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To cite this article: Dale Pankhurst (2023): ‘When militias go ‘rogue’: explaining anti-government extremism in so-called ‘pro-nation-state’ militias in the United States of America and Ukraine, Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict, DOI: 10.1080/17467586.2023.2219703

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2023.2219703

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Published online: 31 May 2023.

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‘When militias go ‘rogue’: explaining anti-government extremism in so-called ‘pro-nation-state’ militias in the United States of America and Ukraine

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ABSTRACT
Polarization, populism, and animosity amongst political parties, movements, and societies across Europe and North America has led to an increase in violent extremism in recent years. Groups and individuals motivated by extremist ideology have launched violent attacks against democratic institutions, murdered elected representatives, and bombed government buildings. Militia organizations with a pro-state orientation have also been involved in anti-government extremist violence and terrorism against their own governments. Despite being pro-nation-state, some of these militias now have an anti-government agenda leading to an awkward relationship with the state as a diverse actor encompassing both the government and other state institutions. How can we explain the shift in pro-nation-state militias from pro to anti-government extremism? Using contemporary case studies from both the United States of America and Ukraine, this article will propose that ideological de-alignment between the government and the militia group leads to pro-state militias becoming anti-government. Furthermore, the article will argue that bargaining processes relating to power and control between pro-state militias and governments can lead to these militias exhibiting anti-government extremist behaviour.

There is a growing body of empirical analysis on extra-dyadic actors that refers to “pro-state militias” (PSMs), conceived as non-state armed organizations that are pro-state, broadly defined. Because these groups are defined by their “pro-state” orientation, researchers often assume that PSMs exhibit a loyal attachment and adherence to their respective governments. However, a closer inspection reveals a variety of relationships with the state. These relationships, both official and unofficial, tend to shift overtime with PSMs sometimes morphing into anti-government extremist groups as they seek to fulfil their own agendas and aspirations as armed political organizations. For example, there is a tendency within the literature to view Loyalist paramilitary terrorist groups in Northern Ireland as pro-state due to their anti-insurgent (anti-Irish Republican Army) stance and
their overall desire to remain part of the United Kingdom (Cadwallader, 2013). Yet these groups also engaged in anti-government extremism. Loyalist paramilitaries murdered the first police officer during the Troubles, launched bombing campaigns to undermine the Northern Irish government in 1969, and organized widespread strikes and protests that collapsed Northern Ireland’s first ever power-sharing arrangements in 1974 (Bruce, 1992). In contemporary Europe and America, militias such as the pro-Trump Oath Keepers or the Right Sector in Ukraine, have evolved from government-sympathetic militias to armed organizations displaying forms of anti-government extremism. How can we explain why PSMs evolve from pro-government armed groups into anti-government extremist organizations?

This article provides an original contribution to the literature by analysing the trigger points that cause anti-government extremism in so-called PSMs. Using case studies from contemporary polarized societies (the USA and Ukraine), this paper will seek to analyse how and why “pro-state” militias sometimes morph into anti-extremist armed groups that are willing to use violence against politicians, governments, and institutions. This article will argue ideological dealignment and/or variations in balances of power can trigger radicalization processes in these militias, regardless of the nature of the political system (democratic or authoritarian). These processes can foment anti-government extremism. Other triggers include divergence within the militias towards criminal expeditions (self-criminalization processes) that contradict their pro-state orientation. How states respond is crucial to either the decline or strengthening of these pro-state/anti-government groups and thereby the potential for further armed violence against governments (Staniland, 2015). This article further makes an original contribution by furthering research and interest into what causes anti-government extremism within non-state armed groups that are often assumed to support the government because of their pro-state origin and ethos. I will first introduce pro-state militias and anti-government extremism as concepts before exploring how anti-government extremism is possible within PSMs. I will then explain the trigger points for anti-government extremism within PSMs before examining two recent case studies from the United States of America and Ukraine. I will then offer a brief comparative discussion before concluding with some summary remarks.

**Pro-state militias and anti-government extremism**

Recent studies on non-state armed actors have focused on the pro-state/pro-government orientation of many militias (Alden et al., 2011; Barter, 2013; Biberman, 2019; Jentzsch, Kalyvas, & Schubiger, 2015). Between 1989 and 2007, it is estimated there were no less than 337 pro-government/pro-state militias operating across the world (Carey, Mitchell, & Lowe, 2013). PSMs are harnessed and used by states as a coercive counter-threat mechanism within the state’s security apparatus (Peic, 2014). In Turkey, the Government used a state-led village guard system to combat against the pro-Kurdish PKK insurgency in the east of the country (Gurcan, 2014). Elsewhere, little to no links between a PSM and a state exist. However, the militia is still described as a PSM because of its organizational pro-state/patriotic/anti-rebel origin/ideology. In the Philippines, several PSMs involved in combatting both Islamist and Maoist rebel groups have no material relationship with the Government in Manila, such as extremist Christian militias battling Muslim rebels in the south of the
archipelago (Kraft, 2010). PSMs are also found in other settings outside of armed conflict. These militias offer governments a cheap form of state security through coup-proofing against threats from within and outside the state as well as policing troublesome minorities within the state. Former Libyan dictator, Col. Muammar Gaddafi raised a militia as a viable coup-proofing mechanism to countenance any potential dissent from within the Libyan State to his authoritarian rule (Carey et al., 2016).

PSMs have also been involved in serious human rights violations against communities and non-state groups they perceive as a threat (Stanton, 2015). In Africa, large-scale atrocities have been perpetrated against ethnic minority groups by PSMs, some of whom have received power delegated by the state. Others have carried out human rights abuses in cooperation with state forces (Ahram, 2014). The rationale for these human rights abuses is explained through either a.) the state’s security forces are unable to halt erratic militia behaviour against civilian populations, or b.) the state is unwilling to carry out human rights abuses for fear of repercussions, thereby shifting responsibility to the militia in question, allowing the state to consequently engage in plausible deniability (Peic, 2014).

**Pro-government as pro-state?**

For the purposes of this article, I define a pro-state militia to be an armed group with an organizational structure and defined purpose that is pro-state in some way. Different terminology is used to label these forms of non-state armed groups. PSMs have been labelled as auxiliaries, self-defence forces, paramilitaries, vigilantes, anti-rebel militias, and are to a large degree, pro-government (Ungor, 2020). For clarity, this article will define groups studied as pro-state militias. Specifically, the term “pro-state” should not be confused with “pro-government” in the context of this article.

To understand the differences, it is important to emphasize that the government and the state (broadly conceived) are separate concepts. The state comprises of several branches: the government, the judiciary, the civil administration, and the security forces. It also has several defining features that a government does not, namely an internationally recognized border, a defined population within those borders, and recognized sovereignty. The government is but one sect of the state (Ahram, 2014). In democratic societies, the government secures its authority from the people through elections. In non-democratic states, the government justifies its control through alternative mechanisms. In both cases, governments control and direct large functions of the state.

In many contemporary scenarios, pro-state militias are also pro-government militias. These militias pledge allegiance to both the government and the state. Though, sometimes pro-government militias can also be anti-state militias. When other state elements attempt to overthrow or crush the government through a coup, a PGM may target the forces of the state to protect the government. During army-led coup attempts in Libya, the pro-Gaddafi militia, the Revolutionary Guard Corps, successfully countered a coup attempt against the former Libyan dictator in 1985 (Jentzsch et al., 2015). Contrarily, a pro-state militia can also be anti-government. A militia may view the objectives of a government as anathema to their perceptions of what the state should be. Thereby, a PSM can exhibit anti-government views. In 1991, the Capois La Mort PSM aided a military coup d'état
against the democratically elected Haitian regime led by President Aristide that resulted in the overthrow of Haiti’s first elected government and the reintroduction of military rule (Carey et al., 2013).

In other cases, the pro-state and pro-government orientation of an armed group can shift simultaneously, and the militia then morphs into an insurgency due to seismic political change such as the secession and creation of new nation-states which the PSM was initially opposed to. For example, the pro-Khartoum Ambororo militia in Central Africa became an anti-government rebel organization when South Sudan became an independent state in 2011. Initially, this PSM acted as a counter-rebel mechanism against pro-separatist insurgents from the Sudan Peoples’ Liberation Movement (SPLM). Since the creation of South Sudan, the militia became anti-government and anti-state due to its pro-Khartoum orientation. The South Sudanese security forces moved to expel the Ambororo armed factions from its territory (Carey et al., 2013). Significantly, the Ambororo militia maintained a consistent political (pro-Khartoum/counter-separatist) position while constitutional change with the creation of South Sudan redefined the orientation of the militia without any internal change within the militia itself.

Alternatively, state fragility and the collapse of political and governmental orders within states can rapidly alter the strategic direction and objectives of PSMs while the sovereign borders of the state remain unchanged. Centeno (2002) highlights how state weakness in various countries throughout Latin America caused fluctuating relationships between states and an array of counter-revolutionary PSMs that were often involved in combatting Marxist-inspired insurgencies, such as the anti-FARC Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) militias in Colombia and the anti-Shining Path village defence forces in Peru (Centeno, 2002). Bates, 2008 highlights how when “orderly strategies” begin to collapse, states begin to fail as political entities and their bargaining position shifts vis-à-vis other state and non-state actors. Bates further points out that the mark of failed states can be measured through a state losing its ability to control the means of coercion that is its monopoly on the use of power over its sovereign territory (Bates, 2008).

Others point to how the internal dynamics of PSMs can influence their pro-government orientation. Christia (2012) argues that no group is safe from internal dissent and factionalization, however homogenous (Christia, 2012). Dissent within a group may shift the overall strategy and objectives of the group, including a PSMs’ pro-government outlook. In addition, Kalyvas (2008) also points to how defection and changing alliances by either militias or insurgent groups during civil wars is often linked to the size of territory the group controls within the borders of the sovereign state (Kalyvas, 2008). Also, interactions and conflict between non-state armed groups, economic elites, and state authorities can also lead to the realignment of pro-state armed organizations. Mazzei (2009) uses the paramilitary phenomenon in Mexico, El Salvador, and Colombia to highlight how interactions between states, insurgencies, economic elites, and the military often shapes and influences paramilitary strategy and alignment with the government’s interests (Mazzei, 2009).

Separating the conceptual differences of statism and governmentalism is crucial to understanding anti-government extremism within PSMs. Some anti-government PSMs may be loyal to a particular pillar of the state (usually the security forces or intelligence services). Others are loyal to the abstract notion of a particular nation-state they see as under threat from a government that may be introducing policies that disrupts that abstract notion. These PSMs are usually motivated by nationalist ideology.
**Anti-government extremism**

Anti-government extremism is a form of extremism that seeks to undermine the authority and objectives of any form of government (regional, federal, national, international, etc.). Over the past 20 years, there has been a sharp rise in anti-government extremism, particularly in Europe and North America (CSIS, 2021). Non-state groups that display forms of anti-government extremism offer alternative forms of governance arrangements that are not usually supported by the public. In many cases, anti-government extremists will exhibit fanaticism and rigid devotion to their alternative worldview (see the Moorish Movement in the USA or Britain First in the UK as examples) (Burke, 2018; Wenger, 2018).

The tactics deployed by each group also varies. Some anti-government extremists engage in violent protest while others commit acts of terrorism. In July 2011, anti-government extremist, Anders Breivik, launched twin terror attacks against targets in Norway. In the first attack, Breivik exploded a large van bomb outside the Prime Minister’s office in the government district in Oslo, killing eight people. Breivik then travelled to the island of Utoya on the same day where the government’s youth wing Workers’ Youth League (AUF) were hosting their summer camp. There, he killed 69 civilians in a mass shooting (Smith-Spark, 2021). During his court hearing, Breivik refused to recognize the legitimacy of the court, hinting that his motivations were also anti-state (Harlem, 2012). Other anti-government extremist groups engage in acts of mass protest against governments and their institutions. In many cases, these protests are violent. In 2011, waves of anti-government protests erupted throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Protest movements sought regime change (usually the removal of authoritarian dictatorships in favour democratic governments) (Sadiki, 2015). In some cases, these movements evolved into anti-government insurgencies where state repression was strong. In Libya, an armed revolution toppled the Gaddafi regime in 2011 (Cole & McQuinn, 2015). In Syria, the anti-government protests triggered a civil war between pro and anti-government factions that eventually morphed into an international conflict with the United States, the United Kingdom, Russia, and other pro and anti-government allies engaging in airstrike campaigns against government and anti-government opponents (Phillips, 2020).

**Introducing pro-state militias (PSMs) as anti-government extremist militias (AGEMs)**

Increasingly, some pro-state militias are displaying extremist anti-government sentiment or have evolved into anti-government extremist militias over time (Staniland, 2015). This shift can be explained by groups becoming disillusioned with their government’s ideological realignment as policy within government shifts (Aliyev, 2016). These shifts occur either due to popular elections or radical change within government institutions. This detachment may be sudden or gradual. Sudden detachment often produces kneejerk reactions while gradual dealignment between governments and PSMs steadily increases friction between the two. Often, PSMs will continue to display loyalty to the state while antagonizing against the contemporary government or governance structures (Staniland, 2021).

Other militias begin as pro-state militias with strong anti-government extremist ideological foundations. These militias are often pro-revolutionary in their anti-government expressions and justify the use of violence to achieve their political objectives (Staniland,
Pearlm an, & Cunning ham, 2012). These m ilitias are usually undemocratic and present a serious threat to political order in liberal democratic states (Baldino & Lucas, 2019). What underpins the militia’s differences with the government is their ideological worldview of what the concept of the state should be.

Pro-state militias that either are conceived with or evolve to show anti-government extremism usually share these similar characteristics:

1. Ideological differences with the government (Staniland, 2015)
2. An ultra-nationalist vision for the state (Ong & Pantucci, 2021)
3. Anti-globalization politics (Haynes, 2021)
4. A willingness to use non-democratic means to achieve their aims (Barter, 2013)

**Ideology and power: variation in attachment to governments amongst pro-state militias**

Attachment to governments by pro-state militias evolves over time. Although other influences exist such as government/regime insecurity (Ash, 2016), I argue that fluctuations in loyalty and commonality between governments and pro-state militias are driven by ideological alignment/disalignment. These variations are pushed by drivers that either diverge governments and PSMs apart over time or force these state/non-state actors to cooperate. Ideological difference in either the government or the militia may cause dissonance between the two actors, leading to friction and tension between them (Carey et al., 2016). For example, an election in a democratic state may lead to a change in government. This may realign the ideological relationship between governments and PSMs. Ideological change within PSMs may also alter the relationship a PSM has with a government. During the mid-1970s, an ideological shift in the Ulster Volunteer Force Brigade Staff from right-wing to left-wing led to a different relationship between the UVF and the British Government. The UVF temporarily shifted from a Loyalist paramilitary force solely concerned with counterinsurgency activity against Irish Republican Army groups in Northern Ireland, to a militia whose leadership considered armed action in countering Irish republicans in Northern Ireland while simultaneously caring for the needs and aspirations of working-class Unionist communities (Pankhurst, 2018). The UVF began to demand more social and economic welfare for Loyalist areas from the British Government in addition to previous calls for more effective counterinsurgency mechanisms to counter the IRA prior to the installation of a left-wing Brigade Staff. They also entered into ceasefires and peace talks, leading to the British Government de-proscribing the group for a brief period (Bruce, 1992). This is a prime example of how shifts in partisan ideology can influence government-PSM relationships.

Other influences can introduce instability into a government-PSM relationship. Power shifts during conflict may cause a PSM to either cooperate or conflict with a national government (Duffield, 1998). Levels of rebel violence in countries facing an insurgency may force greater cooperation between a government and a PSM as the power/control balance of the government comes under threat from increased violence from anti-state forces (Ferguson, 2015). As external threats to a government decrease, the possibility of anti-government extremism between a government and a PSM increase as a government
may move to forcibly disarm or demobilize a PSM after an external threat recedes permanently. These processes can evolve due to either a victory for government forces over a rebel group, or the initiation of a peace process between rebel forces and the government. Whether power structures within PSMs are centralized or decentralized will either enable or disable the potential of mid-to-high-level organizational commanders to engage in spoiler violence. The dissolution of an anti-government threat to a regime from an external force further monopolizes power into the hands of the government, allowing them to move against the wishes of PSMs within their jurisdiction. In Colombia, right-wing pro-state paramilitaries that resisted government-led disarmament, demobilization, and reintegrations processes briefly before and after the signing of the peace accords between the Bogota Government and FARC rebels began to exhibit forms of anti-government extremism (Bassetti, et al., 2015). This extremism mobilized in various forms. Spoiler PSMs that opposed both government demobilization programmes and the continued campaigns of leftist violence by insurgents (such as the ELN and dissident FARC fronts) clashed with government security forces while simultaneously cultivating sections of the Colombian countryside for illegal narcotic operations. This challenged the authority of the government to control its sovereign territory while also damaging Colombia’s fledging economy through an array of criminal enterprises such as money-laundering and robbery (Callenes, et al., 2019).

Shifting power balances and fluctuating ideological centre points between state and non-state actors can cause turbulence in relationships between governments and PSMs (Biberman, 2019). Sometimes, these relationships can evolve from cooperation on the one hand between governments and PSMs to forms of anti-government extremism by PSMs on the other (Jackson, 2019). Acknowledging the causations of shifting loyalties between PSMs and governments is crucial to deploying mechanisms to prevent/soften anti-government extremism by PSMs.

**When militias have went rogue: explaining anti-government extremism in pro-state militias in the United States and Ukraine**

In both the United States and Ukraine, recent political developments have enabled militia movements to challenge the authority of the government while simultaneously remaining loyal to the notion of the state and its position within international politics. These case studies offer contemporary examples of militia movements exhibiting anti-government extremist behaviours in a democratic society (the USA), and in a polarized, deeply divided society with contested forms of governance (Ukraine).

In the United States, the Biden Administration has faced a growing threat from home-grown anti-government extremist groups opposed to the political trajectory of the Presidency and the government. Despite increasing polarization, the USA remains a developed, relatively stable, and peaceful Western society while retaining global dominance in international order. On the other hand, Ukraine has faced a pro-Russian separatist insurgency since 2014 in the east of the country following the overthrow of the pro-Moscow Yanukovych regime. From February 2022, the Ukrainian armed forces have also been engaged in repelling a substantial Russian invasion of Ukraine. An analysis of anti-government extremism within this context offers a radical alternative to compare
with the USA. Ukraine is deeply divided, embroiled in both intra and inter-state conflict, and is situated in Eastern Europe.

Comparing the USA and Ukrainian case studies allows for an analysis and discussion of anti-government extremism within two different political regimes, nation-states, cultures, and government stability. As well as their societal differences, the militia movements are also diverse. However, they share the basic similarity in that they are pro-nation-state but also anti-government to varying degrees. The United States has had a lengthy history of militia movements whereas Ukrainian militia movements are a relatively recent phenomenon.

The political, economic, societal, and cultural differences between these case studies allows for the generation of testable generalizable observations that can be deployed to other case studies around the world. In both case studies, sizable militia movements have threatened their governments in various ways, usually in public acts of violent insurrection against the government and its various law enforcement agencies. These examples allow for comparative case study analysis that can help explain anti-government extremism in pro-state militias.

*Anti-government extremism in the United States of America: right-wing/pro-state militias and the 2021 United States Capitol Attack*

Militia movements have been a common recurrence in the United States of America since the Declaration of Independence in 1776 (Crothers, 2002). The right to bear arms is enshrined in the American Constitution enabling citizens to legally arm themselves and organize (two key characteristics of a militia). Pro-state militias and anti-government extremism motivated by patriotism and right-wing conservative idealism are common throughout the United States (Ong & Pantucci, 2021). The identity of these pro-state militias is often sustained by the presence of counter-militia movements attached to the non-conservative/non-white population in the United States, such as the Black Panther Party and the far-left Antifa Movement. Due to increasing societal polarization and deepening racial/political division in the United States, these militias have multiplied, sometimes in reaction to specific events such as the killing of George Floyd and the onset of the Black Lives Matter movement (Macauley, 2021). These ideological differences at a grassroots community level reinforces/sharpen a militia’s outlook (including towards the government).

As well as armed militia groups, the United States has a history of domestic, anti-government extremist terrorism from both far-left and far-right ideologues, such as the Silent Brotherhood/Aryan Resistance Movement (Flynn & Gerhardt, 1990). In 1995, anti-government extremists Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols detonated a large truck bomb outside Federal offices in Oklahoma City killing 168 people and injuring many more. The attack represented the largest act of domestic terrorism perpetrated in the United States to that date. McVeigh, who was a Gulf War veteran, sought revenge on US federalist agents in the aftermath of the Waco siege in 1993 (Pilat & Ward, 2016). Although motivated primarily by anti-government/federalist extremism, the group responsible for this attack also had alternative pro-state/far-right views that contradicted the worldview of the federal government. Other domestic groups that have carried out terrorist attacks
in the name of anti-government extremism include the anti-state Weather Underground movement and the Black Panther Party (Elbaum, 2018).

Contemporary pro-state militias demonstrate plausible levels of anti-government extremism. For example, the Oath Keepers is known for its anti-government output. This conservative/pro-Trump militia claims to be defending the Constitution of the USA (Crenshaw, Robinson, & Crenshaw, 2021). The militia views the Constitution as under attack from modern progressive/anti-state forces within the government. The Oath Keepers have opposed federal administrative challenges through armed confrontations and protests. After Trump’s 2020 election defeat, pro-state militias displayed high levels of anti-government sentiment due to ideological realignment within the government and power subsequently shifting from Trumpian to Biden governance. Leaders of these militias rejected the result of the election while simultaneously comparing the policies of Joe Biden to those of Great Britain during the Revolutionary Wars, juxtaposing contemporary democratic elections with revolutionary, armed politics (Haynes, 2021). Additional calls were made by militia members for volunteers to provide security for the growing patriot movement that sought to challenge the outcome of the election (Harlem, 2012). Anti-government extremism from these militias will continue to pose a domestic threat to the United States throughout the Biden Presidency and potentially beyond. Ideological change in the Presidency of the United States partially explains anti-government extremism in some American militias. The shift from Trumpian to Biden policy shocked and alienated the militia movement that shifted from anti-government before the 2016 Presidential Elections to pro-government during Donald Trump’s Presidency, before reverting to anti-government extremism with the electoral victory and inauguration of President Biden. The militia movement believes that Biden and the Democrat Party will seek to undermine the American Constitution including the right to bear arms.

The anti-government extremism displayed in 2021 at the Capitol Building by pro-state militias such as the Oath Keepers and the Three Percenters shifted from a pro-government loyalty displayed under the Trump Presidency only months earlier (Haynes, 2021). This rapid swing from pro to anti-governmentalism by militias indicates how volatile non-state armed groups can behave in a democratic society. These militias aligned with Trumpian politics due to ideological similarity and continuity between the Trump government and the militias. The 2020 Presidential Election with Biden’s victory marked a change in government policy that alienated these militias. The shock of the change to the pro-state militias can be analysed through a brief analysis of their tactics before and after the 2020 Presidential Election. Both prior to and during the Trump Presidency, these militias that were sustained by populist conservative ideology often engaged in public displays of protest and confrontation with opponents despite their loyalty to Trump (Ong & Pantucci, 2021). The initial shock of Trump’s electoral defeat in the 2020 Presidential Election caused both the populist right and pro-state militias to reject the result of the election by claiming that the Biden mandate was pre-determined by federal bureaucrats who were motivated to have Trump removed due to his style of conservative politics, which Trump himself claimed (The American Presidency Project, 2021). The polarization is also informed by dyadic “metapolitical” debates with each actor committed to their own political worldview of what the state should be (Bar-On, 2021).
Additionally, the alteration in power balances between state and federal levels of governance in the US aided the strong regrowth of anti-government extremist sentiment in these pro-state militias. Executive decisions during the Trump Presidency often challenged the federalist bureaucracy, positioning the Presidency against the idea of federalism. With the success of Biden came a return to the conventional norm of federalism and the potential erosion of statism within the United States. These shifting power and ideological balances motivated the Capitol Attack in January 2021. Depolarization and the reconstruction of positive political will is crucial in combatting the threat posed by anti-government extremism in the USA as is reform of the security administration.

**Anti-government extremism in Ukraine: Right Sector and informal militia networks**

In 2014, the Revolution of Dignity replaced a pro-Russian Ukrainian administration with a Ukrainian Government that valued independence from Moscow and potential integration with the EU (Schonigh, 2020). Pro-state militias (such as the anti-Russian/pro-Ukrainian Right Sector) played a role in overthrowing the pro-Moscow Yanukovych Presidency. Despite their pro-Ukrainian state ideology, several informal militias also became anti-government against successive Kyiv administrations despite some of those militias being formed and/or receiving financial support from elements of the government and the oligarchy (such as Rikmat Achmetov) (Eckel, 2022). Since the overthrow of the Yanukovych Government in 2014, pro-Ukrainian militias have been involved in a protracted conflict in Eastern Ukraine against pro-Moscow rebel separatist groups in Donetsk and Luhansk that are rooted within the ethnic Russian population in the Donbass region (Aliyev, 2016). Some of these militias have also attempted to morph into political parties vying for governmental power through elections. Although many advocate an independent sovereign Ukrainian state free from both European and Russian interference as a top priority, each has a differing view on how the internal governance structures within Ukraine should operate post-Maidan. In the aftermath of the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine, these militias became a key component of Ukraine’s armed response. Militias such as Right Sector have aligned with the country’s armed forces to stall and repel the Russian advance through a combination of classical battlefield tactics and protracted guerrilla warfare strategies behind enemy lines targeting supply routes and logistical targets with Western-supplied armaments.

Ukrainian militias proliferated in the absence of both effective governance arrangements from the new administration in Kyiv and the inability of the Ukrainian security forces to tackle the separatist threat within its borders (Bukkvoll, 2019). The Right Sector’s Ukrainian Volunteer Corps violently suppressed the separatist movement in Eastern Ukraine while simultaneously challenging both the government and its forces through democratic election processes and brief armed clashes. Despite repeated accusations that the militia was fascist and a neo-Nazi group by Russian media, Right Sector has also provided protection to Ukrainian Jews in cities such as Odessa. A report from Associated Press also found no evidence of hate crimes (Dreyfus, 2014; Jewish Telegraphic Agency, 2014). Right Sector also emerged as a political party after the 2014 revolution, winning a single parliamentary seat in the 2014 Ukrainian election (Mulford, 2016). Although pro-state, Right Sector has often held anti-government views that have strengthened and
weakened as the group evolved. These anti-government views are often motivated by the militia’s ultra-nationalist views which advocate a full and independent sovereign Ukraine free from any external influence (both Russian and European).

In the absence of a functioning Ukrainian State exerting full sovereignty over its territory post-2014, the power associated with Right Sector expanded and diversified as the group sought to challenge any threat to the independence of the Ukrainian state and its territorial integrity from pro-Russian separatists. The shifting power balances between the militias and the security forces compelled the Ukrainian Government to explore initiatives that quelled their growing power. Initially, the Ukrainian Government absorbed the Azov Battalions militia into the regular Ukrainian armed forces (Umland, 2019). A similar proposal was declined by the Right Sector militia group. The absorption initiative did not fully pacify the Azov Movement as the militia retained a unique identity within the Ukrainian security forces. The failure of this absorption highlighted the inability of the Ukrainian Government to fully integrate the Azov Battalions (and other militias) into the Ukrainian army and under full government control (Jackson, 2019). The failure of these integration measures symbolized the power militias held over the government’s monopoly on power. Simultaneously, there is evidence that the Ukrainian Government was pursuing a twin-track approach to these militias. At the same time, some militia groups agitated violently against the government. Right Sector blamed the Ukrainian Interior Ministry for the assassination of the group’s leader in Western Ukraine, Oleksandr Muzychko on 24 March 2014. The group vowed to avenge the death of Muzychko and called for the immediate resignation of the Interior Minister, Arsen Avakov (BBC News, 2014). On 27 March 2014, the Right Sector militia attempted to storm the Ukrainian parliament which drew condemnation from the European Union and others (BBC News, 2014). This act represented a direct attack on the heart of the Ukrainian government. The attack also demonstrated the willingness of Right Sector to openly challenge the authority of the government. On 31 March 2014, a Right Sector volunteer was arrested after he injured three people in a shooting near a restaurant in central Kyiv, including the Deputy Head of the Kyiv City State Administration (Ukrainian Pravda, 2014). Later in 2014, Right Sector accused the government of harbouring anti-militia forces that sought to dismantle an array of pro-state militias including Right Sector (BBC News, 2014). In 2015, Right Sector volunteers clashed with Ukrainian security forces loyal to the government. Right Sector alleged members of the Ukrainian security services were involved in illicit smuggling operations. These allegations were denied by the government who countered Right Sector’s allegations by claiming the militia was involved in criminality. In the ensuing government-militia clash, two people were killed (Luhn, 2015). Although it could be argued the clash represented a conflict over the spoils of war, it also established Right Sector as a potential challenger to the government and its forces. Furthermore, the incident pitched Right Sector against government forces. Other militias warned of further revolutionary activity against the government should reform towards an idealist Ukrainian nation-state stall (Crothers, 2002).

Right Sector and other pro-state militias continued to clash with both Russian separatists and the Kyiv Government simultaneously until the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine (Aliyev & Shaw, 2021). Anti-government militia violence subsided after the Russian invasion (an external threat to the State’s power). Both Ukrainian security forces and an array of pro-state militias countered the Russian military with a mixture of conventional battlefield and quasi-guerrilla
warfare tactics (Engelbrecht, 2022). The Kyiv Government mass mobilized the civilian population into hastily established militia forces with volunteers and conscripted members receiving large caches of assault rifles and instructions from government institutions on how to conduct hit-and-run attacks upon Russian armoured convoys using basic weapons such as Molotov Cocktails (Pankhurst, 2022). Other militias (including Right Sector) became a core component of the Ukrainian counter-invasion strategy. They have operated alongside conventional state armed forces and acquired the skills and qualities of a conventional armed force through using mortar teams and tactical special forces to repel Russian forces in the Donbas region of Eastern Ukraine (Roussinos, 2022).

The Russian invasion acted as a catalyst in both realigning the relationship between the Kyiv Government and the PSMs from conflict to cooperation. Serious and sustained threats to Ukrainian sovereignty from the invasion in February 2022 helps to explain greater cooperation between the government and anti-government/pro-state militias. In January 2022, the Ukrainian President, Volodymyr Zelensky, awarded a senior Right Sector commander with the Order of the Golden Star along with the title “Hero of Ukraine” (Loyd, 2022). These non-state armed actors were motivated primarily by an ideological commitment to preserve the sovereignty of the Ukrainian nation-state as was the Ukrainian Government. The commonality in these primary aims reformed a temporary common purpose between the Government and the PSMs. Additionally, both the government and the PSMs sought to maintain the Ukrainian state’s monopoly of power within its sovereign borders, thereby aligning another significant objective of both actors.

Dealing with anti-government extremism from pro-state militias will be a challenge for any Ukrainian government should it secure either a victory or negotiated settlement with Moscow. Some within Ukraine’s political elite have already signalled their intent to deal with Right Sector’s power. Former Ukrainian President, Petro Poroshenko, stated in early 2022 that the Right Sector militia was to be disarmed and removed from counterinsurgency operations in the Donbas region (Deutsche Welle, 2022). Although continued Russian aggression will temporarily force the government and PSMs to cooperate on security and counter-invasion strategies, it is important to note that the significance, experience, and power of anti-government/pro-state militias continues to grow in areas where state control is weak. Furthermore, the success of militias in countering Russian armed forces in Ukraine will strengthen their popularity and allow the militia leaderships to portray their respective organizations as the real defenders of Ukraine. Dealing with these militias in any post-conflict scenario will be crucial for the stability of Ukrainian governance, be it a sovereign Kyiv administration or a Moscow-installed/friendly regime.

**Discussion**

Governments in the United States and Ukraine have dealt with a myriad of PSMs. Each PSM has a unique relationship with their respective government/governance structure. In the US, both the Trump and Biden administrations have had contrasting relationships with militias such as the Three Percenters. Anti-government extremism towards the Biden Administration from these militias did not manifest as acutely during the Trump administration due to the levels of ideological alignment between militias and the government. Trump’s anti-federalist/populist views aligned with the aspirations of various right-wing, pro-state militia movements
across the USA. These policy similarities aligned governmental strategy with militia ideology. The shift from Trumpian populism to Biden pro-federalist/pro-globalist politics radically altered government-PSM relations in the USA which produced a hostile relationship that fomented anti-government extremism within the various militia movements.

In Ukraine, shifting internal power balances between the government’s authority and the PSMs caused anti-government extremism within some militias. After the 2014 revolution that deposed the pro-Moscow regime, violent rebel separatist campaigns in Eastern Ukraine settled into frozen conflicts. The increased power of some PSMs forced the Kyiv administration to move against them for a range of reasons, including the presence of criminal enterprises and far-right ideology within their organizational structure. Actions against PSMs by government security forces produced a degree of anti-government extremism within these PSMs that materialized particularly in Western Ukraine where government power was relatively monopolized due to the absence of pro-Russian separatist activity. With the onset of the Russian invasion and the threat to Ukrainian sovereignty and power from Moscow forces, the Zelensky Administration has sub-contracted and delegated power, authority, and violence to these PSMs due to the threat Moscow’s aggression poses to the future of Ukraine. The shifting power balances in Ukraine between 2014 and 2022 highlights how PSMs in some states can produce anti-government extremism.

The United States and Ukrainian case studies represent state-militia examples from an array of different backgrounds and scenarios. Both case studies have differing political structures; societal and political stability; economic and military strength; cultural norms; and hostile threats from both internal and external opponents. The militia movements in each case study (although nationalistic) have differing ideologies, strategies, internal organizational structures, and political outlooks from one another. Despite the differences, the trigger mechanisms for anti-government extremist violence in pro-state militias is remarkably similar. The militias share a disdain for their national governments. They are often anti-globalist, nationalistic, and willing to use armed violence to achieve their political objectives. In both cases, ideology helps to explain both the strength and degree of association between governments and militias that produces anti-government violence. In essence, the greater the ideological gap between the governments and militias, the greater risk of anti-government extremist behaviour from militia movements.

Similarly, threats to the sovereignty of the state can often explain the severity of anti-government extremism in militias. In both the United States and Ukraine, pro-state militias have often tempered anti-government extremist output in response to increasing threats to the state. As the anti-state threat from both state and non-state actors increases, levels of anti-government extremism in pro-state militia movements often declines. This is partly explained by the aims and objectives of both the government and the militia group aligning to protect the integrity of the state. Threats to state stability, control, and traditions from internal actors (such as far-left organizations ie. Antifa in the United States) and external actors (such as the Russian state in the context of Ukraine) temporarily refocus the attention of militias away from anti-government extremism and towards counter-threat campaigns. However, these government-anti-government militia alliances are often a temporary response to anti-state threats unless the government initiates a demobilization or attempts to integrate the militias into state structures.
Limitations

Although both case studies present contemporary examples of PSMs adopting anti-government extremist methods, there are several limitations to this article. Both the United States and Ukraine, despite their cultural and political differences, have experienced distortions to political reality at the macro-level. This study does not account for countries that do not experience significant political upheaval and yet still face anti-government extremism from PSMs. For example, in several countries such as Iraq and Syria, anti-government extremism has developed in PSMs without significant realignment between state and non-state actors. Localized disputes between community-based vigilante militias that have a pro-state orientation have resulted in clashes with regional and central government forces despite the power balance and ideological alignment between the militias and the central government remaining relatively static. In other words, anti-government mutations develop in PSMs without any seismic political change occurring. This could be partially explained by the fragility of the state and the inability of its security forces to act as a deterrent to anti-government extremism in PSMs. Both the United States and to a lesser extent Ukraine have professional armed forces with sufficient equipment and weapons as well as centralized, modern administrative structures in place to support day-to-day governance and public sector services. Due to the longevity and intensity of their respective protracted periods of conflict, the armed forces and state infrastructure has been significantly weakened in both Iraq and Syria due to anti-government campaigns of violence. It is possible that these factors create a power gap for opportunistic PSMs to fill and attempt to discredit or undermine government authority. It is further possible that the internal dynamics and change within PSMs make anti-government extremism more or less likely depending on leadership style and control over their respective memberships.

Further research is needed to examine anti-government extremism in PSMs in Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, both at localized and national levels.

Conclusion

Both the US and Ukrainian case studies highlight how shifting ideological realignment between governments and pro-state militias can foment anti-government extremism within PSMs. Sudden or gradual shifts in government-PSM ideological symmetry (either internally within PSMs or externally in governments) produce schisms in the government-PSM relationship that provokes violent protest, terrorism, and in some cases, rebellion. Likewise, both case studies also demonstrate how disturbed power balances in government-PSM relationships can also invoke anti-government extremism. The movement of power from the government to the militia or vice versa (violently or non-violently) disturbs delicate power balances which can trigger anti-government extremism in pro-state militias. Volatility in PSM relationships with governments can be explained through ideological alignment, dealignment, and realignment. Rogue, anti-government extremism within PSMs can be explained through ideological dealignment and/or shifting power balances. These are influenced by both internal (intra-state/intra-PSM power shifts) and external (threats to state power/PSM power outside of the relationship) dynamics.
Understanding the processes that triggers this volatility can help explain why some PSMs engage in anti-government extremism and others do not.

Anti-government extremism is a growing threat to democracies throughout the world. Although many associate anti-government extremism with anti-state, rebel, terrorist, or insurgent forces, this form of extremism is also found in militias and other non-state armed groups that are seemingly loyal to or pro-state. Additional research is needed to further analyse why militia movements deploy violence against their government. Understanding the causations for anti-government extremism amongst these militias is crucial to eradicating it. Here, I argue both ideology and shifting power balances amongst state and non-state actors have driven anti-government extremism amongst pro-state militia groups. Further research may uncover other variables that encourage pro-state militias to go rogue against their own governments.

Disclosure statement

The author has no conflict of interests to declare in relation to this article.

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