militias, weak states and armed violence: Towards a theory of 'state-parallel' paramilitaries," *Security dialogue* 47, no. 6 (2016): 498-516.

[62] Ilmari Käihkö, "A nation-in-the-making, in arms: control of force, strategy and the Ukrainian Volunteer Battalions," *Defence Studies* 18, no. 2 (2018): 147-166, 154.

[63] For example, "Azov" interprets the usage of runic Wolfsangel symbols on its insignia as representing letters "N" and "I", which stand for "National Idea." It employs the symbol in order to appeal to both ultranationalists ("*ultras*") and the patriotic membership.