



**REPORT:
VOLUNTEER BATTALIONS.
ORIGIN, OPERATION, CONTROVERSIES**



The report discusses the phenomenon of establishing Ukrainian volunteer battalions to fight in the ATO zone (Anti-Terrorist Operation in the eastern regions of the country), their specificity, as well as their role and importance in the conflict with Russia

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00-580 Warsaw

11a Szucha Avenue, office 21

Tel. +48 22 307 11 22

E-mail: odfoundation@odfoundation.eu
en.odfoundation.eu

For more detailed information, please contact:

Project Manager:

Lyudmyla Kozlovska lyudmylakozylovska@odfoundation.eu

Author:

Agnieszka Górska agnieszka.gorska@odfoundation.eu

Editing:

Bartosz Kramek, Lyudmyla Kozlovska, Agnieszka Piasecka

Proofreading:

Andy Sewell

Graphic design:

Andriy Osavoliyk

Photo on the first page: [Open Dialog Foundation](http://OpenDialogFoundation.eu), author: Agnieszka Górska

Table of Contents:

1. INTRODUCTION.....	4
2. THE ORIGINS OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF VOLUNTEER BATTALIONS AND THEIR SPECIFICITY	5
3. LEGAL SITUATION OF THE BATTALIONS AND RELATED PROBLEMS	6
3.1. National Guard.....	6
3.2. Territorial Defence Battalions (BTRO)	7
3.3. Special police battalions	7
3.4. The 'Right Sector' and 'OUN' Battalions.....	8
4. POLITICAL VIEWS AND IDEOLOGY	9
5. THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTEER BATTALIONS IN THE ATO ZONE	10
6. THE FIGHTING PARTIES AND CIVILIAN POPULATION	12
7. THE TREATMENT OF PEOPLE TAKEN AND HELD CAPTIVE BY BOTH SIDES.....	14
8. SUMMARY.....	16

1. INTRODUCTION

A lot of controversies have arisen in connection with the volunteer battalions which have been involved in the anti-terrorist operation in eastern Ukraine. To a great extent, this is due to aggressive Russian media propaganda which promulgates the notion that the battalion soldiers are, in fact, 'fascists'. In the rhetoric employed by the Russian media, the new government in Kiev is referred to as the 'junta' and the battalions of volunteers have been nicknamed 'punitive battalions'. By continuing to use this term, the pro-Russian media are striving to formulate in the minds of the recipients of the information, an association between Ukrainian volunteer battalions and World War II formations which carried out executions of civilians.

This sort of propaganda, referring to the realities of World War II, is addressed primarily to 'domestic' audiences, that is, to the Russians themselves. As the modern national and state identity in the minds of the Russian Federation's citizens is based on the mythologisation of the Red Army's heroic struggle against fascism during the so-called 'Great Patriotic War', referring to ideologies prominent at that time is proving to be a very effective method. The average Russian who has access to information presented in this manner, perceives the conflict in eastern Ukraine through the prism of everything that he knows about the crimes committed by the Nazis - and through this prism, he also begins to see Ukrainians who are fighting for the integrity of their borders. [\[1\]](#)

In this way, in its own country, the Kremlin evokes public acceptance for armed aggression against the 'brother country' - Ukraine. As it is difficult to explain the mass resistance of Ukrainians against Moscow-orchestrated separatism and widespread anti-Russian sentiment, the new government in Kiev is presented in the Russian media as the 'junta', the military regime, whose aggression is directed against its own people in eastern Ukraine, and volunteer battalions are portrayed as the main tool of the regime.

The scale of this propaganda by organisations which should remain impartial and apolitical towards the conflict ongoing in Ukraine is so enormous that it is beginning to affect the perception of the battalions. Statements by the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), following the organisation's observation mission, raised many legitimate questions. Numerous soldiers in the east of Ukraine accuse the OSCE of bias and of deliberate actions in cooperation with Russia aimed at disseminating propaganda emanating from Moscow. [\[2\]](#) Representatives of the organisations themselves admitted that 'their mission is being hampered', and their inability to confirm certain facts is connected with the intentional actions of pro-Russian militants who only allow observers to obtain information that is convenient for them. [\[3\]](#), [\[4\]](#) The author of this study, who spent time in the conflict zone as an observer of the Open Dialog Foundation (ODF), had a chance to observe the movement of the OSCE representatives between the areas occupied by the army of the so-called separatists. None of the Ukrainian volunteer battalions confirmed visits of observers, which could lead to the obtainment of reliable information about these battalions. [\[5\]](#)

Another example is the report, published by Amnesty International, which accused the volunteer battalion 'Aidar' of numerous abuses committed against civilians in areas controlled by the troops of the battalion. [\[6\]](#) Doubts were raised by the fact that in its report, Amnesty International representatives relied on testimonies of representatives of the local police (in eastern Ukraine, the police support the pro-Russian side), and unconfirmed information from civilians, sceptical about soldiers, without any attempts having been made to verify the acquired information with the Ukrainian side.

The creation of this report was prompted by the fact that both the propaganda disseminated by the Russian side, as well as the lack of reliable and comprehensive studies on the Ukrainian volunteer battalions, have prompted misunderstandings to arise with regard to these unique military formations. We believe that it is necessary to present these battalions in full view in order to counter the false accusations, which they have often fallen victim to.

Representatives of the ODF were regularly on location in eastern Ukraine, and subsequently, in the conflict zone from the end of February 2014. The author of the report had the opportunity to observe volunteer battalions from the moments of their creation, from April 2014, to March 2015, and to collect data on issues related to their functioning and their activities throughout this period. She interviewed soldiers and commanders, as well as volunteers and civilians. She watched the fulfilment of obligations by battalions in the anti-terrorist operation (ATO) zone.

The report was drawn up on the basis of information from primary sources in the form of conversations and interviews with members of the volunteer battalions and soldiers of the Armed Forces of Ukraine (ZSU), the National Guard, volunteers as well as civilians, carried out between February 2014 and March 2015. The secondary sources took the form of materials from the Ukrainian and Russian mass media and social media, which frequently, expressed, most directly, the positions of the interested parties and have often been used for the dissemination of unique materials from the ATO zone.

For obvious reasons, a lot of information gathered in preparation for the production of this report was omitted – in eastern Ukraine, military operations are being carried out; hence, numerous details, which would otherwise have given credence to the stories, had to be omitted. Safety considerations also led the author, in many cases, to list sources as ‘anonymous’ or merely disclose the nicknames of soldiers.

In this study, we use the term ‘separatists’ in relation to illegal armed formations fighting in the Donbass, in the interests of remaining neutral. We opted not to use the term ‘terrorists’, which is actively used in the Ukrainian media, although, undoubtedly, there are valid reasons supporting the use of the term (suffice it to mention the terrorist act during the peaceful demonstration ‘For the unity of Ukraine’ in Kharkov on 22 February, 2015, resulting in the deaths of four people). [\[7\]](#) In this report, however, we focus on the military dimension of the conflict, and so we use the term that is in common use and, in our opinion, accurately describes the nature of the troops that are fighting against the Ukrainian army, as from the very beginning, one of the objectives announced by them was to achieve autonomy and independence from the government in Kiev. We use the terms ‘pro-Russian side’ and ‘pro-Russian forces’ interchangeably, as Russia is a major ally of the so-called Donetsk and Lugansk People’s Republics (and, as we believe, also the mastermind behind their formations).

2. THE ORIGINS OF THE ESTABLISHMENT OF VOLUNTEER BATTALIONS AND THEIR SPECIFICITY

Volunteer battalions were established primarily under pressure from society, but rather from the element of society which took an active role in the EuroMaidan protests from November 2013 to February 2014. They are also, to a large extent, a direct product of those events.

Initially, the ‘Revolution of Dignity’ took the form of peaceful demonstrations - a relatively small group (approx. 1,000 participants) mostly made up of students and other young people gathered on 21 November, 2013, in order to protest against the president’s decision to suspend the signing of the Association Agreement with the European Union. However, as a result of the first attempt to forcibly remove protesters - the so-called ‘beating of students’ on the night of 1 December 2013 - Euromaidan became a mass movement opposing the regime of Viktor Yanukovich. Brutal methods employed by the authorities forced the protesters to create so-called Self-Defence groups – volunteer formations which were designed to defend protesters against the aggression of the police units. [\[8\]](#)

Over the several months of its activity, this spontaneous movement went on to become an efficient and well-organised structure. In line with Cossack tradition, volunteers were divided into ‘sotnyas’ (hundreds) and ‘desyatnas’ (dozens), headed by ‘sotniks’ and ‘desyatniks’, respectively. Some groups stood out among the others; for example, the fourth sotnya was known as the ‘Cossack’ (based on the traditions of the Ukrainian Cossacks), while the eighth - as the ‘Afghan’ (it comprised veterans of the war in Afghanistan). Self-Defence was a de facto civil movement until the very end, but it gradually assumed

the nature of a paramilitary organisation. [9] Members began to wear uniforms and carry 'weapons' such as shields and wooden batons, helmets (initially orange construction helmets in the main part, then bicycle helmets and later metal ones). They organised training sessions and practised combat tactics. [10]

The Self-Defence of Maidan consisted of both people who, at that critical moment, driven by a sense of civic duty, left their jobs or businesses, and those for whom Euromaidan had become their first major 'occupation' for a long time. For the former, the victory of the revolution in Kiev brought about (at least initially) the possibility of returning to interrupted work or study. However, many protesters had nothing to go back to, and so it was on Maidan that they finally began to feel that they were needed. They were treated as heroes by a large portion of the population. The Maidan victory in the fight against better-trained and armed police troops strengthened their belief in the power of the spirit as a more important factor than the theoretical military advantage. Thus, it inspired them to continue with their activism. [11]

The annexation of the Crimea 'without firing a single shot' as well as the surrender and evacuation of Ukrainian army units from the occupied peninsula led Ukrainian society to believe that the regular army is neither as well-trained nor as motivated as one would expect. Members of the Self-Defence, who just a few weeks earlier had been ready to lay down their lives on the Maidan, were embittered by the attitude of the Crimean soldiers - despite official attempts to present the latter as heroes who had managed to avoid a threat being posed to the lives of civilians by surrendering. In reality, opinions soon began to form that Crimea had been 'sold off', and the blame for this should lay squarely with politicians and spies in the command of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. [12] It was the conviction that there was a presence of traitors in the Ukrainian army (largely confirmed in the following months [13]) and the associated lack of confidence in it, that led to a situation in which the need to create volunteer battalions based on the Self-Defence started to be discussed.

On 5 May, 2014, the Maidan Council adopted the Regulation: 'On the core tasks of the Maidan Self-Defence under the circumstances of Russian aggression'. [14] On the basis of this regulation, self-defence volunteers, who were still members of the sotnyas, were summoned to commence service in one of the following structures: volunteer battalions of the National Guard, special police battalions or reserve territorial defence battalions, which started to be formed in April 2014. Since then, battalions have officially become the basic Self-Defence units in the composition of the aforementioned structures. As it transpired, the Maidan Self-Defence volunteers were the ones who became the basis for the creation of many of these battalions from the first days of their establishment (such as the 1st Battalion of the National Guard or the volunteer battalion 'Aidar').

3. LEGAL SITUATION OF THE BATTALIONS AND RELATED PROBLEMS

Problems concerning the legal statuses of both battalions themselves, and individual soldiers, appeared almost immediately and, unfortunately, they continue to exist today. This is related primarily to the fact that volunteer battalions do not have a uniform system of command, and some of them refused to become part of official structures under the conditions that they had been offered ('Right Sector' and 'OUN' Battalions). A total of approximately 30 volunteer battalions are located in the ATO zone (this number varies due to the rotation to which they are subjected).

3.1. National Guard

The National Guard was first created in Ukraine in 1991. However, in 2000, it was resolved. Soldiers serving in it were then given the opportunity to be transferred to other units of the army. On 13 March, 2014, in the face of aggression in the Crimea and the tense situation in the east of the country, the

National Guard was reinstated and it began to enlist in its ranks volunteers prepared to defend the integrity of the Ukrainian state.

The National Guard Battalions are subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Ukraine. According to the Law 'On the National Guard of Ukraine', [15] they were formed to conduct riot control and protective and auxiliary functions. For this reason, they were originally equipped only with light weapons. After a two-month preparatory course, they began serving in the ATO zone, where very quickly, it became apparent that they were required to perform tasks on a par with well-trained and appropriately armed troops of the regular army of Ukraine. Following their many months long service on the front line, amendments were introduced into the Law in February 2015, the Guard battalions were then also equipped with heavy weapons. [16]

The National Guard Volunteer battalions also incorporated the 'Azov' Battalion (later to become a regiment) and the volunteer battalion 'Donbass', which was initially meant to be a territorial defence battalion of the Donetsk province. The relevant documents were even signed; however, due to the fact that the local authorities of the Donetsk province increasingly overtly supported the separatist movement, the activities of the battalion were hindered in many ways (from continuous postponement of the decision on the appointment of the place for the battalion to be stationed, to attacks on still unarmed volunteers, carried out by the pro-Russian 'Self-Defence' separatists). Finally, on the basis of the first recruits of 'Donbass', the Special Battalion of the National Guard of 'Donbass' was established in May 2014.

3.2. Territorial Defence Battalions (BTRO)

They form part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine and are subordinated to the Ministry of Defence. They were established partly through the recruitment of volunteers, and partly as a result of mobilisation (though there are territorial defence battalions which are entirely voluntary, such as 11. BTRO 'Kievsk Rus'). As the name suggests, they were formed to deal with 'territorial defence', which, according to Ukrainian legislation, means both border protection and operations in the event of a threat to territorial integrity [17] - the latter part of the provision gives a basis for the operation of the territorial defence battalions in the ATO zone.

Initially, they were to fulfill auxiliary functions along with the troops of the regular army, but - as was the case with the National Guard - they, very soon, started to be assigned combat tasks on the front lines. Information about the heroic Ukrainian soldiers standing in positions under fire, unable to respond due to the lack of proper weapons, in a short time, was leaked to the public prompting a significant response. Volunteers, being on good terms with various battalions, raised money to buy vehicles and prepare them for service in the ATO zone; they made attempts to influence the Ministry of Defence to bring about the deployment of heavy weapons to the battalions. In many cases, they achieved partial success, for example, in August 2014, the 11th Battalion 'Kievsk Rus' was assigned some dozen armoured vehicles which volunteers were able to restore with the money collected. [18]

Initially, the 'Aidar' battalion was also a territorial defence battalion, but in August 2014, it was transformed into a battalion of the Armed Forces of Ukraine due to the new opportunity to receive heavy weapons.

3.3. Special police battalions

They were appointed to serve as protection in the ATO zone. As Ukraine isn't officially in a state of war, but carrying out an anti-terrorist operation, the troops, subordinated to the Ministry of Internal Affairs are appropriate structures for operations in the ATO zone aimed maintaining order. Battalions, such as

‘Kiev-1’, ‘Kiev-2’, ‘Sich’, ‘Zoloti Vorota’ and the ‘Dnipro-1’ regiment have fought and will probably continue to fight on the front lines. During the rotation, instead of staying in the training area, (as did, for example, the National Guard battalions or the BTRO) they are engaged in maintaining order in the cities; in, amongst others, Kiev, they protect public buildings and provide security for events organised by the city. The ‘Sich’ battalion may be mentioned here, as it is serving in the liberated Slavyansk, maintaining order while the ‘Kiev-1’ battalion protected the Verkhovna Rada during the rotation in the capital.

A very controversial decision related to the use of the ‘Kiev-1’ battalion to remove EuroMaidan tents and participants from the centre of the capital city in August 2014, especially as many volunteers from the battalion had been members of the Self-Defence structures at Maidan. Accusations of ‘betrayal’ and comparisons of the battalion to the Berkut forces of the EuroMaidan era began to be voiced among the defenders of the tent town. Soldiers themselves are convinced that they did the right thing because, at that time, true patriots should have been in the ATO zone, rather than in the tents on the main square of the capital city. [19]

3.4. The ‘Right Sector’ and ‘OUN’ Battalions

The ‘Right Sector’ (‘Ukrainian Volunteer Corps’ – ‘DUK’) battalions and the ‘OUN’ battalions haven’t been incorporated in the Armed Forces of Ukraine, and officially, they are not subordinated to the Ministry of Defence or the Interior Ministry. Despite their unclear status, the ‘RS’ and ‘OUN’ battalions cooperate with the ATO headquarters and constantly carry out negotiations regarding their subordination to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. For now, the talks are ongoing, as the battalions do not want to agree to any proposition which would violate their internal structures.

Officially, the battalions are in no way supported by the state structures nor are they issued any weapons. Their soldiers are, thus, forced to take weapons from the enemy, or borrow them from the army (and use them to commandeer their own weapons). [20] The lack of an official status is, therefore, problematic both for the soldiers, and the Ukrainian state, which may be accused of supporting illegal militias; hence, the two negotiating parties are strongly motivated to reach an acceptable compromise. All the more so that the ‘RS’ battalions distinguished themselves in the ATO zone as extremely brave, honest and disciplined. They are present in the places where the fiercest battles are fought. Along with the 93rd Brigade and the 3rd Ukrainian Special Forces Regiment, they earned the title of ‘the cyborgs’ during the many months long defence of the Donetsk airport, due to their heroic defence of the target against the full scale attacks of the numerically superior pro-Russian forces. Soldiers, who have fought alongside them, speak of the ‘RS’ with the utmost respect. The ‘RS’ has done nothing but gain a good reputation.

One of the examples proving that attempts have been made to establish closer cooperation between the ‘Right Sector’ and the army structures is the appointment of the ‘RS’ leader, Dmytro Yarosh, to the post of chief adviser to the General Staff of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. When accepting the proposal, Yarosh stated that the ‘RS’ battalions were ready to subordinate to the army in operations aimed at defending Ukraine from the external enemy. [21]

Due to their lack of official status, ‘RS’ soldiers are struggling with another problem - according to the law, they cannot obtain the status of ‘ATO participant’, nor can they obtain the corresponding benefits. Still, this is not only a problem for the ‘RS’. Among the remaining volunteer battalions, there are some in which up to ten percent of personnel do not appear on official lists.

The reasons for this differ, and so do the attitudes of the commanders of each unit to these problems. For example, in the ‘Kievsk Rus’ battalion, the lack of an original medical certificate may cause delays in the recruitment of a volunteer. In this battalion, all soldiers are recruited for service officially. On the

other hand, Oleh Odnorozhenko, an officer of the 'Azov' regiment, admitted that up to 10 percent of their soldiers cannot acquire the appropriate status - for example, due to their criminal records. In contrast to 'Kievsk Rus', the 'Azov' regiment does recruit such volunteers and, as stated by O. Odnorozhenko, commanders seek to resolve such problems on a case-by-case basis. [22]

Regardless of whether volunteer battalions are subordinated to different structures, in the area of the anti-terrorist operation, they fulfil similar functions. During the active phase of military operations, in the spring and summer, all volunteer battalions participated in the battles along with the troops of the regular army. Very often, they were the ones to have suffered the brunt of the enemy's attacks, or to carry out offensive actions, supported by the regular army. Residents of Starobelsk, a town in the north of the Lugansk Province, admitted in conversations with the ODF correspondent, that if it hadn't been for the 'Aidar' battalion, which appeared in their village in May 2014 and brought about the withdrawal of representatives of the separatist movement, most probably, the territory would now be part of the so-called 'Lugansk People's Republic'. It was due to the active involvement of 'Aidar', which received the support of Ukrainian army troops only later, that pro-Russian troops were successfully pushed back beyond the Donetsk River in May and June 2014.

4. POLITICAL VIEWS AND IDEOLOGY

All volunteer battalions are filled with Ukrainian patriots. However, their beliefs, political preferences and ideologies for the development of the state often vary significantly. Among the volunteer battalions are both those which do not position themselves as 'political' and those who are associated with specific ideologies. For example, in the first composition of the 'Donbass' battalion, a Kiev resident and an active participant of EuroMaidan nicknamed 'Reider' (killed during the battle of Karlovka in July 2014), and a 'musician', previously one of the organisers of the Anti-Maidan in Donetsk served side-by-side. The latter is not a supporter of the new government, but he joined the battalion to fight against separatism. [24]. In most battalions, ideology boils down to the broadly understood 'pro-Ukrainian' position, and the main cohesive element is the fight against Russian aggression. The question of whether or not Ukraine should join the European Union is met with differing responses. Only a few volunteer battalions are guided by a particular ideology. Among those, the most controversial are undoubtedly the 'Right Sector' and 'OUN' battalions, and the 'Azov' regiment.

The 'Right Sector' unduly raises a lot of excitement. Since EuroMaidan, the Russian propaganda pejoratively labelled them 'fascists'. Among Polish people, their red and black symbols and references to the figure of Stepan Bandera evoke associations with the massacres of Poles in Volhynia during World War II. In recent months, pro-Russian propagandists and the extreme-right circles have been striving to induce in Polish people into a fear of 'Banderites' (admittedly, with limited success).

Meanwhile, for young Ukrainians, Stepan Bandera is a symbolic figure of patriotism. Patriotism, in terms of Bandera, means friendly relations with those who support Ukraine, a tolerance of those who refer to it with indifference and hostility for those who threaten it. Poland and its people evoke in the 'RS' soldiers friendly feelings; their common enemy is Russia. [25] A very important part of Ukrainian identity within the meaning of 'RS' ideology is religion; the soldiers pray before meals and try to uphold the ideals of brotherhood and mutual respect. This is confirmed by other soldiers who almost always voice the same opinions about the 'RS': honest, disciplined, courageous, for whom the main objective is to stop the Russian intervention in Ukraine. Representatives of the Open Dialog Foundation observed the same during their many visits.

The 'Azov' battalion was initiated by members of the Kharkov organisation 'Patriots of Ukraine' and it assumed the organisation's ideology. It is a nationalist organisation, referred to as fascist by many. Its members themselves describe it as 'social-nationalist'. The ideologues of the organisation who are also members of the regimental headquarters would like to rebuild Ukraine on the notion of 'natiocracy'.

According to this concept, Ukraine would develop beyond the existing political and military alliances, and in internal politics, it would assume restrictions on freedom of speech and association, restrictions on the right to vote and nationalisation of the economy.

The ideology of 'Patriots of Ukraine' raised a lot of controversy among Ukrainians themselves and is not widely supported. Conversations with private soldiers of the 'Azov' regiment showed that only a small percentage was attracted to the military formation due to its ideology: most of the volunteers serving in 'Azov' do so as the regiment has a reputation for being brave and well commanded. [26]

After the recent elections to the Verkhovna Rada, the Ukrainian parliament saw a number of new faces, which became famous due to their activities in the ATO zone. The new MPs also include volunteer battalion commanders, namely: Semen Semchenko ('Donbass'), Yuriy Bereza ('Dnipro-1'), Andriy Biletskyi ('Azov'), Serhiy Melnichuk ('Aidar'). Currently, it is difficult to assess the long-term results of their activities.

5. THE ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF VOLUNTEER BATTALIONS IN THE ATO ZONE

Volunteer battalions were created primarily as units which would support the actions of regular troops. From the very beginning, they demonstrated a very high motivation with varying degrees of training and preparation. Initially, they consisted not only of inexperienced enthusiasts, they constituted, to a great extent, especially among the younger generation, of soldiers. There are no statistics on this, but observations of the ODF correspondent revealed a large number of former professional soldiers and militiamen who, for a variety of reasons (mainly due to the disillusionment with the weakness of the army and pervasive corruption) decided to make use of their experience in the new structures.

In the first period of the anti-terrorist operation, the lack of preparation and appropriate habits among the battalion soldiers was very apparent. One of the officers of the 'Donbas' battalion, previously a professional soldier, revealed in an interview with ODF's correspondent that young volunteers broke all the safety rules associated with moving around the area or maintaining their positions, which they were taught during training. This has led to a situation where the above-mentioned officer, along with his unit, tried to keep a distance of about half a kilometre from the battalion, moving in a column to ensure the safety of his soldiers... [27]

This information was confirmed by young soldiers of 11th Battalion of the Territorial Defence 'Kievsk Rus'. According to one of the soldiers, upon arrival at the ATO area, volunteers often failed to comply with the instructions communicated to them during their basic training – it concerned, amongst other things, the proper way to move around during reconnaissance. It seems that such problems arose due to insufficient training time for inexperienced volunteers who, consequently, weren't able to develop their skills and therefore, were at risk of responding inappropriately in stressful situations. [28]

As practice has shown, in various battalions, the process and the duration of preparation prior to deployment to the ATO zone, differ. The National Guard battalions spent two months on the training ground while territorial defence battalions often limited training time to two weeks. One of the groups of volunteer conscripts of the 11th BTRO 'Kievsk Rus' was sent unprepared to the village of Fashchivka - a battalion position, being shelled by separatists. They were told that "in practice, they will learn everything much faster". [29] Most of the new recruits accepted this method of 'training' because of their previous military experience, but one of the younger recruits resigned from taking up service in the battalion.

Such cases, however, were isolated. In most volunteer battalions, military training has been taken seriously from the start. In this regard, the 'Right Sector' stand out positively – the period of intense preparation lasts no less than three months, and during this time, instructors try to assess volunteers' readiness to participate in combat tasks. According to the instructor from the 'RS' training centre in

Desna, ultimately, no more than 30 percent of those who have begun training, are deployed to the front line, others resign from their membership in the battalions. [30] Consequently, 'DUK' soldiers, who fight in the ATO zone, are famous for being well-trained and effective soldiers, compared to other units, located there.

Doubts about the level of training of volunteer battalions and the related combat value of these units also resulted from a large number of casualties in such volunteer battalions as 'Aidar' or 'Donbass'. Colonel Dmytro Hubskey, deputy commander of 93. Mechanised Brigade is, however, of a different opinion. For many months, his brigade maintained their positions at the Donetsk airport and in Peski, and at that time soldiers collaborated with 'RS' and 'OUN' battalions and the regiment 'Dnipro-1'. He believes that the level of motivation of volunteers from these battalions also positively affected the morale of the soldiers of the regular army, and their enthusiasm caused the latter to learn quickly; consequently, they began to show signs of a high level of training within a short period of time, normally unachievable for soldiers called to arms. According to the commanders of the 93rd Brigade, months of conflict in the east of Ukraine have shown that only the model of a volunteer army, highly motivated and maintaining a high level of morale is effective and worth developing. [31]

High motivation has become the reason for the participation of volunteer battalions in all of the fiercest areas of the ATO zone. Initially, battalions, especially special police battalions and battalions of territorial defence (such as 'Kiev-1', 'Kiev-2' and the 'Dnipro-1' regiment) were to fulfill auxiliary, riot control and protective functions. However, it soon became apparent that the high levels of motivation of soldiers in such battalions led to their high efficiency in carrying out the anti-terrorist operation. In contrast to mobilised soldiers, volunteers are not only willing, but demanding to be sent to the most dangerous places; often, they refuse to go on rotation. The 'Kiev-2' battalion commander (nicknamed 'Sto') refused to withdraw his battalion from the ATO zone due to his belief that no regular army unit would perform the necessary tasks more efficiently at those sections of the front line, maintained by the battalion from the beginning. The Ministry of Defence has taken into account the arguments put forward by the commander and 'Kiev-2' remained in position. [32] In the period between August 2014 and January 2015, the ODF correspondent twice visited the battalion position in the vicinity of the village of Volnovakha and witnessed the high level of motivation of the battalion soldiers in performing tasks in the conflict zone.

Analysis of the situation in the ATO zone over the months of the operation has allowed the assessment of the reasons for the high level of losses in some volunteer battalions. A lack of training in the first period, unnecessary bravado resulting from huge enthusiasm is only part of the truth. As mentioned above, the volunteer battalions were initially assigned to perform auxiliary functions, and so, according to the law, they could not be equipped with heavy weapons. This meant that in the first period of military operations, they were often deprived of artillery support in places where, according to the soldiers - it was necessary.

This problem was raised, among others, by soldiers of the 22nd BTRO in an interview with the ODF correspondent in September, 2014. According to them, in the position near the town of Metalist, they were exposed to continuous shelling by separatists and received no support from the Ukrainian artillery. Also, soldiers of the volunteer battalion 'Donbass', surrounded in Ilovaysk in August and September 2014, did not understand why, despite numerous requests, a command was not given to the Ukrainian army troops, stationed nearby, to employ artillery.

However, developments in the ATO zone in recent months have positively affected the coordination of actions between volunteer battalions and the supporting regular army troops, provided with heavy weapons; long-term fighting at the same positions also improved the quality of cooperation in various sections of the front line. The ODF correspondent had an opportunity to observe such a change. When she arrived in one of the sections of the front line in the summer of 2014, sector M, individual battalions treated each other with suspicion. In December 2014, the correspondent visited the same place and she

observed that between the commanders of individual units, there is a well-functioning task coordination system and that liaison officers met regularly in order to discuss the situation in their sections.

Regardless of problems with weapons and coordination, volunteer battalions probably played a decisive role in stopping the offensive of troops of the so-called separatists, supported by the Russian army. On the northern section of the front line, the 'Aidar' battalion almost singlehandedly fought off the strike of enemy troops and suffered huge losses. On the southern front line, key Ukrainian positions are being maintained by 'Azov' and 'Dnipro-1' regiments. The 'Kiev-1' battalion played a significant role in the liberation of the areas near Slavyansk. The 'Donbass' battalion, one of the most famous battalions in eastern Ukraine, participated in many battles in Donetsk Province and suffered the greatest losses in the so-called Ilovaysk Cauldron (August and September 2014).

ODF observers have watched the military operations in the ATO zone from the beginning and they can confirm the veracity of the opinion, which occasionally appears in the Ukrainian media - if it hadn't been for the volunteer battalions, the Ukrainian army would probably not have succeeded in stopping the offensive of pro-Russian troops. One could state with great confidence that the plan hatched in the Kremlin, assumed that the weaknesses of the Ukrainian army and its command system were there to be exploited. In this case, they were not mistaken, but it is possible that it was the creation of volunteer battalions that made it possible to withstand the first strikes and allowed time for the reorganisation of the army.

The ODF correspondent saw the first volunteers of the 'Donbass' volunteer battalion in April 2014. They were 'armed' with machetes and Molotov cocktails in case their bases were attacked because the process of issuing weapons was becoming protracted. One of the soldiers posed for a photo with a 'spear' – i.e. a knife taped to a wooden stick. At that time, it was difficult to believe that troops equipped in this way, would play a real part in the impending war (no one in the east of Ukraine had any doubts that war was coming). But highly motivated volunteers (initially, the 'Donbass' battalion consisted mostly of inhabitants of Donetsk Province for whom the motivation was to protect their own land) did not give in to apathy, so common in the army at that time. They commandeered their first weapon, disarming a station of local separatists. [\[33\]](#)

It's hard to believe how far they have come within such a short period of time. The volunteer battalions are now a symbol of heroism, courage and professionalism in Ukraine. For separatists and the Russian media: enemy number one.

6. THE FIGHTING PARTIES AND CIVILIAN POPULATION

The pro-Russian media have made volunteer battalions the main target of their attacks. In our opinion, they did this for the reasons mentioned above. It is extremely difficult to fight with highly-motivated soldiers, filled with a sense of patriotism. Ukrainians display huge affection for volunteer battalions, women often refer to them as 'our boys' even if they do not know them. The ATO zone is continuously visited by volunteers who collect all possible aid for the needs of the army - thanks to them volunteer battalions were equipped with uniforms and better prepared for the winter than many of the regular units.

When the conflict began in eastern Ukraine, the Ukrainian army was not prepared for effective actions. While the Ukrainian media spread information about well-equipped units, sent to the ATO zone, practice has shown that soldiers lacked not only bulletproof vests and helmets, but even ordinary socks. When in the media and in parliament discussions returned to corruption in the army, a throng of ordinary citizens began to organise themselves around organisations or groups on social media in order to deliver all necessary items to the front line. Due to the fact that the Ukrainian people united in order to 'feed and clothe' soldiers in the ATO zone in the first period, they could effectively carry out their

tasks while the state structures were dealing with the political crisis in Kiev. This served as confirmation to the international community that opposition against Russian aggression in Ukraine is countrywide.

That is why Russian propagandists stop at nothing in discrediting and slandering battalions. This aggressive propaganda against Ukrainian battalions is primarily directed at the recipients of information in their own country. Not knowing anything about the war in Ukraine from personal experience, the people of Russia accept the version of 'Ukrainian fascists' who kill civilians in the Donbass. According to this version, the government in Kiev has an incomprehensible hatred of everything that is 'Ruthenian' (Russian, but also associated with the Holy Russia - symbolic values which traditionally contrasted with European liberalism), and volunteer battalions are the punitive bodies of the 'junta'. [34]

The Russian media report on the atrocities carried out against civilians by the volunteer battalions. The 'Donbass' battalion, in particular, was subjected to an intense campaign of hate (until the Ilovaysk events), as it was formed largely from residents of eastern Ukraine, and so it did not suit the version of 'banderites' who invaded peaceful inhabitants of the Donbass. And so, they were treated as 'traitors of the Russian/Ruthenian world'. Another battalion, hated by the Russian media, is 'Aidar' which has inflicted heavy losses on separatist troops in the Lugansk Province. The 'Right Sector', holding positions at the Donetsk airport, has also been consistently portrayed in the darkest possible light since the EuroMaidan protests.

All this has contributed to a negative perception of volunteer battalions in eastern Ukraine among the population that has not had the opportunity to meet them. Conversations, carried out before the start of the anti-terrorist operation by the ODF correspondent, revealed that pensioners watching Russian TV channels lived in anticipation of the arrival of 'buses carrying banderites', which they were deathly afraid of. When questioned as to the root cause of the fear or who specifically the 'banderites' were, no one could give an accurate answer, but the power of this propaganda was so great that interlocutors were in no doubt that the threat was real. [35]

Over time, the mythical 'banderites' were replaced by the very volunteer battalions. The so-called separatists, supported by the Russians, seemed, to many people, the only salvation from certain death at the hands of 'fascists'. Stories of cruelty of Ukrainian soldiers, created by the Russian media, sometimes sounded absurd – i.e. the story of 'a refugee from eastern Ukraine', who said that after entering Slavyansk, Ukrainians allegedly crucified a three-year-old boy on the main square of the city and forced people to watch the execution. [36] Despite the fact that this 'revelation' was proven to be false very quickly, [37], [38] (not to mention its utter absurdity), many people still believe it to be true.

A similar situation arose regarding information, being spread via social media, that, in exchange for the victory over the Donbass, volunteers from the National Guard had been promised land belonging to the inhabitants of these lands and two slaves each. [39] This and other false information, distributed *en masse*, still leave part of the civilian population in fear of the entering of the Ukrainian army. Extremely interesting in this context are the testimonies of volunteer battalion soldiers who liberated the territories, previously occupied by separatists. They spoke about the genuine fear of a large element of the local residents who experienced shock when it transpired that the Ukrainian soldiers behave quite differently than they had expected.

The soldiers themselves are aware of the fear that is prompted by their presence and strive to act in a way which will convince residents of eastern Ukraine of their good intentions. Especially in the volunteer battalions, the sense of mission, associated with the presence on the liberated territories, is very high. The 'Kiev-1' battalion remained in Slavyansk after the city was liberated, in order to perform riot-control functions. The battalion was supposed to work with the local police (and, in practice, to control their actions and teach the new approach to the profession). Despite the disappointment with the lack of participation in direct combat operations, soldiers approached the new tasks very seriously. Conversations, carried out regularly with both commanders and private soldiers of the battalion,

showed that they understood the need for them to act as a 'new police', which the society needs after the change of government.

Personal observations of the ODF's observers demonstrate that reports claiming that the volunteer battalions are, by and large, preoccupied with robberies and thefts on the subordinate territories is another line of Russian propaganda, disseminated in order to discredit those battalions. In the vast majority, volunteer formations are full of patriots who went to the ATO zone in order to fight in defence of the integrity of their country. Most frequently, these are conscientious citizens, driven by noble intentions – the probability of such people being involved in robberies is extremely slim.

The majority of the confirmed, single cases of 'appropriation of property' could have motivated by other factors than a desire to become rich. This applies in particular to the frequently cited stories of 'taking away cars'. None of the soldiers that we know have ever used their position in order to get rich. However, in the event of military operations, cars, especially unarmoured, are usually in use in the ATO zone not for months, but for weeks. One of the soldiers of the 'Donbass' battalion, who requested anonymity, said that when they didn't have a car to transport the wounded, they forced locals to give them two cars, and promised to give them back. It was practically extortion because residents were reluctant to surrender their cars for the needs of the army, even for such a purpose. Finally, one of the vehicles was returned undamaged to the owners, and the second remained on the battlefield. The soldier, who told this story, had no doubt that his actions were just, he only regretted that the people valued their property more than the lives of the wounded.

Cases of looting from shops and the taking over of businesses 'under the guise of' battalion soldiers are commonplace. On 31 December, 2014, in Mariupol, an attempted takeover of a chain of shops took place. The perpetrators were wearing military uniforms and badges of the 'Dnipro-1' regiment. The commander of the regiment immediately refuted the rumours about the participation of soldiers in the criminal offence. [41] A similar incident occurred earlier in Kiev in which a man identifying himself as an 'Aidar' soldier, forced a resident of the capital to 'lend' him her car. The perpetrator was arrested and the subsequent investigation showed that he had no relationship with the battalion. [42]

A small number of cases of law infringement by soldiers in the ATO zone were proven, and the cases were referred to the prosecutor's office. On 17 September, 2014, the 'Shakhtyorsk' volunteer battalion was dismantled due to proven allegations of looting, committed by a group of its soldiers. This story confirms the readiness of the Ukrainian authorities to punish violations of the law in the ATO zone.

7. THE TREATMENT OF PEOPLE TAKEN AND HELD CAPTIVE BY BOTH SIDES

In the aforementioned report about the 'Aidar' battalion by Amnesty International, there are suggestions of ill-treatment of prisoners of war by Ukrainian volunteers. However, all available sources indicate that the situation is precisely the opposite: separatists are characterised by incomprehensible cruelty towards prisoners of war, especially towards soldiers of volunteer battalions who have the misfortune to be taken captive. The ODF correspondent gathered testimonies of soldiers from volunteer battalions about their stay in captivity, which point to violations of human rights, the abuse of prisoners and their mutilation.

A female soldier nicknamed 'Masyanya', who, along with other soldiers of the 'Donbass' battalion was taken captive after the battles of Ilovaysk, believes that she only survived thanks to a Russian army officer of Ukrainian origin. According to her, soldiers of 'Donbass' were taken out of the Cauldron into captivity along with regular troops of the Ukrainian army. Their group, surrounded and shelled in the village of Chervonosil'ske, was taken captive by Russian soldiers, who weren't very well acquainted with the differences between volunteer battalions and regular formations, and treated them as prisoners of

war. Meanwhile, local commanders of the 'Army of the Donetsk People's Republic' were carrying out the 'sorting' of prisoners, treating those from the 'Donbass' battalion with the greatest cruelty.

According to 'Masyanya', in a conversation with the aforementioned Russian officer, separatists repeatedly demanded that all the soldiers of volunteer battalions be transferred to them, showing no interest in other prisoners. She is convinced that she escaped torture and possibly death due to the fact that the Russian officer, emotionally uninvolved in the conflict, decided not to hand over the women into the hands of separatists who behave aggressively. He introduced her and her companion, nicknamed 'Stroitel' as his nurses and helped them to get to the territory occupied by the Ukrainian army. [43]

On 26 August, 2014, soldiers of the 'Aidar' volunteer battalion were being bombarded by shells near Lugansk. Of a few soldiers, only the 19-year-old Vasyl Pelysh survived; at the time when separatists found him, he was wounded. According to him, the militants who took him prisoner, humiliated him and beat him heavily, deliberately inflicting more blows to the areas of his body where debris from the projectile had stuck. Then, they began to undress him and at that moment, they uncovered a patriotic tattoo, located on his right shoulder; the tattoo was done during the time of the EuroMaidan protests (a drawing of the state emblem and the lettering 'Glory to Ukraine'). Seeing this, one of the separatists grabbed an axe and cut off the arm bearing the tattoo.

On the verge of bleeding to death, Vasyl was dumped at the door of one of the hospitals in Lugansk, where he spent the next month. According to him, doctors prevented him from being rendered back into the hands of separatists who arrived every day to take the prisoner of war away. He was released thanks to the efforts of many individuals and he is now undergoing treatment. Despite the apparent rapid recovery (even though he cannot fight, he has returned to the ATO zone and is staying with the battalion), psychologists have indicated he is suffering from very deep trauma, which is manifesting itself through increased aggression, depression and anxiety. His rehabilitation will certainly be long-term. [44]

In addition to direct statements of ill-treatment of prisoners of war who fall into the hands of separatists, the latter personally provide evidence of the above publicly. An example of this may be video footage, posted on social media, depicting Ukrainian soldiers who were taken captive on 22 January, 2015, after the armed groups of the so-called 'Donetsk People's Republic' took control of a new airport terminal in Donetsk. This material was found in one of the closed groups of supporters of the so-called 'New Russia' and was distributed by the ODF volunteer as means of revealing the extent of the separatists' cruelty. [45]

In conversations with the ODF correspondent, many soldiers of volunteer battalions expressed the opinion that it is better to die than to fall into the hands of separatists as a prisoner of war. A volunteer of the 'Donbass' battalion nicknamed 'Set' (who comes from the Crimea) reminisced that when he came to the ATO zone, it was one of the things that he was told before his very first engagement with the enemy. For this reason, when his unit was unable to continue the fight near Ilovaysk, he was intending to blow himself up with a hand grenade and had it prepared for use. By chance, he was able to withdraw unnoticed and after two weeks of transversing territories occupied by the pro-Russian troops, he reached the Ukrainian positions. However, during the conversation, he assured our correspondent that, were he to find himself in such a situation again, he would choose death rather than captivity every time, because the latter would probably end in his death anyway. [46] Soldiers in the ATO zone share the opinion that for the volunteer battalions, the chances of returning home from captivity are lower than those of other soldiers.

Reports of the killing of prisoners of war by separatists can be confirmed by yet more video footage, also placed on a social network by separatists. The video footage features Ukrainian soldiers who were taken prisoner near the village of Krasnyi Partyzan on 24 January, 2015. Analysis of the positions of bodies of

the prisoners and the walls, next to which they were sitting, proves that some of them were shot dead. [47] Similar evidence was provided to the public by one of the commanders of an illegal armed formation, Arseniy Pavlov (nicknamed 'Motorola'), who, in a telephone interview with a journalist from the 'Kyiv Post' newspaper admitted that he killed prisoners. [48]

None of the materials available indicate that similar treatment is handed out to prisoners by Ukrainian soldiers. The ATO zone procedure is clear - prisoners of war are handed over to the competent authorities of the Security Service of Ukraine (SBU). During their captivity in places of detention, the ODF correspondent has noted no cases of ill-treatment of prisoners. The latter are also well-fed and provided with necessary medical assistance.

One of the soldiers [49] relayed the story that in July 2014, during a reconnaissance mission in the vicinity of the border with the Russian Federation they came across several soldiers from the Russian Federation army. According to his words, the soldiers were very young and had been found while they were sleeping, unaware that they were on the territory of Ukraine. During their arrest, they were frightened and confused; they testified that they were conscript soldiers, brought to the border area for exercises and were ordered to depart in the appointed direction and maintain position. The narrator stated that despite the ongoing war, the Russians who were taken captive looked more like children dressed in uniforms and aroused feelings of sympathy in the Ukrainian soldiers. In spite of the grounds for their arrest and their transfer to the SBU, the decision was made to escort them to the border and release them.

The observations and conversations, conducted during the year of the conflict have shown that such behaviour is more characteristic of the Ukrainian side than the pro-Russian side. Unjustified cruelty, combined with bullying and the shooting of war prisoners are more and more frequently reported with regard to the so-called army of 'New Russia'. No such cases have been proven on the Ukrainian side. If they do appear, it can be stated with confidence that they are isolated cases.

8. SUMMARY

Ukrainian volunteer battalions are a unique phenomenon in this unique conflict, which has been ongoing in eastern Ukraine. Officially, the events are still not referred to as 'war', but an 'anti-terrorist operation'. Separatists are referred to by the Ukrainian government as 'terrorists', and some battalions are 'special police units', performing tasks in the ATO zone.

Regardless of the terminology, and whether or not or when, martial law will be officially introduced, volunteer battalions have been on the front line. For Ukrainians, they have become a symbol of courage, patriotism and bravery. In promotional materials, aired on Ukrainian television, volunteer battalion soldiers pass through an airport passenger terminal, while people waiting for their flight stand up, applaud and squeeze the hands of the soldiers, departing for the front line. [50] This short, but poignant social advertisement has been prepared for the project 'Come back alive', which raises funds in support of volunteer battalions. It shows very aptly the attitude the Ukrainian community towards volunteer soldiers. The ODF correspondent has witnessed numerous times situations in which people on the streets have approached soldiers returning from the ATO zone and thanked them for what they do, handing them flowers and symbolic gifts.

This widespread recognition enjoyed by volunteer battalions seems justified in the light of the gathered observations. Volunteer battalions are a 'product' of a new civil society, which was born on the Maidan. Under the conditions of Ukrainian army's paralysis in decision-making, which was evident in the first period of the ATO, soldiers of volunteer battalions faced the major impact of enemy forces, often operated by *fait accompli* and with a feeling that the state did not support them.

The role of the state in this period was assumed by the society. Uniforms, helmets, bulletproof vests, food supplies, sleeping bags - in fact, everything, often including weapons, was bought by the Ukrainians and the soldiers themselves. A huge crowd of volunteers saw to it that the soldiers had the minimum necessary items: food products, equipment. The Open Dialog Foundation has actively participated in providing aid to volunteer battalions, which took it upon themselves to counter the strike of the armed troops of the so-called separatists, supported by the Russian regular army. [51], [52]

According to the plans, distributed on the territory of Ukraine as early as in 2012, eastern provinces of the Ukrainian state were to be 'spontaneously' combined into a new state – 'New Russia', and its army was to take up the offensive towards Kiev in order to restore the 'legitimate' president Yanukovich, overthrown as a result of the revolution. One of the activists of the Ukrainian educational organisation in Krasnoarmiysk (Donetsk Province) told the ODF correspondent that a year before the 'spontaneous' development of separatist movements in March 2013, they had already heard about training organised for activists of 'New Russia', which people of the city attended. Later, they became the leaders of the separatist movement in Krasnoarmiysk. One can state with a high degree of probability that if it hadn't been for the creation and operation of volunteer battalions, given the disastrous state and slow response time of the Ukrainian army, these plans wouldn't have had a chance of success.

After a year of armed conflict in Ukraine, one can certainly say that over that time, a lot has changed for the better. Volunteer battalions are cooperating with state structures more and more efficiently. A lot of changes have been implemented in the Armed Forces of Ukraine; the staff work more efficiently and quicker. Soldiers of the volunteer battalions gained experience and became trained soldiers.

Unfortunately, the analysis of the situation in the ATO zone shows that, despite the effective resistance that the Kremlin plan's implementers encountered in Ukraine, they still haven't abandoned schemes for a long-term intervention. Soldiers, located on the front line, are very sceptical about the ceasefire agreement, signed in Minsk on 11 February, 2015 and they believe that the ceasefire will be used by Russia - as was the case before - to prepare a new strike. In this situation, the support of volunteer battalions fighting in the ATO zone is not only an important act of solidarity with our neighbour, fighting for the integrity of its borders, but is also in line with the interests of Poland and other countries of the European Union.

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