

## Proxy agents, auxiliary forces, and sovereign defection: assessing the outcomes of using non-state actors in civil conflicts

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### Abstract

This article interrogates the role of non-state armed actors in the Ukrainian civil conflict. The aim of this article is twofold. First, it seeks to identify the differences between the patterns of military intervention in Crimea (direct, covert intervention), and those in the South-East (mixed direct and indirect–proxy–intervention). It does so by assessing the extent of Russian troop involvement and that of external sponsorship to non-state actors. Second, it puts forward a tentative theoretical framework that allows distinguishing between the different outcomes the two patterns of intervention generate. Here, the focus is on the role of non-state actors in the two interventionist scenarios. The core argument is that the use of non-state actors is aimed at *sovereign defection*. The article introduces the concept of *sovereign defection* and defines it as *a break-away from an existing state*. To capture the differences between the outcomes of the interventions in Crimea and South-East, sovereign defection is classified into two categories: *inward* and *outward*. Outward sovereign defection is equated to the territorial seizure of the Crimean Peninsula by Russian Special Forces, aided by existing criminal gangs acting in an auxiliary capacity. Inward sovereign defection refers to the external sponsorship of the secessionist rebels in South-East Ukraine and their use as proxy forces with the purpose of creating a political buffer-zone in the shape of a frozen conflict. To demonstrate these claims, the article analyses the configuration of the dynamics of violence in both regions. It effectively argues that, in pursuing sovereign defection, the auxiliary and proxy forces operate under two competing dynamics of violence, *delegative* and *non-delegative*, with distinct implications to the course and future of the conflict.

**Keywords** Proxy war proxy agent auxiliary force Ukraine sovereign defection civil war

Accounts of the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula to the Russian Federation in March 2014 emphasized primarily its swift character (Snegovaya 2015), while pointing towards the coming of age of a shift in Russian contemporary warfare (Karber 2015) that had been on its way since the move towards what Major-General Vladimir Slipchenko called 'sixth generation of warfare' (Kipp 2012). Serhiy Kunitsyn, the ex-premier of Crimea and former Permanent Representative of the President of Ukraine to Crimea, recalls to have been the last bulwark of the legitimate Ukrainian Government there at the time:

I came to the office of the Crimean union of Afghan war veterans, where we decided to stand as a shield between the Russian and Ukrainian troops, and half an hour later the building was blocked and Aksyonov's<sup>1</sup> bands led by the 'green men' began to storm it. (Kunitsyn 2014)

What started as protests in late November 2013 (Grytsenko and Walker 2013), and escalated into violent demonstrations over the course of the following months (Kramer and Higgins 2014), effectively turned into an internationalized civil war<sup>2</sup> with the annexation of Crimea and the eruption of armed hostilities in the South-Eastern regions of Donetsk and Lugansk.

At the centre of the rapid escalation of violence was the involvement of Special Forces (Galeotti 2015), volunteer groups such as the far-right Azov and Donbass battalions (Reuters 2015), and paramilitary configurations such as the organizationally reformed and party-turned Right Sector (Kozłowska 2014). The national and international media paid great attention to the issue. While some reports raised significant questions about their actions, others focused on their origins (Lipsky 2014; Shevchenko 2014). Yet, the main interest was in the so-called 'little green men' and less in the self-defence forces accompanying them, on the rebel groups in the South-East or on the armed volunteers helping the Ukrainian army.

Moreover, in their investigative pursuits, accounts of the developments collapsed under the same label different types of armed groups, or employed labels in an interchangeable fashion. 'Special Forces', 'proxy agents', 'surrogate militias', 'state-sponsored terrorists', 'satellite groups', 'insurgents' and 'auxiliaries' became synonymous, despite referring to stand-alone entities with fundamentally different roles in the conflict.

With President Vladimir Putin's admitting the 'little green men' in Crimea were Russian Special Forces (Donaldson 2014), academic research swiftly moved to correcting the existing incongruities surrounding the military operations in Crimea. Karagiannis made the case for understanding Crimea's annexation as a result of 'a covert operation with Special Forces and a local Pro-Russian militia in Crimea' (2014, 409). Galeotti noted that 'while claiming to be a local militia, this well-armed and highly professional unit turned out to be the first deployment of operators from the KSO (Special Operations Command)' (2015, 50), and Cimbala explained that instead of an overt military intervention, 'Russia occupied Crimea with special operations troops, supported by already deployed forces' (2014, 359). Similarly, Hansen analysed the interplay of military action and propaganda, advancing the idea of a 'minimal action space' designed 'to deter adversaries from investing in the conflict and to reap the benefits of victory' (2015, 153). Lastly, research such as that of Bartles and McDermott integrated the role of the Special Forces in the overall process of Russian military modernization and transformation (2015).

Despite the literature covering significant ground at a fast pace, key questions on the origins and role of the local self-defence forces, the volunteer groups and, most importantly, the state-sponsored insurgents in the South-East remain unanswered. The puzzle concerning this article links these entities to their function in the armed conflict and to the external support they receive. As the 'little green men' also became involved in the armed hostilities in Donetsk and Lugansk (Luhn 2014; Vlasova and Miller 2014), and as groups of armed volunteers, such as the 'men in black' (Euromaidan press 2014) or Semen Semenchenko's Donbas battalion, reinforced the response of the Ukrainian army, paying closer attention to

the morphology of actors involved in Ukraine's conflict setting is imperative for both policy-making and academic considerations. The aim of this article is twofold: first, to comparatively evaluate the types of military interventions in Crimea and the South-East, and, second, to provide a theoretical framework that allows distinguishing between the outcomes of the events in Crimea and those in South-Eastern Ukraine by looking at the role of the non-state armed groups. In doing so, the article engages in the wider ongoing debate on the changes in Russian warfare (Johnson 2015; Thornton 2015) which has emphasized the emergence of a type of 'hybrid warfare' (Brun 2010; Rojanki and Kofman 2015; Sinovets and Renz 2015) and have put forward the idea of the development of a novel 'full-spectrum conflict' (Jonsson and Seely 2015).

To this end, after assessing the intervention patterns, the article develops a tentative theoretical framework that might help with ordering the variation in empirical observations on the violence in Crimea versus that in South-East Ukraine, and with providing a more integrated account of concurring explanations of the situation. At the centre of the article is the claim that the use of non-state armed actors for the projection of political violence in Ukraine is aimed at *sovereign defection*. The article introduces the concept of *sovereign defection* as a novel analytical tool for assessing the outcomes of using non-state armed actors in both interventionist scenarios. It is defined here as *a break-away from an existing state*. To capture the difference between the purpose of the application of violence in Crimea and that in the South-East, sovereign defection is classified into two categories: *inward* and *outward*. The latter refers to a physical, territorial breakaway, the former to a political, ideological one. Outward sovereign defection equates to the territorial seizure and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russian Special Forces, aided by existing criminal gangs. Inward sovereign defection refers to the external sponsorship of the secessionist rebels in South-East Ukraine with the purpose of creating a political buffer-zone in the shape of a frozen conflict. To demonstrate these claims, the article analyses the dynamics of violence in both regions. It effectively argues that in pursuing sovereign defection, the use of non-state armed actors frames two competing dynamics of violence, which the article labels *delegative* and *non-delegative*. At the core of these concepts is the idea of delegation of the practice of violence to third parties. It originates in the Principal-Agent theory which has approached delegation as a transactional enterprise focused on maximizing utility and shifting responsibility on the basis of a contractual agreement. As Gilardi argues, the standard view is that 'a principal wishes a given task to be executed but lacks the expertise or time to perform it and therefore delegates it to an agent, which gets the job done in exchange of remuneration' (2008, 29). In this case, delegation is defined in relation to authority: 'the use of the term "delegation", [...], is meant to suggest no more than a "transfer of authority"' (Donnelly 2007, 3); or as 'the process by which the principal offers a "conditional grant of authority" to an agent to act on their behalf (Byman and Kreps 2010, 3). In conflict research, however, delegation has been used to refer to the empowerment of third parties as a cost-saving device and to indicate 'that external actors play an important role in shaping the insurgency and exert control over it' (Salehyan 2010, 501). Specifically, in the process of delegation, 'states (principals) will sometimes wish to retain foreign policy autonomy and will decide against backing insurgent groups' (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 711), and, in doing so, 'their willingness to back such groups will depend on the costs of direct military action and the states' ability to select and monitor appropriate agents' (Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011, 711). As such, the article explains the variation in the outcomes of the situations in Crimea and the South-East by differentiating between delegative and non-delegative dynamics of violence. Specifically, it argues that delegating violence to non-state actors is observed in the South-East and is linked to promoting inward sovereign defection, while operating covertly with Special Forces, aided by local criminal gangs, accounts for pursuing outward sovereign defection by following a non-delegative dynamic of violence.

The article, thus, proceeds as follows. First, it begins by providing a brief overview of the events. Second, it compares the types of intervention patterns in Crimea and South-East Ukraine. Against this background, the article introduces the notion of sovereign defection as a more powerful explanatory tool capable of capturing the differences between the intervention strategies. Then, it interrogates the validity of the concepts of outward and inward sovereign defection by analysing the chosen dynamics of violence, delegative and non-delegative. It concludes that the Russian Federation shifted from opting for a non-delegative dynamic of violence in Crimea to a delegative one in the South-East on the basis of significant differences in the salience of each outcome.

## From maidan mayhem to secessionist strife

In March 2014, Dmitry Rogozin, Deputy Prime Minister of Russia in charge of the defence industry, visited the recently annexed Crimea and issued a brisk tweet: 'Crimea is ours. Basta!' (Mills and Isachenkov 2014). A couple of months later, this was followed by a similar comment on the same social media network: 'Crimea. Every stone, every square meter of this land is soaked with Russian blood. That's why it's ours' (Rogozin 2014). The replies addressed Ukrainian and international condemnatory reactions of Russia's decision to intervene in the peninsula (Akinyemi 2014). Former President of Ukraine, Oleksandr Turchinov spoke of the events as a clear 'political aggression' (Wilson, Foster, and Grant 2014) and international leaders followed suit. Notably, the European Union High Representative Catherine Ashton issued a statement on the developments claiming they represent 'an unwarranted escalation of tensions' (European Union External Action Service 2014) and the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-moon, expressed great concerns over the situation (BBC News 2014a). The strong rhetoric accompanied a striking course of events that unfolded against a more complex background. The beginning is linked to Ukrainian President Victor Yanukovich's decision, in November 2013, to abandon closer economic ties with the European Union in favour of those with Russia. The public reactions saw immediate demonstrations which quickly escalated into protests with record levels of violence and high numbers of fatalities (BBC News 2014b). Soon after, Yanukovich fled the capital, and this provided what Johnson called 'the starting point for transition and escalation from the years-long non-military phase of Russia's hybrid campaign against Ukraine' (2015, 8). Previously, ever since the signing of the Declaration of Ukrainian Independence on 24 August 1991, the Russian Federation had relied on devised narratives 'designed to link Ukraine's future with the 'common' future of other post-Soviet countries, particularly the East Slavic ones' (Bogomolov and Lytvynenko 2012). Against this background, the transition from the soft, non-military influence saw as a first step the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation. In the spring of 2014, 'little green men' (Kramer and Gordon 2014) – which President Vladimir Putin would later admit to be Russian soldiers (MacFarquhar 2015) – entered and took hold of the peninsula with the help of local militias. With the Russian Parliament approving Putin's request to use force as to protect Russian interests, and with overwhelming results in favour of joining Russia in a highly contested local referendum, Crimea officially became part of Russia.

The events were quickly followed by unrest breaking out in Eastern and Southern Ukraine. As Crimea was being institutionalized into the Russian Federation, rebel separatists occupied administrative buildings, airports and radio stations in cities such as Donetsk, Luhansk and Kharkiv. Led by Aleksandr Zakharchenko and Igor Plotnitsky, the rebel groups initially voiced claims for varying degrees of autonomy and independence. With the independence of the Donetsk People's Republic and of the Luhansk People's Republic, the Federal State of Novorossiya was officially declared on May 22 (Babiak 2014b). To further emphasize the rebels' determination, their militias fused under the new United Armed Forces of Novorossiya. Pro-Russian news agency Novorossia.su called the merger a 'truly historic' moment and 'a crucial milestone' (2014). Over the course of 2014, and into the first months of 2015, the fighting intensified with significant battle- and non-battle-related casualties. The Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs reports that 'since the beginning of the conflict in April 2014 and 19 June 2015, at least 6,503 people have been documented as killed and another 16,385 as wounded in the conflict zone of Eastern Ukraine' (2015). Included were the 298 lives lost in the crash, on 17 July, of the Malaysia Airlines flight MH17 from Amsterdam near the village of Grabove in rebel-held territory. Currently, attempts at regulating the violence have seen several European brokered truces and cease-fire agreements being signed, with varying degrees of success. In December 2015, the clashes continued despite the Minsk Agreement having been in place since February, effectively showing an overall predisposition on both sides for coercive measures at the expense of diplomatic efforts.

## Assessing patterns of intervention

There are significant differences in the type of military operations carried out in Crimea and in the South-East, and it is the purpose of this section to comparatively qualify the patterns of intervention in both regions. Here, the starting assumption is twofold: on one hand, the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula is seen to have been the result of use of covert action carried out by Russian Special Forces with the collaboration of local armed groups, identified as local self-defence militias and formed of members of established criminal gangs (Galeotti 2014a, 2014b; Losiev 2014). On the other hand, the violence in the South-East of Ukraine unfolds according to a more complicated pattern: the pro-Russian separatists engage in armed conflict against the central government in Kiev while being externally supported by Russia<sup>3</sup> as well as accompanied by Russian troops (Sutyagin 2015). As the following paragraphs will discuss, if Crimea is a clear case of covert direct military intervention, the armed struggle waged by the separatist rebels requires several clarifications since current explanations shift between treating it as either direct or indirect. The existing literature has already determined the covert direct character of the events in Crimea with Karagiannis making the case for understanding Crimea's annexation as a result of 'a covert operation with Special Forces and a local Pro-Russian militia in Crimea' (2014, 409) and Cimbala (2014) and Galeotti (2015), among others, stressing similar points. For this reason, the section proceeds to detail at large the situation in the South-East, contending that, in fact, it is a case of a covert military intervention retaining both direct and indirect features: Russian troops and externally supported rebels. Effectively, it is a military intervention where 'the non-military non-linear hybrid segment is embedded within Russia's more broadly conceived and fully integrated conflict spectrum and relies on the leveraging or actual employment of conventional, unconventional and nuclear forces' (Johnson 2015, 10).

First, classifying the situation in the South-East as a direct Russian military intervention requires caution and increased specificity of arguments. Much of the debate centred on the presence of Russian citizens in the separatist groups (Babiak 2014a). Journalistic accounts, academic research and official statements have repeatedly claimed that Russian citizens are involved in the fighting. For example, one of the leaders in Donetsk, Alexandre Zakharchenko, was quoted in early 2014 that '3–4000 Russian citizens had joined the fight alongside the insurgents' (BBC News 2014b). This, however, erroneously adds to the argument and complicates matters significantly. As Robert Heinsch argued, 'the questions this raises are whether the Russian soldiers were following orders from their superiors when joining the rebels or were leaving the regular Russian forces during their "free time"' (2015, 330). Formulated under the label 'citizen', accusations of direct military intervention fail to build a strong case because, rather than being an issue of intervention, this is a question of presence of foreign fighters in conflicts. Recently, David Malet argued that foreign fighters should be defined as 'noncitizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict' (2013, 17), and that they are part of the wider issues of rebel groups recruitment and organization strategies. Thomas Hegghammer stressed similar concerns, despite operating a terminological differentiation between 'domestic' and 'foreign fighters'. Accordingly, the former refers to 'a person who perpetrates or tries to perpetrate violence in the West, whereas a 'foreign fighter' is someone who leaves or tries to leave the West to fight somewhere else' (Hegghammer 2013, 1). What does build a convincing argument, however, is the documented evidence of the presence of Russian troops and Special Forces as servicemen on active duty, as opposed to just Russian citizens.

This underlines the fundamental citizen–soldier distinction that has allowed the Kremlin to dismiss claims of military intervention on the basis of the voluntary character of the fighting implied by the concept of 'citizen'<sup>4</sup>. Significant evidence, however, has substantiated claims of direct covert intervention, similar to the military operations in Crimea. As Ukraine's Foreign Ministry began tweeting the hashtags #UkraineUnderAttack and #RussiaInvadedUkraine (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Ukraine 2014), proof of troop involvement amounted considerably. Satellite imagery and digital detective work accompanied academic research in building a strong case for understanding the reality of the battlefields as a Russian military intervention. The core of the argument was the rising numbers of fatalities on the rebel side, many of whom proved to be Russian soldiers. Recently, investigative reporting linked the deaths of three Russian servicemen to the violence in Donbass, despite officials claiming the soldiers

died in operations in the North Caucasus (Stallard 2015). As evidence amounted, battle-related casualties accompanied personal testimonies (Ostrovsky 2015), the capture of Russian soldiers as war prisoners and official statements documenting the situation. In regards to the latter, Ukrainian officials detailed the situation at large (Kramer and Gordon, 2014; Kramer and Higgins, 2014), with periodic reports on the state of the violence continually referencing the Russian troop involvement (Ministry of Defence of Ukraine 2014a, 2014b).

More specifically, President Poroshenko reiterated the interventionist narrative by stating that 'Russia already cynically uses its troops in Ukraine having brutally violated the basic principles of the international law' (2015).

Independent journalism seconded the claims across all types of evidence, and the diverse nature of the reporting was proportional to the striking character of the facts. One such account produced a geographic mapping of the place of origins of the soldiers. The Open Russia organization, founded by Mikhail Khodorkovsky, published the report on the dead soldiers in an infographic aimed as a response to Kremlin signing a decree classifying certain peacetime deaths of soldiers as state secrets (Luhn 2015). And, while these findings may be fraught with bias in the light of the controversial relationship between Khodorkovsky and the Russian administration, other reports soon surfaced.<sup>5</sup> Published in October 2015, *Hiding in Plain Sight, Putin's War in Ukraine*, is an Atlantic Council report that exposed 'the breadth and depth of Russian military involvement in Ukraine's east' (Czuperski et al. 2015, i). It emphasized the multifaceted involvement, ranging from provision of troops, training, cross-border sanctuary, and arms and munitions. This strengthens the relevance of previous investigations such as the one by the Open Russia organization or that issued by independent think tank, Bellingcat. Addressing the concerns of Russian relatives of those serving and dying, the independent think-tank dedicated to the use of open-source information, analysed the origins of artillery attacks on Ukrainian military positions. The analysis used Google Earth satellite images, as well as videos from social media and local media reports. The complex methodology enabled Bellingcat to determine that the attacks were launched from Russian territory (2015). While experts cautioned on the accuracy of such reports on grounds of replication issues and methodological validity (Borger and Higgins 2015), such evidence is significant because, firstly, it responds to emerging trends in research in favour of using social media data (Zeitoff, Kelly, and Lotan 2015), and, secondly, because it corroborates with data and conclusions from academic research. For example, a RUSI study by Igor Sutyagin documented the presence of Russian troops as well as reconnaissance and special operations units. It concluded that the overall figure of Russian troops operating in Eastern Ukraine 'reached approximately 9000 by the last week of February 2015 and has increased by at least 1500–2000 personnel since then' (2015). In his analysis, Sutyagin also noted that, once introduced, Russian troops 'were moved to the rear, behind rebel formations' (2015). This observation brings the assessment of the difference in patterns of military operations to the initial point: that, unlike Crimea which saw only direct, covert military intervention, the South-East marks the application of a joint, direct–indirect intervention. The discussion on troop involvement reviewed the direct component of the interventionist strategy, but it left unanswered the question of the indirect intervention. More specifically, what needs to be determined is the provision of external support to pro-Russian rebels by Russia and its impact to the projection of rebel violence.

If the core concept for determining Russian direct military intervention was the soldier, in the case of indirect intervention, the role is taken by external sponsorship in the form of arms transfers, hosting and military training. This is of significant importance as determining the extent of support to the separatist rebel organization allows acknowledging the operations in the South-East as being a proxy war. As Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham argued, 'understanding external support for rebel organizations is important for the study of international relations since it constitutes a form of interstate conflict, albeit indirect' (2011, 710). Moreover, as Andrew Mumford observed, in a proxy war 'the supplying of military material, such as arms, ammunition and other military technology, by benefactors to their chosen proxies is the prime way for benefactors to get others to do the fighting for them' (2013, 78).

With the aforementioned reports highlighting the prevalence of arms transfers, it is important to frame the practice as part of a menu of choice for rebels' arms procurement strategies that is dependent 'on the stage of the conflict, the size and strength of the armed groups, and the state armed forces' (Jackson 2010, 131). Moreover, it should be noted that it sits alongside other methods such as theft, smuggling, weapons capturing or development of war economies. Bourne (2007) proposes a classification of these arming patterns into 'bottom-up' and 'top-down' categories and reinforces the relevance of the 'conflict-complex', namely the political and economic background. Studies of armament used by the terrorist-labelled rebels in Ukraine point to its provenance to be predominantly of domestic origins and only in part complemented by ingress channels in the form of transfers and illicit activities (Ferguson and Jenzen-Jones 2014). The overall preponderance of domestic weapons in Ukraine is explained, in fact, as an endogenous process to the conflict. This results, first, from the precarious state of the Ukrainian army and its suboptimal control over its resources (Beckhusen 2014; Lombardi 2001; Parchomenko 2002; Recknagel 2014; Sanders 2008). Marsh underlined that 'the most important factor in determining the availability of weapons to insurgents is the ability of state forces to defend their arms stockpiles' (2007, 61). Since the Ukrainian Army 'has been increasingly left by the state to reform itself and to survive on its own' (Parchomenko 2002, 284), lack of control challenged its ability to defend stockpiles. Second, stockpile leakages are linked to successive army defections (Shuster 2014a) that saw armed personnel switch loyalties. Since the outbreak of hostilities, this has become a common feature of the fighting even within the ranks of specialized forces, such as the riot police Berkut. <sup>6</sup> .

These processes reinforce the existing literature claiming that 'under certain circumstances domestic procurement of weapons is widespread, and is often more decisive than international transfers' (Jackson 2010, 131). The role of transfers should not, however, be misrepresented in comparison to in-country procurement methods, for its implications are politically and militarily significant. In the case of the latter, arms transfers can enhance the tactical performance of the armed groups because of the potentially high quality of provided arms. In the case of the former, it becomes a key asset to determining cross-border interference as it plays a constitutive role in the process of external support. <sup>7</sup> . Specifically, as Ferguson and Jenzen-Jones argued, 'alien' weapons become 'flag items that can serve as significant indicators of external supply' (2014, 18). Thus, as previously mentioned, external sponsorship is understood as strategically relevant because it adds the indirect component to the characterization of the intervention in South-East Ukraine. Specifically, by providing assistance, the supporting-state opens the frontlines of a proxy war that complements the traditional, covert mode of direct intervention. In this way, the chosen proxy becomes 'conduit for weapons, training and funding' (Mumford 2013, 11) from benefactor wishing to influence the strategic outcome of the conflict.

In the Ukrainian scenario, the benefactor is Russia and its use of the rebels as proxies targets the Government in Kiev. While the issue remains contentious in the light of Russian denials, support in the form of arms transfers has been extensively documented. First, specialist studies concluded that the rebels are in possession of arms previously known to have been exclusively in the use of the Russian army. This is the case, for example, of the mm heavy machine gun Kord, entered in service in 1998 and virtually unobtainable without Russian consent (Ferguson and Jenzen-Jones 2014, 18). Second, NATO released satellite imagery reinforced claims of arms transfers. Brigadier General Nico Tak was quoted saying that large quantities of advanced weapons had been detected 'including air defence systems, artillery, tanks' (NATO 2014). Such statements became an integrative part of Ukrainian official discourse statements on the conflict, and have been a source of confirmation of Russian involvement. Moreover, since the benefactor-proxy relationship has been noted to incorporate 'funding, training, arming and equipping, [as well as] the use of the sponsor's territory as a sanctuary' (Hughes 2012, 12), external support has been corroborated with evidence of Russian training and provision of logistical support (Aljazeera 2015).

Drawing a demarcation line between the patterns of intervention observed in Ukraine – direct military intervention in Crimea and joint direct-indirect in

the South-East –, solves, however, only part of the puzzle. What remains is the question 'what explains the difference between choices of intervention strategy?' To address this issue, the second half of the article argues that the variance in patterns of performance can be assessed by integrating the role and use of non-state armed groups – auxiliaries in Crimea and proxy forces in the South East – into the Russian Federation's pursued outcomes.

### **Sovereign defection and non-state armed groups**

This section puts forward a tentative theoretical framework that locates the situation in Ukraine within the Russian aim of externally promoting *sovereign defection*. This is defined as the deliberate pursuit of a *break-away from an existing state* – in this case, the state of Ukraine. To capture the variation of the aim according to the previously identified patterns of military intervention, sovereign defection is classified into two categories: *inward* and *outward*. The latter refers to a physical, territorial breakaway, while the former to a political, ideological one. Outward sovereign defection equates to the territorial seizure and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula by Russian Special Forces, aided by existing criminal gangs. Here the goal was 'to secure the most important Russian physical asset in Ukraine, namely the Black Sea Fleet' (International Institute for Strategic). Inward sovereign defection, on the other hand, refers to the external sponsorship of the secessionist rebels in South-East Ukraine with the purpose of creating a political buffer-zone in the shape of a frozen conflict. This ultimately is directed at coercing 'the new Ukrainian authorities into accommodating Moscow's broader interests in Ukraine' (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2014, ix).

Why sovereign defection? First, because of meta-theoretical considerations. Thinking theory thoroughly (Rosenau and Durfee 1999) requires developing and applying a cumulative approach to the enterprise of inquiry. Cumulation refers to the growth of knowledge in a certain research area. It is a pattern of thinking that merges the past, present and future. The aim of the concept of sovereign defection is to rebalance the existing discussion towards a more integrative answer. Currently, the debate on the rationale behind the Russian interventions has been generated by generic 'identity-interest-ideology' explanations. Occasionally, these have distilled into considerations of nationalism, historical irredentism or geo-strategy. More importantly, and with severe consequences to the overall conceptualization of the military interventions, this recently emerging commentary has run the error of treating Russian interference and involvement as mono-causal.

Notably, it has sought to harness the individual ability of a proposed explanation to frame the event. In doing so, it portrayed explanations as mutually exclusive and as running in opposite causal directions.

For example, Barbashin and Thoburn (2014) championed the nationalist dogma as a cause. Similarly, Shlapentokh (2014) called for a closer inspection of geopolitical Duginism, an emerging foreign policy discourse carved by anti-Western philosopher Alexander Dugin. Moreover, a debate between McFaul, Sestanovich, and linked the events to a diversionary explanation, reducing the situation to conditions of domestic stability. However, as Tsygankov commented 'what is lost in this explanation is an analysis of Putin's power structure, and his perception of the crisis and Russia's economic development' (2015, 296).

Very few analyses, thus, proceeded with a correlative mind-frame in which the 'intensity' of a factor did not outweigh another. Notably, Karagiannis observed that 'geopolitics alone cannot explain the new Russian foreign policy in region' (2014, 415), and proposed linking it to Russia's 'humiliation (*unizhenija*)' (emphasis in original 2014, 415) in the aftermath of the Cold War and its portrayal as the 'loser' of the Cold War contest. Similarly, Allison (2015) framed explanations in a three layer model including geopolitical competition and structural power, identity and ideational



factors, as well as the search for domestic political consolidation in Russia.

Sovereign defection breaks away from the general tendency of providing only a fractured analysis that performs suboptimally in the face of causal heterogeneity. It does so because of its ability to be a predicator of the logic behind the events from the stage of input to that of output, while keeping separate the category of desired outcome. Basically, it walks the narratives of intervention from beginning to end through the causal maze much like an analytic Ariadne's thread. How does it accomplish the task? First, sovereign defection allows framing both interventions as processes aimed at a 'lock-in' of preferred outcomes. It, thus, asks not a why-oriented question, but rather that of 'to what end?' Adopting the general concept of preferred outcomes moves the discussion beyond the previously mentioned generic answers as what is channelled is the flexibility of the response and not a specific category of responses. For example, the situation is no longer viewed just as a function of interests defined per power, but rather the result of weighing the salience of each interest in relation to context-dependent and context-developing aims.

Second, a focus on outcomes within the sovereign defection framework addresses inconsistencies in the debate. Specifically, it locates macro and micro problems of current explanations. Macro failings are essentially issues of contextualizing the interventions. This refers to the tendency to approach the topic with a pronounced Cold War mentality in which power and interest remind of the decades of long superpower competition. While Putin has been known to reference the disintegration of the Soviet Union as one of the 'the greatest geopolitical disasters of the last century' (BBC News 2005), and despite the United States shifting Russia to the top of the security threats lists (Shalal 2015), Ukraine is far from being a sufficient cause for reviving hegemonic ideological confrontations: 'Russia misperceives itself as trapped in a zero-sum conflict of civilizations, leading to a situation that can best be characterised as a cold peace (Engle 2014–2015, 173). Thus, what is observed is not a preoccupation with the west, but rather a prioritizing of the east. As John Biersack and Shannon O'Lear argued, 'the events in Crimea's annexation in the 'west' signal a Russian shift "eastwards"' (2015, 247). The establishment of the Eurasian Economic Community is a clear example as it is 'a key foreign-policy priority' (International Institute for Strategic Studies 2014, viii), and, what is more, backs statements claiming that 'Moscow is making a geopolitical comeback in the former Soviet space' (Karagiannis 2014, 400).

But it is not just macro deficiencies that undermine explanations. Micro problems confuse debate in a similar fashion. Here, the article refers to the error of falling into the legitimization-goal trap, namely confusing narratives of legitimization with causal motivations. In the case of Ukraine, 'the Russian government needed to complicate the storyline of who annexed whom' (Biersack and O'Lear 2015, 247). This happened against a background in which Russian foreign policy remained essentially undefined and lacking clear direction for years. Not even the newly released military doctrine offered specific clues: 'the Kremlin neither issues a doctrine of nuclear pre-emption, nor explicitly named its perceived foes' (Sinovets and Renz 2015, 1).

Causal explanations, thus, morphed from carefully crafted legitimization narratives that referenced identity, history and nationalism. Crimea's symbolic significance was fundamental and its relevance was built through both positive and negative reinforcement. On one hand, its history was used to fire 'patriotic imagination' (Braithwaite 2014, 63). On the other, deliberate attempts were made to vilify Ukrainian-ism in a search of discrediting other-ness and promoting Russian values and traditions. Allison aptly labelled such efforts 'justificatory smokescreens' (2015, 1259) and Hansen noted the way in which policy-making constructed 'filters by framing issues in such a way as to lead a particular policy challenge to a particular and predefined outcome' (2015, 142). However, these symbolic strings were aimed at accommodating Russian behaviour into the international legal order, and should not be automatically derived into causal determinism.

Third, and most importantly, sovereign defection provides an overall more refined analysis. Here, the discussion departs from the meta-theoretical considerations of cumulation and macro–micro problems, and enters into a discussion on sovereign defection's substantive advantages. Military intervention, direct or indirect, overt or covert, targets the core of state authority: its ability to exercise exclusive control over a given territory. In practice, this ability has been coined under the concept of sovereignty. As defined by Krasner (1999), sovereignty applies to four categories of meaning: interdependence, domestic, Westphalian and international legal. For the purposes of this analysis, the focus is on the latter acceptations. To this end, Westphalian sovereignty ascribes the functioning of the principles of territoriality and of exclusion of external actors from domestic authority (Krasner 1999, 20), and international legal sovereignty is concerned with 'establishing the status of a political entity in the international system' (Krasner 1999, 14). Against this background, sovereign defection becomes a tool for understanding the pursued outcomes of the Russian Federation in Ukraine.

Recently, Clem (2014) addressed the fundamental question of Ukraine's ability to legitimize its sovereignty in the present geopolitical circumstances of the Crimean annexation and of the East being engulfed by a separatist civil war. At the centre was the relationship between territory and nationality, and Clem (2014, 229) concluded that the Ukrainian claims for sovereign legitimacy are based on the historical association of territory with an ethno-linguistic distinctive cultural group. Sovereign defection explains the Russian interventions by conceptualizing them into an attack on the territorial integrity and a challenge to national unity which generate a collapse of the control over the exercise of authority. First, the Westphalian sovereignty is undermined because both interventions result in the alteration of the domestic authority arrangements via territorial breaches: Crimea sees a total replacement of Ukrainian authority by integration within Russian authority, and the South-East observes the emergence of a competing authority infrastructure through the backing of separatist claims. Second, the international legal sovereignty is eroded as the annexation of Crimea removes Ukraine's ability to exert exclusive representation over the region as a political entity of the international system. Moreover, the support for the separatist rebels pushes the development of a new politico-judicial entity in the international system, one able to seek agreements and recognition. Thus, what emerges is a state of domestic anarchy where 'the state apparatus loses authority relative to non-state armed groups who are able to become the highest authority over their internal and external relations' (Vinci 2008, 296). In other words, when central authority is challenged, 'a microcosm of the

international systemic replicated within the state' (David 1997, 557).

In this way, sovereign defection formalizes official statements accusing Russia of sovereign interference. Vasylenko, author of the first draft Declaration of State Sovereignty, was one of the first to claim that Russia never intended to respect Ukrainian sovereignty since 'it believed all along that Ukraine's independence is a temporary anomaly' (2014). Similarly, Poroshenko argued that the Russian aggression undermines 'social and political stability in order to destroy the state of Ukraine and seize its territory' (2015). But, sovereign defection pushes for further specificity in understanding the issue. Thus, based on the variations in patterns of military interventions, it argues that two types of sovereign defections can be observed: inward and outward. As mentioned, the latter refers to the territorial breakaway of Crimea and the former to a political breakaway of the South-East into an autonomous region acting as political buffer-zone. To interrogate the validity of the outward and inward types in the sovereign defection framework, the article proposes an assessment of the role of the non-state armed groups in both Crimea and the South East. Therefore, to distinguish between outward and inward sovereign defection, the article contends that Russia made use of two competing dynamics of violence: *delegative* and *non-delegative*. As the labels suggest, the difference between the dynamics references Russia's willingness to delegate the application of violence to third parties: delegative implies transferring authority over violence to a non-state actor which becomes a proxy agent, and reversely, non-delegative implies a concentration of the authority and an aversion toward authority transfers, other than minor interaction with auxiliary forces. The last section of the article assesses the performance of the local self-defence forces in Crimea and that of the pro-Russian rebels in the South-East as part of Russia's application of delegative and non-delegative dynamics of violence.

### **Inward–outward sovereign defection and non-state armed groups**

Definitions of non-state armed groups differ 'between international lawyers, social scientists from different disciplines, and practitioners from international governmental and non-governmental organisations' (Krause and Milliken 2009, 203). Aware of this caveat, the article defines non-state armed groups as non-state actors with 'capacity for systematic military action' (Vinci 2008, 299), which are 'at least in principle, autonomous from the structure and machinery of the state, and of the governmental and intergovernmental bodies above the formally sovereign state' (Josselin and Wallace 2003, 3). The purpose of this section is to observe the construction of inward and outward sovereign defection as strategic outputs, or goals of the Russian interventions. Acknowledging the differences in types of military interventions—covert, direct in Crimea, and covert, joint (direct–indirect) in the South-East—the premise of the argument is the development of two competing dynamics of violence for each type of intervention, effectively corresponding to the inward–outward categories of sovereign defections. The dynamics are defined as delegative and non-delegative and the difference rests in the use of non-state armed groups. Specifically, as mentioned above, delegative implies transferring authority over violence to a non-state actor, and non-delegative implies a concentration of the authority and an aversion towards authority transfers. Against this background, Crimea exhibits a non-delegative dynamic of violence where the integration of non-state armed groups is at maximum in an auxiliary capacity. The South-East, on the other hand, makes a case for a delegative dynamic of violence where the Russian-backed separatists take charge of the violence in a proxy capacity. The essence of the argument is, thus, in the distinction between auxiliary and proxy forces and how they are used in the process of pursuing the specific outcomes.

The literature on non-state armed groups had for long noted that 'non-state armed actors have been known to act clandestinely on behalf of states – or in conjunction with the state's own armed actors, sometimes as formal or informal contract employees' (Davis 2009, 222). Recently, the literature moved toward drawing a clear demarcation between *acting on behalf* and *acting in conjunction*. The latter refers to a type of relationship involving 'a benefactor, who is a state or non-state actor external to the dynamic of an existing conflict, and their chosen proxies who are the conduit for weapons, training and funding from the benefactor' (Mumford 2013, 11). Basically, in a proxy relationship the proxy agent wages war against a target in the name of the benefactor. This effectively renders the proxy agent a third party in a conflict between the benefactor and the target where they intervene indirectly. Here, the distinctiveness of the proxy agent rests, thus, on its ability to carry out violence through delegation from the benefactor. This is in stark contradiction with the type of relationship implied by *acting in conjunction*, in which case proxy forces are replaced with auxiliary ones. Much like proxy agents, the role of auxiliaries in warfare has received little attention and, moreover, has been often labelled as 'unlawful'. In fact, it is only recently that the study of the irregular fighter has been brought back into the centre of war studies

(Scheipers 2015). In underlining their differences to proxy agents it should be noted that while functionally similar, auxiliaries are relationally different because their contribution is collaborative in nature and associative in type. Specifically, auxiliaries have followed a path of working 'under and with' the military and, thus, their contribution to fighting should be seen as complementary and as a direct part of the military effort.

Collaboration with auxiliaries is underpinned by outward sovereign defection. As an outcome, it refers to the territorial breakaway of a region and its annexation to the territory of another state. Put in practice, this is the case of the events in Crimea. Secession and annexation were pursued by applying a non-delegative dynamic of violence. In this case, the action was carried out by Russian Special Forces in a covert military intervention. The exact steps of

the process were already discussed at length when comparing between types of interventions. The focus here, however, is on the local self-defence forces and their role. Auxiliaries in Crimea played the political role of justifying and legitimizing the intervention with their actions being portrayed as supportive to the covert military intervention. It was essentially collaborative and non-military. In support of this claim is, first, the nature of the auxiliary forces and, more precisely, their loose organizational structure. As documented, the self-defence forces were a patchwork of organized gangs descending from Crimea's embroiled network of criminality, which despite having a long-standing collaboration with Russia (Roslycky 2011), lacked the stability to efficiently make use of violence in a political dimension and not just criminal. Moreover, preference over delegative violence is corroborated with the politico-military significance of Crimea as a host of the Black Sea Fleet, which has for long been perceived 'as a projector of Russian power abroad' (Nilsson 2013, 1168).

Inward sovereign defection is qualitatively different from outward sovereign defection because it promotes only a political breakaway. Practically, this takes the form of supporting rebel claims for autonomy or independence. As noted previously, the haphazard development of events in the South-East confused the aims of the rebels, which found themselves claiming various degrees of independence from administrative autonomy to secession and annexation to Russia. What constitutes the core of inward sovereign defection as an outcome is, however, the desire for the establishment of a buffer-zone in the shape of a frozen conflict. To clarify, frozen conflicts stand for 'conflicts that were not formally concluded by a peace agreement' (Tudoroiu 2012, 136), or that are 'the result of post-conflict situations that have never been properly resolved' (Kemp 2004, 46). Specifically, the strategic advantage of developing a frozen conflict is that, once in place, it marks the emergence of a de facto state which displays organized political leadership receiving popular support in exchange for provision of governmental services (Pegg 1998). More importantly, the de facto state becomes a channel for blocking the activity of the 'host' state and, thus, limiting its domestic and international manoeuvre space.

The development of such a buffer-zone and establishment of frozen conflicts requires empowerment of local rebel forces which, in receiving support, become proxy forces. This characterization is an apt descriptor of the events in the South-East where 'there is little doubt that Russia has supplied armed, armoured vehicles, tanks and other equipment to the insurgent forces' (Heinsch 2015, 357). The strength of inward sovereign defection to capture the attempts at fostering a zone of frozen instability is reinforced when looking at the long-standing practice in Russian foreign policy to bolster frozen conflicts. Applied specifically to the Russian near-abroad and to the territory of the former Soviet Union, the practice of 'freezing conflicts' knows significant examples: Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Nagorno-Karabakh in Azerbaijan and Transnistria in Moldova. As Roslycky noted, separatism in these regions 'has played a key role in maintaining Russian influence over the region' (2011, 299), and with the conflict in the South-East showing gradual signs of transition to a frozen conflict, inward sovereign defection captures the potential in the ability of Russian forces to 'take control of Transdnister, Odessa, and Mariupol and create a buffer zone between Ukraine and Crimea' (Thomas 2015, 447).

## Conclusion

The article argued that understanding the situation in Ukraine should take into consideration the generally complex causal setting leading to the events.

It contended that causality should not strive for complete specification of singular explanations and that such treatment in isolation produces an artificial answer to the key questions surrounding the ongoing armed conflict. To counterbalance the logical fallacies of the current research enterprise, the article advanced the idea of 'sovereign defection' as an alternative explanation. Defining it as a breakaway from an existing state, sovereign defection re-framed the issue of causality of the events by using the concept of outcome as an analytical tool. It proposed two categories of sovereign defection, inward and outward, and to assess their empirical relevance, the article analysed the difference in dynamics of violence in both regions: Crimea and the South East. By underlining the role of non-state actors as remarkably distinct in the two regions, the article put forward the claim that, essentially, the armed conflict in Ukraine portrays a Russian search for interrelated yet distinct outcomes: the territorial seizure and annexation of the Crimean Peninsula, and the establishment of a political buffer-zone in the shape of a frozen conflict in the South East. By using a combination of Russian Special Forces and auxiliaries, Russia obtained effective control over the Black Sea Fleet. Similarly, by employing the pro-Russian separatist as proxy forces, Russia pushed for the creation of a de facto state, a significant control mechanism already in practice in regions such as Transnistria or South Ossetia. The article's pursuits are only tentative and, the ongoing character of the conflict diminishes any predictive attempts. However, by comparing the pattern of military intervention and by drawing a clear distinction between the uses of non-state actors, the article has pushed the debate towards new questions. Taken serially, the most important question the article addressed was that on the sought outcomes of the Russian incursions into Ukrainian territory. Essentially, this was a twofold discussion about the construction and directionality of military intervention as a foreign policy tool. While retaining the obvious Clausewitzian undertone linking war to politics, it departed from mainstream conceptualizations of cause and refined the debate by shifting focus on purpose. The article's attempt at grasping finer nuances of Russian foreign policy added to the dominant narrative of interest and power a sense of regional historicity, one capable of explaining events in a more comprehensive manner by effectively detaching the analysis from slowly crushing Cold War geopolitical burden. In this way, it echoed the importance of understating Russian attitudes towards Ukraine as 'largely consistent with historical Russian (and Soviet) thinking about security interests and foreign policy, not only over the past decade but going back some three centuries' (Oliker et al. 2015, 1).

### Notes on contributor

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### Notes

1. Sergey Aksyonov is the current Prime Minister of the Republic of Crimea (Shuster 2014b).
2. Correspondence with the Ukrainian Embassy in London (21 July 2015) emphasizes that use of 'civil war' is a misnomer. Specifically, the argument stresses that the ongoing situation is not an internal conflict and that Ukraine is engaging Russian regular troops. Similar concerns were raised in reference to the use of 'rebel groups'. It was noted that the Ukrainian authorities label the pro-Russian separatists as 'terrorists'. The article admits that 'civil war' carries a stigma of chaos and loss of ability to effectively control. However, in the light of the article putting forward an objective, non-biased argument, as well as for the sake of academic consistency, the concept of 'civil war' will be used. For these purposes,

Kalvays' definition will be used: 'armed conflict within the boundaries of a recognised sovereignty between parties subject to a common authority at the outset of hostilities' (2006, 17). Moreover, to accurately represent the facts, the article refines the concept by specifically labelling it 'internationalised civil war'. This represents an intrastate conflict with foreign involvement. Following the Uppsala Conflict Data Program's definition, this is 'an armed conflict between a government and a non-government party where the government side, the opposing side, or both sides, receive troop support from other governments that actively participate in the conflict' (UCDP 2015).

3. The article returns to this point further one in detail. Despite vehement denials on behalf of Russia, conclusive evidence has been presented by the Ukrainian authorities, NATO and independent sources. Communication with the Ukrainian Embassy in London (21 July 2015) acknowledged and stressed this aspect as a fundamental feature of the conflict (Embassy of Ukraine to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland 2015).
4. Putin defended the volunteer thesis and was quoted saying 'We're not attacking anyone' (Greene and Cullinane 2014). Later, Putin stressed similar tone and continued with dismissing claims of Russian troop involvement as 'nonsense' (Demirjian 2015).
5. The issues of bias is a significant one, and information from organizations such as Open Russia should be approached cautiously. However, it is worth underlining that the data are corroborated from two human rights groups, Cargo 200 and the regional societies of soldiers' mothers (Gregory 2015).
6. After being dissolved through Presidential decree on account of force brutality in February 2014, Berkut dismantled and its members have been seen fighting alongside both sides of the conflict (Shelomovskiy 2014)
7. External support has received substantial attention in research. However, in the light of space considerations, the article does not provide a review of the literature, the focus being on its political consequences and the emergence of a strategy of war by proxy (Byman et al. 2005; Cunningham 2010; Salehyan, Gleditsch, and Cunningham 2011; Salehyan, Siroky, and Wood 2014).

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