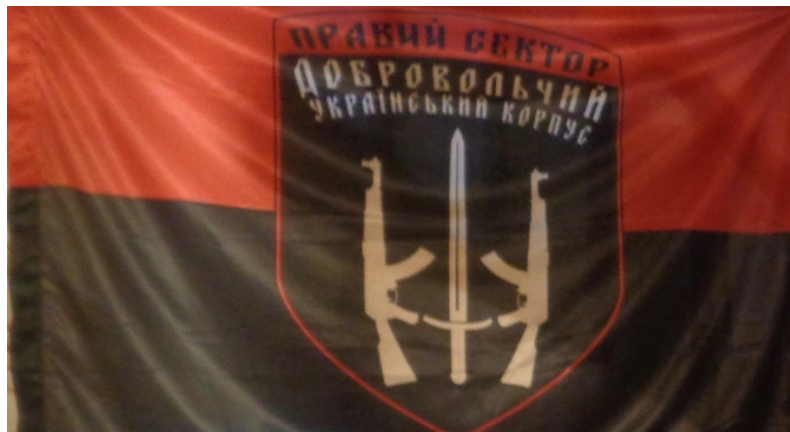


Extremism amid Uncertainty?

A Case Study of Fighters' Motivations to join the
Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps

Khalil Mutallimzada



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Abstract

In response to the conflict in eastern Ukraine that began in April 2014, thousands of Ukrainians voluntarily enrolled to various paramilitary battalions. Except the Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps, all battalions have been incorporated into official defense and security structures. This study investigates why some combatants choose to serve in the paramilitary Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps rather than join the state-sanctioned military, and specifically how this choice is influenced by uncertainty. This multisite case study is conducted with volunteer fighters in the regions of Odesa and Donetsk, using data collected through interviews, observations and through the review of documents. The study applies uncertainty-identity theory, which explores how uncertainty in an individual's own life, or their environment can prompt them to seek structure through belonging to a group or ascribing to an ideology. This theory is applied to understand how participants' identification with the paramilitary Volunteer Ukrainian Corps might influence their feelings of self-uncertainty. The data led to six themes: Russian aggression; patriots and opportunists; enemies among us; trust, confidence and cohesion; sworn brothers; and construction of uncertainty. These themes help to understand the motivations of participants, but also how uncertainty is constructed through the membership in the Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps. The findings of this study give a holistic account about participants' feelings of self-uncertainty through their multifaceted and complex experiences. Analysis of the data revealed that the clear group prototype and the high entitativity of the Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps increased participants' self-confidence, which inspired their continued identification with the group.

Key words: *Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps, volunteer fighters, motivations, paramilitary, uncertainty, extremism, case study, Ukraine, Odesa, Donetsk.*

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Cover photo: The flag of the Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps, at the basement in the town of Karlovka, Donetsk. (Photo by author May 5, 2019).

“In the absence of actual certainty in the midst of a precarious and hazardous world, men cultivate all sorts of things that would give them the feeling of certainty”.

John Dewey



Table 1: Map of Ukraine (Source: Central Intelligence Agency of the United States of America)

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List of abbreviations

AFU	- Armed Forces of Ukraine
ATO	- Anti-Terrorist Organization
EU	- European Union
IRA	- Irish Republican Army
ISIS	- Islamic state of Iraq and Syria
MoD	- Ministry of Defense
MoIA	- Ministry of Internal Affairs
MFS	- Minor Field Studies
NATO	- North Atlantic Treaty Organization
PACS	- Peace and Conflict Studies
RS	- Right Sector
RS VUC	- Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps
SDG	- Sustainable Development Goals
SIDA	- Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency
UN	- United Nation
VRS	- Vojska Republike Srpske (Army of Serb Republic)

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Cover page - the flag of the Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps.

1) Map of Ukraine

1. Introduction

The nature of contemporary warfare has changed during the era of globalization (Kaldor, 2013: 72). The involvement of multiple non-state armed groups and a breakdown of the state's monopoly on violence typifies these 'new wars', and this characteristic is more or less evident in most present-day conflicts worldwide (ibid: 185). The overall tendency to join non-state military units makes the profiles and motivations of fighters in paramilitary groups a compelling phenomenon for academics, and although individual motivations of combatants have been the focus of research for years, "there is still no consensus over the question: What motivates combatants to fight?" (Malešević and Dochartaigh, 2018: 293).

Nowadays, countries across the world struggle with huge uncertainty regarding the honesty and true intentions of 'governance' and 'security policies' (Kaldor, 2012: 187). Growing complaint leading to popular uprisings following the financial crisis, particularly in Europe, have been attributed to distrust in official state institutions (ibid). Within some five years, Ukraine went through the Maidan revolution, a coup d'état, the Russian annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and hostilities in the Donbas region in East Ukraine (Malyarenko and Galbreath, 2016 :113). Research within social psychology suggests a relationship between a person's self-uncertainty and extremism (Hogg, et. al., 2013: 413). Consequently, in the midst of this social and political turbulence in Ukraine, motivations to join paramilitary units of the Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps¹ (RS' VUC) present a highly relevant case for study.

Although most volunteer battalions in Ukraine have been incorporated into official security structures under state control, RS' VUC is the only battalion that acts independently (Puglisi, 2015: 7). Currently most of the battalions in Ukraine have been incorporated into state structures, and act under the official command of either the Ministry of Defense (MoD) or the Ministry of Internal Affairs (MoIA) within the hierarchy of Anti-Terrorist Operation² (ibid: 4). RS' VUC is an exception and operates on its own (Käihkö, 2018: 161).

¹ In Ukrainian: Добровольчий Український Корпус Правий сектор (ДУК ПС).

² ATO was launched in 2014 by the Ukrainian interim government to counter the pro-Russian separatism in the eastern Ukraine, See Käihkö (2018).

The conflict in East Ukraine is far from being resolved. It becomes important to understand why individuals choose a paramilitary extreme group such as RS' VUC over other formal battalions under state control. Applying a case study approach, this thesis investigates the motivations to join RS' VUC, by using the theory of uncertainty-identity as a starting point.

1.1 Research problem

Several studies have focused on the social psychological factor of identity uncertainty in explaining the motivations to join extremist groups (Goldman, Giles and Hogg, 2014; Doosie and van den Boss, 2013; Webber et. al., 2018). As argued by researchers like Michael Hogg, when individuals experience uncertainty in their own life or their immediate surroundings, referred to as "self-uncertainty", extreme groups and ideologies become attractive as a means of providing clear structures to counteract those uncertainties (Hogg, et. Al., 2013:413). This theory is explained in detail in chapter four of this thesis. This study tentatively implies the definition of "extreme" as "exceeding the ordinary, usual or expected" (Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1986, p. 441). This definition of extremism will be discussed and justified in greater detail in chapter 3.1.

The deficiency of social psychological research in understanding the phenomenon of extremism has been its reliance mainly on quantitative and experimental studies (Ginges, Atran, Sachdeva, and Medin, 2011: 36). Therefore, through the lens of uncertainty-identity theory this qualitative case study will investigate the motivations for extremist behavior in the field, sticking to the premises of naturalistic inquiry (Guba and Lincoln, 1985: 39-41). Furthermore, there are very few studies examining the motivations of individuals who decide to join voluntary battalions in the east of Ukraine. The scarcity of research on the profiles of Ukrainian volunteer fighters and their motivations can probably be ascribed to the methodological obstacles mentioned in the existing research, such as difficulties attaining reliable primary data and lack of access to conduct field studies (Karagiannis 2016; Malyarenko and Galbreath 2016: 117). The main deficiency of literature on combat motivations in the Ukrainian conflict is that RS' VUC fighters as a group go largely unnoticed and underrepresented. The motivations of individuals to join Right Sector's (RS) deadly corps in eastern Ukraine remain mostly unexplored by the academia. Most studies about the RS are descriptive, focusing on the ideological dimensions of RS' political party and its role in Maydan revolution (Likhachev, 2015; Ishchenko, 2016).

The purpose of this study is to advance an in-depth understanding of fighters' motivations for joining RS' VUC, as well as to explore the mental profiles of

fighters who belong to what is currently an understudied group. Unlike other literature on combat motivation in the Ukrainian conflict, this study more specifically seeks to understand why people choose a route outside of state control. This study presents an opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the reasons for joining RS' VUC from the perspectives of fighters rather than through quantitative and experimental studies. Uncertainty-identity theory is a useful tool in understanding the motivations of fighters who join RS' VUC. Uncertainty-identity theory enables to examine extreme attitudes and behavior in terms of social identity and social categorization processes, which is highly relevant for understanding why individuals join extreme groups (Hogg, 2012: 73). Using this theory, the study will attempt to make sense of fighters' accounts and perspectives of the world around them. The purpose of this study is to better understand the role of this social psychological concept of self-uncertainty in accounting for extremist behavior.

1.2. Aim and research questions

Case studies are undertaken to make the case understandable (Stake, 1995: 85). This qualitative case study aims to understand how uncertainty influences individuals who decide to join RS' VUC, by examining the case of fighters' motivations for engaging in extra-legal paramilitary activities in eastern Ukraine. For this purpose, the central question to be explored is:

How is 'uncertainty' constructed through identification with the RS' VUC?

At this stage in the research, the motivations for volunteer enrollment to RS' VUC are explored from the social psychological perspective, namely in the light of uncertainty-identity theory. Grounded in the work of Michael Hogg, motivation to identify with extreme groups is explained by the urgent need to reduce feelings of self-uncertainty (Hogg, 2012: 71-72). The main research question is explored through the case of motivations for volunteer enrollment to RS' VUC. More specifically, through their interpretation of self-uncertainty in the everyday civilian life and in a soldier life at the frontline. The operational questions that will assist the central question are:

- 1) How do fighters describe their motivations to join RS' VUC in east Ukraine?*

This question touches on the push factors that induce fighters to join RS' VUC.

- 2) *How do fighters interpret their decision to choose RS' VUC over other military units under state control?*

This question presents an interesting puzzle that remains largely unaddressed by mainstream academia. This question seeks to reveal the preferences of fighters to choose extreme paramilitary corps over those military units that operate legally, given that individuals who join RS' VUC could easily join other battalions under state control and fight pro-Russian separatists there.

- 3) *How is self-uncertainty experienced by volunteer fighters in the civilian life and in the war zone?*

This question goes into the core of uncertainty-identity theory. It tries to understand how fighters construct their experiences of uncertainty in the everyday civilian life and at the frontline.

- 4) *What organizational features are perceived by the fighters of RS' VUC to serve as attractive group prototypes able to influence feelings of self-uncertainty?*

This question addresses the meanings that fighters bring to their enrollment to RS' VUC. More specifically, it touches on factors that pull fighters to join RS' VUC, and questions what is so appealing about the identification with these military units. The concepts of group prototype and entitativity are covered by this question.

- 5) *What is the nature of relationships among fighters in their respective corps?*

This is where the social psychological aspects of this investigation come into play. The relationship between in-group members is observed in the field to understand how identification with RS' VUC influences fighters' feelings of uncertainty.

The study aims not only to fill an important gap in the literature but also to contribute to a better understanding of the issue for broader audiences such as students, researchers, other practitioners in the field and funding organizations.

1.3 Relevance to Peace and Conflict Studies

Ukraine is in an ongoing war with the pro-Russian separatists in the east of the country. According to Galtung's typology, violence can be expressed in direct, structural and cultural forms (1969: 170-171). Volunteer fighters including those who enroll to RS' VUC travel to east Ukraine to participate in combat. Since these fighters participate in 'killing' and 'maiming', this falls into the category of direct violence in Galtung's typology of violence (1990: 292).

Moreover, this study adds to the PACS literature on combat motivations through the meaning's fighters bring to their experiences, specifically paramilitary fighter motivations in the context of the Ukrainian conflict. Despite many articles written on paramilitary combat motivations, few of them are based on primary data such as firsthand accounts from fighters themselves (Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017: 191).

1.4 Delimitations

This study has several delimitations that need to be addressed. The research site is limited to two regions: Odesa in the south of Ukraine and Donetsk in the east Ukraine, which renders non-generalizable results. The study is limited to qualitative case study methodology (Stake, 1985: 16) and will not include other quantifiable measures such as survey methods or statistics. The data collection is confined to two months of fieldwork (mid-March to mid-May 2019), seven in-depth interviews, twenty-three hours of participant observation and the review of documents relating to RS' VUC activities. This thesis does not argue that self-uncertainty is the only reason why people are joining RS' VUC, but it only investigates the role that uncertainty plays in why people join this paramilitary group. The study will not go into the detailed discussion about political extremism or the process of radicalization. Neither will it capture the complex relationship between state and non-state military structures. The study will rather focus on fighters' subjective constructions of uncertainty in relation to their decisions to join RS' VUC. This study will be limited only to the fighters of RS' VUC. Members of other branches of RS such as the political party or RS's Youth Movement³ are not included. Lastly, individuals who have been subject to compulsory conscription in the Armed Forces of Ukraine (AFU) or who have voluntarily enrolled to various formal battalions controlled by state authorities will not be included as research participants in this study.

³ **Права Молодь** - українська молодіжна організація, Right Youth along with the political party Right Sector, **Політична Партія Правий сектор**, are not the focus of this study.

1.5 Chapter outline

This thesis is comprised of seven chapters, including this introductory chapter. The second chapter presents a brief historical background of events leading to the conflict in east Ukraine as well as the creation of RS' VUC. The third chapter outlines the previous research on motivations to join extreme groups and the paramilitary combat motivations in Ukraine. The fourth chapter presents the theoretical framework of the thesis and discusses the concept of uncertainty. The fifth chapter discusses the methodology, research design and the methods of data collection. The sixth chapter introduces the analysis of data. This chapter is organized into subchapters in line with the research questions and these subchapters seek to answer the operational research questions of this study. Finally, the last chapter encompasses the concluding remarks and thoughts about the findings, as well as recommendations for future research.

2. Historical background

2.1 Maidan Revolution

Since November 2013 Ukraine experienced some major events that changed its political landscape, territories and brought about conflict in east Ukraine (Käihkö, 2018: 148). Popular uprisings in November 2013 were caused in response to, among other issues, the failure of the then-current government to seek closer relationships with European Union (Yekelchyk, 2015: 3-4). Within a short period of time small scale protests were transformed into a nationwide revolutionary force that beside European integration were also concerned with the widespread corruption and the inadequacy of the Yanukovych⁴ government (Zabyelina, 2019: 277). The Maidan Revolution, also called the Revolution of Dignity, quickly turned into a violent confrontation between the protesters and police, which resulted in the overthrowing of the then pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych who fled to Russian Federation in February 2014 (Yekelchyk, 2015: 3-4). Experienced activists mainly with ultranationalist dispositions swiftly organized and assisted protesters in fighting back against the police violence (Zabyelina, 2019: 284). This violent confrontation during the Maidan protests resulted in over one hundred deaths and many injuries that left the country with interim government that lacked legitimacy, especially in the eyes of Russia (Käihkö, 2018: 148). As a result of the Maidan revolution Ukraine became “politically divided and institutionally fragmented” (ibid: 151).

2.2 The Russo-Ukrainian conflict

The victory of the protesters in the Maidan revolution and the overthrow of the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych disappointed the Russian political elite, which resulted in the annexation of the Crimean Peninsula⁵ into the Russian Federation (Yekelchyk, 2015: 4). After Crimean Peninsula was seized, Russia actively fueled separatism in the east Ukraine (Käihkö, 2018: 148). Whereas the annexation of Crimea did not provoke violence, further developments in Donbas

⁴ Viktor Yanukovych acted as the president of Ukraine from 2010-2013, see Yekelchyk (2015).

⁵ See Yekelchyk, (2015), pp. 131-132.

region⁶ turned into overt hostilities (Malyarenko and Galbreath, 2016: 113). Subsequent violence that led to conflict in east Ukraine was initiated in the beginning of April 2014 (Karagiannis, 2016: 139). The hostilities in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions in eastern Ukraine combine elements of both implicit foreign occupation and civil war (Yekelchyk, 2015: 5). In April 2014 thousands of individuals with little or no military experience enrolled into the pro-Ukrainian battalions to fight Russian-backed separatists in east Ukraine (Karagiannis, 2016: 140).

2.3 Ukrainian paramilitary battalions

Although the focus of this study is on the RS' VUC, some general information on other Ukrainian paramilitary battalions will help in understanding the whole picture. Initially, volunteer battalions were formed in April-May 2014 when it became evident that the pro-Russian separatists strived to control most of the Donbass region in eastern Ukraine (Karagiannis 2016:143). According to Ukrainian law, explicit participation of any paramilitary battalion in open military confrontation is prohibited (Malyarenko and Galbreath, 2016: 123). Yet, far-right nationalist groups of vigilantes acted as guarantors of law and security by forming into paramilitary formations that used extra-legal violence. (Zabyelina, 2019: 277).

The new president of Ukraine, Petro Poroshenko, signed a decree calling all paramilitary battalions to “disarm and subordinate” to either the MoD or MoIA (Poroshenko, 2015, No. 341). Eventually, all Ukrainian volunteer paramilitary battalions were incorporated into formal defense and security structures under state control (Puglisi, 2015: 7; Kähkö, 2018: 159). RS' VUC stands as the only battalion that chose not to be subordinated (Puglisi, 2015: 7; Kähkö, 2018: 161). After paramilitary battalions were incorporated into formal state institutions some fighters even preferred to leave their battalions and to join RS' VUC (Kähkö, 2018: 162).

2.4 Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps

Today Ukrainian nationalist formations, including RS consider themselves the descendants of the Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists (Marples, 2006: 555-

⁶ Donetsk and Luhansk regions combined together are often called as Donbas, see Yekelchyk, 134-135.

56). The historical leader of all Ukrainian nationalists Stepan Bandera⁷ is considered by some as a national hero, yet there are many others who view him as “the epitome of evil, treachery, and as a collaborator with the Hitler regime” (ibid: 565).

RS’ VUC is one of the three branches of the organization called Right Sector (“About Pravyi Sector”, n.d.). RS has three branches of activities: RS political party, RS Youth Movement, and a paramilitary battalion comprised of Volunteer Ukrainian Corps (ibid). The first RS battalion was created within the confines of the RS nationalist organization (Puglisi, 2015: 7). RS in turn was established during the Maidan revolution in November 2013 when several nationalist groups united to form a coalition called RS (Zabyelina, 2019: 284). Despite being small in numbers, members of RS were able to organize into “lethally armed self-defense hundreds”⁸ that further laid the foundation of the battalion of RS’ VUC (Shekhovtsov and Umland, 2014: 59).

The main objective of RS’ VUC is to achieve “liberation of Ukraine from Kremlin’s⁹ control” and to “clean the Ukrainian government from internal oligarchic occupation” (Zabyelina, 2019:287). RS’ VUC is not subordinated to any state institution, which means it neither presents reports nor takes orders from any formal defense or security institution concerning its use of violence (ibid: 288). Because of its illegal status, the fighting units of RS’ VUC are not supplied with weapons by the Ukrainian state, and they mainly arm themselves by obtaining trophy weapons in the course of hostilities (Zabyelina, 2019: 287). The next chapter will review the literature that attempt to understand combat motivations and explain why individuals join extra-legal paramilitary groups.

⁷ Stepan Bandera is a controversial figure in both Ukraine and Russia due to his alleged cooperation with Nazi Germany during the Second World War. See David Marple (2006).

⁸ Self-defense hundreds, *soznyas* in Russian, резервная сотня самообороны.

⁹ Kremlin is associated with the capital Moscow, and the Russian government. See Zabyelina (2019).

3. Literature review

This chapter will introduce the reader to studies on paramilitary combat motivations, and on research that focuses on the causal links between joining extreme groups and uncertainty. The chapter ends with studies that emphasize on paramilitary motivations in Ukraine, as well as with perspectives about the positioning of this thesis within the existing academia.

3.1 Paramilitary combat motivations

Before starting to review the existing studies on paramilitary combat motivations, and especially motivations to join extreme groups, it would be beneficial to define the term 'extremism' as it is understood in the epistemological position of this study. This study sticks to the definition of extremism that defines the term as a "deviancy from a general pattern of behavior or attitude that prevails in a given social context" (Webber et al., 2018: 272). This use of 'extremism' is well established in PACS literature on 'new wars' and in social psychology as seen in (Kaldor 2012; Kruglanski et. al., and Webber et. al., 2018). According to this definition, the choice to join a paramilitary group is considered as an extreme act in comparison with e.g., the choice to join regular armed forces under state control. What makes then individuals to defy from generally accepted norms and incline towards more extreme forms of social and political engagement? To get a better understanding of this phenomenon, as well as to understand what motivate and sustain fighters in the battlefield, the findings of other studies on combat motivations are further presented.

In today's new wars within the framework of a globalized world, individuals who join paramilitary groups often consist of "unemployed young men in search of a living, motivated by a cause or an adventure" (Kaldor, 2012: 98). On the other hand, Elisabeth Jean Wood found in her study that in 1980s individuals in El Salvador joined the left-wing insurgency for moral and emotional purposes (2003: 235). Similarly, the motivations of individuals to join extremist groups in Syria and Iraq can be attributed to "personal rather than political factors" (The Soufan Group, 2015: 6). A quest for "belonging, purpose, adventure, and friendship" seem to serve as the main motivation for people who decide to join the ISIS¹⁰

¹⁰ Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

(ibid). Cottee and Hayward suggest that joining extremist groups alleviate the feelings of “existential frustration” in the midst of a boring and meaningless world (2011: 978-979). In their study of foreign fighters’ motivations to join extremist groups in Syria and Iraq, Dawson and Amarasingam (2017) found that along with existential pull factors, religious ideology may be a key factor informing the motivations of these combatants (p. 206).

In the study of Irish and Bosnian Serb paramilitary groups IRA¹¹ and VRS¹², Malešević and Dochartaigh (2018) found that “ideology obscures much more powerful and important motivations at the micro-level” (p. 321). Social loyalties, “inter-personal bonds”, “micro level solidarity” and a wish to contribute motivated more than a mere dedication to the nationalistic ideology (ibid). As is evident, one factor that previous research on paramilitary combatants has not addressed is the social psychological factor of uncertainty.

3.2 Extremism and Uncertainty

The concept of uncertainty and its role in the decision to join extreme groups have been a subject of interest for scholars within the field of social psychology. In their quantitative study of Muslim Dutch adolescents, by using survey questionnaire Doosje and van den Boss found a causal relationship between “personal uncertainty” and “radical belief system” (2013: 589-590). In another study of convicted religious extremists in Philippines, by using survey questionnaire it was demonstrated that “significance loss” weakened “individual self-confidence”, which in its turn elevated the attractiveness of “extreme ideologies that offer simplistic, certainty-affording worldviews” (Webber et al., 2018: 274). Another study of ethno-nationalist extremists and several other studies present evidence that “personal feelings of insignificance lead to increased extremism through increased need for closure” (ibid: 280). It is suggested that feelings of self-uncertainty can be reduced if an individual identifies with strongly entitative groups and that conditions of uncertainty can push individuals to participate in extremism (Hogg, Adelman and Blagg, 2010: 79).

3.3 Ukrainian context

Even though since April 2014 thousands of individuals in Ukraine most of whom had no previous military experience joined pro-Ukrainian armed groups, information about these individuals is very scarce (Karagiannis, 2016: 139-140).

¹¹ The paramilitary Irish Republican Army. See Malešević and Dochartaigh, (2018) p 294

¹² Vojska Republike Srpske. The Army of the Serbian Republic in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Based on the findings attained through a qualitative field study in Central Ukraine, Karagiannis (2016) studied volunteer fighters from various paramilitary battalions. This study suggests that ideology, social-political norms and emotions served as powerful motivational forces that enabled paramilitary mobilization into volunteer battalions in Ukraine (ibid: 149). According to Puglisi (2015), in April 2014 Ukrainian volunteer fighters were motivated to participate in hostilities by strong feelings of patriotism and had a common goal of liberating their country (p. 9). In his ethnographic study on volunteer battalions in Ukraine, Kähkö (2018) emphasizes that beside patriotic commitment, volunteer decision to join and fight in a paramilitary group can also be pursued due to the social advancement and improved social standing that military experience offers (p. 156).

3.4 Positioning this study

Literature on motivations for joining extreme groups varies depending on the context. The reviewed literature on individual combat motivations to join extreme groups, including paramilitary groups has revealed four motivational forces to be present: ideological, existential, emotional and social psychological. As a point of departure this thesis can be positioned within the above-mentioned premises. The literature on paramilitary combat motivations emphasize ideology, “existential attractiveness”, and emotional attachment to serve as the basic motivations of fighters to join extreme groups (Dawson and Amarasingam, 2017: 206; Cottee and Hayward, 2011: pp. 973-74). However, the underlying structural and psychological component that gives rise to ideological belief and emotions is overlooked. Moreover, the literature on paramilitary combat motivations fails to capture why individuals join extreme military groups when they have less extreme choices to fulfill the same desire and perceived duty to fight in the conflict. Although Kähkö’s study (2018) hints on the lack of confidence that Ukrainian volunteer fighters expressed in relation to society and government, it does not address the larger identity processes involved in the expression of fighters’ self-uncertainty (pp. 151-152).

Research that applies uncertainty factor to explain extremist attitudes and behavior use quantitative methods (Doosje and van den Boss, 2013; Webber et. al., 2018). There is lack of qualitative field studies exploring the meanings individuals bring to their subjective experiences of uncertainty when they join extreme groups. Many important issues regarding the identification with extreme groups remain unresolved (Kruglanski et. al., 2017: 217). These unresolved issues include “dynamics leading to extremism, the contribution to this phenomenon of social networks and the place of personality predispositions in this process” (ibid).

Qualitative field studies on the motivations of individuals who join RS' VUC in Ukraine are difficult to find. Existing literature on Ukrainian volunteer battalions fall short of explaining why individuals join extreme military groups such as RS' VUC and not other battalions under state control. By positioning within the broader literature on paramilitary combat motivations, this thesis will try to understand the motivations to join RS' VUC in light of 'uncertainty identity theory'.

4. Theoretical Framework

This chapter serves as a conceptual and theoretical guideline. Following the discussion on the philosophical assumptions underpinning this study, the second section of the chapter describes the social psychological concept of uncertainty and discusses the premises of uncertainty-identity theory. The third section of this chapter touches on the issue of how uncertainty may lead to extremism. Uncertainty-identity theory helps to understand the social psychological impulses in the construction of self-uncertainty and the decision to join RS' VUC.

4.1 Philosophical assumptions

The role of theory in qualitative research is often unclear due to a widespread belief of its inductive use (Collins and Stockton, 2018: 7; Creswell and Poth 2018: 24). This study applies theory semi-inductively since an investigation without a theoretical framework is impossible even in the most eager qualitative research (Schwandt, 1993: pp. 7-8). Epistemology and the choice of theory are mutually interdependent (Collins and Stockton, 2018: 6). Similarly, this interdependence is explicitly presented in this paper through the further selection of the case and research participants.

The epistemological and ontological assumptions that underpin this study are based on the theory of social constructivism. "Reality is socially constructed" (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 13), and this construction is based upon research participants' subjective meanings of their experiences (Guba and Lincoln, 1985: 80). It is important to note that the reality of everyday life is mostly experienced through "face-to-face" interaction with others where the 'other' is presented in clearly articulated terms (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 43). "The reality of everyday life contains typificatory schemes in terms of which others are apprehended and dealt with in face-to-face encounters" (ibid: 45). Thus, the subjective understanding of the typificatory schemes such as e.g., a patriot, a freedom fighter, a separatist or insurgent are developed and grasped within the face-to-face contact of social interaction (ibid).

Thus, the philosophical conviction of this study can be understood in terms of the constructivist 'ontology' that presents multiple realities of the fighters in RS' VUC, as well as in terms of 'epistemology' where the knowledge derives through

researcher's interpretation of participants' construction of meaning" (Denzin and Lincoln 2018: 20).

4.2 Uncertainty-Identity Theory

4.2.1 Social Psychology

Social psychology is a scientific inquiry that seeks an understanding and explanation of "how the thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of individuals are influenced by the actual, imagined, or implied presence of others" (Allport: 1954: 5). George Mead (1934) links the social constructivist ontology of meaning produced through multiple realities to the field of social psychology through its social process of complex subjective interactions in relation to objective reality (pp. 76–77). Because from a social psychological perspective, "the behavior of an individual can be understood only in terms of the behavior of the whole social group of which he is a member" (Mead, 1934: 6). The mind and its subjective mechanisms awaken through reflexiveness that takes place within mutual interaction, and where the attitudes of the other towards oneself are experienced (ibid: 134). In this constructivist perspective there is a relationship between mind and reality: the objects of our knowledge are not independent but are constructed by our minds as a result of meaning making interaction with others (ibid). Accordingly, the self arises through the process of social interaction with other individuals in a given context (ibid: 164). George Mead (1934) argues that "the 'I' reacts to the self which arises through the taking of the attitudes of others and the 'I' is the response of the organism to the attitudes of the others" (ibid: 174–175). This process that involves the "mind as a constructive thinking" builds a bridge between the given epistemology and the social psychological explanations (ibid: 308).

4.2.2 Uncertainty

Uncertainty is a widespread aspect of life and people constantly make efforts to minimize feelings of uncertainty since it is impossible for people to be fully certain (Hogg, 2012: 74). Uncertainty emerges when people find out that their perceptions, attitudes, feelings and behaviors are in sharp contrast with the rest of society (Hogg, 2000: 233). Such uncertainty has "a powerful motivational effect" (ibid: 64). Uncertainty inheres in "interpersonal relationships, group and intergroup dynamics, or widespread events in the larger society or global

community” (Hogg, Kruglanski, van den Bos 2013: 411). Economic crisis, immigration, regime collapse and even climate change can all provoke intense and lasting feelings of uncertainty among people (ibid: 407). Consequently, the social and political tensions in Ukraine, since 2013 (Malyarenko and Galbreath, 2016 :113) can be the source of uncertainty. People constantly strive to minimize such uncertainties so that they can experience less uncertainty about their social surrounding, which will provide a more predictable environment where individuals can behave more effectively (Hogg, 2012: 64). Uncertainty matters most, and triggers motivations to reduce it when individuals either feel uncertain about certain things related to self or when people feel uncertain about their identity (ibid: 64-65). People prefer an unambiguous comprehension of self, as well as a predictable relationship with other members of a society because they make efforts to construct “a coherent and meaningful worldview” (ibid: 65). Uncertainty can also be experienced differently depending on the context. This study concentrates on that dimension of uncertainty that is relevant to individual self. Because “self is likely to have the greatest motivational force and the self is the critical organizing principle, for perceptions, feelings, and behaviors” (ibid: 66).

4.2.3 Uncertainty–Identity Theory

Uncertainty-identity theory is concerned with minimizing the feelings of uncertainty rather than attaining absolute certainty (Hogg, 2012: 65). According to Hogg (2012), identification with groups is able to reduce uncertainty, and therefore group identification serves as a powerful motivational force in reducing feelings of self-uncertainty (p. 67). Identification with groups is certainly not the only panacea that deals with uncertainty, but it is remarkably efficient to reduce feelings of uncertainty relevant to self (ibid). Uncertainty-identity theory can be defined as “a social psychological theory of the motivational role played by self-uncertainty in group processes and intergroup relations” (Wagoner and Hogg, 2017: 1). The basic tenet of this theory is that individuals identify with social groups to reduce feelings of self-related uncertainty (ibid).

Uncertainty-identity theory was developed as the extension of other social psychological theories, namely social identity and social categorization theories (Hogg, 2000: 249). To understand how uncertainty-identity theory works, some attention must be paid to these two concepts, namely the social identity and social categorization. Tajfel (1974) defines social identity as “that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group together with the emotional significance attached to that membership” (p.

69). Social identity theory seeks to understand the dynamics that lead to individual's attitudes and behavior in terms of a social rather than a personal identity (ibid). Social identity theory superficially refers to the motivational aspect of minimizing uncertainty. Tajfel (1969) argued that individuals join social groups due to the "search for coherence" (p. 92).

On the other hand, social categorization takes a step further towards one of the key premises of the uncertainty-identity theory. Social categorization can be defined as a classification of social surroundings in terms of social groupings that provide individuals with meaningful comprehension of their place in society (Tajfel, 1974: 69). It is suggested that an individual will join new social groups if these groups are able to reinforce "the positive aspects of his social identity, those aspects of it from which he derives some satisfaction" (ibid: 69). "Uncertainty motivates self-categorization", hence it urges people to join and identify with groups (Hogg, 2000: 224). Feelings of uncertainty about the rightness of attitudes, beliefs and perceptions urge people to look for groups whose members share similar values (Hogg, Kruglanski and van den Boss, 2013: 410). Thus, uncertainty motivates to identify with like-minded people and join cohesive social groups (ibid). Identification with groups that share one's beliefs and attitudes is an effective antidote that helps to deal and minimize the feelings of self-uncertainty (ibid: 412).

Uncertainty-identity theory has three main premises:

1. People are motivated to reduce feelings of uncertainty about or related to themselves;
2. Identifying with a group reduces self-uncertainty because the group's attributes are cognitively internalized as a prototype that describes and prescribes how one should behave and be treated by others, and one's prototype is consensually validated by fellow group members; and
3. Highly entitative groups that are distinctive and clearly defined are most effective at reducing self-uncertainty (Hogg, 2012: 62).

The main principle of uncertainty-identity theory is that feelings of self-uncertainty motivate individuals to minimize uncertainty through the process of self-categorization (ibid: 64). Because "self-categorization as a group member provides a consensually validated group prototype that describes and prescribes who one is and how one should behave" (ibid).

4.2.4 Group prototype and entitativity

Group prototype and group entitativity are two basic characteristics in the process of self-categorization. "Social categorization depersonalizes self-perception in

terms of in-group and out-group prototypes” (Hogg, 2000: 227). Beside the depersonalization of self-perception, social categorization also reshapes self-conception by assimilating individual’s “attitudes, feelings and behaviors to the in-group prototype” (ibid). The function of prototypes is to “define and prescribe attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that characterize one group and distinguish it from other groups” (ibid). A straightforward, clearly articulated, and explicitly normative prototype can be much more effective in reducing uncertainty than an intricate, ambiguous and prescriptively vague prototype (Hogg, 2012: 68). After being depersonalized to suit the group prototype, self becomes altered to suit the prototypical qualities of a group (Hogg, 2000: 233). “The mechanism of uncertainty reduction is assimilation of the self to the in-group prototype” (Hogg, 2004: 266). Michael Hogg (2000) argues that “uncertainty motivates people to identify with groups, particularly high entitativity groups that have clearly defined prototypes” (p. 248). Consequently, group prototypes such as “conformity, normative behavior, solidarity, cohesion, intergroup discrimination and in-group favoritism” explain the further dynamics of attitudes and behavior both towards in-group and out-group members (Hogg, 2004: 263). Unambiguous prototypes can be frequently found in high entitativity groups (Hogg, 2012: 68). “Uncertainty motivates people to identify with groups, particularly high entitativity groups that have clearly defined prototypes” (Hogg, 2000: 248). The characteristic features of such high entitativity groups are their distinctiveness, clear structure, unambiguous membership criteria and the prescriptive qualities defining attitudes and behavior (Hogg and Adelman, 2013: 437). Moreover, high entitativity groups are characterized by a well-built in-group loyalty, an unambiguous ideological belief system that ascribes group members with normative behavior, lack of dissent within a group, uncompromising ultimate “truth” as well as, “an us versus them mentality that is highly ethnocentric, and views out-groups as fundamentally wrong, perhaps evil and immoral” (Hogg, 2005: 215).

4.3 Uncertainty and Extremism

High entitativity groups with clear prototypes are best at reducing uncertainty, and during extreme uncertainty such groups embrace a powerful ideology (Hogg, 2005: 206). Ideologies that embrace nationalistic and patriotic feelings may arise in response to uncertainty (ibid: 216). Hogg (2004) further suggests that extremism is a by-product of uncertainty (p. 271). “Extreme subjective uncertainty” may induce people to identify with extreme nationalistic, political and religious groups (ibid: 262). Such groups provide individuals with a strong identity and these groups are potentially capable to dampen the feelings of self-

uncertainty (Hogg, 2012: 74). The yearning to reduce feelings of self-uncertainty is particularly acute during periods of lasting and extreme uncertainties such as natural disasters, economic hardships, regime change, state reforms, societal cleavages and civil conflicts (Wagoner and Hogg, 2017: 4-5). Uncertainty not only motivates people to join high-entitativity groups with clear prototype, but it also urges people “to defend their in-group from threatening out-groups” (ibid: 7). People are motivated to reduce their feelings of self-uncertainty through identifying with extreme groups because extremism implies coherence through “a black and white perspective, admitting no ambiguous shades of gray” (Klein and Kruglanski, 2013: 413). Extremist groups are “ultra-entitative” and such groups can be appealing for people who experience uncertainty, especially extreme uncertainty (Hogg, 2012: 73).

Nevertheless, Klein and Kruglanski (2013) have pointed to a shortcoming of uncertainty identity theory, arguing that it fails to specify the main psychological rationale for the nexus between uncertainty and extremism (p. 420). Although it is proposed that extremism is effective in reducing uncertainty, it is still unclear how this process of uncertainty reduction unfolds in real life (ibid). This shortcoming can probably be explained by relatively few studies that attempt to account for the phenomenon of uncertainty through the meanings that individuals bring to their extreme behavior. However, by using the premises of uncertainty-identity theory, I argue that the turbulent social and political milieu in Ukraine may challenge a comprehensive sense of self, and ultimately serve as a motivation to join and identify with RS’ VUC.

5. Methodology

5.1 Research design

This study is a constructivist and qualitative case study (Yazan 2015:142), striving to investigate how RS' VUC fighters construct meanings of their experiences (Yazan 2015:137), especially their construction and interpretation of self-related uncertainty in relation to their decision for voluntary enrollment to RS' VUC. Qualitative case study research "explores a real-life, contemporary bounded system through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of data" (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 96). What makes a case bounded, is its parameters that can describe the case best (ibid: 97). Parameters can represent a location, a time frame and even people (ibid). Consequently, the case of this thesis is bounded to the fighters of RS' VUC who have joined these paramilitary units since April 2014. As a rule, a case study focuses on present-day and ongoing real-life cases, "not lost by time" (ibid). The intent of a qualitative case study is "to gain an in-depth understanding of the situation and meaning of those involved" (Merriam, 1998: 19). Case studies investigate a particular case to scrutinize an issue or problem in the case to show the intricacy of the issue (ibid: 121). Issues are used as "a conceptual structure in order to force attention to complexity and contextuality" (Stake, 1995: 17). This characterizes a single instrumental case study (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 98), and this research design will guide my study. An instrumental case study can be understood as an investigation that has "a research question, a puzzlement, a need for general understanding, and a feeling that we may get insight into the question by studying a particular case" (Stake, 1995: 3). A case in the case study can be an individual, organization, community, decision process or activity (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 97; Stake, 1995: 44).

Since the intent of this study is to understand how fighters construct uncertainty, the case of fighters' motivations will demonstrate the meanings brought to the 'activity' of enrollment to RS' VUC. The case of this study illustrates 'fighters' motivations to join RS' VUC, and the issues of this case are demonstrated through the extra-legal nature of this battalion, the preferences to choose RS' VUC over other battalions under state control and the role of extremism in minimizing the feelings of self-uncertainty. The case is bounded to RS' VUC fighters' experiences. Hence, a single instrumental case study is a

relevant approach to be used as the research design of this study. Of course, other research approaches could be used to conduct this study, such as ethnography, narrative study or phenomenology. However, an instrumental case study design is better suited to gain an in depth understanding of the issues through studying the case of this thesis. This design is relevant to the posed research problem, and the questions that have been addressed. Qualitative case study approach is emergent in nature and is known for its flexibility in the process of data collection and analysis (Stake, 1995: 9; Merriam, 1998: 28).

One of the shortcomings of the case study approach is its non-generalizable findings (Stake. 1995: 7; Hamel, 1993: 23). Moreover, a researcher using case study approach must be ready for unforeseen circumstances, follow academic rigor, and to be aware that its flexible nature also results in an absence of structural guidance (Merriam 1998: 20-21). Case study research is also considered as relatively expensive and time consuming (ibid: 42). In a qualitative case study, “the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis”, which brings about issues related to researcher’s subjectivity and bias ((ibid: 42-43).

All in all, the art of qualitative case study research enables an in-depth understanding of the case through multiple realities, as well as a holistic picture of differing, and even divergent views about social reality (Stake, 1995: 12).

5.2 Data Collection

5.2.1 Method

This study was conducted within two months of fieldwork conducted in Ukraine between the 19th of March and the 21st of May, 2019. The project to conduct a field study in Ukraine was funded and enabled by SIDA through the MFS scholarship.

The premises of uncertainty-identity theory, namely the research of Michael Hogg (2000; 2004; 2012) guided my data collection. The primary data was collected through in-depth, open ended, semi-structured interviews (Brouneus, 2011: 130) with the volunteer fighters of RS’ VUC, which provided opportunity to ask predetermined and follow-up questions with flexible wording (Merriam 1998:74). These interviews were conducted to better understand how fighters construct self-uncertainty when they interpret their decision to join RS’ VUC. Participants were selected using the strategy of purposeful and snowball sampling, which is appropriate in a case study of a limited group (Chambliss and Schutt, 2016: 105). Further in the research process, individual fighters who were selected

through purposeful sampling advised and assisted in contacting other fighters who could be useful in understanding the case. The overall purpose of the interviews was to reveal and understand the personal experiences of fighters.

Interviews were conducted in Russian, which served as a lingua franca and was second a language for me and my research participants. In total seven interviews were conducted, by using a voice recorder. The average time for the interviews was one hour.¹³ These semi-structured interviews focused on five key themes closely related to the operational questions of this study. These themes explored the motivations as push factors to join RS' VUC; attractiveness of the battalion as a pull factor; construction of self-uncertainty; organizational features of RS' VUC; and the nature of relationship among RS' VUC fighters. Another source of primary data was derived from the direct observation of my research participants where my role can be explained as more of an observer rather than a participant (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 168). My presence in the events and activities of RS' VUC enabled me access to the fighters of this volunteer battalion that consists of several paramilitary corps. During observations I jotted down some key quotations and complemented the field notes with observed information and comments soon after observation was completed. The participation in the activities was minimal, and it helped to avoid 'going native' or siding with my research participants (ibid: 57). The data triangulation essential for the purpose of case study research (Stake, 1995: 107) was completed through the document review, namely information about RS' VUC in RS organizational newspaper, mobilizational brochures and the website of the RS. This will serve as the secondary source of data. The organization's quarterly newspaper called Pravyi Sektor¹⁴ is relevant to be used as a documentary source of this case study research (Stake, 1995: 68; Meyer, 2001: 341).

Interviews and field notes were translated from Russian and documents such as newspapers were translated from Ukrainian. The translation was enabled by my skills and fluency in the Russian language, gained through my work experience as a translator¹⁵. The newspapers were translated with the help of my Ukrainian friends and acquaintances. Only minor grammatical corrections were made in the interview transcripts, leaving the text in the quotations unchanged. To ensure transparency and intersubjectivity, the original quotations in Russian will be presented in the footnotes.

¹³ The longest interview was one hour and 28 minutes. The shortest interview was 39 minutes.

¹⁴ Правий Сектор.

¹⁵ I have long work experience in the translation agency called Språkservice AB, in Malmö, Sweden.

5.2.2 Research site

Initially this study was planned to be conducted only in the city of Odesa. The choice of the second research site and the eventual trip to Donetsk region was necessitated by the need to observe and interview fighters within a natural setting. This multisite investigation of the case enabled me to better understand the research problem and eventually answer the research questions with higher confidence. Consequently, relying on the emergent design of the qualitative case study (Stake, 1995: 9), I observed and interviewed some fighters of RS's VUC in the town of Karlovka, in Donetsk region. Five interviews were conducted in Odesa and two interviews in Donetsk.

5.2.3 Research participants

Research participants in this study are bounded to the fighters of RS's VUC, and the purposeful sampling does not include members of the RS political party or RS Youth Movement. All my research participants were paramilitary combatants of RS' VUC except one young woman who was present in the battlefield as a paramedic, although she also carried a weapon. The age of my research participants ranged from 19 to 50 years old. Five men and two women fighters were interviewed. One interviewee was from Kiev, two from Donetsk and the rest were from the Odesa region. Access to research participants was not without challenges and required time in the field to gain their trust. My strategy for gaining the trust of research participants was to establish contact with the gatekeeper and the key informant long before departing to the field (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 150). The research participants in this study have participated in paramilitary activities at various periods of time since April 2014. However, this study can be bounded to the period of this field study that is from March 19th to May 21st 2019. More information on the profiles of research participants is available in the Appendix section (Appendix 4).

5.3 Analysis of material

Data analysis is a meaning making process, and it is concerned with the interpretation of collected material (Merriam, 1998: 178). In my case, the data was analyzed simultaneously with data collection, after each interview, observation and document review was done. All three sources of data were analyzed by using the techniques of qualitative content analysis, since this method is concerned with the interpretation of meaning (ibid: 160). Qualitative content

analysis can be defined as “a research method for the subjective interpretation of the content of text data” (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1278), that seeks to produce “knowledge and understanding of the phenomenon under study” (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992: 314). The generally accepted procedure of the qualitative content analysis consists of coding the data into appropriate clusters of information, from which further categories are developed into thematic patterns (Morgan, 1993: 114–116; Merriam and Tisdell, 2015: 187). The analysis applied “open coding” where the goal was to identify data with words and utterances that appeared to address the issues related to my research questions (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015: 208). As a type of qualitative content analysis, “conventional content analysis” allowed the categories derive from the text, which led to the appearance of new insights (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005: 1279). This inductive process was accompanied with some deductive reasoning since the data presented in this study were coded and categorized with the theoretical framework in mind, which illustrates the semi-inductive nature of the inquiry.

The first phase of coding revealed 96 codes, which were later reduced to more theoretically relevant codes. These codes were categorized into clusters of information that at the end became thematically organized sections highlighting the research questions and the findings of this study (Appendix 1).

5.4 Trustworthiness and dependability

This study will replace the traditional positivist validation and reliability measures with qualitative criteria such as “credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985: 42-43; Shenton, 2004: 64). Similar strategies have been proposed by various authors to enhance the authenticity of a qualitative study. These strategies are: consistency of the collected data with the findings, which verifies the dependability and confirmability of the study (Merriam and Tisdell, 2015: 250–251); and assessing the credibility of the study by the data triangulation and the member checking procedures (Stake, 1995: 109; Merriam, 1998: 204-205; Creswell and Poth, 2018: 262). Although the transferability of results is generally problematic or even impossible in qualitative studies (Merriam, 1998: 206; Bednarz, 1985: 303), data triangulation, thick and rich description, as well as researcher reflexivity will increase the reliability of this study (Creswell, 2014: 201-202; Merriam, 1998: 211). The problem with dependability criteria can be explained with the constantly changing dynamics in the lives of research participants, such as aging and gaining new knowledge (Tracy, 2013: 229). To ensure the dependability, this study relies on the “reader

generalizability”, namely the applicability of findings to other cases and other people that a reader has encountered (Merriam, 1998: 211; Walker, 1980: 34).

To enhance the credibility of this study, the raw interview transcripts and the draft of the preliminary analysis of themes were sent by e-mail to my research participants for the purpose of member checking and confirmation. Most of the research participants confirmed the accuracy of the interview transcripts and even left some comments concerning my interpretation of their experiences. This validation strategy enabled me as a researcher to better understand the meanings that participants bring to their experience (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 262). Some of the participants came back later to me with comments saying that “the social psychological factor was somewhat overemphasized and that the political factor was understated” (P2, P3). The rest of the participants replied and conformed the accuracy of my interpretation.

5.5 Ethical considerations

The research participants in my study are individuals who have decided to join the extra-legal paramilitary battalion called RS’ VUC. Hence, the identification of research participants by their names or even their combat pseudonyms may endanger and harm their lives. Although some of my participants did not want their names to be confidential, saying that they were proud nationalist and had nothing to hide, I still decided not to mention their real names because this may harm their position both within the organization and the wider society. Therefore, I refer to my research participants by using the capital letter of ‘P’, standing for ‘Participant’, and further mention them as P1, P2, P3 etc.

During the field study I was totally aware of power imbalances between me and my research participants, so I made all efforts to be polite, honest, sincere, respectful and reciprocal with the research participants (Creswell, 2014: 98-100). Permissions were gained before an interview or participant observation, and everything was agreed upon in advance with the gatekeeper. I have with all force tried to avoid being coercive and obtrusive towards my research participants, letting them speak for themselves in a comfortable and non-coercive environment. During observations I tried not to disrupt the activities of my research participants to better understand their experiences in the real-life setting.

Consent forms were presented to my research participants (Appendix 3). These consent forms informed my participants about the purpose of the study, the data collection methods and the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Verbal consent was obtained prior to interviews and was recorded by a voice recorder. I

have tried my best to establish a non-threatening environment with my research participants throughout this field study.

5.6 Researcher reflexivity

As in all qualitative research it is equally necessary to reflect on my background and possible biases (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 228), since I have conducted this study from a position of a Swedish citizen who was born in Soviet Union and raised in the post-Soviet Azerbaijan. When I was growing up in war-torn Azerbaijan in the early 1990s, I witnessed a massive volunteer mobilization to paramilitary battalions, which at that time were organized to fight the war in the Karabakh region. Some of our family friends and even relatives were among those who enrolled to these self-defense paramilitary battalions. Ever since I was curious about the psychological aspect behind people's decision to join and identify with such groups.

Ukraine is facing pro-Russian separatism in the east of the country. My ethnic background made the relationship between me and the research participants more open and trustful, as my research participants were aware that Azerbaijanis have experienced a Russian-backed Armenian separatism in the early 1990s. Research participants often told me that “we have a common enemy in the face of Russia” (P7). The findings of this study would probably not be the same, if repeated by a researcher with a different ethnic background and life experience. My fluency in Russian language was an advantage since it increased trust, as well as made research participants to feel comfortable and to speak out.

I am also fully aware about how my theoretical and methodological orientation can shape and influence the findings of this study. I have strived to be as reflexive as possible at all stages of this study. I admit that the above-mentioned factors could have influenced my interpretation of what I saw and heard, as well as my experience with research participants and the reporting of findings. Nevertheless, I have rigorously tried to be objective, not to side with my research participants and avoid “going native” during my presence in the field (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 57).

6. Analysis

This chapter is organized into six sections that represent the themes derived from the coding process and categorization of data. The first five sections of the chapter are built around the theoretical premises presented through operational questions of this study. The last section deals with how research participants construct their self-uncertainty and discusses the applicability of the theoretical framework.

6.1 Russian aggression

When I arrived to Odesa, the life in this south Ukrainian city went as usual, and initially there were no signs that the country was at war. However, the participation in the activities of RS' VUC and increased familiarity with the research site promised new insights. Huge advertising posters could be encountered in the city of Odesa. These posters both included texts reminding people about Russian aggression, as well as inspirational posters that incited passersby to enroll as volunteer fighters.

Most of my research participants ascribe part of their motivation to the conflict in east Ukraine (P1, P2, P3, P4, P7). One participant explained his motivation to join RS VUC referring to the enemy that has invaded Ukraine: "The enemy has invaded our land (...) and to somehow prevent the advance of this enemy, we nationalists should go to war. (...) Our purpose is to protect the country from separatists" (P3).¹⁶ Another young recruit mentioned about the ideological attractiveness and the meaningful experience that RS VUC offers: "I liked the actions and ideology of the organization" (P4).¹⁷ According to some fighters (P3, P7), without the contribution of paramilitary units, the separatist movements could spread to other regions of Ukraine: "Without volunteers, it would have started in both Nikolaev and Odesa. So, all Ukraine would be taken away!" (P4).¹⁸ One participant calls the pro-Russian separatism an "infection":

¹⁶ Вот в нашу родную землю действительно вторгся враг (...), и что бы как то препятствовать этому врагу, такие как я националисты, должны идти (...) Мы идем для того что бы защитить нашу страну от этих всяких сепаров (P3).

¹⁷ Мне понравились действия и идеология организации (P4).

¹⁸ Без добровольцев началось бы и в Николаеве и в Одессе. Так бы всю Украину отобрали (P4).

I thought that my duty as an inhabitant of this planet was to prevent the advance of this infection further. I joined the RS in 2015. I departed to the frontline a month after joining the organization. Here people risk their lives not for the sake of money, but because they want to live in a free country and do not want the so-called Russian world (P7).¹⁹

One participant explained her motivation by the need to protect the country: “At the frontline we were all united by one goal and motivation. To liberate Ukraine and to defend our lands” (P2).²⁰ Similarly, P1 mentioned:

“The enemy has attacked our territory. I do not want a different flag, or to follow other laws and traditions. I want to live in Ukraine. We don’t need someone else’s land, but we don’t want to give our own either (P1).²¹

The only paramedic among my research participants said that she was motivated because her family members and relatives fought in this war, but she also wanted to share her war experience with future generations:

My motivation was that my uncle had been at war for a very long time. My younger brother also fought in the war, as well as my ex-boyfriend (...) I wanted to be useful for my country, for my nation. I decided that I could be helpful for those men and women who are at the frontline. (...) I want to tell my children in the future that I was not sitting at home during war but contributed to ensure the territorial integrity of my country (P5).²²

In his interview to the RS’ newspaper, the commander in chief of RS’ VUC said that “RS’ VUC will exist until all threats to the Ukrainian nation are neutralized and all Ukrainian territories are returned”²³ (Stempitskiy, 2018: p.1).

Another paragraph of RS’ newspaper calls all who are not indifferent about the fate of their country to volunteer in the struggle to liberate Ukraine from Moscow’s influence (Pravyi Sector, 2019: p. 1).

¹⁹ Я подумал что мой долг как у мужчины у которого место жительства является планета земля, не допускать эту заразу дальше. Я 2015 вступил в РС. Месяц после вступления в организацию я был уже на линии фронта в в зоне боевых действий. Тут люди рискуют жизнью не ради денег, а на основе того что хотят жить в свободной стране и не хотят так называемого русского мира (P7).

²⁰ Нас всех там объединяла одна цель и мотивация. Освободить Украину, отстоять свои земли. (P2).

²¹ Враг напал на нашу территорию. Я не хочу чтобы тут был другой флаг, другие законы и традиции. Я хочу жить в Украине. Нам чужое не надо, но и свое отдавать не хотим (P1).

²² Моя мотивация была, было то что мой дядя был на войне провоевал очень долго. Мой брат младший тоже на войне воевал. Мой бывший парень тоже воевал и я решила в свое время что хочу быть полезной для своей страны, для своей нации. Я решила что могу быть полезной для тех мужчин и женщин находящихся на войне. (...) Потом когда мои дети спросят, ‘мама где ты была и чем занималась когда у нас была война’, я могла сказать что не сидела дома, а все таки помогала чем могла для того чтобы наша страна была целостной (P5).

²³ In Ukrainian: Український Добровольчий Корпус існуватиме до тих пір, поки не будуть нейтралізовані всі загрози для української нації та не повернені усі території до складу України (Andriy Stempitskiy).

Thus, participants explained their underlying motivation and the push factor of their decision to join RS' VUC in terms of the external enemy that has invaded Ukraine.

6.2 Patriots and opportunists

Most of the participants divide the combatants in this conflict into “volunteers” who are dedicated to their country and “money-makers” who join the regular army to receive salaries, to make career advance or to obtain other privileges. One participant at the frontline in Karlovka, Donetsk explains the difference between the regular army and RS' VUC:

At the moment, combatants of the regular army and other battalions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs receive salaries for their so-called war effort. Therefore, so many "are present" (...) I repeat, just “present” in this war to just receive salaries. They just want to spend their time and get their payment until their contract ends. In a volunteer battalion like this, everything is different. We have never been paid for our duty. Volunteer battalions always fought and are fighting on an ideological basis, and not for receiving benefits (P7).²⁴

One participant defined volunteer fighters as those people who did not serve in the army, but who want to fight for their homeland (P3). P3 told that he had some obstacles to join regular army, for not having the required documents because he was raised in the orphanage. Similarly, another participant points to the bureaucracy in the state structures:

I did not serve in the army through compulsory military service. Therefore, my case was lost. While I was recovering some lost papers, I was longing to enroll as a volunteer fighter. Regular army's recruitment office rejected my application and told that I have first to serve the compulsory military service. I don't know whether they wanted money, or they were just fools (...) Honestly from the beginning I wanted to join RS' VUC, because it is much cooler to be here than in the army (P1).²⁵

²⁴ На данный момент бойцам ЗСУ и других батальонов МВД платятся зарплаты. Поэтому очень многие “присутствуют”, (...) я повторяюсь, “присутствуют” на войне ради зарплаты. Лижбы отсидеться и получать свою зарплату чтобы время контракта прошел. В добработе все иначе. У нас не платится никаких денег. И не платились никогда. Разве Добробаты они всегда воевали и воюют на идейной основе, а не на основе заработной платы (P7).

²⁵ Я не служил в армии срочную службу, дело мое было утеряно, пока я восстанавливал бумаги, меня очень тянуло пойти добровольцем. А они мне – нет надо срочку отслужить, начали крутить. Не знаю, то ли они деньги хотели толи они дураки. И изначально хотелось в ПС, потому, что это намного круче чем в армии (P1).

Along with the patriotism and the flexibility of RS' VUC some participants (P1, P2, P6) emphasized on hazing and the abuse of power in the regular army:

Those who were rejected to be enrolled to the regular army for various reasons joined voluntary battalions because they failed to fulfill certain requirements of the regular army. Regular soldiers saw the fighting as a work. The act of hazing is absent in volunteer battalions. We are as family here. Even the commander communicates with his subordinates on equal terms. Everything is built on trust, not submission. This is one team where everyone trusts each other (P2).²⁶

Another participant explains why people leave the regular army and join RS' VUC: "Unlike the regular army, we do not have such thing as hazing in RS VUC. I know many who drop from the army for this reason. They join us after their contract ends" (P1).²⁷ One of the participants has left the regular army and joined RS' VUC. He explains that the fighting morale is at the lowest level in the regular army and this reduces the trust among comrades:

In 2014, the war started, a real war. At the end of 2014, I signed a contract with the regular army that lasted until 2016. I returned back home after the end of the contract. I was tired of the lawlessness in the army. Eventually I decided to join RS' VUC. (...) People make a conscious decision when they join a volunteer battalion. People enroll to the regular army to receive salaries paid by the state, (...) the motives are different. In RS' VUC, there is a great freedom. I know that the people who surround me here are like-minded and if there is an open fight no one will hide in the trenches as the regular combatants would usually do (...) RS' VUC fighters are the true patriots! There were times when I admired the fighters of RS' VUC. When I served in the regular army, I used to encounter the guys from RS' VUC. At that time, it seemed to me very strange why some were fighting better than others. Now, when I am a fighter of RS' VUC, I see and understand everything (P6).²⁸

²⁶ Тех кого через военкоматы не брали в ЗСУ по тем или иным причинам эти люди шли в добробаты из за отсутствия критерий. В ЗСУ солдаты относились к службе как к работе. В добробатах нет дедовщины. Семья, побратимы. Даже командир общается с подчиненными на равных. В добробате все строится на доверие, а не подчинение. Это одна команда где все доверяют друг-другу (P2).

²⁷ В ДУК ПС нет такого как в армии, как дедовщина. Я знаю многих кто переходит из армии в добробаты. Они заканчивают контракт и уходят к нам (P1).

²⁸ В 2014 году у нас началась война, реальная война. В конце 2014 года я подписал контракт до 2016, в том же году я уехал домой. Надоел беспредел армейский. А потом пришел сюда, в ДУК ПС. В добробаты люди приходят осознанно, для того чтобы защищать свою страну. А в ЗСУ большинство приходят за зарплатой которую платит государство, мотивы разные. В ПС как то свободнее, я знаю что люди которые меня окружают здесь, они единомышленники, а не так что пять человек пришли защищать страну, а остальные пятнадцать – нет мы не пойдем, мы не вылезем с окопа, Здесь истинные патриоты! В свое время я восхищался всем этим. Когда я ЗСУ служил и мы пересекались с парнями с ДУК ПС, тогда уже мне показалось очень странно, почему одни воюют так а другие по другому. Сейчас я все это вижу и понимаю на себе (P6).

According to one participant, RS' VUC is a military unit where one can concentrate on serving the nation and fighting the enemy rather than on bureaucracy:

The most important thing about RS' VUC is that here there is no such mess as in the army. On the contrary, I liked everything and wanted to continue my duty. Fighters of RS' VUC are more ideological and are less afraid. In RS' VUC there are no irrelevant orders as in the regular army. There is only one order, and it is the victory!" (P1).²⁹

The commander in chief of RS' VUC is skeptical about the future legalization of volunteer battalions since they cannot operate effectively after incorporation:

The state has offered us many times the so-called legalization of RS' VUC, but it will entail our subordination to the Armed Forces of Ukraine. This was to be all legalization that was proposed. We were proposed to repeat the fate of dozens of other volunteer units that eventually joined the ranks of the Armed Forces and other law enforcement structures. As a result, all these battalions ceased to exist as volunteer groups (Stempitskiy, 2018: p. 2).³⁰

The accounts of fighters and the statements in organization's newspaper come from only one source of information, and it can contradict the mainstream political and military course of the Ukrainian government.

6.3 "Enemies among us"

Individuals construct and apprehend their realities through constant interaction with the in-group members and this group process forms a "system of agreed upon categories and beliefs", which serves as a behavioral pattern for group members (Kruglanski et al., 2006: 84). But the 'self' also arises in response to the wider social interaction (Mead, 1934: 135). Fighters of the RS' VUC used to follow organization's website where the purpose of the RS' VUC is clearly stated. Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps are fighting an external and internal enemy of the Ukrainian people through the struggle in Ukraine and beyond ("About Pravyi Sector", n.d.). Participants explained the ambiguous nature of

²⁹ Самое главное нет такого бардака, как в армии, за все мое время не было, что бы мне надоело, и что бы я хотел все бросить. Наоборот мне нравилось все, я хотел продолжать служить. В ДУК ПС парни больше идейные. Ну как бы меньше парни боятся. В ДУК ПС нет приказа можно/нельзя, есть один приказ и это победа. В ДУК ПС парни больше идейные. Ну как бы меньше парни боятся. В ДУК ПС нет приказа можно/нельзя, есть один приказ и это победа (P1).

³⁰ Дійсно багато разів пропонували так звану легалізацію Добровольчому Українському Корпусу, але вона зводилась до одного - вступайте у лави ЗСУ. Це і мала бути вся легалізація. Тобто, повторити долю десятків добровольчих підрозділів, які увійшли у лави ЗСУ та інших силових структур. Так вони перестали існувати як добровольчі формування (Andriy Stempitskiy).

their society where the boundary between “enemies” and “friends” is blurred. One participant tells how she wanted to get back to the frontline when she returned to Odessa after her first rotation:

I wanted to go back to the frontline because I felt morally comfortable there. Back then, when people in Ukraine saw me in military uniform, they looked at me angry like a wolf. It was especially the case in Odessa where people have different views about the conflict. (...) There is a bunch of local separatists, many of whom did not understand what we were doing. People had different reactions when they saw me in military uniform. I tried not to pay attention. There were unpleasant looks. (...) There were people who came up and thanked me. Once I was even offered a free coffee. The reaction of people differed in Odessa. Yet, I think here in Odessa many would be glad either to war, or the arrival of the Russian world. For example, in Odessa we can say that I am not a Russian and not a Ukrainian, but Odessit. This is how people separate themselves from Ukraine (P2).³¹

The same research participant (P2) expressed extreme attitudes towards the so-called “internal enemies”, hinting that in the war zone these enemies could be treated differently than here in Odesa.

Everything was simple in the war zone. There is a clear delimitation between the enemy and us. In the war zone you do not think that you need to pay your rent and bills. You only think about ordinary and primitive things such as where to take a wash. (...) But in general, it’s easier there. Everything is clear there. (...) Here, I am surrounded by unpleasant people, and in fact, there is nothing you can do about it. (...) But in the warzone, basically it would be possible to do something about it (P2).³²

Similarly, another participant tells about the reactions of ordinary people in the streets when they saw him in military uniform:

Our society is interesting because people are so different. Let's compare Odesa with Dnipro. When I was in the military hospital in Dnipro, people used to approach, and thank me when they saw my uniform with the RS’ VUC insignia. When I came to Odesa in uniform, people looked at me like

³¹ Хотелось вернуться туда где комфортнее морально Потому что на самом деле тогда еще люди в Украине, увидев тебя в военной форме, могли волком посмотреть на тебя. (...) Особенно в Одессе где люди с разными соображениями, куча бытовых сепаратистов, многие не понимали и не воспринимали чем мы занимались. Когда я была в военной форме были очень разные взгляды. Старалась не обращать внимания. Были неприятные взгляды. (...) Были люди которые подходили и благодарили. Один раз даже кофе бесплатное сделали в кафе. В Одессе какая то не однозначная реакция. Здесь в Одессе, думаю многие были бы рады либо войне, либо приходу Русского мира. В Одессе например, можно говорить что я не Русский и не украинец, а Одессит. Вот так люди отделяли себя от Украины (P2).

³² Мне там было даже проще. Там ты знаешь где враг где свой. Там ты не думаешь что после завтра надо коммуналку и счета платить. Ты думаешь про обычные и примитивные вещи. Например, где бы помыться. (...) Но в общем там проще. Там все ясно. (...) Здесь больше неприятных людей меня окружают и человек по сути ничего не может им сделать, (...) а там можно было бы в принципе (P2).

as I was going to rob someone. (...) I try not to wear my uniform in Odesa. They treat us differently in Odesa (P1).³³

“Identity emerges in social interaction where boundaries between them and us are established” (Harle, 2000: 4). Participants in this study construct their reality in relation to their experience within the wider society. This social construction of “us” and “others” is characteristic of the “struggle between good and evil” (ibid: 5–6). One participant in Karlovka, Donetsk explained the uncertain, as well as an unpredictable nature of Ukrainian society:

People have become terrible. (...) Firstly, there are many refugees, and among them there are separatists who fought on the other side. Most of them were simply amnestied and now they live nearby. Here I have a weapon and the sworn brothers. I feel more confident and calm here. But this situation needs somehow to be changed. The more we are, the more chances we have to change something. (...) They will say that there is no war and that nobody has sent us here. We are dying here so that people in the civilian life could live in peace, and they hate us (P6).³⁴

Participants (P1, P2) understand the enemy not only in terms of a foreign invader but also in terms of an internal enemy:

We have an external enemy with whom we are at war at the moment. There are also a lot of internal enemies. There are all sorts of pro-Russian people and oligarchs. (...) I would say that it is even more complicated with internal enemies than it is in the trenches. I feel more confident in the war zone. There you know where the enemy is. Here in the civilian life everything is much more complicated, and the law is sometimes against us here. In the civilian life, there seems to be an enemy, but an invisible one (P1).³⁵

My gatekeeper in Donetsk was a Ukrainian man in his fifties who voluntarily took food, clothes, vehicle components and other necessary provisions to the frontline. He said to me once that “we have an ambiguous society where only 20 % of the

³³ А общество у нас интересное, все разные. Вот сравнить Одессу с Днепром. Я лежал в Днепре в госпитале, когда выходил в форме, мне чужие люди говорили:» ООО, спасибо» то се. Видели шеврон ДУК ПС, благодарили, а в Одессу приехал в форме и с шевроном, на меня так смотрели, ко будто я кошелек стырил у кого то. (...) Я стараюсь в форме не ходить в Одессе. В Одессе по другому относятся (P1).

³⁴ Люди страшные стали. (...) Во первых много переселенцев, среди которых много сепаратистов, которые воевали на той стороне. Их просто амнистировали и они живут рядом. Дети семья они живут рядом и их становиться все больше и больше. Здесь у меня есть оружие, побратимы, товарищи. Я себя здесь чувствую увереннее и спокойнее Но эту ситуацию надо как то менять , чем больше нас таких будет тем больше шансов что то поменять. (...) На гражданке скажут что войны нет и мы мол тебя туда не посылали. Мы здесь гибнем что люди на гражданке спокойно жили, а они нас ненавидят (P6).

³⁵ Снаружи у нас есть враг с кем у нас война на данный момент. Внутри у на тоже очень много врагов. Есть про Российские всякие люди, олигархи, коррупция. (...) Я бы сказал бы что внутри еще сложнее чем там в окопах. Я в ЗБД чувствую себя более увереннее, там знаешь где враг, а тут намного все сложнее и закон иногда против нас тут. Вроде и есть враг, но он не видимый тут (P1).

population understand that we have war in this country. We are a minority in our own country”.³⁶ I understood what my gatekeeper was talking about when I attended the posthumous reward ceremony held at Donetsk National Technical University that was dedicated to a fighter of RS’ VUC. When I arrived at this university, I could not find the place where the event was held, and I asked a charwoman to help me. When I asked her if she knew where the posthumous reward ceremony was held, she replied with an arrogant tone “they do not deserve to be rewarded”!³⁷

My interviewees and other people that I observed frequently used stereotypes and other derogatory terms towards pro-Russian oriented people. “Vatnik”³⁸ and “Sovok”³⁹ were among the most frequently used words to describe a Ukrainian citizen with a pro-Russian orientation. “Vatnik” means wadding and it refers to people with a muddled thinking, who have wadding in their brains and who are susceptible to the propaganda in Russian TV channels. “Sovok” refers to the people of older generations who were born and raised in Soviet Union, and most importantly to those who are occupied with Soviet nostalgia. I was told that “Sovoks” usually occupy high positions in all spheres of government. One of the articles in the RS newspaper refers to the need to get rid of the Soviet mentality and to raise a new generation with a consolidated national identity. The article begins with the following statement:

Dozens of Ukrainian generations grew up in the yoke of the enemy invaders and did not receive a sense of national identity, a sense of responsibility to the dead, to the living and to those who are still to be born. However, now there is a good opportunity to grow and educate Ukrainian generations who are fortunate enough not to experience this yoke (Pravyi Sector, 2018: p. 4).⁴⁰

During a walk with my gatekeeper’s son, this young male imagined the future of Ukraine without “Sovoks” and said: “This Soviet mind generation will die out, and then Ukraine can thrive in the environment of new Ukrainian generation raised in the patriotic spirit”.⁴¹

³⁶ Только 20 % населения понимает что у нас идет война в стране. Мы в меньшинстве в своей собственной стране (Gatekeeper).

³⁷ Было бы за что награждать!

³⁸ Ватник.

³⁹ Совок.

⁴⁰ In Ukrainian: Десятки поколінь українців виросли у ярмі окупантів і абсолютно природно не набули почуття національної ідентичності, почуття відповідальності перед мертвими, живими і не народженими. Проте є вдала нагода виростити і вишколити покоління українців, яким пощастило не знати ярма.

⁴¹ Это поколение с Советским мышлением скоро вымрет и Украина зацветет в среде нового поколения которое выросло в патриотическом духе (Gatekeeper’s son).

6.4 Trust, confidence and cohesion

Some of the participants (P1, P3, P4, P6) expressed confidence and trust towards RS' VUC saying that they feel fully protected through their identification with RS' VUC:

“When I spent the first three months with the members of RS' VUC, it was just like a family, everyone treated each other like they were brothers and sisters. (...) I have a 100% confidence and devotion to RS' VUC because I saw how they live and what they do to live freely. (...) Of course, I trust RS' VUC more. I know that they will not leave me, that I have protection, in case something bad happens with me. I know that RS' VUC is not some underground organization where they would just use me for a purpose. I have more confidence in RS' VUC, than my family and friends! (P3).⁴²

Participants believed that RS' VUC is a collective that takes a proper care of its members. Participants expressed confidence through identification with RS' VUC:

The most important thing is of course the support of the organization. God forbid, if something happens there is a support. Soldiers are dispersed in the ordinary army. Here, everyone is responsible for each other. (...) It works like one for all and all for one. Organization even helps homeless and unemployed fighters. When volunteer fighters return from the war zone, the organization supports them both mentally and physically (P4).⁴³

Beside the protection that fighters get in RS' VUC, one participant mentioned the family-like relationships within RS' VUC, which breed confidence:

RS' VUC does not offer mountains of gold. I only know that if a person returns crippled or wounded, he will not be abandoned. It's probably like a family, a brotherhood. Anyone here will be supported to the last, because he is one of us! (...) He was with us and fought with us for our land. (...) I can't imagine my life without RS' VUC. I think this feeling is forever. Thanks to my experience in the war zone, I now have friends all over Ukraine. I did not have so many friends before. These are the ones I can rely on. (...) True friends, not those who just want to drink beer and spend some time with you (P1).⁴⁴

⁴² Когда я прожил первые три месяца с членами ПС, именно как семья, как брат с братом, сестра с братом. (...) У меня на 100% уверенность и преданность ПС, потому что я увидел как они живут и что они делают что бы жить свободно, (...) конечно я больше доверяю ПС я знаю что меня не бросят, что у меня есть защита, если не дай бог что. Я знаю что я пришел не в какую то подпольную организацию где мною воспользуются и выкинут. Нет! Я пришел в хорошую контактную группу, которая существует на самом деле. Так что у меня больше доверия к ПС чем своим близким и друзьям! (P3).

⁴³ Самое главное, это конечно поддержка, если не дай бог случится то поддержат. В обычной армии там отслужили и разошлись и все. А здесь каждый друг за друга отвечает один за всех и все за одного. А еще если нет жилья , работы то организация помогает с этим. Организация при возможности помогает добровольцам по возвращению, как морально так и материально (P4).

⁴⁴ Нет ничего, никаких золотых гор, я знаю только, что не дай бог что человек вернется калекой или еще что то, то его не бросят. Это как семья наверное, братство такое. Но, то есть человека будут тянуть до последнего, потому, что он наш! (...) Он с нами был и с нами

During the observation of participants, I noticed a sense of belonging among the fighters. These fighters were proud to belong to RS' VUC and openly wore their uniforms with the battalion's badges and insignia. Fighters often hold together and went in groups. When I was accompanying fighters in the streets of Odesa, I could notice how people suspiciously stared at us. Gradually, I began to grasp the interpretations of my research participants' experiences.

6.5 Sworn brothers

During my interaction with research participants and participation in their activities, one thing drew my attention. Participants were not referring to each other as friends, comrades or even relatives. They called and treated each other as sworn brothers, or *pobratimi*⁴⁵ in Ukrainian. One could hear this term to be pronounced very often in the habitat of volunteer fighters. Two of the participants (P3, P4), one of whom has lost his parents in childhood and raised in orphanage, capture the core of the miraculous power of *pobratimi*:

I have no fear when I understand that I belong to the brotherhood! (...) Seriously! I had a fear before, but now I am getting rid of this fear. I'm no longer afraid of loneliness. I'm not afraid that if something happens to me, no one will know about it (P3).⁴⁶

The most important thing is to find a common language with the pobratimi. If there is a mutual understanding, then I think everything will be fine. (...) I am proud to be a member of RS' VUC. This is very appealing since everyone has one idea! To defend the fatherland. But the most attractive thing is the idea of brotherhood (P4).⁴⁷

One participant told how people in her battalion didn't feel the severity of being at the frontline since the atmosphere was always positive and full of jokes. "The relations in the battalion were very warm. Despite the protracted war, the mood was always high" (P5). Another participant describes that the relationship between the sworn brothers is based on justice and equality:

воевал за нашу землю. То есть своих не бросают как бы. Я не знаю как я был бы, если бы бросил ПС? Мне кажется, что это навсегда, благодаря опыту в ЗБД у меня сейчас друзья по всей Украине. У меня раньше столько друзей не было. Именно такие на которых я могу положиться. (...) Настоящие друзья, а не те которые за пиво дружат (P1).

⁴⁵ Побратими (means Sworn Brothers in Ukrainian).

⁴⁶ Страх теряется! (...) Серьезно! Вот у меня до этого был страх, а сейчас на данный момент я избавляюсь от этого страха. Я не боюсь больше одиночества, и не боюсь если со мной что то случится, то никто об этом не узнает (P3).

⁴⁷ Самое главное надо найти общий язык с побратимами, если будет общий язык, то я думаю все будет хорошо. (...) Я горжусь быть членом ДУКа ПС Коллектив привлекает и идея у всех одна! Защищать родину! А привлекает побратимство! (P4).

For all the time that I was on the front line, I did not quarrel with anyone. Everything felt so fraternal, (...) we shared everything we had. There was a commander, but everyone was treated equally (P1).⁴⁸

During my presence and observation at the RS' VUC basement in the town of Karlovka in Donetsk region, an ambulance car arrived with a wounded fighter. He needed blood transfusion to be stabilized and further to be sent to the military hospital in Dnipro, the neighboring region west of Donetsk. There was another fighter, who had the same blood group, and he immediately agreed to help, and he gave approximately 500 milliliters of blood, which was needed so that the wounded soldier could reach Dnipro alive. I was around when this happened and the fighter who was going to give blood said: "Before we were brothers on words, but now we are crowned to be brothers, because he will have my blood flowing in his veins".⁴⁹ I recall that those fighters whose blood did not match became somewhat envious for not being able to contribute.

According to the fighters the idea of sworn brothers is a very appealing prototype. Such a clear group prototype plays an important role in the process of social categorization.

6.6 Construction of Uncertainty

It is necessary to point that the intent of this study is not to speculate whether the research participants were certain or uncertain about their personal feelings of uncertainty, but rather to show how they construct self-uncertainty in relation to their decision to join RS' VUC. The cohesion within RS' VUC serves as a mechanism of depersonalization of 'self', and an eventual identification of the "self" in terms of a group prototype. The family-like relationships within RS' VUC contribute to this transformation of the individual 'self' in accordance with the values and beliefs of the group. As a result, self-uncertainty is reduced when individuals obtain a social identity that shares the perceptions, attitudes and behaviors of other like-minded in-group members (Hogg, 2012: 69). This theoretical lens on the social psychological aspect of uncertainty reduction determines the scope of this analysis chapter.

Participants (P1, P3) expressed their uncertainty towards the Ukrainian government and decision makers, people in the society and the regular Ukrainian

⁴⁸ Я за все время что был на передовой даже не поссорился и не поругался не с кем. Так настолько все по братски, (...) как бы поедним поделимся. Там званий нет все одинаковы. Есть командир, а остальные все равные (P1).

⁴⁹ До этого мы были братьями на словах а теперь мы коронованные братья потомучто у него будет течь моя кровь (Fighter in Karlovka).

army. Ukrainian presidential elections were going on in the course of this field study. One participant was very skeptical and unconfident about the candidates:

We will soon have presidential elections, and we have to choose between a clown and a moron. Well, is it serious to choose a clown and a moron? (...) If Zelensky will be elected, we will have a country of clowns. Zelensky is not a man who can even be put close to Putin. It becomes clear that we will not have a real ruler in this country. (P3).⁵⁰

The same participant clearly articulated his distrust even towards his friends and relatives:

People cannot be trusted here, and you never know what to expect. (...) I would like to trust other people, even my relatives. But I don't know how I can trust them?! Because when I said that I was going to war, everyone became cold with me. I then realized that I cannot rely on these people. It is not good! I would like to have support, but I do not see a drop of it. They think that it is wrong, that I'm going to protect my country. They begin to treat you differently. (...) When you feel and understand that you are treated differently, that feeling encourages aggressive behavior (P3).⁵¹

Another participant recalls the tensions between RS' VUC and the regular army:

There were times when the regular army at the frontline refused share any information with us. There was an order from above to pull out RS' VUC from the front line. But we continued our struggle and did not give up. RS' VUC has always been on the first line of defense. There were moments when they wanted to bring us out. They did not give us support or enemy positions. It would be good if there was support from the state. Instead of disturbing our war effort, they can help us with equipment and ammunition (P1)⁵²

The accounts of fighters in this chapter demonstrate the multifaceted constructions of uncertainty in relation to various issues ranging from external and internal enemies to army inadequacy and distrustful politicians.

⁵⁰ У нас сейчас будут выборы президента, сами посмотрите между кем выбирать? Клоуна и дибила! Ну серьезно выбирают клоуна и дибила? Если Зеленского выберут у нас будет страна клоунов. Дела сейчас обстоят так что становится понятно что у нас не будет настоящего правителя (P3).

⁵¹ Здесь конечно нет доверия, каждый человек живет по своему, и не известно что ждать от людей. (...) Хотелось бы больше доверять окружающим, даже те же самые родственники, но я не знаю как можно им доверять?! Потому что я только заикнулся что иду на войну и все сразу стали ко мне холодными. Я тогда понял, что на этих людей я не могу положиться это не хорошо, хотелось бы поддержки, но не увидел ни капли. Они думают, что это плохо, что я иду на защиту своей страны. Они начинают по другому к тебе относиться и ты уже чувствуешь и понимаешь что к тебе по другому относятся (...) и это толкает на агрессивное поведение (P3).

⁵² Были моменты когда регулярная армия на фронте не давала нам позиции. Был приказ сверху вытаскать ДУК с передовой. Но мы всеравно добивались своего и шли вперед. ПС всегда был на первой линии обороны. Были моменты когда нас хотели вывести. Не давали нам поддержки, позиции. Было бы хорошо чтоб была поддержка от государства чтобы нам палки в колёса не вставляли. Чтоб помогали снаряжениями и боеприпасами (P1).

7. Concluding remarks

This multisite case study attempted to explore how uncertainty is experienced by the Ukrainian volunteer fighters of RS' VUC in Odesa and Donetsk regions. As a rule, the final report of a qualitative case study involves an interpretation of findings and "loosely determined assertions" (Stake, 1995: 12). Built on the experiences of research participants, this case study makes two assertions: socio-political and social psychological. The study found that fighters of RS' VUC construct their uncertainty through the distrust in the wider population, as well as state authorities. The group prototype that characterizes RS' VUC is an unambiguous ideology that lays clear boundaries between the in-group members and "enemies", both internal and external. Group cohesion and a family-like relationship is found to serve as another group prototype that characterizes RS' VUC. Participants described RS' VUC as a cohesive high entitativity group that reminded a family of like-minded people who treated each other with respect and dignity. A clear group prototype and a high group entitativity are important mechanisms of social identity and social categorization processes that reduce the feelings of self-uncertainty (Hogg, 2012: 62-64).

This case study has revealed the variability and complexity of accounts relating to the concept of uncertainty. Participants in this study construct their self-uncertainty in relation to the ideological split that the conflict has entailed, as well as the distrust towards politicians and the military command of the regular army. According to some research participants (P1, P3, P6), uncertainty derives from the inadequacy and the inability of the regular army to confront the Russian backed insurgents in the east Ukraine. Uncertainty is also constructed as a response to a distrustful Ukrainian society (P2, P3, P6). Since "the self-arises in the process of social experience and activity" (Mead, 1934: 135), it can be assumed that participants in this study construct their realities in response to the so-called "internal enemies" encountered in the everyday life. Some participants (P1, P2, P6) explain their self-uncertainty in terms of the ideological split present among Ukrainians. In this light, membership in RS' VUC offers an incredible opportunity where "genuine" Ukrainians can confirm their social identity, which is articulated by RS' VUC through a clear group prototype. Through the process of social categorization participants in this study identify themselves in accordance with the group prototype. According to uncertainty identity theory this

self-categorization leads to the internalization of the in-group attitudes and behaviors towards threatening others (Hogg, 2012: 66). Through participants' accounts this case study found that self-uncertainty can be experienced differently by various people. Participants explained their self-uncertainty in terms of an unreliable government, weak state institutions and most importantly the "internal enemies". Amid such a precarious social setting, RS' VUC stands as an ideal solution to reduce feelings of self-uncertainty.

The thesis does not ascribe the motivations to join RS' VUC exclusively to the need of reducing self-uncertainty, but rather seeks to underpin the importance of this social psychological process in relation to other factors such as ideology and the ongoing war in east Ukraine. All in all, this case study has revealed that the participants interpret their decisions to join RS' VUC not only in terms of the conflict in east Ukraine, but also because the membership in RS' VUC offers them a unique opportunity to determine their place in an uncertain environment. Unlike other studies on Ukrainian paramilitary motivations (Karagiannis, 2016; Käihkö, 2018), this study found that ideology and emotional attachment serve as appealing motivational mechanisms due to the perceived self-uncertainty in the wider Ukrainian context.

Last but not least, it is important for the reader to understand that the findings in this study derived only from my experience with a complex case, and other researchers will most likely attain different results if the same study is conducted in another environment. Thus, this case study was undertaken not to generalize the findings to all Ukrainian combatants. The intent was rather to gain an in-depth understanding of social-identity processes experienced by the individuals who join RS' VUC.

7.1 Recommendations for future research

The fundamental issue raised in this study touches on one of the many Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) addressed by the United Nations. Extra-legal paramilitary units worldwide pose challenges for an effective implementation of SDG goal number 16, which emphasizes on peace, justice, accountability and strong institutions. Therefore, more research on paramilitary combat motivations will lead to a better understanding of the phenomenon, enable decision makers to better deal with the issue and most importantly to understand the needs of individuals who decide to join extreme groups. The ongoing conflict in Ukraine supports the importance of future research.

"Insights gleaned from case studies can directly influence future research" (Merriam, 1998: 19). During this field study I encountered two issues that demand

further clarification. First, since there are women who join RS' VUC, further studies can incorporate gender perspective in understanding the motivations of women fighters. Second, I encountered many foreign fighters within RS' VUC who come from Russia, Belorussia, Caucasus, Poland and even other west European countries. Insights gained from the studies on women and foreign fighters may lead to the reconsideration of the concept of uncertainty in a new light. It would be of interest to explore how and to what extent uncertainty-reduction can motivate women, as well as foreign fighters to join extreme paramilitary groups. Moreover, in the course of this field study I was curious about the motivations of the so-called separatists⁵³ to join their respective paramilitary squads. Although it raises serious methodological challenges to study pro-Russian paramilitary fighters, it is equally important to get their accounts of how they construct and associate their self-uncertainty in relation to their extreme choice.

Lastly, due to limited research on motivations to join extreme paramilitary groups and the lack of studies about RS' VUC, this case study presents themes and a theoretical framework that can be investigated in other cases.

⁵³ Pro-Russian fighters are called as insurgents, separatists or rebels by Ukrainians with varying political standpoints.

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Appendix 1

Semi-inductive coding process with both predetermined conceptual coding and codes that derived from the text

Theory	Themes	Categories	Codes (please note that not all codes are included here)
Uncertainty-Identity Theory	Russian Aggression	Motivations to join the RS' VUC Foreign invasion and the pro-Russian separatism	Ideology; invasion; enemy; war; nationalists; separatist movement; infection; Russian world, a free country; territory; Ukrainian nation; Ukraine-Rus; Muscovy; external enemy;
	Patriots and Opportunists	Volunteer and non - volunteer enrollment	Volunteer; money makers; receive salaries; payment; contract, volunteer battalion; ideology; compulsory military service; volunteer fighter; army; regular work; no submission; trust; war; lawlessness in the army; like minded people; inadequacy of the army; legalization of RS' VUC

Uncertainty- Identity Theory	Enemies among us	Internal and External Enemies	Enemy; morally comfortable; frontline; military uniform; angry gaze; local separatists; Russian world; Russian; Ukrainian; Odessit; Ukraine; war zone;
	Enemies among us	Internal and External Enemies	clear/unclear; unpleasant people; terrible people; separatists; civilian life; internal enemies; external enemies; pro-Russian people; oligarchs; invisible enemy; Ukrainian society; Vatnik; Sovok; Soviet; us/them;
	Trust, confidence and cohesion	Group prototype and entitativity	Family; protection; brothers; sisters; confidence; devotion; support; feelings;
	Sworn Brothers	Fraternal relationships	Brothers; pobratimi; brotherhood; appealing; father land; idea; fraternal; equality
	Construction of Uncertainty	Distrustful social and political environment	We; distrustful presidential candidates; country of clowns; trust in people; cold relationships

Uncertainty- Identity Theory			with people in civilian life; inadequate army; no cooperation between army and us;
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Appendix 2

Main Interview Questions (without follow-up questions).

- 1) What was your motivation to enroll to the RS VUC? (Why, how, when);
What factors influenced your decision?
- 2) How do you understand the difference between the regular Ukrainian army and the RS VUC?
- 3) How do you deal with your feelings of self-uncertainty in the civilian life and in the warzone? What is the difference between being certain and uncertain in civilian life and in war zone?
- 4) How is your identification with RS VUC influences your feelings of self-uncertainty?
- 5) How do you assess the relationship among comrades in your squad? What does it mean for you to belong to the Sworn Brothers?
- 6) What factors may influence your feelings of self-uncertainty in terms of the wider Ukrainian context? (How, Why);
- 7) Who should I turn to, to learn more about this topic?

Appendix 3

Consent Forms in English and in Russian

MALMÖ UNIVERSITY

Expression of consent

Dear Sir or Madam,

My name is Khalil Mutallimzada, student at Malmö University, Sweden. I conduct a field study and collect data about the Ukrainian volunteer fighters in the Right Sector's Volunteer Ukrainian Corps (RS VUC) for my bachelor's dissertation.

The purpose of my study is to get a better insight about the incentives and motivations of volunteer fighters who travel to fight in the Eastern Ukraine. I would like to deepen my understanding about possible motivations to join the RS VUC, as well as the attractiveness of these military congregations for future recruits.

If you want to know more about the research project, please let me know.

This interview, as well as the processing of the data retrieved in this interview is based on your consent. The data retrieved in this interview will be anonymized and will be kept private. If you want, I can send you the transcript of the interview when it is transcribed. You give me consent in the beginning of the interview.

The interview will be individual and recorded. Only you and I will be present during the session, unless you want to bring a second interviewee. The interview will take about one hour, but that is up to you how much time you can give me.

You can stop the interview at any time without giving any reasons. You do not have to answer all the questions, you can simply ask me to move on to the next one. You may withdraw the consent at any time, and the data may not be retained or processed without any other legal grounds. The data will be used only in relation to my dissertation.

You can find out what has been registered about you or have feedback on the processing or information collected by contacting Khalil Mutallimzada at khalil.mutallimzada@gmail.com or the university's Data Protection Officer at dataskyddsbud@mau.se. Complaints that cannot be resolved with Malmö University may be submitted to Dataskyddsmyndigheten.

Lastly, and most importantly, I will begin the interview asking you whether you give your permission for information collected in this interview to be stored and

processed for the purpose of my study and to be used in relation to my bachelor's dissertation.

Sincerely,
Khalil Mutallimzada

Student, Peace and Conflict Studies
Malmö University
Faculty of Culture and Society
Department of Global Political Studies
e-mail: khalil.mutallimzada@gmail.com
Tel Sweden: +46762223435
Tel Ukraine: +380684447532



MALMÖ UNIVERSITY

Выражение согласия

Уважаемый (ая)...

Меня зовут Халил Муталлимзада, студент университета Мальмё, Швеция. Я провожу полевые исследования и собираю данные об Украинских добровольных бойцов для моей диссертации бакалавра.

Цель моего исследования получить более полное представление о стимулах и мотивациях добровольных бойцов в Добровольном Украинском Корпусе Правого Сектора (ДУК ПС), которые едут воевать на востоке Украины. Я хотел бы углубить свое понимание возможных мотивов вступления в ДУК ПС, а также привлекательности этих военных конгрегаций для будущих призывников.

Пожалуйста, дайте мне знать, если вы хотите узнать больше об исследовательском проекте.

Это интервью, а также обработка данных полученных в этом интервью основаны на вашем согласии. Данные полученные в этом интервью будут анонимными и будут конфиденциальными. Если хотите, я могу выслать вам письменную версию интервью когда оно будет записано. Вы даете мне согласие в начале интервью.

Интервью будет индивидуальным и записанным. Только мы с вами будем присутствовать на сессии, если вы не захотите пригласить второго собеседника. Интервью займет около часа, но это зависит от вас сколько времени вы можете мне уделить.

Вы можете прекратить интервью в любое время без объяснения причин. Вам не нужно отвечать на все вопросы, вы можете просто попросить меня перейти к следующему. Вы можете отозвать согласие в любое время, и данные не могут быть сохранены или обработаны без каких-либо иных законных оснований. Данные будут использованы исключительно для моей бакалаврской диссертации.

Вы можете узнать то что было зарегистрировано о вас или оставить отзыв об обработке собранной информации связавшись с Халилом Муталлимзадой по адресу khalil.mutallimzada@gmail.com или сотрудником по защите данных университета по адресу dataskyddsbud@mau.se. Жалобы которые

не могут быть разрешены в университете Мальмё, могут быть отправлены в Dataskyddsmyndigheten.

В заключение, и самое главное, я начну собеседование с вопроса о том даете ли вы свое разрешение на хранение и обработку информации собранной в ходе этого собеседования для целей моего обучения и использования для моей диссертацией.

С уважением,
Халил Муталлимзада

***Студент, Мир и конфликтология
Университет Мальме
Факультет Культуры и Общества
Департамент Глобальных Политических Исследований
e-mail: khalil.mutallimzada@gmail.com
Tel Швеция: +46762223435
Tel Украина: +380684447532***

Appendix 4

Information about research participants

Participant 1. Male, 29 years old.

This young man is the commander of the 25th reserve hundred in Odesa. He works as a constructor worker in the civilian life. He was responsible for the recruitment process of the new fighters, their training and eventual departure to the frontline. The interview with this participant was conducted on April 8, 2019, at Ekaterininskaya 1, in Odesa.

Participant 2. Female, 27 years old.

This young woman was my key informant, but she has also participated in combat at the frontline. She has accomplished two rotations, in 2014 and 2017. She graduated from Mechnikov university in Odesa, with law degree. She participated in the Maydan Revolution and the violent events in Odessa, in early May 2014. Later, she worked in the mobilizational center in Kyiv. She has participated in combat in Donetsk region with the 5th battalion of the RS' VUC. The interview with this participant was conducted on April 26, 2019, in the Right Sector's headquarters, at Uspenskaya 53, in Odesa.

Participant 3. Male, 26 years old.

This research participant departed to the war zone a day after our interview was conducted. At the moment I have contact with this participant, and he is with the RS VUC, in the Donetsk region. The interview with this participant was conducted on April 9, 2019, at Ekaterininskaya 1, in Odesa.

Participant 4. Male, 19 years old.

This young adult was the contact person and the administrator of the RS' VUC reserve hundred in Odesa. He departed to the frontline in July 2019. The interview with this participant was conducted on April 4, 2019, in the Right Sector's headquarters, at Uspenskaya 53, in Odesa.

Participant 5. Female, 29 years old.

Originally from Odesa, she was a paramedic in the war zone. She was studying economics at the university but later dropped of the university. However, she has accomplished NATO courses in the city of Lviv and felt that she is needed at the frontline, because her relatives and her boyfriend fought in this war. She returned recently from the frontline. At the time of this fieldwork she worked as a waitress in the civilian life. The interview with this participant was conducted on April 4, 2019, in the Right Sector's headquarters, at Uspenskaya 53, in Odesa.

Participant 6. Male, 32 years old.

This participant was interviewed in the headquarters of the RS VUC in the town of the Karlovka, in Donetsk region. His wife accompanied him at the frontline. He makes frequent rotations and periodically works in civilian life to sustain his family. After some time in the civilian life he returns to the frontline again to fight as he called them "the pro-Russian separatists". The interview with this participant was conducted on May 5, 2019, at the RS' VUC military basement in Karlovka, Donetsk.

Participant 7. Male, 50 years old.

This fighter was interviewed and observed during my visit to the RS VUC basement in Karlovka, Donetsk. In the beginning this middle-aged man was somewhat suspicious about me, but later when he knew that I was from Azerbaijan, he agreed for an interview. He saw me as the friend of his nation, because according to him, we had a common enemy, in the face of Russia. The interview with this participant was conducted on May 6, 2019, at the RS' VUC military basement in Karlovka, Donetsk.