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Side-Switching as State-Building: The Case of Russian-Speaking Militias in Eastern Ukraine

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**Side-Switching as State-Building:
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Abstract

We analyze a formal model of the cooperative mode of consolidation. The model treats militia commanders as interchangeable rent-seekers competing for a divisible share of what Fearon (1999) calls “pork” goods: salaried jobs in the security sector. Goods are distributed by a civilian bureaucracy that interfaces with international donors in order to “buy” order. One interesting result is a robust *partial incorporation* equilibrium: jointly-sustainable strategies chosen by non-ideological, completely interchangeable, rent-seeking battalion commanders, all hoping to maximize their share of aid rents with no interest in policy. The potential of Ukrainian militias to form blocking coalitions and “veto” peace settlements is also discussed. A dataset of volunteer battalion incorporation, the results from an original survey of 64 Ukrainian volunteer battalion members, and a case study of the Azov Battalion are used to evaluate model predictions.

Introduction

An important distinguishing feature of the war in Ukraine's Donbas region is the presence of the Russian military. Ukrainian volunteer battalions had ambitions to completely re-conquer secessionist territory coercively in the summer of 2014, forcibly re-securing their border with Russia. Battles at Ilovaisk and Debaltsevo decisively clarified that *coercive* modes of consolidation were off the table for military planners in Kyiv.

When the umbrella of Russian military power froze the map in Eastern Ukraine, the Kremlin's policy created a data-rich laboratory to observe the limits of what this volume calls *cooperative modes* of militia consolidation. This paper filters case observations through a formal model of the cooperative mode of consolidation (vertically, vis-à-vis the state, rather than horizontal consolidation between militias). Our model focuses on the question of how relative political stability emerged in the shadow of Russian meddling and Western aid by the choices of field commanders.

Settlement politics, in this account, have not stalled because some of the policy issues are such high stakes as to seem indivisible, or because Russia refuses to acknowledge its role—though both are salient barriers.¹ In our account, conflict resolution has stalled in part because, in a cooperative consolidation modality, the rents of post-settlement statehood are worth fighting over. Intra-Ukrainian distributional political compromises will leave a smaller pie to divide between more rent-seekers. Mundane coalition management concerns on the Western Ukrainian side may inhibit compromise.

While game-theoretic modeling is a powerful deductive tool, a drawback of the modeling enterprise is that predictions are only as good as the assumptions built into the model in the first place. One way to assess the “realism” of a model is an analytic narrative, in which contextual knowledge is brought to bear to see how a model's assumptions, and its predictions, fit a real empirical situation. Temporal dynamics of militant consolidation in Ukraine are illuminated, beginning with the rapid proliferation of and *fragmentation* of militia groups in spring and summer 2014, followed by a rapid *consolidation* of political control over initially-fragmented militias in state-held areas. The potential for field commanders to *cannibalize* the Ukrainian state remains salient, and the ability of non-state armed groups who retain significant independence from Kyiv to influence the direction of Ukrainian politics as a potential *blocking coalition* is discussed. A final section concludes with a discussion of the argument's implications.

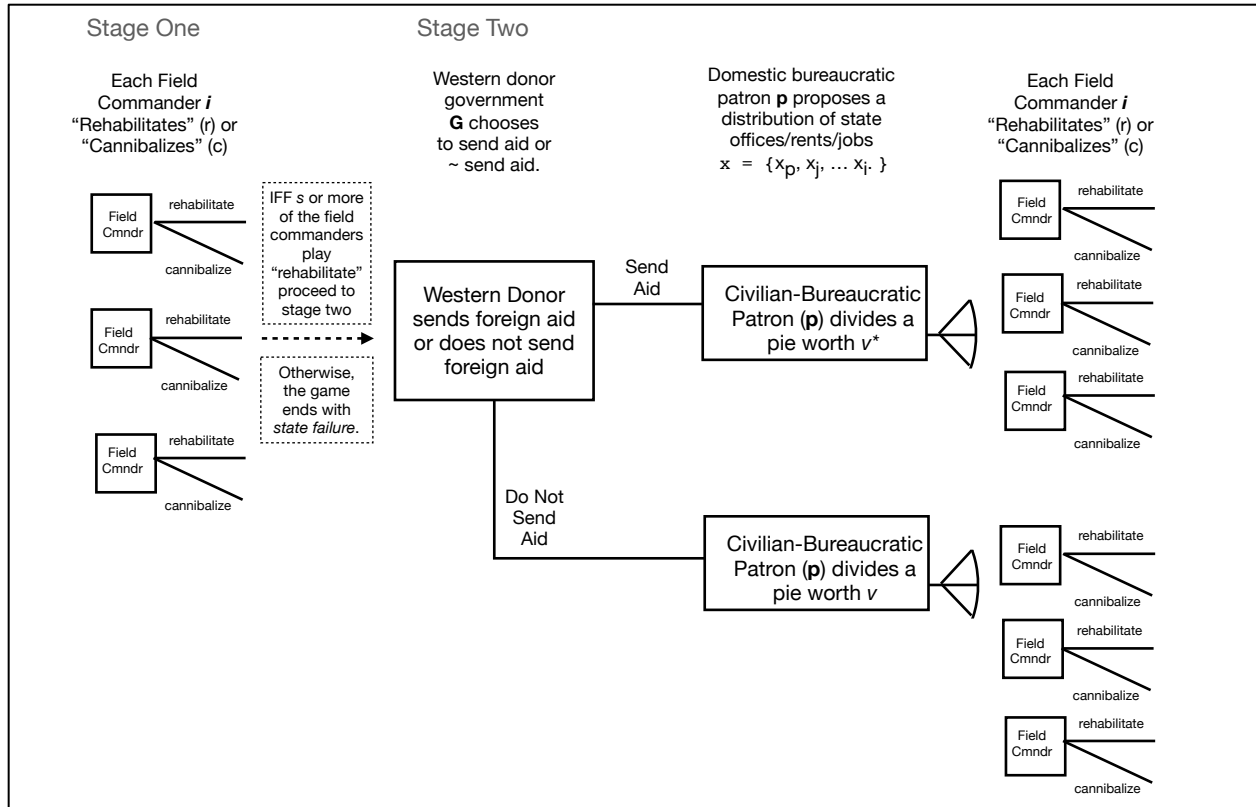
A Model

The game begins in a country housing a large, concentrated ethnic minority near an international border. The country has a well-institutionalized patronage system that has, in the past, accommodated the political demands of this minority group with jobs, cultural autonomy concessions, and access to symbolic and practical power – but as a result of a political crisis, these order-providing bargains have broken down.

There are three classes of strategic actor: more than one *field commander*, a **Western great power (G)**, and a *local patron* in the security bureaucracy (**p**).

Since the purpose of the model is to illuminate potential for side-switching in the cooperative consolidation mode, whether a militia commander is pro-government or a rebel is determined by strategies chosen, not set ex-ante. Since the analytic focus is the behavior of field commanders, they get the first move and concluding move of the game. The game unfolds in two stages. In the first stage, field commanders act simultaneously. In the second stage (if it is reached), first the great power moves, then the bureaucratic patron moves, and then each of the field commanders has a final move (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The Formal Model (Path of Play)



In the first stage, each of n field commanders emerges endogenously from social groups inside the polity. The political crisis that begins the game is some event that causes important social groups to re-evaluate their future rents from aligning with the central government. Field commanders may be former police captains, heads of special forces units, criminal actors with access to heavy weapons, oligarchs heading private armies, or heads of radical street parties with a well-armed hooligan fringe – the point is that there are many of them, and their comparative advantage is the production of violence. To simplify the choice set of field commanders, a militia leader must either **cannibalize** pre-crisis institutions or try to **rehabilitate** them, infusing those institutions with their charisma and legitimacy. This choice set is repeated (they have the final move).

Without a minimum level of coordination by violence specialists, a state cannot maintain a pretense of a monopoly on violence. Practically, if **rehabilitate** is not

selected by enough field commanders, the result is *state failure*. Call this minimum number of field commanders the “stability threshold,” \mathbf{s} ($1 < \mathbf{s} < \mathbf{n}$).² Only if \mathbf{s} or more field commanders choose *rehabilitate* does the game enter stage two. The stability threshold is related to a country’s external threat environment (e.g., the willingness of great powers to tolerate domestic disorder), so parameter \mathbf{s} can potentially change rapidly – and does in our narrative – but it remains fixed from stage one to stage two.

The first thing that happens in stage two is that Western donors \mathbf{G} send aid to stabilize the country. To highlight essentials, either a large package with few strings is sent (*send aid*) or a token package with many onerous conditions is extended (*do not send aid*).

The last two moves of the game involve the interplay of a consolidated coalition of patriotic field commanders (some of whom now lead the fighting and claim to be the state), the government security bureaucracy (which interfaces with donors). The patron \mathbf{p} can offer state employment: honor, pensions, the opportunities for graft and collecting bribes, and contracts. If the donor sends no aid, these are worth \mathbf{v} . If there is a generous infusion of foreign assistance by \mathbf{G} , the total worth of the state will grow to $\mathbf{v}^* > \mathbf{v}$. The bureaucratic patron (\mathbf{p}) then takes stock of the identities of various field commanders and the resources available for redistribution (\mathbf{v} or \mathbf{v}^*) and proposes a distribution among commanders and himself, $\mathbf{x} = (\mathbf{x}_i, \mathbf{x}_j, \dots, \mathbf{x}_q, \mathbf{x}_p)$. This is meant to capture that while the sum of all transfers will be either \mathbf{v} or \mathbf{v}^* (depending on \mathbf{G} ’s decision), there are many distributional possibilities. Many field commanders are all hoping for the same thing: ascending to a position within the state security services.

Finally, each of the \mathbf{n} field commanders observes their offer. Charismatic patriots now jockey for power. Some groups are elevated and others sidelined, with some symbols memorialized in insignia (and others dropped). New influence emerges in the security bureaucracy. No one has disarmed, however. Field commanders, once again, decide to either *cannibalize* their newfound positions or try to *rehabilitate* state institutions. If fewer than \mathbf{s} field commanders choose *rehabilitate*, the game ends with *state failure*, with commanders now fighting over the carcass of a state flush with aid rents. If \mathbf{s} or more field commanders choose *rehabilitate*, \mathbf{p} ’s transfer occurs, and the game ends.

The payoffs for different actors depend on the joint strategies of the players. The first thing to assess is whether there is sufficient coordination by field commanders to meet the stability threshold, \mathbf{s} .

While the method of coordination is extra-model, it is important to note that coordination can fail in the first or second stage (since field commanders have the first and last move). Field commanders are assumed to be symmetric, with a roughly equal chance of aggregating power by force in the event of state failure. But fighting with improvised armies destroys assets and risks unpredictable spirals of violence. Call these costs \mathbf{c} .

Cannibalization comes with an opportunity to seize local power – and this is exactly what many recruits expect their commander to do. Playing *cannibalize* in the first stage of the game, and again in the second, nets a de-facto oligarchic fiefdom ($\mathbf{v}/\mathbf{n} - \mathbf{c}$). Furthermore, if the stability threshold \mathbf{s} is not passed in the first or second stage, any field commanders

who played *rehabilitate* will be punished for misplaced loyalty to institutions that are bankrupt. Call this weakness penalty ($-w$).

If the field commanders coordinate to cannibalize the state in the second stage of the game, especially if G sent a lot of aid, the “pie” being fought over will be worth more, and a better prize can be envisioned (e.g., a roof within a relatively-autonomous security bureaucracy, a protection racket in a wealthy urban neighborhood, or perhaps even a scramble to seize the statehouse). The payoffs are higher: $v^*/n - c$.

Table 1: Payoffs for Strategy Combinations

	s not passed in stage one (no stage two)	s passed in stage one; s not passed in stage two	s passed in stage one; s also passed in stage two
payoff for warlord playing “cannibalize, cannibalize”	$v/n-c$	$v^*/n-c$	$v/n-c$
payoff for warlord playing “rehabilitate, cannibalize”	$v/n-c-w$	$v^*/n-c$	x_i
payoff for field commander playing “rehabilitate, rehabilitate”	$v/n-c-w$	$v^*/n-c-w$	x_i
payoff for field commander playing “cannibalize, rehabilitate”	$v/n-c$	$v^*/n-c-w$	x_i
payoff for Western Donor	0	0	1 if Aid was sent, 0 Otherwise
payoff for civilian/figurehead	0	0	Maximum: $v^*-(s(v^*/n-c))$. Minimum: >0

If the game does not reach the second stage, the civilian bureaucrat p receives zero, as does the donor state G . If the stability threshold is not passed at the end of the second stage, the same payoffs are obtained. Both p and G get positive payoffs only if enough field commanders support the state ($k \geq s$) and zero otherwise. The difference is that p has the ability and incentive to shape the game in a way that increases the probability of this outcome, as we describe below. G does not. The purpose of the aid is to institutionalize pro-Western reforms impossible in a failed state. The core strategic problem, from the perspective of the donor (G), is commitment: it stands to lose its investment if too many field commanders opt to *cannibalize* instead of *rehabilitate*, but the size of the aid package is chosen before G can see how strategies unfold. In the best case, foreign aid creates opportunities for local bureaucrats to “buy off” street forces and assemble a military quickly (even if some aid is diverted by a political logic). In the worst case, field commanders will cannibalize state institutions and steal all the aid.

If the stability threshold is reached a second time in the second stage, the distribution x is implemented. All warlords that played *rehabilitate* in the first stage as well as any that changed their minds across the two stages are eligible for a transfer. Having a two-stage game play out in this way illuminates the possibility of “buy-out” of formerly non-affiliated commanders, re-shaping the governing coalition to reflect the fortunes of war.

Table 1 also clarifies the possibility that field commanders can do well, in principle if the stability threshold is not passed in the second stage, by playing *rehabilitate, cannibalize*: performing loyalty to the state, waiting for the arrival of foreign aid to “fatten the stag”

and *then* coordinating to *cannibalize* state institutions. Because $v^* > v$, if they play correctly, they can expect to do better than those who played *cannibalize* in both stages. A militia commander can “opt out” of the cooperative consolidation process at the beginning of the crisis, seize territory, and refuse to allow himself to be bought out with aid, but he only gets just the land and population initially seized, minus the cost of fighting ($v/n-c$).

By a minimum winning coalition logic, p should offer exactly s field commanders enough to overcome their indifference between *rehabilitation* and *cannibalization*, with p pocketing as much of the rest of v or v^* as they can.³ Depending on field commanders’ expectations about the path of play, it is possible that there will be one or more “leftover” field commanders, all of whom played *rehabilitate* in the first round, but all of whom should expect a transfer of zero. If v^* is large, however, the odds may still be favorable compared to the expected payoff of remaining outside the state (*cannibalize*, *cannibalize*). It is possible for a field commander i to be transferred a positive x_i even if they play *cannibalize* in the second stage, so long as s or more other warlords choose to *rehabilitate* in the second stage. (Imagine an aborted effort to try to disrupt consolidation by a field commander who then pretends it ever happened and keeps his job). A field commander, even one snubbed by an $x_i=0$ transfer, may not be in a pivotal position to crash the coalition and claim the higher *cannibalize* payoff, anyway. This risk of being snubbed can be variously thought of as the risk of being arrested, or not promoted into a job with status or material benefits.

Key Results

There are two stable equilibria in which no player plays weakly dominated strategies. The first, *state failure*, is an equilibrium where all field commanders play *cannibalize* in the first round because none want to suffer the penalty for appearing weak. The second stable equilibrium is a *partial incorporation* equilibrium. Exactly s of the field commanders play *rehabilitate* in the first stage, the remaining $n-s$ field commanders play *cannibalize* in the first round, G sends aid, p transfers a minimum winning coalition ($s=k$) of field commanders just what they would get by playing *cannibalize* ($v^*/n-c$), p transfers himself the entire remainder of v^* ($v^*-s(v^*/n-c)$) and the $n-s$ field commanders that played *cannibalize* are offered zero, “insider” warlords play *rehabilitate*, the rest play *cannibalize*, and the game ends with a peaceful distribution.

Which of these two equilibria will obtain is a political question. There are two analytically distinct logics by which a field commander might decide to *cannibalize* the state in the first stage. A commander pessimistic about the possibility that the game will not advance to stage two should want to avoid a reputation for indecision or weakness ($-w$). The logic, in this pathway of reasoning, is analogous to the choice to go for the rabbit in a stag hunt: a fat stag (engorged by generous Western aid packages, in the analogy) is no temptation if it is thought no other hunters will cooperate to catch it. Alternatively, a commander may be pessimistic about whether they will be in the minimum winning coalition or not. A commander may expect that a state-seizing coalition will form (that k will equal or exceed s) but that he will be excluded from the flow of benefits.

The logic of a *partial incorporation* equilibrium is straightforward: a minimum winning coalition of field commanders coordinate, play *rehabilitate*, and cooperatively consolidate into the state, essentially lured into the state by the promise of a job in which they do at least as well as they could do by *cannibalizing* aid-saturated institutions:

H1: The “Aid Buys Peace” Hypothesis: Welfare of field commanders inside the state is greater than the welfare of field commanders outside the state ($v^/n - c > v/n - c$).*

In addition, for some field commanders to defect in the first stage, cannibalization must provide some benefits: that is, the cost of fighting on one’s own must not be greater than a commander’s share of the cannibalization rents. Russia can guarantee that these first-stage rabbits are fat, too. A field commander *cannibalizing* the state near Russia’s border can anticipate a flow of rents from seizing and maintaining control of local assets, defended by Moscow’s umbrella.

H2: The “Russian Policy Can Guarantee Fat Rabbits in A Stag Hunt” Hypothesis: Welfare of field commanders outside the Ukrainian state is not zero ($v/n - c > 0$).

As commanders make their first-round choice, the civilian bureaucratic apparatus **p** has not yet interfaced with donors. This creates an intertemporal commitment problem: The civilian figurehead government never gets off the ground without coordinated support from field commanders, but civilians in the state apparatus cannot credibly commit to transfer wealth to any one field commander.⁴ The decision to *rehabilitate*, not *cannibalize*, is a gamble at the time it is made. Field commanders know **p** needs just **s** supporters, and that **p** maximizes its utility by offering just **s** field commanders just enough to convince them not to *cannibalize* the state. When it comes time to consider cannibalization in the second stage, they have a much better sense of how large the pie is, and also how well other commanders are doing. To *cannibalize* in the second stage is not secession (as per the DNR/LNR), but rather to begin to think creatively and entrepreneurially about the “second-best thing” one can do with a private army. For groups that refuse to disarm, criminal behavior is one possibility.

H3: The “Bandits into Bureaucrats” Hypothesis: For volunteer battalions, welfare of field commanders “ambiguously in” the state should approximate the welfare of field commanders “ambiguously out of” the state ($x_i = v^/n - c$).*

The other possibility is threatening to collapse political order. The model’s sequencing emphasizes that it is not clear who will be “dealt in” by **p** at the time initial strategies are chosen.⁵ (Those “dealt out” will receive transfers of zero – worse than those playing *cannibalize* from the beginning.) Once a member is in, however, moves towards further incorporation into the coalition *should be resisted by the militias already in the state*, since it requires dividing the (**v***) among more legitimate claimants. The game, especially in a one-shot setting, places a very high premium on players’ ability to coordinate with each other to create *blocking coalitions*. A blocking coalition of field commanders requires just enough supporters to prevent the other field commanders from exceeding the **s** threshold: **n-s+1**. If $n=50$, $s=35$, a blocking coalition needs just 16 commanders:

H4: The “Blocking Coalitions” Hypothesis: Insider militia captains should prefer the status quo to any peace settlement that would dilute their current share of rents (e.g., by granting amnesty to mobilized anti-regime militias and letting them compete for jobs).

Full consolidation ($k=n$) is never an equilibrium so long as $s < n$. We can achieve this result even with field commanders that are interchangeable, materially motivated, and non-ideological. Both the field commanders incorporated into the state and the civilian patrons in the bureaucracy resist proposals that would force them to share rents.

This simple framework deliberately excludes personalities of leaders, political institutions, nonviolent social actors, ideology, factional organizational characteristics, and more, treating militia commanders as interchangeable rent-seekers with equal opportunity to join the state or oppose it. Militia factions, especially in the second stage, compete against each other for what are essentially “pork” goods: salaried jobs in the security sector that come with employment security, social status, formal amnesty or relative immunity from prosecution, decent salaries, and a promise of a pension.⁶

The model shows that *partial incorporation* – which, in the real world presents as a frozen territorial conflict in Ukraine’s eastern Donbas region – may be a sustainable political equilibrium. In particular, the potential of Ukrainian militias to coordinate to act as spoilers (a blocking coalition that can “veto” a settlement), will continue to frustrate Western governments hoping to accelerate the Minsk process.⁷ Standard accounts of frozen conflicts tend to emphasize Russian meddling, attrition processes, and especially the large distance in ideological policy preferences between Eastern and Western social forces.⁸ While we do not deny all these factors are salient in Ukraine, we show that a frozen conflict can be sustained as an equilibrium of strategies by fully non-ideological, interchangeably-rent-seeking battalion commanders, all competing in a *cooperative consolidation* scramble and hoping to maximize their share of state rents.

An Analytic Narrative

The purpose of a formal model is to make it clear who the actors are, the sequence of play, and the payoffs over strategies, to clarify what is being argued. The model is solved formally in a downloadable appendix, but core results can be summarized, and a few formal statements of welfare for field commanders can be re-stated as the testable hypotheses discussed in the previous section, all emerging from the model. This guides our analytic narrative.

A typical starting point for descriptions of Ukraine’s war is the metaphor (or model) of a war of attrition. In a typical war of attrition, two well-institutionalized (in this case state-backed) actors face off. The no-man’s land in Ukraine’s east, if described in terms of a static ethnicized master cleavage, fits this well.⁹

Our modeling approach differs. We treat militia leaders as interchangeable, scrambling in a competitive market for pork and political influence. In Ukraine’s eastern theater, especially early in the conflict, much of the relevant political and military action was

within Russian-speaking communities. As face validity for this initial claim, we can note that it was a very confusing time for observers:

One rebel group, Oplot, comes from the Russian city of Kharkiv. Another, the Russian Orthodox Army, is composed of Russians and Ukrainians. A third, named for a river, Kalmius, is made up mainly of coal miners. This motley mix forms just part of the fighting force of Ukraine's eastern uprising. It is more patchwork than united front: some groups get along with others. Some do not. And their leaders seem to change with the weather. 'I can't keep them straight anymore,' said a fighter...¹⁰

The interchangeability assumption remains controversial, admittedly. Readers who know the case well can judge for themselves whether group boundaries were as contestable and or permeable as we imply, whether small factions could really "gang up" on larger ones or "splinter off" and cannibalize their memberships, and whether the transformation of some groups into special interest veterans' groups to lobby (and threaten political order if they do not get their way) fits Ukraine's reality. What is uncontroversial is that, in the initial stages, Ukraine's military was underequipped, poorly organized, and poorly led.¹¹ It was demoralizing to observe most of the Ukrainian military in Crimea defecting to the Russian side.¹² The new government in Kyiv, moreover, clearly did not trust police to carry out policing units in the East, especially after heavily armed groups seized and held government buildings. In this chaotic milieu of armed organizing by the separatists and counter-organizing by the volunteer units it was not known, even to participants, which communities of Russian speakers were forming militias to "opt out" of the Ukrainian government taking form in Kyiv and which were forming to protect their country from invasion. As the quote above makes clear, what clear most clear was the proliferation of armed groups occurred across Eastern Ukraine.¹³ The Ukrainian government reinstated conscription in May, but to supplement its green recruits and small number of reliable contract troops, Kyiv relied more and more on a patchwork of "volunteer battalions."¹⁴ As far-right paramilitaries claimed new prerogatives to dictate terms in civil-military debates, many Eastern field commanders mobilized in order to protect themselves, and safeguard their values, against the Western far-right social forces defining themselves as the state.

The sequencing of moves we outline in the model has face-validity claims in Ukraine. After regime change in February 2014, the Kremlin ordered special forces to secure government buildings in Crimea, and quickly absorbed it into Russia's territory, *de facto* altering Ukraine's interstate border. As Russian elites broadcast their desire on television and Russia's army massed troops for a rescue mission, it raised the calculated benefits of *cannibalization* for Ukrainian field commanders. This set off a scramble for influence. After an initial breakdown of order in the spring of 2014, Russian-speaking battalion commanders rallied to the defense of the Ukrainian state, the West sent aid to support Ukraine, some of the aid was diverted to the bank accounts of bureaucrats in Kyiv, and some of the battalion commanders merged their militia memberships into the state security forces, rehabilitating the institutions that endure to this day.

A deductive model can illuminate not only the equilibrium path, but counterfactual “roads not taken.” We know the path of actual play. What might have been?

The first stage of the game describes the chaotic initial weeks and months after Russia’s seizure of Crimea. Russian policy raised the stability threshold s in February 2014. Whether or not the goal was to deliberately push Ukraine towards *state failure* is disputed.¹⁵ Since at least 1997, the Ukrainian state had acted as if it had no need for a military for self-defense, a situation that implies a low stability threshold. After Crimea, the gap in military power between Russia and Ukraine mattered a great deal – which we can parameterize as a higher threshold (s). Regardless of intent, the possibility of *state failure* in Ukraine loomed, and Russia annexed Crimea knowing that dominoes could fall in Eastern and Southern Ukraine as a result, since so many Russian-speakers (and millions of self-identified ethnic Russians) might have wanted to “opt out” of Ukraine and hope that they could “opt in” to Russia, too.

Did the Kremlin hope to induce field commanders to play *cannibalize* instead of *rehabilitate* so that the stability threshold would not be passed? Perhaps. Russian television messaging was certainly calibrated to push a narrative of imminent threat from Ukrainian fascists (as cover for their Crimea policy) and long-term status reversals (aided by the unfortunate decision by the Maidan victors to immediately revisit the language law). The effects of the Russian government’s propaganda narrative were never intended to only influence politics in Crimea. In the language of the model, we would say that the propaganda perhaps made Russian-speaking Ukrainian field commanders pessimistic about whether they would be in the winning coalition even if they were to join the state, as well as promised commanders that their payoffs for playing *cannibalize* would be substantial with Russian support. Opening the border to patriotic Russophile volunteers, clandestine arming and re-supply, and other forms of plausibly-deniable support cast a security shadow over the Eastern Donbas that allowed field commanders to expect a positive payoff from *cannibalization*. Russia tried to engineer a situation in which locals compared a positive $v/n-c$ payoff from seceding to a transfer of 0 from a state that no longer wanted to include them.

Russian propaganda, however, fell short of convincing a majority of locals to mobilize against the state. If *state failure* had occurred, what would have happened? Speculatively, the Kremlin might have been tempted to deploy troops further into Ukraine, framing the intervention as humanitarian. Russian elites would have had to be willing to incur the occupation costs, but it would have effectively changed the geography of the conflict front lines. Without a massive armed anti-Kyiv mass-uprising to assist in 2014, however, occupation was not to be, and Russia’s military stayed primarily on its side of the interstate border. Russia’s Crimea policy backfired, essentially, easing and facilitating cooperative counter-consolidation. Many field commanders opted to *rehabilitate* the Ukrainian state military, as the line of control enveloped nearly the entire width of the country, including much of the Donbas. The game entered stage two.

If the first stage of the game focuses on Russian intervention, the second stage of the game is meant to model the arrival of Western aid – and the limits of Western ability to

influence the particulars of the consolidation of Ukraine's security forces in intervening years. Model predictions hold up serviceably well in terms of describing the equilibrium path of play. Field commanders were offered positions, considered *cannibalization*, but, because the offers were good, chose to *rehabilitate*.

While the mobilization of a critical mass of locals in support of Kyiv averted state failure, a new problem arose as these non-state armed actors gained significant power by taking up arms. For its first year, the Donbas war was fought primarily by well-armed volunteers, as the dawning realization that the Ukrainian military was in disarray sparked a cascade of volunteer battalion formations. Many drew on local symbolism for their names and in their insignias.¹⁶ A vocal portion of the volunteer battalions were radical right paramilitary groups, such as the Azov and Pravyi sektor battalions, who took upon themselves the responsibility to defend the nation.¹⁷ The state announced an "ATO" (Anti-Terrorist Organization) to act as an umbrella for mass social mobilization, but it was the volunteers themselves who pushed the state over the threshold of responding with force to the separatists.¹⁸ For a few months during the "Russian Spring" of 2014, it was simply not clear to onlookers, or Ukrainians, that the center would hold and that the civilian Maidan government being recognized in Kyiv would be able to command the political loyalty of the volunteer battalions. Since these pro-government militias mobilized to fill a gap in Kyiv's coercive power, the state had few direct means to control them.

Our model emphasizes two parameter shifts that jointly explain patterns of centralization: stabilizing costs of fighting, c , and the arrival of foreign aid. The conflict rapidly became conventional, especially after August 2014 when the Russian military intervened at the battle of Ilovaisk. Front lines were basically fixed by the fall of 2014, with artillery separating lines of control. Russia never quite withdrew, and lines have not moved much since the fall of 2014. Less is known about processes of consolidation that have taken place in this period in the separatist republics in the Donbas, even years into the conflict,¹⁹ than is known about the consolidation on the Ukrainian side. However, the operational readiness of the DNR/LNR by fall of 2014 suggests that they had institutionalized a hierarchical military chain-of-command,²⁰ which stabilized into an order of battle designated as the DNR Army I Corps and the LNR Army II Corps to form a total force size between 26,000 and 35,000 fighters.²¹ This fighting force is clearly capable of absorbing cost c and still persevering, making *cannibalization* a viable long-term option (*Hypothesis 2*).

Buying off the remaining pro-Ukraine militias became the order of the day. The process involved cosmetic changes and brokering. Beards were shaved, new uniforms were given old patches, the mandate of the "anti-terrorist operation" was extended to approximate a *levee en masse*, and many vigilante social groups emerging from the streets were deputized. The model does not specify the brokerage process of consolidation but does make crude predictions: A side-payment to a local field commander in the form of immunity from prosecution, a salary, a uniform, and a promotion, along with his top lieutenants, to join the state security forces with a winking promise of a pension and upward advancement opportunities. There is no moment of

disarmament. Instead, there is a considered comparison between the payoffs for operating outside the state and inside it (*cannibalization* and *rehabilitation*).

Table 2: Battalions and Centralized Control as of 2015

Battalion Name	Soldiers	Unit Commander	Subordination
37th TBD (Zaporizhia)	600	Oleksandr "Sobol" Lobas	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
43th TBD (Patriot)	500	Oleksandr Vodolaz'kyi	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
24th TBD (Aydar)	300	Mykola V. Petrushyn *	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
Azov	2000	Andrii Biletskyi	National Guard of Ukraine (MOD), *Not
"General Kulchytskyi"	400	Viktor Tolochko	National Guard of Ukraine (MOD)
Bilotserkivskiyi TDB	200	Unknown (Denys "Angel")	Main Directorate of Intelligence (MOD)
Cherkasy (14th TDB)	100	Mykola P. Radchenko	Armed Forces of Ukraine
Police Company "Chernihiv"	600	Vitalii Kostiuchenko **	National Police (MOD)
"Crimea"	150	Issa Akayev	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
Dnipro-2 (39th TDB)	400	Volodymyr P. Berbusenko	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
Donbas - Ukraine (46th TDB)	400	Vyacheslav Vlasenko	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
Donbas (the National Guard)	600	Anatolii Vinohorodskiyi	National Guard of Ukraine (MOD)
Harpun (Kamianets-Podilskiyi)	Unknown	Kostiantyn O. Zhuk	Ministry of Interior
Horyn' (2nd TDB)	400	Oleksandr Tsys'	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
Ivano-Frankivsk	150	Mykola R. Ivoniak	National Police (MOD)
Karpatska Sich (rota)	Unknown	Oleh Kutsyn	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
Kharkiv - 1	300	Serhii Yanholenko	National Police (MOD)
Police Company "Kherson"	100	Maksym V. Zharkov	National Police (MOD)
Khortytsia (23rd TDB)	650	Dmytro Herasymenko	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
Kirovohrad	150	Vyacheslav H. Shevchenko.	National Police (MOD)
Police Company "Kremenchuk"	100	Oleh V. Berkelia	Ministry of Interior
40th TDB (Kryvbas)	600	Viktor Pochernyayev	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
12th TDB (Kyiv)	400	Nikolay "Akula" Bilosvit	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
11th TDB (Kyivska Rus) -	400	Valeriy Vovk	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
25 TDB (Kyivska Rus)	400	Andriy Yanchenko	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
Luhansk-1	250	Kostyantyn Sklifus	National Police (MOD)
OUN Battalion	100	Mykola Kohanivkyi	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
Poltava (16th TDB)	300	Oleg Gromadskiyi	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
Police Battalion "Poltava"	50	Yuriy Anuchin	National Police (MOD)
Prykarpattia (5th TDB)	400	Vitaliy Komar	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
42nd TDB (Rukh Oporu)	500	Kostiantyn Zayichenko	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
"Storm"	300	Yevgen Rudkovsky	National Police (MOD)
Sich Battalion	200	Oleksandr Pysarenko	National Police (MOD)
Sicheslav	100	Vladyslav Portanko	National Police (MOD)
"Slobozhanshchyna"	300	Andrii O. Yanholenko	National Police (MOD)
"St. Mary"	Unknown	Oleksiy Serdiuk	National Police (MOD)
Sumy	Unknown	Igor Martynov	National Police (MOD)
15th TDB (Sumy)	400	Pavlo Herasimov	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
Ternopil	400	Volodymyr Katruk	National Police (MOD)
22nd TDB "Kharkiv"	400	S.V. Gorbenko	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
53rd Mechanized Brigade	Unknown	Unknown	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
Tornado (rota, Luhansk)	200	Ruslan Onishchenko	Ministry of Interior
UNA-UNSO Battalion	1000	Kostiantyn Vinnytskyi	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
9th TDB (Vinnytsia)	700	Sergii Ivanov	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
1st TDB (Volyn)	450	Oleksandr V. Ohrymchuk	Armed Forces of Ukraine (MOD)
Zoloti Vorota (Golden Gates))	300	Sergii Shapoval	National Police (MOD)

Western aid can facilitate *cooperative consolidation* indirectly, increasing the size of the pie to be divided between the Ukrainian government and the pro-government militias. In the model, this can alter "lottery odds" that *rehabilitating* institutions in the first stage is

a risk worth taking (fattening the stag). As the introduction to this edited volume hypothesizes, when international sponsors share similar goals with the armed groups they support, cooperative consolidation tends to be a general policy aim. However, Western actors have limited leverage, since aid also increases the potential payoffs of cannibalizing the state.

In Ukraine, anticipated arrival of Western assistance (v^*) changed strategies. Governments in the West responded to the Crimea annexation with economic sanctions on Russian firms and, shortly thereafter, IMF announced a \$14-18 billion rescue package.²² IMF transfers were a very important part of the lure that convinced militia captains and de-facto field commanders to rehabilitate, and not cannibalize, Ukrainian state institutions. The state became a straightforward conduit for accessing Western funds. Salaries would be paid to public-sector jobs in a currency that was not worthless. Consistent with *Hypothesis 1* and *Hypothesis 3*, **Table 2** is consistent with strategic field commanders weighing options and “tipping” away from *state failure* toward *partial incorporation*. By fall 2015, most factions chose to affiliate with the state.

By the summer of 2015, the resilience of the Ukrainian institutions was clearer – at least on paper. Volunteer battalion memberships expanded in 2014-2015 and then contracted rapidly in 2016-2017.²³ The drawdown can be attributed to both supply and demand factors: the supply of public donations had dried up by mid-September 2015, and the demand from units had also gone down. Volunteers already had necessary survival equipment like bullet-proof flak jackets and helmets, and the frontlines were no longer moving.²⁴ Officially, various self-organized militias voluntarily subordinated their chains of command to the Ukrainian state in exchange for the provision of nonlethal Western aid. Unofficially, many soldiers remained in an ambiguous gray zone between disarmament and incorporation into the state, operating as “contractors” according to opaque logics. Chains of command were opaque, and the militias retained significant autonomy and control over their own organizations. There were strong incentives to maintain an ability to return to the streets and disrupt political order, and some of the most visible fighting units maintained ties to a far-right-wing social milieu even as they were folded into the government.²⁵

Once IMF transfers began to wash through bank accounts in Kyiv, the payoffs for militias in the winning coalition were higher than those of their counterparts that could not access these funds. This is clearest if one compares life outcomes at the ragged edge of the coalition formation project in the Donbas. The DNR/LNR militias that *cannibalized* the pre-Maidan state institutions are still huddled in the defensive position (often the same literal buildings) they were in before ($v/n-c$). On the Ukrainian side of the line of control, members of the Ukrainian armed forces better enjoy more life opportunities ($v^*/n-c$). Some patriots mobilized early, were not selected to be part of the minimum (s) winning coalition (for whatever reason), and are today bitter about the corruption at the top (x_p) that yielded an outcome these veterans see as unjust ($x_{in}=v^*/n-c > x_{out}=0$).

In August and September of 2015, 64 representatives of defense battalions (at various levels, some at command rank) were administered a survey that included many open-

ended questions by our research team. One question asked was, “Do you think most members of your group consider themselves to be subordinate to the regular police and military forces of the government of Ukraine, or are they operating outside of (and parallel to) the regular police and military forces of the government of Ukraine? Explain what you mean in your own words.” The modal response was a variant of “Yes, we are in the structure of the Armed Forces of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. The battalion used to be a territorial defense battalion, but now it is incorporated.”²⁶ Consider the following variation in answers that we received, however:

*I do not have an unambiguous answer. On the one hand we are an independent military unit, on the other hand we subordinate to the National Guard of Ukraine and ATO Joint Staff. We subordinate to the National Guard in terms of military matters, military actions, but we are different regarding trainings and structure.*²⁷

*No. Factually, DUK (UVC) is not legal. It is not in the structure of the Ministry of Interior or the Ministry of Defense, but there is a coordination with the Joint Staff.*²⁸

*Yes, we are supposed to say that the battalion completely subordinates to the Ministry of the Interior. But even though we subordinate to the Ministry of Interior, the battalion makes some independent decisions on the front line. They are all ignoramuses in the Staff. They do not understand what is happening during the fight, so we must act on our own.*²⁹

*We started as an independent unit, then then had to legalize ourselves as people usually called us a criminal gang. We asked the former Minister of Defense Heletei for help. We have been a part of the Armed Forces of Ukraine since that moment.*³⁰

*We became the Ministry of Interior’s military unit, but for us it means only a formal legalization of a volunteer movement. When we were just a volunteer rota, we faced difficulties of getting weapons. We realized that the Ministry of Interior would supply us with weaponry and equipment, so decided it would be wise to incorporate into it.*³¹

*No. They are absolutely independent.*³²

*No. The battalion is part of DUK[UVC] organization. It was founded as an alternative to Ukrainian army and it remains independent.*³³

Well, the answer is complicated. This special forces unit have never been under the Armed Forces of Ukraine. However, I cannot say we are illegal since we subordinate to the Chief Directorate of Intelligence and perform special military operations. The only people aware of our existence are our intelligence superiors. We are not fighting at the moment; a part of soldiers joined other brigades, mainly the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Still,

a group of people remain subordinating to me as their commander, because they don't want to be under the Armed Forces.³⁴

Yes. At first we came here to protect our country, not to climb the ranks within the Ministry of Interior. But the situation has changed, now we subordinate to the Ministry of Interior.³⁵

In part. If there was an opportunity, we would act independently, but now we [are told we] must subordinate whether to the Ministry of Interior or the Armed Forces. We are in the process of merging with the Armed Forces because we fought alongside with them since the first day and performed some combat tasks [cooperatively].³⁶

The motivations of the volunteer units for fighting were similarly ambiguous. The most common answer to the question “Why did most men in your unit volunteer?” was “We were fighting a Russian invasion.” This is completely consistent with the basic choice set in the model. Many interviewees claimed they were fighting against infiltration by the Russian military, but distrustful of the dilapidated and incompetent institutions of the Ukrainian military. Others were clearly interested in engaging in heroic military performances while subordinating themselves to the least possible amount of government oversight. Whether it made more sense to code these performances as efforts to *rehabilitate* dilapidated Ukrainian security institutions or *cannibalize* them was not all that clear.

The ambiguity is consistent with *Hypothesis 3*, as field commanders tried to “price out” the correct offer to buy their loyalty and bring them into the state. Buying loyalty took several forms. For ideologically motivated fighters, the transfers of weapons and goods from the state made it possible for them to fight more effectively (as a survey respondent stated above). Other militias wanted a side transfer of policy advocacy – to act as armed lobbyists for a government policy on language, cultural protections, or some such – which is outside the scope of the model (the model’s fit is best for militias motivated by economic motivations – jobs with pensions, freedom to continue criminal enterprises or solicit private donations without interference from the state, etc.).

Prominent far-right volunteer militias exemplify ambiguity in practice. Consider two of the most prominent major volunteer battalions that continue to publicly recruit volunteer soldiers outside the state, maintain independent training, and cling unapologetically to divisive symbols – Azov and the Right Sector’s Ukrainian Volunteer Corps (DUK). When asked, representatives of Azov are quick to assert that their Regiment is formally incorporated into the Ukrainian National Guard.³⁷ Despite its formal incorporation into the National Guard, Azov still maintains its own recruiting facilities -- in a Kyiv building, Cossack House, that also houses other right-wing organizations, the National Corps leadership, and Azov’s outreach efforts to right-wing groups across Europe.³⁸ It rents Cossack House from the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense to maintain physical autonomy. War has been profitable for Azov and other far-right groups, shielding their members from prosecution, allowing them access to the budget of the National Guard, and more.³⁹ So even the most ideologically-motivated militias

find they have strong material incentives to align with the state and capture the largest share of foreign aid.

The merging of militia commanders with the state gives them a vested interest in the status quo, which can impede efforts to resolve the conflict (*Hypothesis 4*). The logic is straightforward coalition management. In order to maximize their share of Western assistance, they construct a variant of Ukrainian patriotism that exiles from the normal political sphere any actor (especially any armed actor!) disloyal to the Ukrainian nation. They can wave the bloody shirt, and rally ‘round the flag, and maximize their rents, too. The possibility that pro-government armed actors might “spoil” or “veto” a future peace settlement in Ukraine is thus illuminated by our model. The continued autonomy without disarmament by these militias gives them the option to exercise such a veto. Veteran constituencies are adamantly opposed to re-integration of secessionist territory until Russia withdraws its military completely and want no votes counted in the DNR/LNR. Constitutional revisions that would grant special status or autonomy the East are similarly anathema. In August 2015, when this proposal was discussed in the Rada, there were calls of treason inside parliament and three police officers were killed by a grenade. The outsized influence of paramilitary forces allied with the “No To Capitulation” front in parliament is well-established. Their talking points are consistent. As one member of the Azov battalion stated, “If there is renewed Russian aggression and the Ukrainian government shows weakness by trying to compromise between Russia and Ukrainian society, then the veterans will again regain their power and show who they are. The necessary network, the pyramid of power is already built within the veteran organizations, the battalions.”⁴⁰

Theoretical and Policy Implications

Our model provides several theoretical and policy implications regarding the potential resolution of the Ukraine conflict. The first illuminates continued Russian involvement in the conflict. Without Russian support for the Donbas separatists, Ukraine would be tempted to engage in coercive consolidation. By assumption in our analysis, *cannibalization* payoffs are positive. The Ukrainian state cannot use coercive consolidation to force separatist militias in the DNR/LNR to join, nor can it forcibly disarm pro-Ukraine militias with a certain probability of success. If we relax this assumption, it is possible to use the same model to describe a *coercive mode* of consolidation.⁴¹ *Coercive* consolidation would raise the costs of fighting on the battlefield c high enough to deter cannibalization (perhaps if Western donors provided Ukraine with more military assistance and if the Ukrainian military was a great deal more effective).

This possibility sheds light on Russia’s intransigent bargaining position on the Minsk accords. The Kremlin argument is that Ukraine must do what it has promised: hold elections and seat representatives in the Rada before Russian and heavy weapons depart from the DNR/LNR territories. Russia’s refusal to admit it even has troops in Eastern Donbas is often viewed as cynical hypocrisy – but there is a consistent logic to it. Continued Russian support gives separatist fighters the leverage to ask for something substantial, imposing costs of expanding the rent-capturing coalition that the Ukrainian state does not want to pay. Ukraine’s refusal to implement its Minsk obligations until

Russian withdrawal occurs can be packaged, in the court of Russian public opinion, as evidence of intent to engage in victor's justice (*coercive* consolidation, by the logic of the previous paragraph). The Ukrainian position, which also sounds reasonable to many, is that Russia must be *taught* that there are consequences for *not* respecting Ukrainian sovereignty after Crimea. The goal of getting the Kremlin to alter its policy, so that the secessionist commanders could be incorporated coercively, has as much to do with communicating resolve to a bully as a desire to knit the territory of the state back together. Resolving this deadlock is beyond the ambition of this paper.

What can donors in the West do about the gridlock on the Ukrainian side? Little, if the logic of the model is correct.⁴² A Ukrainian polity with its territorial integrity restored may be desirable, but *full incorporation* is unsustainable as an equilibrium (so long as $s < n$ and $v/n - c > 0$). At least one field commander could always have done better if they had played *cannibalize*. Perhaps recognition of this dynamic is one reason that, despite conflicts of interest between Ukraine and its Western donors, aid has not diminished. This reveals something about Western priorities and ambitions. Public diplomacy notwithstanding, aid is delivered to purchase stability in Ukraine and punish Russia, not to transform a Ukrainian culture of corruption or seed liberal democracy. Training and advising of operational units and ongoing advising to the Ukrainian Ministry of Defense provides some influence over the Ukrainian military while punishing Russia for bad behavior (especially annexation of Crimea). There have been no signs that the West is going to reduce aid to Ukraine unless it moves first to implement the concessions promised at Minsk, which eventually may be necessary to end the conflict.

Among ourselves, we remain optimistic that the DNR/LNR territorial dispute could be resolved with creative institutional design. Such a design, however, would need to overcome a political logic – the minimum winning coalition – that our model suggests unfortunately hedges in the direction of permanent stalemate. Ideally, Western policy should aim to balance the need to punish Russia for its transgressions *and* the need to induce Ukrainian elites to politically re-integrate and to rebuild the East to change the incentives for DNR/LNR residents.⁴³ This is difficult. It violates taboos in Ukrainian society to suggest that any barriers to settling Ukraine's war are intra-Ukrainian.⁴⁴ Our goal in this paper is not to whitewash Russia's role in instigating and prolonging the crisis, but to remind analysts of two basic facts: (1) in fragile institutional settings, agents are tempted to gradually cannibalize state institutions; and (2) military jobs are a particularly desirable, and divisible, form of pork that the winners prefer to keep for themselves.

Still, Western policymakers should not let the normatively mixed news overshadow the good. Ukraine is an unusual success story for foreign-incentivized centralization. The pressures of war combined with timely infusion of Western assistance incentivized consolidation in the *cooperative mode*. This averted state failure and saved lives. By bringing errant militias under the authority of the Ukrainian state, moreover, cooperative consolidation had benefits beyond those captured in the model, such as fewer civilian atrocities, incentives to censor divisive symbols and purge right-wing fringe extremist elements, and more.

¹ For a very good summary of this position, see Kristian Åtland, "Destined for deadlock? Russia, Ukraine, and the unfulfilled Minsk agreements." *Post-Soviet Affairs* 36, no. 2 (2020): 122-139.

² This assumption implies that no field commander should be sufficient to unilaterally ensure state survival ($s > 1$) or have a veto over state stability ($s < n$).

³ For those seeking an accessible introduction to how the notion of a minimum winning coalition shapes political decision-making, a good start is Bruce Bueno De Mesquita et al., *The Logic of Political Survival* (MIT press, 2005). The original source is William H. Riker, *The Theory of Political Coalitions*, vol. 173 (Yale University Press, 1962).

⁴ The equilibrium formally defined in the downloadable appendix fudges this point a bit, with exactly s joining so each is pivotal (capable of unilaterally breaking the coalition and achieving a $v^*/n - c$ payoff). If $k_i > s$, this commitment problem is more serious.

⁵ The hypothesis is stated with a playful nod to Karen Barkey, "Bandits and Bureaucrats: The Ottoman Route to State Centralization (Ithaca, NY 1994)," 1994.

⁶ James D. Fearon, "Why ethnic politics and 'pork' tend to go together." In *an SSRC-MacArthur sponsored conference on "Ethnic Politics and Democratic Stability," University of Chicago. 1999.*

⁷ There is a rich literature how rebel groups often act as spoilers for peace processes across a variety of contexts. See David E. Cunningham, "Veto Players and Civil War Duration," *American Journal of Political Science* 50, no. 4 (October 2006): 875–92; Wendy Pearlman, "Spoiling Inside and Out: Internal Political Contestation and the Middle East Peace Process," *International Security* 33, no. 3 (January 1, 2009): 79–109, <https://doi.org/10/bg569f>; Wendy Pearlman and Kathleen Gallagher Cunningham, "Nonstate Actors, Fragmentation and Conflict Processes," *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 56, no. 1 (2012): 3–15, <https://doi.org/10/fz2hc7>; Andrew G. Reiter, "Does Spoiling Work? Assessing the Impact of Spoilers on Civil War Peace Agreements," *Civil Wars* 17, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 89–111, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698249.2015.1059567>. Similarly, interveners in conflict can make a peace settlement less likely. See David E. Cunningham, "Blocking Resolution: How External States Can Prolong Civil Wars," *Journal of Peace Research* 47, no. 2 (March 1, 2010): 115–27, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343309353488>; Aysegul Aydin and Patrick M. Regan, "Networks of Third-Party Intervenors and Civil War Duration," *European Journal of International Relations* 18, no. 3 (September 1, 2012): 573–97, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066111403515>.

⁸ Our sparse model excludes many variables that are relevant to a complete history of the case, such as variation in the economic recruiting base of militias (Yuri M. Zhukov, "Trading Hard Hats for Combat Helmets: The Economics of Rebellion in Eastern Ukraine," *Journal of Comparative Economics* 44, no. 1 (February 2016): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jce.2015.10.010>), local community beliefs about the legitimacy of the Maidan regime change (S. Kudelia, "How They Joined? Militants and Informers in the Armed Conflict in Donbas," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 30, no. 2 (23 2019): 279–306, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09592318.2018.1546361>; Elise Giuliano, "Who Supported Separatism in Donbas? Ethnicity and Popular Opinion at the Start of the Ukraine Crisis," *Post-Soviet Affairs* 34, no. 2/3 (March 2018): 158.), the role of some business oligarchs (Volodymyr Ishchenko, "Insufficiently Diverse: The Problem of Nonviolent Leverage and Radicalization of Ukraine's Maidan Uprising, 2013–2014," *Journal of Eurasian Studies* 11, no. 2 (2020): 201–15.), regime characteristic of Russia or particular beliefs of Russian leaders (Samuel Charap and Timothy J. Colton, *Everyone Loses: The Ukraine Crisis and the Ruinous Contest for Post-Soviet Eurasia* (Routledge, 2018); Michael McFaul, "Putin, Putinism, and the Domestic Determinants of Russian Foreign Policy," *International Security* 45, no. 2 (2020): 95–139; Catherine Belton, *Putin's People: How the KGB Took Back Russia and Then Took on the West* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020).), East-West cleavages in Ukrainian domestic politics (Keith Darden and Anna Grzymala-Busse, "The Great Divide: Literacy, Nationalism, and the Communist Collapse," *World Politics* 59, no. 1 (2006): 83–115.), domestic changes in Ukraine undermining its ability (or NATO's ability) to credibly commit to not taking actions in the future that might threaten Russia (Robert Powell, "War as a Commitment Problem," *International Organization* 60, no. 1 (2006): 169–203.), and slow-moving shifts in the global distribution of power affecting polarization in Ukraine (Nicholas Sambanis, Stergios Skaperdas, and William Wohlforth, "External Intervention, Identity, and Civil War," *Comparative Political Studies* 53, no. 14 (2020): 2155–82.).

⁹ Stathis N. Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War*, 1st ed. (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For a model that puts policy divergence between social forces zero-sum issues (especially language choice) more central to analysis, see Driscoll and Arel (forthcoming).

¹⁰ Sabrina Tavernise and David M. Herszenhorn, "Patchwork Makeup of Rebels Fighting Ukraine Makes Peace Talks Elusive," *The New York Times*, July 9, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/07/10/world/europe/patchwork-makeup-of-rebels-fighting-ukraine-makes-peace-talks-elusive.html>.

¹¹ Maj Michael Cohen, "Ukraine's Battle at Ilovaik, August 2014: The Tyranny of Means," *US Army Press Online Journal*, 2016, 11.

¹² Serhy Yekelchuk, *The Conflict in Ukraine: What Everyone Needs to Know*® (Oxford University Press, 2015).

¹³ Volodymyr Ishchenko, "Far Right Participation in the Ukrainian Maidan Protests: An Attempt of Systematic Estimation" (European politics and society, Taylor & Francis, 2016), 453, <http://proxy.uchicago.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=edsbl&AN=vdc.100036350859.ox000001&site=eds-live&scope=site>.

¹⁴ Ilmari Kähkö, "A Nation-in-the-Making, in Arms: Control of Force, Strategy and the Ukrainian Volunteer Battalions," *Defence Studies* 18, no. 2 (April 3, 2018): 147–66, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14702436.2018.1461013>.

¹⁵ Some in the Kremlin probably desired more secessionist Russian influence than just a sliver of the Eastern Donbas, but only if they could avoid paying occupation costs. Some pro-Kremlin groups clearly believed Russia might come to their defense if they could provoke a general uprising through actions such as seeking a referendum on independence: Ilmari Kähkö, "A Conventional War: Escalation in the War in Donbas, Ukraine" Forthcoming (2021). For others, the violence was motivated both by strategic reasoning and strong emotion: to protect family and friends or to respond to Ukrainian nationalists in the new government. Serhiy Kudelia, "The Donbas Rift," *Russian Politics & Law* 54, no. 1 (January 2, 2016): 5–27, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10611940.2015.1160707>.

¹⁶ Those interested in these insignias (or the raw survey data) should contact the authors directly.

¹⁷ Alexander Clapp, "The Maidan Irregulars," *The National Interest*, no. 143 (2016): 26–33; Andreas Umland, "Irregular Militias and Radical Nationalism in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine: The Prehistory and Emergence of the 'Azov' Battalion in 2014," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 31, no. 1 (2019): 105–31.

¹⁸ Kähkö, "A Conventional War: Escalation in the War in Donbas, Ukraine."

¹⁹ Kimitaka Matsuzato, "The Donbas War: Outbreak and Deadlock," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 25, no. 2 (April 27, 2017): 175–201.

²⁰ Tetyana Malyarenko and Stefan Wolff, *The Dynamics of Emerging De-Facto States: Eastern Ukraine in the Post-Soviet Space* (Routledge, 2019).

²¹ The reorganization seems to have folded the original militia units into a command-and-control structure with some brigades based on a single militia unit and others constructed from remnants of other units or reassigned fighters. For very informed speculation on these matters, see Mark Galeotti, *Armies of Russia's War in Ukraine*, 1 edition (Osprey Publishing, 2019).

²² The year-by-year amounts subsequently transferred from the IMF (in SDRs): \$3.9b in 2014, \$7.7b in 2015, \$8.4b in 2016, \$8.5b in 2017, \$8b in 2018, \$6.9b in 2019, \$6.5b in 2020. Non-military and military assistance allocated to Ukraine adds hundreds of millions. US GAO, "Democracy Assistance: State Should Improve Information Sharing with Embassies" (US Government Accountability Office, January 2020), <https://www.gao.gov/products/GAO-20-173>.

²³ Kateryna Zarembo, "Doing State's Job: The Impact of Volunteers on State Defense Capacity in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine," in *Civil Society in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine* (Columbia University Press, 2018), 101–28.

²⁴ See also Vera Mironova and Ekaterina Sergatskova, "How Ukraine Reined in Its Militias," *Foreign Affairs*, 2017. who describe how militias filled niches in state capacity. Examples include the provision of

thermal imaging cameras, drones, and tablets with ballistic software and electronic maps, and the development of artillery fire control systems.

²⁵ Volodymyr Ishchenko, “Nationalist Radicalization Trends in Post-Euromaidan Ukraine,” *Ponars Eurasia*, 2018.

²⁶ Interviewee #63, Interview with self-identified member of 37th TBD, September 15, 2015.

²⁷ Interviewee #3, Interview with self-identified member of Azov, August 19, 2015.

²⁸ Interviewee #5, Interview with self-identified member of DUK (Ukrainian Volunteer Corps); 5th independent battalion, August 20, 2015.

²⁹ Interviewee #8, Interview with self-identified member of Slobozhanshchyna, August 20, 2015.

³⁰ Interviewee #12, Interview with self-identified member of UNA-UNSO Battalion, August 26, 2015.

³¹ Interviewee #13, Self-identified member of St. Mary Special Battalion (Reserve Rota), August 25, 2015, 13.

³² Interviewee #16, Interview with self-identified member of DUK (Ukrainian Volunteer Corps); 6th Alternate Battalion (Ternopil Oblast), August 25, 2015.

³³ Interview # 25, Interview with self-identified member of DUK (Ukrainian Volunteer Corps); the 7th Alternate Battalion, August 28, 2015.

³⁴ Interviewee #41, Interview with self-identified member of Bilotserkivs'kyi TBD, September 4, 2015.

³⁵ Interview #50, Interview with self-identified member of Ternopil', September 9, 2015.

³⁶ Interview #58, Interview with self-identified member of Crimea Battalion, September 11, 2015.

³⁷ “Attention! The Azov Regiment’s response to the allegations published in ‘TIME’ magazine,” *Офіційний сайт полку “Азов” На захисті України з 2014 року* (blog), January 10, 2021, <https://azov.org.ua/the-azov-regiments-response-to-the-allegations-published-in-time-magazine/>; Vyacheslav Likhachev, “Far-Right Extremism as a Threat to Ukrainian Democracy,” Freedom House, accessed March 5, 2021, <https://freedomhouse.org/report/analytical-brief/2018/far-right-extremism-threat-ukrainian-democracy>; Aris Roussinos, “[Letter from Kyiv] The Armies of the Right,” *Harper’s Magazine*, January 2021, <https://harpers.org/archive/2021/01/the-armies-of-the-right-ukraine-militias/>.

³⁸ Simon Shuster and Billy Perrigo, “How a Far-Right Militia Uses Facebook to Train New Members,” *Time*, January 7, 2021, <https://time.com/5926750/azov-far-right-movement-facebook/>; Oleksiy Kuzmenko, “The Azov Regiment Has Not Depoliticized,” *Atlantic Council* (blog), March 19, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-azov-regiment-has-not-depoliticized/>.

³⁹ “По Ту Сторону «Азова». Чем Занимается в Тылу Самый Известный Полк Нацгвардии,” *ФОКУС*, August 4, 2017, <https://focus.ua/long/377902>., Aris 2021. *Violence Marker 2021*

⁴⁰ Julia Friedrich and Theresa Lütkefend, “The Long Shadow of Donbas” (Global Public Policy Institute, 2021).

⁴¹ Formally, if $c > v^*/n$, there is a unique equilibrium in which every field commander plays *rehabilitate*, G sends aid, p allocates all of v^* to himself, all field commanders still play *rehabilitate*, and the game ends.

⁴² Western actors have some ways that we do not model to influence Ukraine’s actions. For example, Ukraine’s need to develop a supply chain for its military that is not dependent on Russia gives Western powers some transactional leverage over reform processes. Training and advising by Western military actors may mitigate the information problems inherent in principal-agent relationships and provides opportunities for influencing reforms. See Alexandra Chinchilla, “Advising War: Limited Intervention in Conflict” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2021); Walter C. Ladwig III, *The Forgotten Front: Patron-Client Relationships in Counterinsurgency* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316756805>; Eli Berman and David A. Lake, *Proxy Wars: Suppressing Violence through Local Agents* (Cornell University Press, 2019).

⁴³ Roger D. Petersen, *Western Intervention in the Balkans: The Strategic Use of Emotion in Conflict* (Cambridge University Press, 2011), 64–79; Aila M. Matanock, “Bullets for Ballots: Electoral Participation Provisions and Enduring Peace after Civil Conflict,” *International Security* 41, no. 4 (2017): 93–132.

⁴⁴ See also Tymofiy Mylovanov, Yuriy Zhukov, and Yuriy Gorodnichenko, “Review of EU Policy for Ukraine,” *EU Global Strategy and Human Security: Rethinking Approaches to Conflict*, 2018.

Downloadable Appendix: Formal Propositions

This is intended for readers interested in formally solving the game in Alexandra Chinchilla and Jesse Driscoll, “Side-Switching as State-Building: The Case of Russian-Speaking Militias in Eastern Ukraine.” The paper describes Ukraine’s conflict resolution problem as a matter of distributional politics, with the unusual simplifying assumption of interchangeable, predatory, non-ideological, non-policy-motivated field commanders as key actors. It departs from typical descriptions of Ukraine’s war that privilege attrition or policy/status-based bargaining between antagonistic social forces.

The notion of a Nash equilibrium is a powerful tool for making predictions about what “ought” to happen in a complex strategic setting. To recap, the path of play is as follows:

- Each of n field commanders simultaneously chooses whether to mobilize a militia that goes outside the chain of command (“**cannibalize**”), or to mobilize a militia that remains subordinate to the institutional chain of command (“**rehabilitate**”). Call the number of field commanders who play *rehabilitate* \mathbf{k} , with additional subscripts for stage. (Call the number playing *rehabilitate* in first stage \mathbf{k}_1 and in the number who play *rehabilitate* in the second stage \mathbf{k}_2). If \mathbf{k}_1 is less than a stability threshold \mathbf{s} ($1 < \mathbf{s} < \mathbf{n}$), the game ends with state failure. If $\mathbf{k}_1 \geq \mathbf{s}$, the game advances to stage two.
- A foreign government \mathbf{G} chooses to either assist consolidation processes in the security sector or not. If they assist, call the total value of the security forces of the target state \mathbf{v}^* . If they do not assist, call the total value \mathbf{v} .
- A domestic patron \mathbf{p} observes this transfer and proposes a distribution among n field commanders and himself $\mathbf{x} = (\mathbf{x}_i, \mathbf{x}_j, \dots, \mathbf{x}_q, \mathbf{x}_p)$.
- Each of n field commanders observe their transfer and choose, a second time, to “**cannibalize**” or “**rehabilitate**”. If \mathbf{k}_2 is less than a stability threshold \mathbf{s} ($1 < \mathbf{s} < \mathbf{n}$), the game ends with state failure. If $\mathbf{k}_2 \geq \mathbf{s}$, \mathbf{p} ’s distribution \mathbf{x} is implemented and the game ends with political order.

We solve for subgame perfect Nash equilibria by backwards induction.

The last move of the game is by field commanders. Each field commander \mathbf{i} compares the size of his individual transfer \mathbf{x}_i to his *cannibalize* payoff $\mathbf{v}^*/\mathbf{n}-\mathbf{c}$ and assesses whether the stability threshold \mathbf{s} is likely to be passed.

Proposition One: Definition of a State Failure equilibrium - *The game contains a SPNE in which every field commander plays “cannibalize” in the first stage, and no field commander plays the weakly dominated strategy “rehabilitate.” The game also contains a SPNE in which no player plays a weakly dominated strategy in the final subgame (regardless of choices made by \mathbf{G} or \mathbf{p}).*

Proof: If $\mathbf{s} > 2$, playing *rehabilitate* unilaterally when either \mathbf{k}_1 or \mathbf{k}_2 is zero is weakly dominated ($-\mathbf{w}$). The field commander cannot improve his position unilaterally by playing *rehabilitate*, so should play *cannibalize*. This is true in the second stage regardless of \mathbf{x}_i .

Now move backward to consider the game from the point of view of local patron \mathbf{p} . Proposal power allows this actor to shape the individualized *rehabilitate* payoffs for field commanders. If the observed transfer \mathbf{x}_i is less than $\mathbf{v}^*/\mathbf{n}-\mathbf{c}$, field commander \mathbf{i} should prefer state failure to occur and should play *cannibalize*. The goal must be to engineer a situation where it is in the interests of \mathbf{s} or more warlords to play *rehabilitate*, or \mathbf{p} will receive nothing.

- **Lemma 1:** Only if the observed transfer \mathbf{x}_i is greater than $\mathbf{v}^*/\mathbf{n}-\mathbf{c}$, and $\mathbf{s}-1$ other field commanders are expected to play *rehabilitate*, should \mathbf{i} *rehabilitate* as well.

If every warlord \mathbf{i} is offered a transfer $\mathbf{x}_i = \mathbf{v}^*/\mathbf{n}-\mathbf{c}+\varepsilon$ (where ε is a small amount to overcome indifference), it creates a situation where every warlord \mathbf{i} can, in principle, do better by playing *rehabilitate* than by playing *cannibalize*. If \mathbf{p} were to do this, so long as \mathbf{s} or more warlords accepted it would still allow \mathbf{p} to pocket the “lost costs” of fighting and assure himself a positive payoff, transferring himself $\mathbf{x}_p = \mathbf{n}\mathbf{c}$ while leaving no field commander worse off. This would, in essence, set up the possibility of all field commanders joining the state. There are many other viable ways \mathbf{p} can structure the game. Let us define *full consolidation* as a situation in which $\mathbf{k}_2 = \mathbf{n}$, $\mathbf{x} = (\mathbf{x}_i, \mathbf{x}_j, \dots \mathbf{x}_q, \mathbf{x}_p)$ includes a transfer $\mathbf{x}_i > 0$ for every field commander \mathbf{i} , and every field commander plays *rehabilitate*. Let us also formally define a *partial consolidation* as a situation in which $\mathbf{k}_2 \geq \mathbf{s}$, $\mathbf{x} = (\mathbf{x}_i, \mathbf{x}_j, \dots \mathbf{x}_q, \mathbf{x}_p)$ includes a transfer $\mathbf{x}_i = 0$ for at least one warlord \mathbf{i} (and at least one warlord \mathbf{i} observes the proposal and plays *cannibalize* instead of *rehabilitate*, by Lemma 1).

- **Lemma 2:** Full consolidation is never a SNPE.

A strategic \mathbf{p} should want exactly \mathbf{s} field commanders to play *rehabilitate*. Buying the loyalty of additional field commanders beyond the minimum \mathbf{s} up to \mathbf{n} for *full incorporation* may cushion the margin of victory, but \mathbf{p} can do better with a distribution that pockets all of \mathbf{v}^* not spent buying field commander loyalty.

Proposition Two: Definition of a Partial Consolidation equilibrium - There exists an SNPE in which \mathbf{s} field commanders play “rehabilitate” in the first stage and the remaining field commanders play “cannibalize,” \mathbf{G} sends aid, \mathbf{p} proposes a payoff in which \mathbf{s} field commanders are transferred exactly $\mathbf{v}^*/\mathbf{n}-\mathbf{c}+\varepsilon$, each of these commanders play “rehabilitate”, \mathbf{p} transfers the remainder of \mathbf{v}^* to himself, the other commanders observe a proposed transfer of zero and play “cannibalize” again in the final subgame. No player plays a weakly dominated strategy.

Proof: Each of \mathbf{s} field commanders compare their $\mathbf{v}^*/\mathbf{n}-\mathbf{c}+\varepsilon$ transfer in the final stage to their $\mathbf{v}^*/\mathbf{n}-\mathbf{c}$ cannibalize payoff, and support the transfer. This means $\mathbf{k}_2 = \mathbf{s}$, so \mathbf{p} 's transfer is implemented.

Next, we consider whether \mathbf{p} could improve her situation. Since \mathbf{p} can keep for herself anything not transferred, she wants to purchase loyalty as cheaply as possible. \mathbf{P} must

transfer at least \mathbf{s} field commanders an amount $\mathbf{x}_i \geq \mathbf{v}^*/\mathbf{n}-\mathbf{c}$ to induce them to play *rehabilitate* instead of *cannibalize*. Paying more than \mathbf{s} field commanders this amount is weakly dominated by paying exactly \mathbf{s} field commanders this amount and the rest nothing, allowing \mathbf{p} to pocket the remainder: $\mathbf{v}^*-(\mathbf{s}(\mathbf{v}^*/\mathbf{n}-\mathbf{c}))$.

What about the additional $\mathbf{n}-\mathbf{s}$ field commanders? In the actual path of play, many may play *rehabilitate*, then observe a transfer of zero from \mathbf{p} , and *cannibalize* fruitlessly. This is not an equilibrium, however, since they would wish they had played *cannibalize* in the first stage for the $\mathbf{v}/\mathbf{n}-\mathbf{c}$ payoff. Only if $\mathbf{k}_2 < \mathbf{s}$ is the “fatted stag state failure” strategy of “*rehabilitate, cannibalize*” an equilibrium strategy. If $\mathbf{k}_2 = \mathbf{s}$, a warlord not transferred $\mathbf{v}^*/\mathbf{n}-\mathbf{c}$ should play *cannibalize, cannibalize*.

Finally, \mathbf{G} gains nothing from defection. \mathbf{G} receives a positive return on investment \mathbf{a} so long as $\mathbf{k}_2 \geq \mathbf{s}$. If $\mathbf{k}_2 < \mathbf{s}$, then *send no aid* is the best response. The outcome of the final subgame is not known at the time the investment is made, however. Varying strategies (offering \mathbf{v}^* or leaving it \mathbf{v}) in a one shot-setting does not communicate or change incentives or behavior (by Lemma 3 below).

- **Lemma 3:** *Partial Consolidation* strategies for \mathbf{p} and $\mathbf{k}_2=\mathbf{s}$ field commanders are sometimes supportable (by *Proposition Two*) even if \mathbf{G} does not send aid.

Little changes if \mathbf{G} does not send aid. Field commander \mathbf{i} decides whether to cannibalize for payoffs of $\mathbf{v}/\mathbf{n}-\mathbf{c}$ or take a buyoff from \mathbf{p} of $\mathbf{x}_i = \mathbf{v}/\mathbf{n}-\mathbf{c}+\varepsilon$. Lemma 3 reinforces that \mathbf{G} does not have much leverage. Sending aid inflates both stag and rabbit payoffs simultaneously; coordination will either happen, or not. \mathbf{G} should not expect *full consolidation* no matter what \mathbf{a} is selected. Note that this would remain true even if the second stage of the game were iterated. The problem is that some Ukrainian actors correctly anticipate that they will be cut out of the spoils of aid by politics. This is a “demand” problem, not a “supply” problem, so changing the amount of aid doesn’t fix it.

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Formal proofs for blocking coalitions are beyond our ambition. Future work could explore richer settings. If \mathbf{G} had another move at the end of the game and could pull support if \mathbf{s} was not passed, or if it were passed but the coalition included (or did not include) certain field commanders (violating the convenient assumption that field commanders are interchangeable), this threat might induce a shift in strategies by sufficiently forward-looking field commanders. They might police their own coalition membership to maximize aid rents. On the other hand, especially in a more complex setting with individual warlord characteristics *that warlords could make investments to modify*, they might not. Field commanders could circumvent the threat perhaps by making investments to hide their characteristics, choosing partial compliance falling short of full *cannibalization*, or doing other things. We leave these speculations to others.