

Proxy Armies and Principal-Agent Problems: A Review of Militias in Eastern Ukraine

Description

In his newest book, [Rebel Militias in Eastern Ukraine: From Leaderless Rebellion to Proxy Army](#), political scientist Martin LaryÅ explores the nexus between political extremism, violent rebellion, and proxy wars, using the Donbas War as an exemplary case. The book is an important contribution to literature on irregular warfare through its discussion of diverse methods of coercion, delegation chains, and a variety of principal-agent problems including decentralization, competition, and structural weakness. While the theoretical underpinnings are important, the specific case study and conclusions are what make this book of particular interest to scholars of warfare and Eastern Europe today.

The Principal-Agent Model in Practice

Rebel Militias in Eastern Ukraine proves to be a timely and insightful contribution for understanding the early phases of the Russo-Ukrainian War (2014-present) that helps to understand specific dynamics of the Donbas War as well as other strategies and developments in the Russo-Ukrainian War writ large. LaryÅ primarily accomplishes this through the lens of the principal-agent model, to explain how a powerful actor (the principal, Russia) may coerce or incentivize another actor (the agent, local militias in the Donbas) to act on its behalf, or in accordance with the principal's objectives.

LaryÅ argues that there are several reasons an actor like Russia might choose this method in warfare. First, the strategy provides avenues for deniability of involvement, augmented further when delegation chains are used. Second, agents managed from afar can be directed through access to resources that the principal controls. Third, this strategic method can allow external actors to gain a local foothold where they might not be able to establish one easily, given their position as foreigners. In addition to LaryÅ' arguments, it is worth considering the reduced costs for the principal that such a model would entail. This can be considered in terms of financial costs or human lives, both of which are likely to be more tolerable and easy to cover, or accept, for a principal who chooses not to employ their own forces.

Despite these theoretical benefits, there can be some serious risks to relying on proxies, which LaryÅ highlights. Distance and decentralization can create unanticipated costs for principals when agents are not internally organized, disciplined, or experienced. Another issue related to decentralization is the trade-off between agent autonomy and effectiveness. If agents are not closely managed or directed,

they are more likely to pursue actions that cease to align with the principal's plan, otherwise known as moral hazards. However, steering agents too closely toward desired outcomes can increase the principal's resource costs and undermine plausible deniability. Principals must therefore strike a delicate balance between the risks of distance and the costs of direct management in the course of navigating a conflict operated by their agents.

Weak Social Ties and Fragmented Rebel Forces

LaryÅ¡ explains that when the principal-agent model is put into practice, local actors face an additional challenge to establish themselves among the local population who may or may not consider them legitimate political actors or representatives.

As a case-in-point, pro-Russian secessionists were a minority in the Donetsk and Luhansk Oblasts, and an unpopular one at that, limiting their sway with the public. This argument is a key part of LaryÅ¡'s analysis, as he identifies low social embeddedness of rebel militias in the Donbas as a central reason that such groups were not able to gain more local support, attract more experienced or qualified individuals, and be taken seriously, either by locals or the government in Kyiv.

According to LaryÅ¡, weak ties between secessionists, rebels, pro-Russian groups, and Ukrainian society contributed to difficulty organizing a cohesive rebel movement from the earliest stages. This is evident in the chasm between the weakly-organized and under-developed ideology of rebels and the majority opinion of Ukrainians at the time of the Donbas War. The [Orange Revolution](#) and [Euromaidan](#) — Ukraine's pro-democracy movements rejecting Kremlin influence and calling for closer ties with Europe — preceded the war in Eastern Ukraine and signaled a majority preference for a democratic, more "European" Ukraine. This stood in stark contrast to the rebels, who embraced the Kremlin's portrayal of these events as products of undesirable Western influence and propaganda. The Kremlin was able to use this to spin its own brand of propaganda, touting an existential crisis targeting ethnic Russians, in order to influence fringe Pro-Russian Ukrainian groups who mobilized due to such fears. As a result, the existing ideological split grew even wider.

However, it was not only an ideological disconnect that contributed to the weak ties between rebels and local civilians in Eastern Ukraine. Besides embracing fringe political beliefs that were not shared by either their neighbors or Ukrainians at large, militia members were not well-integrated into — nor representative of — the population of the Luhansk or Donetsk regions. LaryÅ¡ paints a picture of rebel commanders in the Donbas region as inexperienced, colorful opportunists — many with ties to organized crime, or with criminal backgrounds of their own. Many of the other actors who joined the movement also lacked sufficient experience, qualifications, or knowledge. Low barriers-to-entry allowed anyone to join, opening the door to the inexperienced as well. This, in turn, chipped away at

the feeble ties between rebels and local communities, contributing to the chaos, disorganization, and low popularity of rebel militias in the Luhansk and Donetsk oblasts.

Although LaryÅ; identifies weak social ties as a central cause of the Donbas rebel movementâ??s poor coordination, it was not the only one. To begin with, the small and underdeveloped structure of rebel militias provided a shaky foundation. Moreover, a highly decentralized organization proved to be a practical problem, especially when combined with opportunistic actors vying for control and power. Combined, these issues led to chronic fragmentation within groups, which weakened the movement and worsened existing issues related to inter- and intra-group coordination. Furthermore, the inability of actors, whether agents or principals, to develop significant support for the rebel movement outside of the Donbas caused the movement to remain geographically small, complicating recruitment and organizational expansion.

The meso- and micro-level analysis of rebel commanders and their units (discussed in Chapters 4 and 5) proves to be the richest part of LaryÅ;â??s analysis. LaryÅ; makes the depth of rebel fragmentation evident, allowing readers to understand why the movement was unable to develop further and demonstrating why it was so volatile. Local disputes and competition between militias, coupled with continued Russian interest in advancing the conflict, resulted in increased Russian involvement and a more complex, coercive, and intractable international conflict.

Russian Involvement and Lasting Implications

By May 2014, the Russian rebel movement was fragmentedâ??both in terms of commanders and their unitsâ?? actionsâ??and heading for near-certain defeat. At this stage, the Kremlin dropped its pretense of staying out and tightened control of the rebels, relying initially on religious institutions, Cossack groups (semi-military communities that originated in the borderlands of what is now Russia and Ukraine), criminal networks, military intelligence, and retired officers to enforce its authority. The Kremlin did this in an attempt to instill organization and coordination where there was little before.

During this discussion of Russiaâ??s control of its agents and secondary principals, LaryÅ; confronts alternative theories regarding the timing and nature of Russiaâ??s participation in the conflict. Specifically, he refutes [Arel and Driscollâ??s](#) claim that the conflict was primarily driven by local politics, with Russia playing only a limited and reactionary role that began in August 2014. But LaryÅ;â??s in-depth focus on Arel and Driscoll comes at a cost. He misses an opportunity to engage other literature and diverse analyses by other scholars on the conflict over the past decade.

Although the timeline and involved actors discussed in prior chapters helps set the groundwork for LaryÅ;â??s refutation of Arel and Driscollâ??s argument, he returns to these arguments to solidify his

claim: that Russia had substantial, varied involvement, which began as early as April 6, 2014, when the “takeover of administrative buildings in Donetsk and Luhansk, [“] along with the subsequent proclamation of secessionist republics, was directed and coordinated from Russia” (LaryÅ; 152). LaryÅ; argues that by August, when Arel and Driscoll claim that Russian involvement began, Russia had adopted a “new approach,” allowing it “increased control over the rebel movement through a direct military invasion” and paving the way for the “forced merger of rebel militias in October-November 2014” (p. 164).

If LaryÅ;’s refutation of Arel and Driscoll feels compelling, it is due to the clarity of his argumentation as well as the strength of the evidence for his claims throughout the book. Well before LaryÅ; discusses alternative theories, he introduces a variety of empirical evidence, including “information from the media, investigative journalists, and associations,” published reports, leaked conversations, and his own semi-structured interviews with topical experts (32-33). These varied forms of evidence support LaryÅ;’s assertions from several angles, giving strength to his arguments and providing proof for events that Arel and Driscoll appear to be unable to address. While LaryÅ;’s analysis could have been enriched by including and confronting additional alternative theories, his strong dismissal of Arel and Driscoll’s claims provides a refreshing and novel contribution to discourse on the subject.

LaryÅ; admits some of his assertions (and assumptions) cannot be tested or supported due to a lack of available Russian data. This is not LaryÅ;’s fault. Instead, we may attribute this to a number of factors, including the obfuscation of information by the Kremlin, the covert nature of its operations, and the many complications of collecting data during developing conflicts. Given these challenges, it is remarkable that the author was able to reconstruct details of social networks, sociopolitical processes, transnational military networks, and military strategy as comprehensively as he did.

Conclusion

Describing the shaky trajectory of rebel groups in the Donbas from disorganized, chaotic militias into fragmented rebel groups and finally into proxy agents under the control of principals delegated by the Kremlin, LaryÅ; brings his book to a close with an ominous warning: this analysis is likely to have lasting insights due to Putin’s designs on other countries in the region. It is plausible to expect similar involvement in the region, especially in other countries that Russia has invaded, influenced, or controlled in the past, or is presently coercing. The author leaves us with this: “By leveraging ethnic, political, or social fault lines, Moscow can fuel discontent and create conditions conducive to rebellion” (p. 180).

LaryÅ;’s work reminds us that in the complex interplay between principals and proxies, the consequences of disorganization, opportunism, and manipulation are not confined to one war—they

echo across borders, shaping the future of conflict in ways the world cannot afford to ignore.

Maya Camargo-Vemuri is a PhD student at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies. Her research interests include political violence, mass atrocity, civilian victimization, and repression in totalitarian and autocratic regimes, with a regional focus on Eastern Europe, Eurasia, and Latin America. Her dissertation research focuses on the dynamics of violence in genocide and mass atrocity and has been supported by the United States Holocaust Museum, the American Political Science Association (APSA), and the Henry A. Kissinger Center for Global Affairs. She has also worked at the Agora Institute in Baltimore, MD, researching nonviolence and democracy, and contributed to ongoing investigations into government corruption and human rights violations at the Institute for Democracy and Human rights in Lima, Peru.

Main Image: A Russia-backed rebel armored fighting vehicles convoy near Donetsk, Eastern Ukraine, May 30, 2015. A stencil on the front armor panel reads "God is with us." Courtesy of [Wikimedia Commons](#).

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