

From civic activism to armed violence
The case of Ukrainian volunteer combatants of the war in Donbas
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Taras¹ was born in 1988 in Kiev and works in the IT sector. In the spring of 2014, he decided to fight in the Donbas region as a volunteer. He sums up the events in Ukraine during the winter of 2013-2014 and his decision to go and fight in these words:

"When the Kremlin saw that Ukraine refused to be integrated into Russia, that Ukraine said "No, we want European values. We want to live as in the European Union, according to its democratic principles, and we go out on the Maidan, and we will not give up. We are ready to defend all this. When the Kremlin understood this, when Putin understood this, there was Maidan, well more exactly, there was in response the escalation on Maidan, the murders on Maidan, Crimea and the war. That's it... Because all this is linked. [...] Then I thought about Maidan, how hard it was, how much it had cost the Ukrainian people, how many people had lost their lives... I told myself that I had to protect my land too..."

For Taras, the conflict that broke out in the spring of 2014 is not a starting point. It is part of a broader chronology that begins in the winter of 2013-2014 at the time of the Maidan mobilization. He describes this entire period as an escalation of violence that culminates with military operations in the Donbas region in the eastern part of Ukraine. As a response to this escalation, armed violence became a relevant choice. Moreover, his testimony shows the multidimensional aspect of his engagement. The armed violence appears to be quite a logical and natural choice; he feels an individual responsibility in the defense of the Ukrainian territory. But by invoking the Ukrainian people and the sacrifices they have faced he also gives a collective dimension to his engagement.

The way in which Taras articulates his individual decision to a collective story invites us to analyze the engagement process of Ukrainian volunteer combatants in the Donbas war. How does armed violence gradually impose itself as a mode of action for individuals? How do individuals acquire violent skills? What are the grounds for individual's armed engagement? To answer these questions, it can be helpful to analyze people's engagement as a process in order to include a chronological perspective (Fillieule, 2001). This article will therefore address the question of the engagement to armed violence by Ukrainian citizen volunteers in the war in Donbas. We will show that the engagement of Ukrainian volunteer combatants in the Donbas war is the result of a process of radicalization understood as "a shift in beliefs, feelings and behaviors in directions that increasingly justify inter-group violence and require sacrifice in defense of the in-group" (McCauley, Moskalenko, 2008 p.416). This article is based on interviews with volunteer combatants. They were conducted during two field surveys in spring and summer 2019 in several Ukrainian cities.

The issue of armed violence has been mainly addressed in two fields of academic literature. On the one hand in the field of sociology of mobilizations. Several works have focused on the political violence used by some specific groups (Sommer 2008; Della Porta 2006; Crettiez 1999; 2010) and on the challenges faced by those

¹ The names of the combatants have been changed.

groups when it comes to put an end to clandestinity. But since September 11, 2001, political violence has been analyzed mainly through the prism of terrorism and considered terrorist violence as a specific academic field (Jerrold M Post 2005). On the other hand, in the field of war studies academic literature focused on international Disarmament, Demobilization, Reintegration (DDR) programs from a macro perspective (Stedman 1997; McMullin, Jaremey 2012; Duclos 2018; Mac Ginty 2010). More recently, numerous sociological works have favored a bottom-up approach that focused on individual trajectories of former combatants. These authors have conducted an analysis of post-conflict situations through customs and practices (Debos 2013; Grajales and Jouhannau 2019; Baczko, Dorronsoro, and Quesnay 2016; Le Huérou and Sieca-Kozłowski 2010). As for the Ukrainian case, recent works described citizen engagement in the Maidan mobilization during the winter of 2013-2014 (Goujon and Shukan 2015) and attempted to understand the political evolution during this period (Minakov 2020; Colin Lebedev 2015; Kuzio 2016). After the war started in the Donbas, a few works accounted for the dynamics and conditions of engagement at the beginning of the Donbas war (Colin Lebedev 2017). This article aims to further develop the understanding of the Ukrainian case by showing that the analysis of citizens' engagement in the armed conflict needs to consider the political events of winter 2013-2014.

1 From the mobilization on Maidan to the war in Donbas

On November 21, 2013, Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich announced his refusal to sign the long-planned association agreement with the European Union. This refusal marks the beginning of the mobilization of Maidan, in reference to the Independence Square in Kiev (*Maidan Nezalezhnosti*) which has been the epicenter of the protest during the whole period. The mobilization lasted until the end of February 2014 and was marked by an escalation of violence from December 2013, culminating in February 2014 with the death of more than a hundred protesters, shot dead by the authorities. The Ukrainian president finally left the country on February 22, 2014. At the same time, anti-Maidan protests emerged in the southern and eastern part of the country, particularly in the Donbas region, and led to clashes with pro-Maidan protesters. These clashes are the result of mutual incomprehension about what the Maidan mobilization represents (Colin Lebedev 2015). Anti-Maidan demonstrators do not necessarily recognize themselves in this desire for emancipation from the Soviet past. In this industrialized region the Soviet time represents a period of significant economic development and is therefore associated with a certain prosperity. Pro-Maidan protesters do not understand why part of the population in the east and south are reluctant to democratic and freedom values, that they consider universal (Colin Lebedev 2015). In addition, Russia has played an important role in the escalation in the Donbas by instrumentalizing fears via a massive disinformation campaign on Russian television, which remains the main information channel for part of the Donbas population.

These clashes between pro and anti-Maidan reached a new stage when unidentified armed men arrived on the Crimean Peninsula and took over the local administration. After a referendum illegitimate in many ways, the Crimean Peninsula is annexed by the Russian Federation. On the occasion of the first anniversary of the annexation in 2015, President Vladimir Putin acknowledged the participation of Russian militaries in the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. In late February and early March 2014, clashes also took place in the Donbas region. In March, armed men seized the administrations of two cities, Donetsk and Luhansk, and declared the creation of two self-proclaimed separatist republics: the Donetsk People's Republic and the Luhansk People's Republic. In April 2014, the Ukrainian authorities launch military operations in eastern Ukraine to regain control over the separatist territories. But this operation entered a new phase and turned into an armed conflict that opposes the Ukrainian army and separatist troops supported militarily and economically by the Russian Federation. In two months, Ukraine lost control over 7% of its territory. When the armed conflict started in Donbas, the Ukrainian army was in bad condition and unable to face the separatist threat. The engagement of citizens in self-formed pro-Ukrainian volunteer battalions prevented the Ukrainian state from collapsing (Minakov, 2018). In the spring of 2014 volunteer battalions appeared all over Ukraine. They were supplied and equipped by civil society via volunteer networks. This shift to armed violence by part of the population was legitimized by the Ukrainian state, which encouraged the formation of these battalions and gradually integrated them into the regular armed forces. We will see first that in the context of the winter of 2013-2014, violence is gradually erupting in the daily life of individuals. The violence of the repression forced citizens to urgently acquire violent skills. It is this gradual radicalization that makes it possible for individuals to consider turning to armed violence when the armed conflict breaks out in the Donbas. Second, we will analyze how people engage and the meaning they give to their engagement.

2 The irruption of violence into the daily lives of individuals

2.1 Violence as a structuring element of the Maidan mobilization

When the war in Donbas broke out in the spring of 2014, citizens had already been confronted for several months with episodes of violence unseen in the history of independent Ukraine. The occupation of Independence Square was marked by repressive episodes on the part of the authorities that brought violence into the daily lives of ordinary citizens. On the night of November 29-30, 2013, the police gave the order to evacuate the square and violently beat the demonstrators. The violence of the repression by the authorities against the demonstrators, many of whom were young students, gathered peacefully in the square deeply shocked the population, who identified with the victims of the repression. Hundreds of thousands of people gathered in the square the following Sunday and demanded the resignation of the president and his government. Taras was on the square since the first day. In this extract, he tells how the violence of the repression affected people around him:

Taras: *Then there was the beating of students, that's it, and there was an escalation on the Maidan, and I participated. Of course, I followed what was happening, we all followed what was happening. And a lot of my friends started to follow more closely, well... they started to be interested, and became more involved in... the politics we'll say, because it was really the heart, the quintessence of the movement at that time.*

The night of the 29th to the 30th gave a new impulse to the mobilization but also gave it a more political dimension. From this date on, violence became a structuring element of the mobilization. The movement turns into a sustained occupation that "reveals the existence of two distinct rival blocs advancing incompatible claims to control the state and the rallying of a significant fraction of the population, subject to the jurisdiction of that state, to the claims of each bloc in the square protected at its margins by barricades erected by citizens" (Goujon and Shukan citing Tilly 2015). The occupation of the square is organized around a daily routine. A stage stands on one side of the square and anyone can come and speak. On the other side, large tents representing the different cities of Ukraine are set up to accommodate those who live on the square. The square is surrounded by barricades made of various objects: pieces of wood, snow, sand, etc. The demonstrators go there for a few hours or more and take part in small daily tasks or in the defense of the square and its surroundings:

Mykhaylo: *I was not in a century². I just came in the evening. I came almost every day because we were afraid that there would be attacks. So, I would come at night... until three or four in the morning, I was on Maidan, I did rounds, I did what I could here and there when I needed to, and then I went home to sleep for a few hours. That was my daily life.*

Moreover, up to this point, the vast majority of the demonstrators had not been involved in any political activity whatsoever³. The enclosed space of the square and the revolutionary routine give rise to a politicization from below based on a strong sense of solidarity between citizens present on the square. Going to the square is almost a performative act of politicization.

Taras: *It was so incredible and beautiful to see how people organized themselves together, people who had never done this before, who didn't care about Maidan, politics and all that.*

In response to the mobilization, the authorities kept using repression as the main mean of action. Citizens experienced violence intimately, but also as a mode of collective action.

2.2 Learning violent skills to respond to the repression

The violence of the repression leads to a gradual militarization of Independence Square and a routinization of violence among the demonstrators, who have to acquire

² Century is the name given to defense groups created to defend the square.

³ Poll conducted by *Democratic Initiative with the support of the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology* on December 7 and 8 2013. <https://dif.org.ua/article/maidan-december-and-maidan-february-what-has-changed>

violent skills in order to defend themselves. On the night of December 10 to 11, 2013, the authorities attempted an assault on the square. From then on, demonstrators organized the resistance to the repression. A Self-Defense Service is formed, composed of men, mostly ordinary citizens but also veterans of the Afghan war. Although it is not professional, the self-defense service takes up some of the codes of warfare: organization in centuries, shields and helmets, Molotov cocktails. Although Independence Square remains the epicenter of the mobilization, other initiatives from below are being set up in some neighborhoods to confront the titushkys⁴:

Taras "At the same time, we started to do guards, we were patrolling our neighborhoods. I come from the west of Kyiv, at that time I lived in the Akademgorodok metro. And there were titushkys who came from the suburbs. [...] The titushkys came by bus, and people organized in the neighborhood, it was unprecedented and unbelievable to see all the inhabitants of the neighborhood, the gopnikis⁵, everyone united, all... the alcoholics, the nerds, all together, we all united in fact... We took what we could find in our homes, sticks, air rifles, and we organized ourselves, we divided the neighborhood, and we did patrols. There were a lot of people. We organized ourselves, we patrolled the neighborhood... There were incidents... because we were divided into groups, the place was big: "oh we see a group of people! It must be them! We go there!... Oh no! They are ours! So, we thought about a password to recognize each other. If I'm not mistaken, it was "Aka" and the answer was "Dem", because we are in Akadem⁶. "

On January 19, 2014, the movement became more radical and entered a first insurrection phase when a group of demonstrators headed from Independence Square to the Parliament, located a few blocks from Maidan. The riot police (*Berkuts*) stopped the demonstrators on Hrouchevski street. Clashes between demonstrators and law enforcement began and continued and ended up on January 22 with three demonstrators killed by the authorities. The violence reached its peak in February. The authorities launched a new operation killing about a hundred demonstrators. These people were declared martyrs of the revolution. Despite the flight of President Viktor Yanukovich on February 22, 2014, the situation did not settle down. In February, anti-Maidan rallies took place in Crimea, and at the end of the month armed men appeared on the peninsula and took over local administrations. Whether or not individuals were in Crimea at the time, the annexation of the peninsula represents a major collective trauma. Taras lives in Kiev and was closely monitoring the situation in Crimea after the first anti-Maidan protests took place on the peninsula. He vividly discussed the situation there on social media with some of his Russian friends in Moscow. As they could not agree on what was going on there, he and his friend from Moscow decided

⁴ Titushkys – in reference to Vadym Titushko, condemned for assaulting a journalist – are groups of people recruited by the authorities and that aim to disrupt peaceful demonstrations.

⁵ Gopnik is negative term that designate young people from the working class and is associated to petty crimes.

⁶ One of Kyiv districts

to go to Crimea to see with their own eyes what was happening. They ended up in Sevastopol in March 2014.

Taras: We watched carefully; we saw men with automatic weapons guarding the buildings... They were controlling everything. Officers with... well, Russian symbols walking around... I said to him [his friend], "Well? What do you still not understand? Here, look! ". But of course... I couldn't really persuade him that it was all wrong etc., that it wasn't right. But at least I could understand why he could not change his mind. For me it was hard... to accept that my friend with such liberal ideas... he was always against the regime, against all the negative things in Russia... At that moment he recognized "you know, yes, actually there is a tiny part of this imperialism that burns in me and approves all this..." [...] That's it, (pause) that was Crimea.

People living in Crimea also felt helpless when they saw local authorities suddenly pledge allegiance to Russian authorities while a few weeks before they were loyal to Ukrainian authorities. Milan is from Kherson, a city in the south of the country, not far from Crimea. He was working in a bar in a small town not far from Sevastopol when the annexation occurred. This is how he experienced the referendum:

Milan "At the time of the referendum, the mayor was in our restaurant with his staff [...]. And he was constantly in contact with people, he was given the participation rate, or maybe the results... I don't know... he was constantly on the phone, and extremely nervous. And I was behind the bar. [...] And so I was following all of this. He was nervous and I was nervous too. He must have noticed that I was nervous because he said, "Milan, why are you so nervous? Crimea is the first step and then it will be Kherson! ". And... well, I was at work. I couldn't show my emotions or my opinions, but I realized that my face was changing and that... I had a forced smile. That was it. And finally, they drank to the success of the referendum. They said: "We were ready to do what was necessary, but we didn't even have to..."

Anti-Maidan movements gradually emerged in eastern Ukraine. Artem was just 21 years old in the spring of 2014 and was living in his Dnipropetrovsk (now Dnipro), his hometown.

Artem: I come from Dnipro, formerly Dnipropetrovsk, and it is, let's say, until today, a pro-Russian enclave. It is a city that has oscillated, that has had difficulty choosing sides, that has had difficulty knowing who to defend, because in this city it is half pro-Ukrainian, half pro-Russian. We had our Maidan. We met every Sunday in a district and the anti-Maidan in another part of the city. We were in peace, it went well, they did not bother us, we did not bother them. Then we got the information that separatists wanted to take over the regional administration of Dnipro. So, we went to the administration building and protected it. [...] I thought it over at that moment because honestly, there were not more than thirty of us protecting the Ukrainian institution. And two policemen. They locked themselves in a small room and waited. And we were

there, I had a bicycle chain, with a stick, I mean we were rather... we were waiting for them, come on, we're going to burn you all, I remember that the atmosphere was like that. And we were waiting for them! But they were many, many more... What could we do? ... The local authorities were gone; everything was allowed there ... - anarchy. Real anarchy! You could do whatever you wanted in this city. You could rob banks. The police just didn't do anything! That's all there was to it. That day was the first time I saw a gun. I had never been in the military, so guns... and I saw a Kalashnikov assault rifle for the first time.

People may have been directly exposed to violence or simply witnessed it from afar. But this experience further developed a horizontal solidarity with fellow citizens and made it possible for the demonstrators to envisage the use of violence in the name of this solidarity. At the end of these long months, armed violence does not seem extraordinary or particularly transgressive. The repression by Ukrainian authorities, the Russian aggression and the flight of the authorities in certain cities pushed individuals to act together, between citizens, and to take part in the defense of their fellow citizens. The way individuals got engaged in the Donbas war vary from one person to the other, however this engagement does not appear as transgressive in a context when the state partly encouraged citizen's engagement. This is what we will attempt to develop in the third part.

3 The transition to armed violence

3.1 Modality of engagement

At the beginning of the armed conflict, the army was understaffed but also under-trained and under-equipped (Colin Lebedev, 2017). In addition to professional military personnel, mobilized people⁷ and volunteer combatants played a key role in the armed conflict. Indeed, citizens enrolled starting from March 2014 and provided the Ukrainian military with valuable support. Mobilized people and volunteer combatants have two options: either join the regular army or join the self-formed battalions. These self-formed battalions are not a paramilitary alternative to the Ukrainian army, they were mostly formed hand in hand with the regular army and integrated into the Ministry of Defense or the Ministry of the Interior during the first months of the war. Only a few battalions were not integrated into the regular armed forces. Between the end of February 2014 and May 2014, the Ukrainian state partially lost its monopoly on its attributes and in particular the monopoly of legitimate violence. To consolidate its legitimacy and ensure greater efficiency, the temporary government allowed civil society – understood here as self-organized groups of citizens formed in the winter of 2013-2014 and which remained active after Yanukovich's flight – to partially take over the state mandate (Minakov, 2020). Therefore, by taking over these functions, civil society acted as close as possible to its *raison d'être* and prevented the Ukrainian state from collapsing, but at the same time pushed back the competences of the state.

⁷ In total, the government launched six waves of mobilization between 2014 and 2015.

For individuals, the choice of the structure in which they are going to fight is made according to subjective criteria. Quite often volunteers start by going to the local military commissariat to join the Ukrainian armed forces. But the disorganization and even denigration of the military personnel make them turn to self-formed battalions. Sometimes they turn to these battalions because they do not fit for combat in the regular army:

Bohdan: I went to the military office, but I was rejected because of my health. I was told that they could take me but that I would be in charge of the local military office in Dnipro or something like that. But I wasn't really interested. So, I went to "Dnipro 1". But there, same thing... Because of my health, I'm not fit for combat, I was discharged. They refused me too. And so, I was left with only two..., there were still other places where I was refused. So, there I was, I was refused in several places and I had two possibilities left: "Karpatska sich", I don't know if you know, from the organization "Svoboda", they were definitely not legal and "Azov". And Karpatska Sich, it didn't reassure me too much... I mean I had the number of the commander, I called him, we had visited him in Menchikova⁸ when he had been wounded. Well, I called him: "Hello. I would like to join you. What do I need for that? Any particular documents?" He answered: "Well, your passport and that's all! And come and join us!". (he laughs) and at that time it was completely incomprehensible to me. You were not registered, the salary, not a word about it. Of course, the money wasn't the most important thing at that time, the most important thing was that if something happened to me, if I got hurt or, God forbid, if I died... My mother doesn't have a lot of income, and I wouldn't want my choice to affect her, I wouldn't like her to have to pay for it. So, because of all that, it didn't suit me. So, I chose Azov⁹ because we were registered, we had a minimum wage. We made (not quite legally) a certificate that I was fit. I was accepted and I went there. But they took a long time to register me. There were problems. There were a lot of people and at that time it was a battalion so the number of places was limited and so they couldn't officially register everyone. So, I went six months without being registered... Well, that's how it was... (he smiles) I mean Azov was a bit of a mess...

Bohdan's testimony shows the failure of the authorities to respond to his desire for engagement. Paradoxically enough it is the disorganization and informal dimension of the beginning of the war that allow him to take an active part in the conflict. Taras took the time to ask his friends for advice. What matters to him is to find a place which is convenient for him:

Taras: "I looked at everything, I read Semenchenko's¹⁰ post on Facebook, which said, 'Donbas Battalion is recruiting people, we have to do something, there is no one else' and... I thought that yes, we have to do something. That's it. I

⁸ Military hospital in Dnipro

⁹ The Azov battalion is a self-formed battalion that has been integrated to the ministry of the interior then to the National Guard.

¹⁰ Semen Semenchenko was the commander of the Donbas Battalion in 2014.

thought about it in the evening, and the next day I went there, so it was in Novye Petrovtsy, near Kyiv, in the north, to see what was going on there, to talk, because I am a rational, reasonable person. Going somewhere in the woods to become a partisan is not for me. Besides, I didn't go to the army for health reasons. ... and then, I knew what to do with my life, I earned a living, it was not a quest for adventure, it was not an emotional decision, but I thought about Maidan, how difficult it was, how much it cost Ukrainians, how many people gave their lives for it... I felt that I had to protect my land too... That's why I asked about the battalions, I asked around the guys who were in charge of recruiting in the battalions what was waiting for us. They said there would be training, the battalion would have training, weapons, and be deployed in combat. That was it. I did my research, came home, finished what I had to do, quit my job, packed my backpack, told my parents I was going to a barbecue for a few days, and joined the battalion. "

Regardless of the choice of the structure, the use of armed violence is not seen as transgressive from an individual perspective. In their view, it is a response to an emergency situation that the Ukrainian state has not been able to control. Moreover, the state emphasized the decisive role of volunteer combatants at the beginning of the conflict and as a consequence partially renounced its monopoly of violence. The violent context of the preceding months and the attitude of the authorities both contribute to the fact that the transition to armed violence is not necessarily experienced as a turning point (Abbott 2009).

3.2 How do combatants perceive their armed engagement?

Even if the engagement in armed violence is not perceived as a turning point, it implies biographical consequences. For that matter, it can be helpful to analyze together the retribution of the engagement and the way combatants perceive their engagement. During the first months of the war, the combatants lacked everything: material, food, equipment. Some of them were not registered and could therefore not claim compensation when they returned to civilian life. The retribution for their engagement is therefore mainly symbolic: in the context of 2014, volunteer combatants have a special aura in Ukrainian society and their engagement gives them a heroic status. In an ex-post justification of their engagement, many combatants use this heroic aura and give their engagement a sacrificial and moral dimension in the name of the community.

Mykhaylo: "I think some people are brought up like that, in a more selfish way - they think about themselves, their family maybe. ... Some people don't care, some people say, "but why should I do this to help the state?" I said, "what does the State have to do with it?" What counted most for was when I saw that many people were starting to die! But they are killing our neighbors, we must go and help! I didn't think I was going to fight, I thought I was going to help! I remember, I said to myself "they kill our neighbors", that's my education."

Mykhailo refers to his education, which he believes led him to do this. What is striking in his story is the way he refers to his engagement: it is, from his point of view, an expression of solidarity with a vulnerable part of the population.

Volodymyr: Why did I go to fight? Because Russia attacked us! What do you mean? Well, it's my... I mean, I wouldn't respect myself if I didn't go to defend my country.

Volodymyr also has the idea of solidarity, which is not based on education but on a certain sense of honor. For Andriy, it is more a question of duty:

Andriy: It is very simple; a war broke out in my country. If a man has no problem with taking up arms and going to fight, he should do it. Frankly for me it was very simple.

The heroic aura of the combatants is also accompanied by a sense of agentivity which was particularly salient on the Maidan. The citizens there developed an "ability to act together voluntarily" (Dubar, 2000, citing Linton). Mykhaylo says it well: this has nothing to do with the state, but with fellow citizens. It is about acting together according to solidarity values in a horizontal and transparent organization. However, we see that their engagement is more a balance between collective responsibility and more personal choices:

Bohdan: "I think that if someone gives you a specific reason why he went to fight, he is not really being honest. He's not telling the truth, because in reality you need a whole bunch of reasons to go. Well, first of all, it's about testing yourself. Can I do it? Am I not going to chicken out? And secondly, there is of course the country, Ukraine, it is a question of patriotism of course. And there are also a million other reasons. "

Viktor wanted to leave since 2014. Yet he chose to stay and take care of his family life, which was his priority at that time. He articulates his engagement with his personal life:

Milan: It wasn't that simple. It wasn't that simple at home. I understood that I couldn't leave my family and follow all my desires. [...] So I opened a bakery. [...] I come from Crimea and when I lived there, I learned to make tandoor cakes, they are local specialties. It wasn't that easy. Then I realized that I didn't have to worry about my family anymore and that it was time to leave.

The transition to armed violence by volunteer combatants does not seem to be experienced by the actors as something unusual, as a radical choice. Even if the combatants express various motivations to justify their choice, they all seem to be coherent both on an individual and a collective scale: their engagement is in the name of solidarity and a sense of duty. However, this decision is made in a specific context is reinforced which is that of winter 2013-2014, marked by a series of violent episode that people experienced directly or indirectly. For many of them, the Maidan mobilization was a period of initiation to violence, after which the transition to armed violence appears to be less transgressive.

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