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The Challenge of Paramilitarism in Central and Eastern Europe

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Summary

In recent years paramilitarism has resurfaced with new vitality in several countries of Central and Eastern Europe (CEE). The appearance of this war-related phenomenon in a predominantly peaceful and stable region might seem paradoxical. Yet a closer look at the historical roots of statehood there (many organizations are building on a heritage of pre-war predecessors), the sociocultural context (insecurity and a lack of alternatives for interested individuals to engage in military and related activities aside from professional service), and major changes in the security environment (the war in Ukraine and the migration crisis) provides some explanations.

From self-defense militias to vigilante migrant “hunters,” state-loyal groups, and paramilitary formations officially integrated into national defense systems, CEE paramilitarism is a highly diverse phenomenon. There are two distinct models in the region: the state-centric and pro-social model in the Baltic states, and the decentralized and often extremist-influenced model elsewhere, with Poland and Ukraine as exceptions. Both models require different sets of approaches by the state to mitigate paramilitarism’s negative aspects and exploit its positive aspects—such as the risk of giving extremists access to military training and structures versus enlarging the recruitment pool for national defense and binding youth to their communities through civic-patriotic education.

This paper maps the paramilitaries of Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Poland, Latvia, Lithuania, and Slovakia. It analyzes and evaluates the main stakeholders, their tasks and activities, and offers recommendations for policymakers. The cases of Lithuania, Poland, and Latvia show that the role of the state is

crucial. Formations like active reserves, national guards, or territorial armies should be accessible to those interested in taking part in military activities but not as their primary, full-time profession. These create platform for voluntary civic participation in defense, which can satisfy such individuals in a legitimate, professional, state-controlled environment.

With regard to youths, civic-patriotic, national-defense, or even military-like training should be understood as a part of broader prevention strategies against extremism and delinquency. Such programs can be implemented in schools or supported as civil society activities. In the Baltic states, several state or semi-state organizations are systematically engaging young people, providing them ways and means to spend their free time meaningfully, developing their bonds with the community, and building a broad spectrum of soft skills. The participation of young people from socially disadvantaged background can be ensured through state support.

These two approaches together can generate the necessary space, opportunities, and incentives for individuals interested in military activities to choose these structures over informal, non-state paramilitary formations. In the CEE region, a majority of the latter have a ultranationalist, far-right political profile, in some cases with vigilante features. Such groups must be closely monitored and scrutinized. While some may present no threat at all, others may lead to radicalization of their members or in extreme cases even creation of “lone wolf” attackers. The high-risk indicators to be monitored are the presence of an extremist ideology, the possession of firearms, the active participation of active or former soldiers, and the presence of foreign influence.

Introduction

Paramilitary organizations have been present in war and peacetime around the world. From Chechnya to Yugoslavia, Colombia, contemporary Ukraine, or Syria, paramilitary actors have been participating in low-intensity conflicts and full-scale wars. They usually attract a lot of attention as they are often connected with war crimes, human-rights violations, weapons smuggling, and other aspects of wars.

The term “paramilitary” itself can be confusing. Some authors consider it to mean militarized police, gendarmerie, or territorial armed forces if they are organizationally outside of the armed forces. Others speak more about non-state actors such as home-defense formations or militias.¹ For this paper, non-state, semi-state, and even state organizations with specific “military-like” features are understood to be paramilitary. These features include: the use of uniforms or any other symbols to identify themselves, a hierarchy with the use of military ranks, drills or exercises typical for the military, and certain specific cultures within a particular group. Participation in their activities should be voluntary and politically motivated in the broad sense. These organizations must be separate from the regular armed forces structure.

Paramilitarism in Central and Eastern Europe has a long history full of negative and positive examples. In the First World War and the interwar period, the Czechoslovak paramilitary organization Sokol (Falcon), the Polish Strzelec (Rifleman), and the Lithuanian Šauliai (Rifleman) played a key role in promoting the idea of independent statehood and patriotism in society. Later these organizations

formed the nuclei of the future armed forces of newly formed states and took part in the armed resistance against Nazi and communist totalitarianism. At the same time, paramilitary formations such as the Nazi SS and local armed fascist militias took part in some of the most horrific war crimes of the Second World War. Later, the paramilitary People’s militias in Czechoslovakia and their equivalents in other countries served as a tool of repression in the establishment and rule of communist regimes in the region. After 1989 some of the organizations were revived as civic associations and guardians of the heritage of their historical predecessors.

Where Things Stand

Central and Eastern Europe is witnessing another surge in the presence and activities of paramilitary organizations. These can be found not only in Ukraine, where their presence due to the armed conflict is understandable, but also in EU and NATO members like Czechia, Estonia, and Poland, which are enjoying long-term peace. This development can to some extent be explained as a grassroots, civil-society reaction to major changes and developments in the security environment.

Broad demilitarization and army professionalization, the end of conscription, budget reductions after the Cold War, and the evaporation of civil defense left many of those who are interested in participation in defense and security-related issues virtually with only one option—joining the armed forces as a full-time job. The lack of alternatives created space that is being filled by civic paramilitaries, the competitive shooting sport Airsoft and military simulation clubs, and survival sports. Additionally, the eruption of war in Ukraine in 2014 and the refugee crisis in 2015 provided a substantial impetus to accelerate the expansion of this sector.

The surge in the presence and activities of paramilitaries within the region raises several questions. Where does authentic, legitimate, lawful, and socially positive civil participation in defense end and where do

1 Andrew Scobell and Brad Hammitt produced an analytically valuable conceptualization of paramilitaries in “[Goons, Gunman, and Gendarmerie: Toward a Reconceptualization of Paramilitary Formations](#),” *Journal of Political and Military Sociology*, winter, 1998. On the convergence of military and police roles, see Benjamin R. Breede, “[The Roles of Paramilitary and Militarized Police](#),” June, 2008. On political extremism and vigilantism, see Miroslav Mareš, [Vigilantism against Migrants and Minorities](#), Routledge, 2019 and [Paramilitarismus v České republice, 2013](#). On the roots of the emergence of paramilitaries, see Pavol Kosnac, “[The Rise of Paramilitarism in CEE](#),” *Aspen Review* (1, 2020).

political radicalization, extremism, and socially negative behavior start? What is the effect of paramilitaries on the state monopoly of the use of force, which is the central concept of modern statehood? How do paramilitaries fit into contemporary civil-military relations? Why are any military-like formations outside of the regular armed forces needed? The following sections map positive and negative examples of paramilitarism across Central and Eastern Europe and then present three case studies of state engagement with paramilitaries in Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia. Based on the findings from mapping and case studies, recommendations are then made as to policies to mitigate and limit the negative side of paramilitarism and support and embrace the positive side.

Paramilitarism as a Threat

The state's monopoly on the use of force is one of the core pillars of modern statehood. If not misused by a totalitarian or authoritarian regime, it tends to increase societal stability, while decreasing the level of violence in general. Therefore, it should rely on highly motivated, disciplined, and well trained and equipped professionals with a clear chain of command and straightforward responsibilities defined by a formal legal framework. Non-state or semi-state paramilitary formations do not fulfill the above-mentioned conditions.

Most of the negative examples of paramilitary activities in Central and Eastern Europe are associated with political radicalism and extremism, typically from the far right. Hungarian extremists with a proven anti-Semitic and anti-Roma background who proclaim themselves migrant "hunters" and defenders of white Europe and Christian values have for years been forming patrols and militias such as Magyar Nemzeti Arcvonal (Hungarian National Front) or Betyársereg (Army of Outlaws). In Czechia, the anti-NATO Českoslovenští vojáci v záloze za mír (Czechoslovak Army Reservists for Peace) has ties to pro-Kremlin separatists in eastern Ukraine and attended and provided organizational

support at nationalist demonstrations. The same group was reported by the Ministry of Interior as trying to legitimize itself through attempts to cooperate with local law enforcement or firefighters and giving lectures in schools. In Slovakia, Slovenskí Branci (Slovak Conscripts), a well-known paramilitary group, has proven ties to Russia's Kremlin-affiliated motorcycle gang, the Night Wolves. Its commanders passed through a Cossack-organized military camp in Russia and at least one of their former members joined pro-Kremlin separatists in eastern Ukraine. Another Slovakian neo-Nazi group, Akčná skupina Vzduch Kysuce (Action Group Resistance Kysuce), came to public attention in 2016 after attempting to infiltrate the armed forces and police. In Ukraine, volunteer battalions were the only capable battle force available in the first stages of the conflict in 2014 and played a substantial part in facing Russian aggression. Later, some of them were involved in conflicts leading even to armed standoffs with the army or Interior Ministry forces. Paramilitary formations like Azov, Aidar, Tornado, and Right Sector-connected armed groups have also been repeatedly connected with and accused of neo-Nazism, torture, rape, looting, and other crimes. Some critics cite financial and organizational connections between Ukrainian oligarchs and volunteer formations that protect their assets and provide private security against other oligarchs.

All these cases relate to the overlapping issue of challenging state authority by providing exclusive security and destabilizing the societal order. Examples of what this can lead to when the state is weak can be found in Afghanistan, Colombia, Libya, and different failed states.

Paramilitarism as Opportunity

Freedom of association, including to self-organize formally and informally, is part of the most fundamental package of civil rights. These rights create a basic framework for what can be described as "voluntary civic defense activity," with paramilitaries as the

highest form in terms of specialization, dedication, and similarity to state armed forces.

While states employ professional armed forces as their main tool of national defense, there will always be an openness to using civil voluntary participation as an important support feature of the broader defense system. This role has several important aspects. There is a substantive academic and military professional discussion about the phenomenon of the civilian-military gap.² With the professionalization of the armed forces and the growing commercialization of defense and security matters, the professional military and civilian worlds are growing further apart, with little understanding of each other. This presents a substantial change from historical experience when militaries and paramilitaries alike were an organic part of society and in many cases functioned as major identity- and nation-building actors.

State and non-state paramilitary organizations can serve as a bridge connecting the professional military and civilian worlds within society. Their mixed experience puts them in a position where military and civilian needs, concerns, and expectations are brought together in profound and complementary understanding. This understanding is needed across political elites for defense and security policymaking as much as it is needed across society to gain and sustain public support for any necessary security reforms or military modernization plans. Aside from the direct deployment of paramilitary organizations as an armed entity, which is of limited use and not their main purpose in many cases, there is a broad spectrum of activities in which they can engage: training, education, preparation, advocacy, and the popularization and promotion of patriotic feelings, citizen responsibilities, and military matters. For example, in Poland these roles are undertaken by non-state paramilitaries that cooperate

with the Ministry of Defense and the armed forces. This is also the case with the semi-state paramilitary Lithuanian Riflemen's Union and the state-organized Estonian Defense League. Both are organizations of national significance and integrated parts of national defense systems with scope well beyond the military alone.

What to Do

Very first step to be taken is to realize that any strategy employed to tackle paramilitarism must acknowledge the negative and positive dimension of this phenomena. Goals, approaches, and measures taken will differ but they should follow same end state—ensuring state monopoly of violence, enabling participatory engagement of volunteers, and minimizing the reach of malign, extremists actors.

No single answer can provide policymakers with a reliable solution to this issue. It is thus necessary to develop criteria, thresholds, and assessment methods to determine the character of each paramilitary group. First must come a review of the national legal and regulatory framework with a special focus on laws and regulations related to armed forces, extremism, inciting hate, gun ownership, and the use of military uniforms to check if it is sufficient or needs adjustments. Cooperation among the intelligence services, police, and other security-related institutions is needed to monitor and evaluate the level of threat to determine if further security measures are needed. Long-term approaches to effectively counter and prevent radicalization should be employed while building and supporting transparent, lawful, and state-loyal alternatives.

These can come in different sizes, shapes and organizational frameworks. There are examples of successful non-state, semi-state, and state initiatives that engage individuals interested or already active in paramilitary formations. These groups can support directly and indirectly the national defense system, generate broader defense potential, shape their environment, and increase the overall stability of society.

2 See Lindsay Cohn, [The Evolution of the Civil-Military 'Gap' Debate](#), TISS Project on the Gap Between the Military and Civilian Society, 1999; and J. Rahbek-Clemmensen et al, "[Conceptualizing the Civil-Military Gap: A Research Note](#)," in *Armed Forces and Society* (38:4), 2012.

MAPPING




This paper deals with non-state, semi-state, and state paramilitary organizations active in Czechia, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Ukraine. kkraine aside, the defining factor for all the non-state paramilitaries in Central and Eastern Europe is their presence in peacetime or at least in the absence of open armed conflict. This has several important implications. There is no legal basis for their use in combat, and their cooperation with the state or local authorities is as open or regulated as that for any other non-governmental organization (NGO). In most cases they function as civic associations or similar legal entities. With very few exceptions, they do not and cannot possess weapons legally as organizations. Most of their roles and functions are dedicated to education, preparation, training, and other support or potential-generating activities. These non-state paramilitaries are

de facto just “quasi-paramilitaries.” This applies to state-loyal groups as well as to groups with radical, extremist, or anti-system political worldviews.

Due to their direct yet partial integration within the national defense system of countries, semi-state organizations have a broader spectrum of possibilities that are defined by dedicated laws and regulations. Being bounded by territorial-defense principles, these organizations do not have the direct combat experience that regular armed forces have due to their participation in operations abroad. The majority of their members is much more civilians than soldiers and their core ideal is closer to citizen-patriot-volunteer than warrior-soldier values.

The mapping section is organized based on organizational principles, looking first at the state or semi-state Baltic organizations and then at the non-state organizations in Central Europe and Ukraine.

Table 1. Baltic Paramilitaries

Name, Country, and Logo	Relation to the State	Year of Foundation and Current Membership	Characteristics
Estonian Defence League, Estonia 	Semi-state (voluntary national defence organisation operating in the Estonian MoD)	Founded: 1990 Membership: 16 000	Organized in accordance with military principles, possesses weapons, and holds exercises of a military nature
Cadet Force, Latvia 	State (directly subordinated to Latvian MoD)	Founded: 1992 Membership: 8000	Youth organization educating youth in the field of national defence, to promote civic awareness, and patriotism
Lithuanian Riflemen Union, Lithuania 	Semi-state (state supported voluntary paramilitary civil self-defence association)	Founded: 1989 Membership: 12 000	Includes combat platoons formed on a voluntary basis of riflemen who are of full age and fit for active military service but who are not fulfilling it; Serviceman in professional military or reserve with rank not lower than a lieutenant colonel (commander) who is a member of the LRU may be appointed as the commander

Estonia

Within Estonia's national defense system is the Kaitseliit (Estonian Defense League). This 15,000-strong voluntary, paramilitary, state-funded formation is organized on the territorial-defense principle and serves as an active reserve component with a broad set of roles and tasks. These are defined by a special law that is the legal basis on which the Kaitseliit operates.³ The organization is funded from the state budget, members fees, public contributions, and income generated from small private contracts such as for providing guarding and security services. The commander of the Kaitseliit is a direct subordinate of the commander of the Estonian Defense Forces and is appointed by the government. By comparison with the Kaitseliit, the Estonian Defense Force is small with only 6,000 members of whom about half are conscripts. The organization enjoys high level of public trust. Ethnic Estonians perceive national-defense as the most important tasks of the organization while the Ethnic Russian minority perceive it as a civil-defense organization, stressing the importance of tasks like participating in rescue activities.⁴

The Kaitseliit is not only supposed to organize its own military training and exercises but also to participate in exercises with the rest of the armed forces or NATO allies. Aside from military assignments, it provides support for civil authorities and institutions like the police, fire brigades, or others as part of Estonia's crisis response, management, and relief capacities. Within the organization are dedicated structures for women, young boys, and young girls. Youth formations focus on developing good citizens imbued with a patriotic spirit. Naaskodukaitse, the women's corps, organizes medical and rearguard support services for territorial units as well as tasks connected with population protection. The Kaitseliit has also a dedicated cyber unit, which was established in reaction to massive cyberattacks on Estonia in 2007. The unit

is developing defense and protection for state and private critical information systems.

Latvia

Paramilitary-like activities in Latvia are closely related to the issue of Russia. In 2013 the authorities raised concerns about Latvian youth attending patriotic-military camps in Russia allegedly supported by the country's secret agencies and employing former military intelligence staff.⁵ Since 2016 the State Security Service in its public annual reports has been warning about Airsoft and military-simulation activities in the country by individuals with pro-Russia orientations and openly supporting Russian policies. The reports also mention the risk of radicalization within martial-arts clubs that expose participants to radical ideologies during training.

In 2016 the State Security Service raided Airsoft exercises near Riga.⁶ A year later the authorities deported three Russian competition judges of the Open Baltic Airsoft Cup 2017.⁷ Amendments to the National Security Law came into force in 2018, making it illegal to organize or participate in tactical military training exercises.⁸ Under the law, such training may only be conducted for the performance of national defense, law and order, and security or other functions stipulated in the law. Pressure on Russian patriotic-military camps escalated in 2018 through amendments to the Law on the Protection of Children's Rights, which introduced a legal ban on youth participation in military activities abroad aside from those undertaken by NATO and EU member states.⁹

The Latvian approach is not purely restrictive and based on regulations. In 2014 the government

3 Estonian Parliament, [The Estonian Defence League Act](#), 2013.

4 Estonian Ministry of Defence, [Public Opinion and National Defense](#), 2018.

5 Gederts Gelzis, [Russian youth camps irk Latvia](#), Deutsche Welle, June 29, 2013.

6 Latvian Information Agency, [Latvian Security Police disrupts Airsoft game following reports about armed men in foreign uniforms](#), August 29, 2016.

7 Associated Press, [Latvia bans Russian judges from military simulation contest](#), December 2, 2017.

8 Saeima, [National Security Law](#), 2000.

9 Saeima, [Law on the Protection of Childrens Rights](#), 1998.

agreed on plans to substantially enlarge the Jaunsardze (Cadet Force), a youth organization established in 1992, expanding its training programs, activities, and presence at school as an accessible alternative for Latvian youth. It is organized, funded, and supervised by the Ministry of Defense and works with youth from 10 to 21 years old. With more than 8,000 members, the Jaunsardze is the biggest youth organization in Latvia and represents a legitimate, state-organized and -controlled alternative to patriotic-military camps or Airsoft activities with questionable backgrounds.

Lithuania

The most prominent, developed, and important paramilitary organization in Lithuania is the semi-state Lietuvos šaulių sąjunga (Lithuanian Riflemen's Union—LRU). Created in 1919, it played a significant role during the struggle for the first independence and in the following turbulent years grew into a mass paramilitary and civil defense association, with 62,000 active members in 1939. During the Soviet occupation, the LRU went underground and many of its members joined the national armed resistance from 1944 till 1953. Legally the LRU was not reestablished till 1989. It is a non-governmental organization defined by its own legal act but certain features (such as its Ministry of Defense funding, its commander coming from the regular armed forces, and the subordination of its combat units to the regular army during armed conflict) create its semi-state character.

The LRU is building on the tradition of the riflemen as freedom fighters and patriots, which is an important source of legitimacy and acceptance for organizations by society and the state. It has 12,000 members, approximately half of them junior members aged 11 to 18 and about 1,000 adult women. The LRU went through substantial changes after 2014 as a reaction to the annexation of Crimea. In 2014, it had 7,000 members, of which only 1,000 were adults including around 400 who were older than 60. Around 260 members are in “combat units,” divided into platoons and squads, which are assigned to and conduct combined collective training and cooperation with

the units of the armed forces. Currently, LRU combat platoons are assigned to the Special Operation Forces and National Voluntary Defense Forces.

Czechia

Several paramilitary formations rose in Czechia as a reaction to the war in eastern Ukraine. They are mobilized on anti-NATO, anti-war sentiments, and lately also have exploited anti-refugee moods and narratives. Most prominent are Národní Domobrana (National Home Guard), Českoslovenští vojáci v záloze za mír (Czechoslovak Army Reservists for Peace), and Zemská Domobrana (Land Home Guard). All the groups were politically active from the very beginning, typically as fierce supporters of President Miloš Zeman and as critics of the EU and NATO, and they were actively engaged in anti-government or anti-immigration protests. Several individuals from the leadership of these groups have proven and public ties to pro-Kremlin separatists in eastern Ukraine or directly to Russia's secret services.¹⁰






The whole paramilitary environment came under public scrutiny by the media and state institutions like the Ministry of the Interior and the Security Intelligence Service in 2014. But the 2018 annual report of the Security Intelligence Service concluded that paramilitary groups were stagnating and did not present a real security threat to the country.¹¹ Their attempts to cooperate on a local level with police units and to promote their activities in schools can be understood as a search for a new purpose for these groups when the dramatic vision of a full-scale war between NATO and Russia and an apocalyptic migrant wave never materialized.

The Ministry of Defense and Ministry of the Interior discussed the preparation of a new law dedicated to civil-defense associations in 2016–2017. With no real outcomes at that time, these debates reappeared

10 Tomáš Forró, [Když vlastence vzrušuje válka](#), Reportér Magazin, 26 June 2019.

11 Security Intelligence Service, [Annual report of Security Intelligence Service 2018](#), 2018.

Table 2. Central European Paramilitaries

Name, Country, and Logo	Relation to the State	Year of Foundation and Current Membership	Characteristics
National Home Guard, Czech Republic 	Non-state	Founded: 2015 Membership: Unknow Estimate in low tens	Registered as association since 2020, nationalists with several prokremlin partnerships and ties, open political ambitions despite declarative apolitical status
Wolves, Hungary 	Non-state	Founded: 2011 Membership: Unknown Estimate in low tens	Publicly low profile with ties to various nationalist and far-right groups
Riflemen's Union, Poland 	Non-state	Founded: 1991 Membership: Estimate 1000 active members	Civic association in cooperation with Polish Armed Forces and MoD
Slovak Conscripts, Slovakia 	Non-state	Founded: 2012 Membership: Unknown Estimates between 100 -150 active members	Registered as association since 2016, nationalists with several prokremlin partnerships and ties, leadership shows and openly articulate political ambitions
National Militia, Ukraine 	Non-state	Founded: 2017 Membership: Unknown	Far right and ultranationalists, "street wing" of Azov Movement consisted of Azov Regiment and political party National Corps

in 2019 accompanied by a new proposal from the Ministry of the Interior to ban armed paramilitary-like formations as part of broader reforms of firearm laws. The Ministry of Defense is also preparing a reform to create new possibilities for civic associations active in civil defense and the voluntary preparation of citizens for state defense.¹²

Hungary

Radical far-right movements have a rich history in Hungary. Various organizations with paramilitary features can be identified now and in recent history. Probably the most extreme case is the neo-Nazi Magyar Nemzeti Arcvonal (Hungarian National Front) led by Istvan Gyorkos. It was dissolved in 2016 after shooting a police officer when Gyorkos's house was being searched for illegal firearms and explosives. Russian military intelligence officers disguised as diplomats reportedly observed and participated in some of the organization in 2016. In December 2019 Gyorkos was sentenced to life in prison.

The best-known group, which provided a blueprint for other organizations, was Magyar Gárda (Hungarian National Guard) established by the far-right Jobbik Party in 2007. This is one of the first cases in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 in which a political party openly and officially created its own "direct action wing" with quasi-paramilitary characteristics. Till its dissolution by the courts in 2009, the organization attended several nationalist marches, memorial events, and anti-Roma demonstrations. Immediately after Magyar Gárda's dissolution, its successor called Új Magyar Gárda (New Hungarian Guard) was established. It overlaps in personnel with Szebb Jövőért Magyar Önvédelem (For a Better Future Hungarian Self-Defense). It used to function as a legal unarmed, auxiliary police NGO under the umbrella of a state-controlled and state-supported association of NGO volunteers having limited policing powers

to participate in crime prevention and crime control. After the violent clashes at an anti-Roma demonstration in 2011, Új Magyar Gárda was also dissolved by the courts.

Nowadays the leading radical far-right organizations are Betyársereg (Army of Outlaws), Magyar Onvedelmi Mozgalom (Hungarian Self-Defense Movement), Hatvannégy Vármegye Ifjúsági Mozgalom (Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement), Légión Hungária (Hungarian Legion), and Farkasok (Wolves). All of them to some degree have paramilitary features like the use of uniforms, military-like structures and hierarchy, self-perception and self-presentation as warriors or guardians, and shooting, survival, and martial-arts training. Their combined active core membership is estimated in the hundreds, while their passive members and supporters are numbered in the thousands. Ideologically these groups represent a mix of neo-Nazism, identitarianism, conservative authoritarianism, white supremacy, anti-Semitism, anti-ciganism, racism, and irredentism. Till 2014 all these groups were cooperating with Jobbik. Now most of them have moved towards the Our Homeland party established by Laszlo Toroczkai, who is one of the leading and most-connected personalities of the far-right scene. He also established his paramilitary organization called Nemzeti Légión (National Legion) in 2019 but the group has been inactive so far.

Poland

Paramilitarism has a rich history in Poland. The most important organization was Związek Strzelecki (the Riflemen's Union) created in 1910 with Józef Pilsudski as one of its commanders. It is role model and predecessor of contemporary Polish paramilitary organizations. This partially explains why the concept of the citizen-soldier is well rooted in the country's military culture and society. The first organizations of this kind started to appear soon after 1989 as part of a broader revival of democratic civil society.

In 2013 and 2014 there was a revival of interest in paramilitary organizations in the state and society. This was accelerated by the annexation of Crimea, the

12 Matej Kandrik, [The Czech Republic Tests a New Approach for Dealing with Paramilitary Groups](#), German Marshall Fund of the United States, January 29, 2020.

armed conflict in eastern Ukraine, and the resurgence Russia's use of force as a tool of foreign policy.

Two changes took place that led to the growth of membership in existing organizations like the Strzelec (Riflemen's Union) or the creation of new one like the FIA—Fideles et Instructi Armis or the Obrona Narodowa (National Defense). One change can be traced back to the expansion of the agenda of paramilitary organizations to include promoting their cause and campaigning for establishing armed territorial forces as a new component of the national defense system. The Ministry of Defense responded in 2014 by creating a new position of plenipotentiary and ministerial adviser for pro-defense matters with an army general as the first post-holder. In 2015, a new office dedicated to the development of cooperation with paramilitary organizations was created under the administration of the defense minister.

Slovakia

The most notorious paramilitary organization in Slovakia is Slovenskí Branci (Slovak Conscripts). Established in 2012, the group went through several developments. It was first associated with the far-right Slovak Upheaval Movement. Through the connections that the latter had with Russian Cossack and ultra-nationalist circles—such as the Narodny Sobor, the Orthodox patriotic military Stjag, and the Dobrovolc (Volunteers)—the organization leaders Peter Svrček and Michal Felling attended a military training camp in Russia in 2013. Afterward, the group broke all ties with the Slovak Upheaval Movement and disappeared from the public eye until one of its former members, Martin Kepřta, surfaced as a foreign fighter alongside pro-Kremlin separatists in eastern Ukraine in 2014.

Today Slovenskí Branci consists of 100-150 core active members. Its leadership continually denies any connections to political extremism, and most radical voices within the group were expelled. In 2018 their close cooperation with the Slovak branch of the Night Wolves drew attention of the public and the authorities. The minister of defense requested the General Prosecutor's Office to investigate the legality of the

group's activities and existence. No legal action was taken against it.

For the last two years the leadership of Slovenskí Branci has been developing a new brand for its activities as the NGO Naša vlasť je budúcnosť (Our Homeland is the Future), a conservative movement trying to actively influence public and political debate. Currently, the group is not seen as extremist but its former and present ties to pro-Kremlin individuals raise questions about its loyalty to the state. Slovakia's 2017 Security Strategy promised steps against irregular paramilitary formations.¹³ Slovenskí Branci was also indirectly mentioned in the annual report of the Security Service in 2017. Moreover, the openly political character of Our Homeland is the Future conflicts with the proclaimed apolitical character of Slovenskí Branci. This collision of political and paramilitary activities goes against the fundamental separation of apolitical armed forces from, and their subordination to, elected political representatives in democracies. Democratic civilian control of armed and security forces is considered a keystone of lasting peace and stability by the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe and is an important prerequisite of membership in both NATO and the EU.

Ukraine

Ukraine's case is fundamentally different from others in Central and Eastern Europe due to its ongoing armed conflict. It shows how paramilitarism can evolve in a war. The first cells of volunteers that would later grow into battalions or regiments started to appear in late 2013 and early 2014, were triggered by the Euromaidan demonstrations. These included former policemen, border guards, and army veterans but also hooligans, far-right activists, and neo-Nazis. These groups already had formal and informal networks and were able to organize themselves quicker than others. This was mostly a genuine bottom-up, self-organized movement created by people with a background in the

13 Ministry of Foreign and European Affairs of the Slovak Republic, [Security Strategy of the Slovak Republic](#), 2017.

security services or nationalistic circles. It is estimated to have numbered 15,000 active members.¹⁴

Since 2013-2014, volunteer battalions have gone through a major and dynamic evolution. In the early stages of the war, they played a crucial role as first responders to the rapidly evolving situation in Donbas, fighting separatists and securing several towns and cities for Ukraine while the official armed forces were in chaos and disarray. This earned them a high level of trust and popularity. One poll in September 2019 had volunteer battalions among most trusted institutions with 62 percent trust support.¹⁵

Most volunteer formations are now incorporated into state structures as units of the armed forces, the National Guard of the Ministry of the Interior, or other security services like border guards. The Azov Regiment and the Donbas Battalion are, for example, part of the National Guard. Dnipro-1 is a special police patrol regiment of the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

This incorporation was a result of international pressure, of the necessity for government control over fighting forces, and mostly of the internal erosion of the volunteer battalions due to a severe lack of logistical, organizational, and financial support. Personal animosities and disagreements accelerated their decay, and part of members gladly contracted themselves to the official armed forces.

Two splinter groups from the Right Sector—the Ukrainian Voluntary Army and Ukrainian Voluntary Corps—can be still found at the front lines, keeping a low profile, often with the tacit support of local military commanders, and fighting outside any formal governmental control. A distinct yet related phenomenon is presented by the National Militia. This is non-state quasi-paramilitary group was formed in 2017 by individuals directly connected with the Azov Regiment and affiliated organizations. These groups are known for spectacular marches and public oath-

swearing, vigilante patrolling, attacks on minorities, and ultranationalist rhetoric. Similar but more radical is the openly neo-Nazi group Carpathian Sich also known as C14.

CASE STUDIES

In Central and Eastern Europe, the Baltic states, and to some degree Poland, have the greatest presence of paramilitaries and the most developed models of state engagement with them. Three brief case studies are presented here to provide an understanding of different state approaches to paramilitarism and civic voluntary participation in defense. They look at the Polish decentralized non-state model based on NGOs, the Lithuanian hybrid approach with one central semi-state, semi-NGO association, and the Latvian fully state-centric model.

Poland: Decentralized Non-state Networks

In Poland, there are dozens of non-governmental organizations or informal groups that by their status and activities can be described as paramilitary. While there are no official membership numbers for them, estimates range from 13,000 to 15,000. Approximately 5,000 to 7,000 are in the family of Strzelec associations. This cluster of organizations consists of five or six nationwide organizations and dozens of smaller local organizations, which usually function independently and are mostly connected only by their proclaimed values, goals, and the name coming from the prewar predecessor Strzelec. The rest of the community is scattered across dozens of organizations of different sizes with Obrona Narodowa, FIA—Fideles et Instructi Armis and Legia Akademicka Lublin as the most prominent and developed ones.

The main state stakeholder dealing with paramilitary organizations is the Ministry of Defense. Within the ministry the Bureau for Pro-defense Matters and the Department of Education, Culture, and Heritage have agendas dedicated to paramilitary organizations. Units of the armed forces can also cooperate with a paramilitary organization by signing a cooperation agreement. This enables military and paramilitary

14 Chris Dunnett, [Ukraine's 'Battalions' Army, Explained](#), Hromadske International, September 17, 2014.

15 Unian Information Agency, [Almost 80% of Ukrainians trust in Zelensky](#), September 17, 2019.

units to train together and use the same shooting ranges and exercise facilities.

Task and Activities

Military-like training and drilling is the core activity for paramilitary organizations. It usually consists of basic green, red, and black tactics, patrolling, shooting practice, survival techniques, and other skills required by a light infantry platoon. (Green tactics are dedicated to fighting in natural environment, black tactics to fighting in an urban environment, and red tactics to medical support and evacuation in a combat environment.) Paramilitary organizations mostly train their own members or join with other similar groups. Trainers and instructors are typically senior members of organizations, in some cases former members of the military or other security services. This connection, if present, provides additional professionalism and military-like elements.

Most of the paramilitaries regularly attend anniversary celebrations, parades, and public displays, and they also participate in such activities as the cleaning of monuments connected with military history or charitable work like support for food banks and blood donations. These activities bond paramilitaries with local communities and are often understood as some kind of service to society.

Since 2017 the Bureau for Pro-defense Matters has run a special program dedicated to paramilitary organizations called Passport. Its three aims are as follows:

- Preparation of trained and interoperable paramilitary organization platoons for cooperation with military units of the armed forces in specific battle tasks, supporting and securing the tasks of sub-units of operational forces in the framework of military exercises and training operations.
- Preparation of paramilitary organization platoons for cooperation with the state administration and other non-military subjects in case of a military or non-military threat.

- Preparation of candidates for service in the professional and territorial armed forces.¹⁶

In 2017 there were 22 paramilitary organizations taking part in Passport, of which 18 finished successfully, and 509 individuals were trained. In 2018, 12 organizations finished the program with 417 individual participants. Participants of the program took part in the Dragon (2017) and Anakonda (2018) international military exercises, the largest military exercises with a NATO presence in Poland.

Paramilitary organizations can also cooperate directly with units of the armed forces. This must be supported by an official agreement, and mutual training and exercises must be in an official training plan of a specific unit and approved by its commander. Cooperation with municipal administrations, the police and other services is possible, which opens the possibility of using paramilitaries in, for example, crisis response and management.

Assessment

Paramilitary organizations in Poland are predominantly state-loyal and do not behave politically in most cases. Therefore, the general approach of the state toward them is not related to security concerns but rather to support and engagement. The paramilitary sector is considered a partner with the potential to generate additional defense potential for the country through education, advocacy, and promotion of and support for patriotic virtues and values in society with a special focus on young people.

The creation of the Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej (Territorial Defense Forces) as a new official branch of the armed forces in 2017 was highly significant. It was understood as a victory for the paramilitary sector, which invested a lot of time and effort into campaigning for a territorial force. On the other hand, when the Ministry of Defense announced that its plan assumed the creation of a completely new force with no formal integration of non-state para-

¹⁶ Biuro do Spraw Proobronnych, [Koncepcja przebiegu programu](#) w 2019 R., 2019

militaries, there was some disappointment. Now a search for a new purpose takes place in some parts of the sector.

With no legally binding definition of a paramilitary organization and no legal basis for their use alongside armed forces, their integration into the national defense system is very limited. Their possible roles are limited to indirect support, education, and promotion of the armed forces. The lack of a developed legal framework also complicates the evaluation and assessment of cooperation between the state and paramilitary organizations. As mentioned in the 2018 special report by the Supreme Audit Office, it is unclear what results were produced by the cooperation and what measurable results even could be produced if there were no legal definitions and laws specifying the roles for paramilitary organizations in defense readiness during peace and crisis, or after the announcement of the mobilization of the armed forces¹⁷. There are also no legal grounds for these organizations to support troops in combat operations or in activities aimed at the protection of war victims, civil protection, and survival.

Poland's model of cooperation between paramilitary organizations and the state is still developing. It is decentralized, with no well-defined roles, tasks, and expectations for the involved actors nor an overall legal framework. Rather than non-state paramilitaries, the Ministry of Defense seems to focus more on fully state-organized and -led programs like the *kłasy mundurowe* (uniformed classes), which is an experimental educational program based on civil defense for students in secondary-education institutions, or the *Legia Akademicka* (Academic Legion), a ministry-run program for students in higher-education institutions. With the paramilitary sector drained of human resources in favor of the territorial defense forces, this development may easily lead to its further stagnation and decline. A recent internal reorganization has centralized the Bureau for Pro-defense Matters and

the Bureau for creation of Territorial Defense Forces into a new Office for the “Become a Soldier of the Republic of Poland” campaign.

Lithuania: Semi-state Hybrid Model

The Lithuanian Riflemen's Union (LRU) is a unique legal entity prescribed by a special law. The commander of the LRU can be an active, reserve, or retired officer of the armed forces, with the rank of lieutenant colonel or colonel. The commander is nominated by the minister of defense and approved by the Congress of the LRU. The Ministry of Defense provides approximately 60 percent of the LRU's funding and its budget is mostly spent on organizing activities and education for junior riflemen, military training for combat platoons, and educational activities to build a resilient society and to introduce methods of non-violent resistance. All activities and training are organized, coordinated, and controlled by 50 full-time employees of the LRU, who are paid directly from the defense ministry budget. Only two out—the chief commander and the commander of the Vilnius unit—are active military service members. The rest are civilians but, in many cases, they are reservists or former members of the armed forces or of other security agencies.

The adult riflemen are divided into mobile and non-mobile units. This division is only functional and informal, but there are plans to amend the LRU constitution to make this part of its formal structure as part of the state emergency response and rescue system. Another proposed change is to empower the organization to be part of a military government, which would be activated under martial law, as support for municipal local authorities. The LRU's mobile units are supposed to serve as one of the main tools of a military governor.

At the same time, the LRU has a high degree of independence regarding all non-military activities. Like any other civic association in Lithuania, it supports itself through membership fees, individual donations, tax allowances, and small-scale commercial activities (for example, guarding military facili-

17 Najwyższa Izba Kontroli, [Współpraca Ministerstwa Obrony Narodowej z organizacjami proobronnymi](#), 2018.

ties). This combination determines the specific nature of the LRU.

Stakeholders

Several different stakeholders are engaged in regular cooperation with the LRU. The most important partner is the Ministry of Defense due to the partial integration of the organization into the national defense system. The ministry evaluates and approves its annual financial reports and supervises its activities that are supported by public resources coming from the ministry budget. The armed forces, particularly the National Volunteer Defense Forces and the Special Operation Forces, are key partners for the LRU in terms of developing training plans and exercises as well as providing instructors not only for combat platoons but for all LRU training. Based on a cooperation agreement with the Ministry of the Interior, LRU units can assist and support the police, fire brigades, medical services, border guards, and other law enforcement agencies. A minor role is also played by the Ministry of Education, Science and Sport, which cooperates with LRU on its educational programs and projects based on a cooperation agreement.

Task and Activities

The LRU engages in a broad spectrum of activities from purely military training to non-armed civilian resistance and preparedness programs. Junior Riflemen go through four levels of training designed to develop their leadership skills, physical prowess and healthy lifestyle, motivation and creativity, citizen-patriotic self-awareness, and military history knowledge. Adult Riflemen can join combat platoons as well as mobile and non-mobile units. Mobile units are dedicated to training, preparation, and support and assistance to state security agencies in tasks such as search and rescue, general support for emergencies, patrolling, basic guarding, and organizational services such as support at various public events.

The use of the LRU in any cooperation and support must be backed up by an official letter of request

from the security services, defining the means and nature of the requested support as defined by dedicated laws.

In peacetime, this cooperation also includes municipal local authorities and, in case of war, the LRU mobile units would be a key resource for the office of the military governor/commandant.

Non-mobile units take part in educational, cultural, charitable, and public-awareness-raising activities. A good example of the integration of all these functions into one activity are LRU youth summer camps (which are also open to non-members) focusing specifically on children who are socially disadvantaged. One notable non-mobile activity was developed as a reaction to information warfare using cyber capabilities. The LRU cooperates with the Lithuanian Elves network of volunteer fake-news monitors and the platform Debunk.eu.¹⁸ At the international level, the LRU cooperates with National Defense League in Estonia, the Army Cadet Force in the United Kingdom, the Cadet Force in Latvia, and the Riflemen's Union in Poland.

Assessment

The Lithuanian Riflemen's Union is an intriguing example of a paramilitary civil defense association. It plays an important role in the preparation of society to be able to participate effectively in total and unconditional defense, which is an overarching principle for the whole Lithuanian national defense system. Having a dedicated law describing its goals, tasks, and roles allows the LRU to engage in direct cooperation with the armed forces and other security forces or agencies. National defense planning documents include the LRU and define tasks for it. Those cover the whole spectrum of situations from peacetime (military training, citizenship training, civil safety training) to crisis (civil safety and rescue-teams support) to occupation

¹⁸ Benas Gerdziunas, [Lithuania hits back at Russian disinformation](#), Deutsche Welle, September 27, 2018.

(guerilla warfare, non-violent resistance, non-collaboration, and friendly-force support).

Yet many consider the non-military part of the LRUs activities as more important and having the highest added value. It is deeply rooted in the ideal of the riflemen as motivated, well-prepared citizen volunteers with high moral standards and patriotic values. Therefore, educational programs, engagement with youth, and carrying on traditions dominate in the LRU agenda. With an extremely high percentage of the population, especially young people, leaving the country for economic reasons, the creation of societal bonds and closer community ties based on a citizen-patriotic framework is of strategic importance.

Latvia: Securitization and a State-Centric Approach

Since 2018 Latvia has been undergoing a major change of its national defense policy, moving toward adopting the concept of comprehensive defense. The objective is to get the population ready to defend the country during a crisis or other emergencies. All critical functions are to be planned, coordinated, and implemented by government bodies in partnership with private actors, NGOs, and citizens. It is a system where all non-government and government actors are supposed to be prepared to manage a crisis, ensure resilience against external impacts, and resist and recover from major shocks and challenges. One of the cornerstones for such an approach is a broad and deep reintroduction of civil society with strong volunteer elements into national defense.

While it is too early to assess the implementation of this comprehensive national defense, the approach to engaging citizens in national defense is strongly state-centric. The Zemessardze (National Guard) is volunteers-based, a territorial defense force fully integrated into the armed forces. Therefore, it should not be considered a paramilitary organization as understood in this study. Still, it represents a clear example of a citizen volunteer element in national defense and

is the backbone of the military sector of the comprehensive defense concept.

Stakeholders

Understanding comprehensive defense as a complete governmental and societal effort means that to some degree everyone becomes a stakeholder. Still, the Ministry of Defense, the armed forces, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of the Interior, the State Chancellery, the Ministry of Finance, and the Ministry of Economics are major stakeholders. It is harder to identify specific non-state stakeholders because civil society is arguably not well developed. Yet some cooperation has already taken place between the Ministry of Defense and organizations like the Latvian Red Cross, the Latvian Scouts and Guides, the Latvian Union of Employees, and the Latvian Hunters' Association. The comprehensive national defense concept assumes substantial involvement of society from the individual and family level to local communities, activists, and NGOs. Therefore, we can expect a boost in the development of programs, initiatives, and activities in state-civil society cooperation regarding national defense.

Task and Activities

The National Guard and the Cadet Force are the main instruments of civil voluntary participation in national defense, and the closest to a paramilitary model. Both have gone through major changes since 2014. The National Guard is now up to 8,200 servicemen and consists of 20 battalions. Its main focus is improving its preparedness, training, and equipment to narrow the gap between it and the rest of the armed forces. It participates with municipalities in mitigating and eliminating the consequences of natural disasters and man-made accidents in cooperation with the State Fire and Rescue Service. Ensuring public order and security in support of state and municipal authorities are also officially defined tasks. The National Guard is an important tool for the country's crisis management and its tasks and activities also include internal security issues. It is an organization fully integrated into

the armed forces yet operating well beyond traditional military domains.

The Cadet Force is a direct administrative organization under the Ministry of Defense as defined by a dedicated law of 2009. Its main functions are youth education in the field of national defense, promoting civic consciousness and patriotism, cooperating with NGOs in national defense. The Cadet Force education program is built on four levels and special courses. Every child and young person from the age of 10 up to the end of general education is eligible. Three distinct pillars can be identified in education programs: civil education, military skills, and life learning. Civil-education subjects include the history of Latvia; the history of the armed forces, NATO, and the EU; and environmental education. The military-skills program, which is proposed from the age of 16, includes mastering means of communication, handling weapons, individual field combat skills, and protection against weapons of mass destruction. The life-learning pillar includes first aid, physical fitness, topography, and hiking. Exceptionally popular are summer boot camps organized in close cooperation with the armed forces.

Assessment

Paramilitaries are on the fringe or non-existent in Latvia. This is arguably a result of the heavily security-conscious approach of the authorities after the annexation of Crimea toward any paramilitary-like activities or viable state-organized, armed-forces-integrated alternatives to the National Guard and the Cadet Force. The mandatory national defense curriculum for secondary schools planned for 2024 confirms that the state is serious about a comprehensive national defense approach. Further implementation of the comprehensive national defense concept may lead to new ways of developing civic voluntary participation in defense, including of a paramilitary character. For now, nothing suggests Latvia will abandon its strong state-centric approach.

An integrated comprehensive response to a complex security environment and hybrid threats

seems to be a wise strategic choice for a small country with a lack of human and financial resources. As proposed, the armed forces are central to, but only one of many elements of, comprehensive national defense. Latvia also plans to bring in civil society and private businesses to create space for inspiring innovations. But volunteering might not be enough, especially as interviewed experts describe civil society as rather weak and under-developed. To raise needed levels of endorsement for such robust society participation, a complex system of direct and indirect subsidies, tax concessions, non-financial benefits, or other means of motivation might be needed.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Paramilitarism is a dynamic, multifaceted phenomenon. At its core one often finds the motivation of individuals to make a difference, to belong, to be a citizen-soldier providing security. These are all very human and pro-social tendencies, even virtues if based on democratic, human-rights-respecting, and inclusive values. If filtered through exclusivist political agendas, violent ideology, or extremism, however, things can quickly turn ugly. The fundamental task for states is how to support the former while limiting the latter.

The first group contains natural targets for recruitment into the armed forces, police, border guards, and other state security institutions. And even if they never enter state service, they are links between the military and civilian worlds. They promote pro-social behavior and a culture of preparedness and readiness. These individuals and their organizations provide resilience on the most basic level.

The second group contains actors of different forms, from hardline neo-Nazi groups, to antimigrant patrols, to various home guards. What connects them is a certain degree of vigilantism in support of their proclaimed goals. Their activities subvert and challenge the state monopoly of the use of force. Sometimes they act in direct opposition to the state, sometimes they try to position themselves

as “helpers” because state institutions do not have enough capacity.

What connects these two different yet related groups is that in times of insecurity they are able to attract people beyond their usual reach. With a dynamic international environment and many deep societal cleavages the different Central and Eastern European countries, different sources of insecurity will not go away. It does not matter if the threats are real or just perceived. If present, they will continue to feed paramilitarism as a phenomenon bringing opportunities and threats at the same time.

The Importance of Education

The education of citizens in national and civil defense, preparedness, and patriotic values is perceived by some as undesirable militarization and by others as crucial nation building. Virtually every paramilitary organization mentioned in this paper puts great stress on the importance of youth education. A citizen-patriotic and values-based upbringing forms good, prepared citizens, who consequently create a resilient society. That is the central idea of bringing young boys and girls into non-state and state quasi-paramilitary organizations. Uniforms, mock weapons, and summer camps are there to make it attractive, not necessarily because the aim is to form future soldiers, but rather to create community-bonded and cause-dedicated individuals with a clear set of values.

Let the State Lead the Way

Self-organized citizen volunteers with an interest in defense and security are a valuable resource for a state to have at its disposal but several conditions should be met to exploit it fully. These citizens must trust the state and its institutions, and they must be interested in being organized under it. The state must have a clear concept of the objectives, roles, and tasks for engagement with citizen volunteers and how to reach, speak, and work with them. A clear legal framework must be established, leaving no grounds for uncertainty about the legal status of paramilitary or quasi-paramilitary organizations and their activities.

A state-led rather than state-supported model has more potential to attract needed resources and to develop an objectives-driven approach. This is all necessary to make cooperation the state and citizen volunteers a meaningful feature of national defense systems. Moreover, active state leadership creates several important preconditions for further measures.

Offer an Alternative

With fully professional armed forces, the end of conscription, and a minimal defense-oriented education, individuals with an interest in military-like activities and roles have very few options to develop their hobby aside from joining the army. Airsoft and military simulation clubs, survival sports, military historical reenactment, or non-state quasi-paramilitary organizations are an outlet for many. This is especially true for those below the age of 18 who cannot join the armed forces.

If the state does not want to see non-state paramilitaries challenging its authority, it should offer an attractive alternative. This will not work for radicals who do not want to be associated with the state, but it will allow co-optation for others. Especially with youth, this can also serve to prevent radicalization because they would not have to join a group with a dubious political agenda.

Gatekeeping

It is an absolute priority that any extremist individual or organization should not be able to legitimize and develop itself through a state-led and funded program. Anyone trying to get accreditation or another form of formal access into the national defense system should be vetted in a similar way to how professional soldiers are vetted. Demand by individuals for greater forms of participation should be rewarded with broader possibilities of self-realization and self-development, allowing them to get as close as possible to the military without being a soldier and eventually obtaining benefits like firearms possession exceptions, tax cuts, or welfare support.

Structured Response

States should reinvent basic civil defense and civic-patriotic education in primary and secondary schools. If interest is running high, they should consider special dedicated programs for secondary schools and higher-education institutions. They should organize volunteers into semi-state nationwide associations with the combined involvement of the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of the Interior, and the Ministry of Defense as well as relevant NGOs, civic associations, and sports clubs. They should develop and implement legislation to stipulate how volunteers can be used in crisis management, disaster relief, states of emergency, and military and non-military threat responses. If present in the national defense system, they should be considered for connection with army reserves.

Limit the Space for Bad Actors

Paramilitaries with a political agenda, vigilantes, and extremists must not receive any kind of state recognition and legitimization. On the contrary, the state must ensure that they are not able to create the impression they are part of the state security forces. This includes placing limits on the use of official uniforms and firearms regulations. The state should prohibit the membership of professional soldiers or policemen in such groups. The state should also enforce anti-extremism and hate-speech legislation and have them constantly monitored by the security services or other dedicated agencies.

The views expressed in GMF publications and commentary are the views of the author(s) alone.

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