

Ukraine's volunteer battalions – advantages and challenges

Margarete Klein

One year ago, on 15 April 2014, the “anti-terrorist operation” (ATO) was launched in eastern Ukraine against separatists supported by Russia. Besides the armed forces, units from other ministries and agencies – such as the national guard, the secret service (SBU), the border guard or the ministry for emergencies – participated. The ATO shed a grim light on the state of Ukraine's regular security forces, exposing serious deficiencies in their armaments, combat readiness and loyalty. As a result, beginning in April 2014, volunteer battalions mushroomed in Ukraine. With their high motivation and fighting spirit, they contributed substantially to the defence of the country's fragile statehood. However, the ambitions of certain volunteer battalions' commanders and the close link between some units and oligarchs carry the risk of their becoming politicized, which might undermine Ukraine's statehood and democratization prospects.

In contrast to Russia, Ukraine had not implemented any meaningful military reform beyond reducing the overall strength of its armed forces from 780,000 servicemen in 1992 to 129,950 in 2014. Hence when the ATO started the hardware at the disposal of the armed forces was mostly insufficient, outdated and poorly maintained. According to data from 2012, 92 per cent of the weapons were over 20 years old and only 1.2 per cent of the hardware had been produced in the previous decade. As a consequence of the annexation of Crimea and the hostilities in Donbas, Ukraine's arsenal was further reduced.

Ukraine's armed forces also proved to be insufficiently trained. Due to shortages of finance, exercises were restricted mostly to the level of platoons and companies or conducted as command staff exercises. Air Force pilots flew only 40 hours annually. Consequently the armed forces were not able to perform integrated and complex operations. In March 2014, the then minister of defence, Ihor Tenyukh, estimated the number of combat-ready soldiers at only 6,000, most of them representing the immediate response forces that form the core of the 24,000-strong joint rapid reaction forces. The remainder were general defence forces consisting of so-called skeleton units that were only 20 per cent manned and 60 per cent equipped. In essence, the armed forces have remained a mass mobilization army for large-scale land war but are not ready for the specific tasks involved in combating irregular local fighters supported by regular Russian troops.

The structural problems of insufficient financing, training and equipment affect the armed units of other ministries and agencies participating in the ATO as well. For example, since the 45,000 border guards lacked heavy weapons they proved unable to defend against rebel attacks or to repel intruders. Rushed organizational reshuffles further undermined operational readiness for a short yet critical period. This is true in particular for the Ministry of the Interior (MoI). After the shootings on the Maidan, well-trained special forces units such as the Berkut police were dissolved. However, some of their servicemen switched to the National Guard which was re-created in March 2014 on the basis of the former interior troops. As a hastily created institution, the National Guard lacks even basic equipment – such as helmets and bulletproof vests – and suffers from an inadequate level of training. When the ATO began, the regular security forces proved to be insufficiently prepared for their tasks. Disloyal behaviour on the part of some police, armed forces and border guards further contributed to the advance of the separatists. In order to fill the gap, on the basis of the 1991 law On the Defence of Ukraine, a 2014 presidential Decree on Mobilization, and instructions from the MoI and MoD, volunteer battalions began to emerge in April/May. These volunteer battalions quickly became a serious factor in Ukraine's security sector.

The volunteer battalions are very varied in regard to the tasks they fulfil – from street patrols to police



functions and combat operations – as well as to their ethnic, professional and political background, their recruitment policies and their sources of funding. While basic salaries and military hardware are provided by the state, equipment and extra pay are often financed through crowdfunding or donations by individuals (family members, local companies or oligarchs).

According to their affiliation, four different types of volunteer forces can be distinguished. In April 2014, oblast governments were allowed to form either territorial defence battalions (e.g. Aydar, Kryvbas) that were incorporated into the regular armed forces, or special police patrol battalions (Dnipro-1) as part of the regional police. Furthermore, volunteer formations joined the military reserve of the National Guard (Donbas, Azov). A fourth category of volunteer battalions is not as yet formally incorporated into any state structure even though they coordinate their actions partially with the command of the ATO. This applies to the military units of Pravy Sector and two battalions comprising mostly exile Chechens (Dzhokhar Dudaev, Sheikh Mansour battalions). Currently, there are between 40 and 50 volunteer battalions varying in size between several dozen and several hundred servicemen.

Volunteer battalions represent both an opportunity and a potential risk for Ukraine's fragile statehood and democratization prospects. Particularly during the first months of ATO, the volunteer organizations with their high fighting spirit contributed significantly to containing the separatists. In this regard, they helped to bridge the gap in the effectiveness of the regular security forces and to defend Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity. According to an opinion poll in December 2014, volunteer battalions ranked second among the most trusted institutions in Ukraine – after NGOs and even before the church and the armed forces. As highly respected institutions, they can at most strengthen the linkage between society and state.

However, there is still a real risk of volunteer formations becoming politicized or turning into private armies. At least six commanders have been elected deputies of the Verkhovna Rada and now combine military and political might, like Andriy Biletsky, commander of Azov and founder of the nationalist organization the Social-

National Assembly. The relationship between some volunteer formations – such as Azov or Donbas – and the political and military leadership is strained. On several occasions, commanders of Donbas or Pravy Sector have implicitly threatened to overturn the current leadership if it did not fulfil their demands. In particular, certain commanders are very critical of the Minsk agreements and could, in a worst-case scenario act as spoilers to a political solution. Moreover, oligarchs have helped to finance several volunteer battalions. The risks of such a “private-public partnership” became obvious when former Dnipropetrovsk governor and oligarch Ihor Kolomoisky presumably misused part of Dnipro-1 in his fight to retain control over Ukrnafta and Ukrtransnafta in March 2015. Last but not least, several criminal investigations against individual members of certain volunteer battalions (Aydar, Shakhtarsk) have shed light on the risk of a violent entrepreneur class emerging.

Creating effective, democratically controlled and loyal security forces is an indispensable precondition not only for defending Ukraine's statehood but for successful democratic transformation as well. In order to mitigate the negative aspects, the volunteer battalions have to be properly financed by the state, set high standards in recruitment and either become fully integrated into state structures or be demobilized. Otherwise, instead of strengthening Ukraine's statehood, certain volunteer battalions might contribute to its further erosion.

Dr. Margarete Klein, Senior Associate, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP)

The views expressed in this briefing are those of the author and do not necessarily coincide with those of the FOI.

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