

**How to understand ex-combatants'
political participation against
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How to understand ex-combatants' political participation against the background of rebel-to-party transformations?

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ABSTRACT

How do ex-combatants participate politically in the context of their rebel movement having transformed into a political party? What factors shape and structure these forms of participation? And what heuristic framework can guide the study of this topic in a variety of contexts in order to fill important knowledge gaps? These questions are at the heart of this paper. While a growing body of literature has in recent years scrutinized rebel-to-political party transformations and their crucial impact on the prospect of sustainable peace, we still know relatively little about the ways in which these processes on the macro- or group-level relate to, and impact on, the micro-level, namely the political participation of individual former rank and file combatants. Addressing this knowledge gap, the paper first charts and further develops the conceptual terrain, based on an analysis of the available theoretical and empirical literature. We consider processes of identification, self-understanding and groupness – constituted by emotions and cognition, the latter comprising ideology – important heuristic devices to develop a fine-grained understanding of factors structuring ex-combatants' political participation. Second, since the rebel-to-party transformation provides contextual background, we suggest to apply the analysis of these processes in a multi-level framework that connects the micro-level of individuals with ex-combatant networks, associations and organisations at the meso-level and the political party that grew out of the rebel movement at the macro-level. We tentatively apply the proposed framework to the case of Burundi to verify its relevance.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the end of the Cold War and the beginning of the ensuing “liberal peacebuilding era” rebel-to-party transformations have become a common phenomenon around the globe (Söderberg Kovacs & Hatz, 2016). For the period of 1990 – 2016, Manning and Smith (2019) identified 77 former rebel parties in 37 countries, ranging from Angola to Cambodia, El Salvador, Iraq, Mozambique, Lebanon or Northern Ireland. Manning and Smith (2016) moreover found that rebel groups transformed into political parties in more than half of the cases they observed from 1990 – 2009. Many peace agreements – especially such with third-party involvement – moreover include specific provisions for rebel-to-party transformations (Söderberg Kovacs & Hatz, 2016). Indicating the rationale behind local and international actors' support for such transformations, the United Nations state that “(a)iding former armed forces and groups and ex-combatants to form political parties and peaceful civilian movements is essential to ensuring that grievances and visions for society continue to be expressed in a non-violent manner in the post-conflict period” (UN, 2014, p. 177). Such transformation processes and their outcomes are hence considered crucial and often decisive factors for the success and sustainability of peacebuilding and longer-term democratisation after civil war.

The large number of rebel-to-party transformations and their important relevance for sustainable peacebuilding has in recent years led to growing academic interest in the topic, producing a comprehensive body of literature on various aspects of such transformation processes and their outcome. Yet, while rebel-to-party transformations are increasingly well understood, very little is known about how such processes on the macro-level impact on the political participation of former rank-and-file combatants on the micro-level. Sindre (2016b) indeed notes that the respective scholarship has so far been “largely evolving in parallel, often in relative isolation from each other” (p. 193). Similarly, Söderström (2016) points out that studies on the political participation of individual ex-combatants have so far largely “failed to consider the role of the armed group's transformation” (p. 215).

The limited understanding of former rebel parties' impact on ex-combatants' political participation reflects a more general dearth of research on individual ex-combatants political participation. Söderström (2013b) – whose work is a notable exception in this regard (Söderström, 2010, 2011, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c, 2015, 2016) – points out that political participation of individual ex-combatants' has in fact for a long time been largely ignored and neglected in research and policy alike. This might be a consequence of the fact that ex-combatants' political agency, especially in Africa, has often been either completely discounted and denied, or generalized as, and reduced to, a threat. McMullin (2012) argues that such “threat narratives”, evaluating ex-combatants “as equally, inherently, and naturally threatening to post-conflict peace”, partly trace back to the discourse of New Barbarism “which constructs young Africans as angry and

irrationally violent” and largely ignores “insurgents’ own claims about the ideas and politics that might underlie their participation in armed violence” (pp. 393-394).

Söderström (2015) argues that “(i)ntead of denying ex-combatants political agency, as has often happened in the past in both representation of ex-combatants and in programs targeting ex-combatants (...), their political agency needs to be taken seriously and not summarily equated with a security threat” (p. 5). This requires “more nuanced and diversified views of ex-combatants as political actors” (Söderström, 2015, p. 5). Recent research has indeed suggested that ex-combatants tend to remain politically relevant and can take on a variety of roles – both destructive and constructive – in post-conflict contexts. Thus, developing a better understanding of “the political voice of former combatants today is imperative for gaining a deeper sense of what role ex-combatants actually play for peacebuilding”, Söderström (2015, p. 3) stresses.

To study political participation of ex-combatants, Söderström (2015, p. 57) suggests subscribing to the broad definition by Brady (1999, p. 737), which includes any “action by ordinary citizens directed toward influencing some political outcomes”. This definition does not, like others do, require the activity to be directed towards government, but claims “that the political quality of the act is related to an idea of a political outcome, and that this can be achieved through directing your attempts at other bodies than government” (Söderström, 2015, p. 57). One of the advantages of this definition is that it allows for violent forms of participation to be included in it, provided that it is directed towards a political outcome.

Yet, as Söderström (2015, p. 57) acknowledges, the definition leaves unclear “what is termed *political* and what can be seen as an *act of participation*” – questions that are highly ambiguous. In her research on ex-combatants in Liberia, Söderström (2015) approached this problem inductively, exploring what forms of participation ex-combatants themselves see as open to them. This context-specific and –sensitive approach does seem very sensible for the study topic at hand, given the variety of political cultures and post-conflict settings we are potentially looking at. Söderström (2015, p. 58) suggests to categorize forms of participation according to channels of expression: either representational or extra-representational. Forms of political participation that fall under the first category might include voting, campaigning, contacting politicians & officials, running for/occupying a political office, or membership in a political party. Political acts through extra-representational channels might include participation in pressure groups, NGOs, think tanks, protest, and violence amongst others. In general, Klandermans (2004, p. 360) moreover suggests to deliberate the *time* and *effort* required to be invested for a specific form of political participation. This does seem useful, as it potentially gives us a certain indication on levels of commitment.

Yet, the assessment of ex-combatants’ forms of political participation leads us to a further question, which concerns the factors that drive and structure the participation. A better understanding of these factors is crucial if we want to be able to impact on how ex-combatants participate in politics. As of yet, this question has not received enough systematic academic attention. It often seems assumed that peaceful, democratic political participation of ex-combatants automatically follows from successful economic and social reintegration after demobilisation (Söderström, 2013b, p. 6). One hence often comes across implicit or explicit assumptions that non-democratic and/or violent political engagement *must* be the outcome of failed or deficient economic and social reintegration. This rather simplistic view also seems to inform policy interventions. As Gilligan, Mvukiyehe and Samii (2012) note, “(t)he typical causal model posited in reintegration program documentation is that economic reintegration fosters political reintegration, with family- and community-level social reintegration moderating the process” (p. 601). Peaceful political participation hence seems to be considered to be a sort of an automatic “downstream effect” (Gilligan et al., 2012, p. 601).

Assuming that peaceful democratic political participation simply – or primarily – depends on successful economic and social reintegration seems problematic, however, as it is not based on solid empirical evidence. It appears to build at least partly on the basic idea that economic factors are prime drivers of violence in civil wars, following Collier’s “Greed Thesis”. Yet, newer academic research has established that armed mobilization in the first place depends on factors much more complex than simple economic deprivation or greed (Humphreys & Weinstein, 2008; Regan & Norton, 2016; Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers, 2004). And Kaplan & Nussio’s (2018, p. 82) study on recidivism among ex-combatants in Colombia, finds that employment has no general effect on whether or not they re-engage in violence. This should hence put in ques-

tion an over-reliance on economic and social reintegration in explaining political participation, as it likely “blinds” us for other, more complex – and possibly more relevant – structuring factors.

While the questions concerning the nature of ex-combatants’ political participation, and the factors structuring it, seem relevant in any given setting, they might be so in particular in contexts where armed groups have transformed into political parties. As Söderström (2015) notes, these parties have usually “been assumed as benign for the individual members of these groups” (p. 167) in terms of political participation. Yet, as the rebel-to-party literature has established, these parties in fact often show war-time continuities that make them tend towards authoritarian practices, proving problematic for democratisation (Höglund, 2008; Lyons, 2016a, 2016b; Wittig, 2016). Against such a backdrop, it appears all the more relevant to gain a better understanding of how individual ex-combatants’ political participation unfolds in such a context, and why it unfolds the way it does.

In this paper, we aim to address the identified knowledge gap by providing more conceptual clarity and by suggesting an operational strategy to unpack and better understand ex-combatants’ political participation – both in general and against the specific backdrop of a rebel-to-party transformation. In a first section we introduce a number of concepts that we consider to be useful and important when aiming to understand what structures ex-combatants’ political participation. We consider (ex-combatant) identity to be an important concept to unpack. We operationalize it through the concepts of *identification*, *self-understanding* and *groupness*, as suggested by Brubaker (2006). We further unpack these concepts through its constituting components of emotions and cognition, the latter comprising ideology. Subsequently, we develop a framework with three levels at which, and through which, political participation is shaped through these processes of identification, self-understanding and groupness. We distinguish the macro-level of the political party, the meso-level of ex-combatants’ associations and organisations, and the micro-level of individual ex-combatants. For each level we suggest, on the one hand, relevant research questions to be asked to further unpack and explore the sources and nature of ex-combatants’ political participation and, on the other hand, possible research strategies and methods to answer these questions. In a last section, we tentatively apply the proposed framework to the case of Burundi, more specifically the CNDD-FDD (National Council for the Defense of Democracy – Forces for the Defense of Democracy). This exercise is preliminary and based on a review of the available literature and a small number of interviews with former CNDD-FDD combatants, conducted during a short initial period of fieldwork in Burundi in February/March 2020. Based on the available material, we aim to suggest avenues to operationalize research questions and strategies to unpack the nature and structuring factors of political participation of ex-combatants against the background of the transformation of their rebel movement into a political party. We do so after providing a brief overview of the historical background of the Burundian conflict, with particular attention on the trajectory of the CNDD-FDD and its transformation into a political party. A final section concludes.

2. COMBATANT EXPERIENCES AS SOURCES OF IDENTIFICATION, SELF-UNDERSTANDING AND GROUPNESS: EMOTIONS AND IDEOLOGY

In the following sections we discuss some factors that we believe are particularly relevant and useful to consider when trying to understand the sources of ex-combatants’ political participation – both in general and against the background of a rebel-to-party transformation. An overarching conception is the notion of identity which we operationalize – building on Brubaker (2006) – through the concepts of *identification*, *self-understanding* and *groupness*. We specify these concepts further through the notions of emotions and cognition, the latter comprising (amongst others) ideology.

The experience of armed combat likely shapes combatants’ long-term identities, as has been suggested by several studies. In her research on M19 ex-combatants in Colombia, Söderström (2016) for instance states that “conflict identities in general can remain intact over long periods of time” (p. 228). She found that among her research participants, the “M19 identity and legacy were felt throughout their life, and formed the basis for many of their life choices, and political choices” (Söderström, 2016, p. 229). In her work on ex-combatants in Liberia, Söderström (2015) also notes that “(b)eing a former combatant seems to be an identity label that, for various reasons, remains potent across times” (p. 168). Maringira (2015) shows that

ex-combatants in South Africa have also retained their military identities, which leads them to see themselves – and be seen by others – as having a particular role in their respective communities.

While identities hence do appear crucial in conditioning ex-combatants' social and political participation, Brubaker & Cooper (2000) argue that this term is too heterogeneous to serve well as an analytical concept, and therefore suggest less ambiguous and more precise alternatives that seem useful when analysing politics of ex-combatants: *identification*, *self-understanding* and *groupness*. These terms equip us with a much more nuanced and analytically more precise vocabulary. Identification refers to “identifying oneself (or someone else) as someone who fits a certain description or belongs to a certain category” or “identifying oneself emotionally *with* another person, category or collectivity” (Brubaker, 2006, p. 44). It hence entails both a cognitive and emotional dimension that can be distinguished. It moreover “invites us to specify the agents that do the identifying. And it does not presuppose that such identifying (even by powerful agents, such as the state) will necessarily result in the internal sameness, the distinctiveness, the bounded groupness that political entrepreneurs may seek to achieve” (Brubaker, 2006, p. 41). Self-understanding is “what might be called ‘situated subjectivity’: one’s sense of who one is, of one’s social location, and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act” (Brubaker, 2006, p. 44). It’s “the practical sense – at once cognitive and emotional – that persons have of themselves and their social world” (Brubaker, 2006, p. 44). And groupness refers to “the emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group, involving both a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group members and a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 19). It is a “strongly groupist, exclusive, affectively charged” form of self-understanding (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 19).

Given that emotions and cognition/ideology – as the definitions above suggest – are the cornerstones of these crucial processes of identification and self-understanding, it appears useful to further unpack these two dimensions.

2.1. Emotions

The importance of emotions has in fact been pointed out in several studies on (politics of) ex-combatants (Nussio, 2012; Söderström, 2015, 2016; Wiegink, 2013). In her study on political participation of ex-combatants in Liberia for instance, Söderström (2015) highlights the “importance of emotions and affect in their political voice”, suggesting that “‘emotion rather than thought’ is the driving force for such political actors”, a logic she terms “politics of affection” (pp. 162-163).

Yet, emotions – their actual nature, role, and effect – have so far received little thorough, systematic analytical attention. This is regrettable, given that emotions – from a constructivist approach, viewing them as culturally constructed rather than automatic somatic responses (Jasper, 1998, p. 399) – can in fact be analysed in the same way as cognitive beliefs and moral visions (Goodwin, Jasper, & Poletta, 2004). And they *should be*, since they are an integral part of all social action (Goodwin et al., 2004; Jasper, 1998). They therefore also pervade politics in important ways (Marcus, 2000), and might well do so even more in the case of ex-combatants – in particular against the background of rebel-to-party transformations – than they do in general.

While there are different types of emotions, *affects* appear to be particularly relevant for the study of politics of ex-combatants. Affects are strong and abiding positive or negative emotions towards people, groups, ideas or things – such as love, hate, solidarity, loyalty, or (dis)trust – that “give us our basic orientations toward the world” (Goodwin et al., 2004, p. 418). Collective action can importantly shape or even create such affects (Jasper, 1998). Given that participation in an armed group is an extreme and highly intense form of collective action, we can expect that it also creates particularly strong (positive and negative) affects – a dynamic that is likely fostered through respective socialization and indoctrination into the ideology of the group. As affects generally persist over long periods of time and have “enormous impact on political action” (Jasper, 1998, p. 402), it is also likely that war-generated affects potentially endure in the post-conflict period and considerably shape ex-combatants' self-understandings, identifications and feelings of groupness, and hence structure their political participation. In essence, when it comes to affects, the combat experience and related cognitive socialization seems likely to create what Brubaker and Cooper

(2000, p. 19) call groupness, namely an “emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group, involving both a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group members and a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders.”

Two basic types of affects created or shaped by the collective action – in this case armed combat – can be distinguished: *reciprocal* and *shared* ones (Jasper, 1998). The *reciprocal* ones refer to the emotions ex-combatants have towards each other, which might typically include friendship, trust, and loyalty (Jasper, 1998, p. 417). If ex-combatants hence have such positive affects, for example trust, towards the rebel-party leaders, for instance, this potentially binds them to the party. As Goodwin et al. (2004, p. 419) note, trust is a crucial factor in politics, functioning as “an emotional equivalent of a cognitive schema, simplifying the world in useful ways”, in the sense that it functions as “a kind of shortcut through which we can avoid processing a lot of information”. This means that “(a)t a cognitive level, we tend to believe the statements of those individuals and organizations toward whom, at the emotional level, we have positive affects: We trust those we agree with, and agree with those we trust” (Goodwin et al., 2004, p. 419). This example points to a logic that, according to appraisal theorists, applies generally: affects bias our cognitive appraisal of an information/event, which shapes our emotional responses/reactions to this information/event (for example anger, joy or fear – transitory, reactive emotions), which in turn impact on the (political) actions we take (Halperin, 2014; Jasper, 1998).

The *shared* affects relate to feelings that members of a group – in this case ex-combatants – commonly hold towards other groups, people, institutions etc., including for instance hate or hostility towards the adversary or (dis)trust towards an institution (Jasper, 1998). Given that armed combat likely leaves behind (potentially strong) negative affects – hostility, distrust, or even hate – towards certain opponents, we can expect these emotions to keep structuring ex-combatants’ political participation. As Halperin (2014) cautions, such emotions can fuel the continuation of conflicts and aggressive behaviour, “inducing violence instead of conciliatory actions and constituting powerful psychological barriers to peaceful resolutions” (p. 68). Grossman, Manekin, & Miodownik’s (2015) study on Israeli veterans offers support for this argument, by presenting “robust evidence that combat exposure has a significant and durable negative effect on attitudes towards peaceful conflict resolution, substantially reducing support for negotiated compromise” (p. 1003). “This effect extends to political behaviour, producing a significant shift to the right in vote” (Grossman et al., 2015, p. 1003), the authors note.

Another type of emotions, apart from affects, that appears particularly relevant to consider when studying ex-combatants’ political participation, are moral emotions. These latter “arise out of complex cognitive understandings and moral awareness, reflecting our comprehension of the world around us and sometimes of our place in it” (Goodwin et al., 2004, p. 422) – which connects again with self-understanding. They tend to “reflect judgments, often implicit, about our own actions”, and might for instance include pride or shame (Goodwin et al., 2004, p. 422). Moral emotions about one’s past participation in the war, seem to be what Nussio (2012), in his study on Colombian ex-combatants, termed “emotional legacies of war”. Among these “emotional legacies”, Nussio (2012) identified among others regret, pride, or resentment – emotions that will shape ex-combatants’ behaviour in the post-conflict context, he argues. This might well be particularly true for political participation. We might for instance expect that emotions like regret or resentment over the past war-time participation will tend to result in disengagement from, and possibly engagement in opposition to the former rebel-party, while emotions like pride will likely tend to foster/uphold the identification with, and participation within, the party.

2.2. Ideology

Another factor we can expect to be potentially significant in shaping ex-combatants’ political participation is ideology. While ideology is an immensely complex and ambiguous concept that has been used and defined in a variety of ways across and within different disciplines of the social sciences, it can broadly be understood as a distinctive system or set of ideas and beliefs, which shapes people’s understanding of their political world and guides their political behaviour (Maynard & Bensch, 2016, p. 73). It does so mainly by “providing cognitive resources for thinking processes, including decision-making processes and, thereby, shaping agents’ behaviour” (Maynard & Bensch, 2016, p. 73). Given “that different individuals, groups, in-

stitutions or societies are characterised by distinctive idiosyncratic worldviews that meaningfully shape their political thought and political behaviour”, it is important to study these worldviews in order to “understand, explain or predict what they say, think and do” (Maynard, 2017, p. 298).

Ideology is considered largely cognitive. Such “a cognitive perspective focuses our analytical lens on how people see the world, parse their experience, and interpret events” (Brubaker, 2006, p. 77). But ideology is also strongly interconnected with emotions. Ideologies not only seem to shape long-term affects, but also impact on the appraisal of events and hence on emotional responses (anger, outrage, joy etc.) and resulting political engagement (Halperin, 2014). This seems to be what Jasper (1998) means when he states that “even the most fleeting emotions are firmly rooted in moral and cognitive beliefs that are relatively stable and predictable” (p. 421).

The role of ideology in post-Cold War armed groups and conflicts has for a long time been ignored or downplayed “as vacuous or superficial” (Straus, 2015, p. 329) in the academic literature, which instead focused on structural and situational factors (Sanin & Wood, 2014, p. 213). Similarly, political parties in the Global South have often been portrayed as non-ideological (Curtis & Sindre, 2019, p. 388). More recently, however, there has been growing acknowledgement of the crucial role of ideology in shaping political violence and conflicts (Straus, 2015), the trajectory and behaviour of armed groups (Sanin & Wood, 2014), and, correspondingly, of former rebel parties (Curtis & Sindre, 2019).

Individual combatants are usually to some extent socialized within a group’s ideology. Even those that do not join the group for ideological and normative reasons, might hence – at least to some extent – “come to be normatively committed to the group’s ideology as a result of socialization processes” (Sanin & Wood, 2014, p. 220). Ugarriza & Craig’s (2012) study on Colombian paramilitaries for instance finds that “ideological differences are not just explained by one’s experiences before enlisting in an armed group; rather, membership in that armed group has a significant effect on one’s ideological development” (p. 468). Ideology can hence be expected to shape and structure ex-combatants’ thinking, emotions and political engagement in the post-conflict period.

In relation to the former rebel-party, ideology can either link ex-combatants closely to the party (since they are potentially deeply socialized within its ideology), or – if the party is considered ideologically inconsistent – alienate them from it. This hence depends on the ideological commitment of the individual on the one hand, and on the perceived ideological consistency of the party on the other hand. While recent work on rebel-to-party transformations has shown that “wartime ideologies continue to shape how these parties govern” (Curtis & Sindre, 2019, p. 394), it has also been noted that there is enormous “variation in the consistency of ideologies of former armed groups over time” (Curtis & Sindre, 2019, p. 388). In the case of Rwanda for instance, Chemouni & Mugiraneza (2020) illustrate ideological continuities between the RPF’s pre- and post-genocide discourses and practices. Other cases are, however, characterised by changes or inconsistencies, for instance due to internal ideological rifts and divisions between factions (Burihabwa & Curtis, 2019), or due to an accommodation to electoral politics (Berti, 2019). As Berti (2019) points out, “(f)or rebel opposition groups that built their wartime political identity around the inherent injustice and unsustainability of the status quo, the illegitimacy of the state and the political system, the need for a revolutionary restructuring of the state and the utility and legitimacy of armed struggle, the challenge of reconciling wartime ideology with the inevitable compromises required by political participation and electoral competition can be daunting” (p. 516). Berti’s (2019) analysis of how Hamas and Hezbollah responded to this very challenge, reveals “a complex process of accommodation of political expediency and ideological aspirations”, in the process of which “governance practices and ideological beliefs are contested, reshaped and adapted over time” (p. 517). Such ideological changes and political compromises – for whatever reason they might occur – potentially estrange ideologically committed ex-combatants from the former rebel-party. Subedi (2014) for instance found that among ex-combatants in Nepal, some seemed confused and disoriented over an ideological rift within the former rebel party and were frustrated over their disappointed expectation of “a total transformation of the state, economically, politically and socially” (p. 48).

3. EX-COMBATANT POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AGAINST THE BACKDROP OF REBEL MOVEMENT TO POLITICAL PARTY TRANSFORMATION: A BROAD FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS

Based on the conceptualisation suggested above, we propose a three-layered framework for analysis of ex-combatants' political participation against the background of their former armed group having transformed into a political party. Aiming to gain a holistic understanding of the complex dynamics involved, we suggest to analyse the topic on three different levels: the macro-level of the political party, the meso-level of ex-combatants' associations/organisations, and the micro-level of individual ex-combatants. The above developed conceptualization of self-understanding, identification and groupness, and its emotional and cognitive/ideological dimensions, is used to broadly structure and guide the analysis on the different levels.

3.1. Macro-level: former rebel party

In order to understand the role of the political party in shaping the individual ex-combatants' political participation, it seems important to gain a holistic understanding of the respective party and its historical roots as rebel group in the first place. This hence relates to many of the questions addressed in the rebel-to-party literature: the nature, organisation, practices, popular support and legitimacy, ideology and goals of the rebel group; the nature of the conflict settlement and the former rebel party's entry in the political arena, its electoral and political viability; the continuities and/or changes in terms of organisational structure, practices, ideology and goals; and its democratic record. Many of these elements are in themselves already relevant to understand if and how ex-combatants continue to identify with, and participate within, the party. Here, we might want to pay specific attention to the ideological dimension – its content, continuity or change, and the affects it creates.

Building on this fundament, we then might want to look more specifically at how – and if at all – the party aims to uphold ex-combatants' political participation. Therefore, we suggest two main guiding questions. First, how – if at all – does the party *directly* and *actively* encourage and mobilize ex-combatants' engagement within and on behalf of the party, and what forms of political participation does that concern? The party might for instance employ ex-combatants for its electoral campaigns, place them as candidates for different positions or specifically recruit them for any other form of political participation. As Sindre (2016b) notes, "(w)artime mobilisation can create strong and lasting ties of inter-dependency between the party elites who are mostly made up of the former leadership of the rebel group and ex-combatants" (p. 196). Party leaders might hence be inclined to include their former combatants into the party in order to guarantee "a stable support base, a pool of loyal and ideologically committed candidates to run for office, as well as an efficient party machinery to run election campaigns and staff party branch offices in between campaigns" (Sindre, 2016b, p. 197).

In terms of mobilising incentive structures, we might expect a certain wartime path dependency, in the sense that, for instance, "rebel groups that rely on selective incentives, including inclusion into patronage networks, might seek to uphold these structures in order to retain a coherent and strong party organisation" (Sindre, 2016b, p. 199). Such direct and targeted mobilisation through patronage relations might hence be based on continued military networks and structures, with former commanders and leaders using their new positions within the party, and possibly the state administration, to offer "their" ex-combatants material benefits, employment or protection in return for their continued loyalty, support and services (Wiegink, 2015a, 2015b; Söderström, 2016). Several studies have emphasized that such vertical military networks generally remain relevant and active even long after the end of conflict and the formal dismantlement of armed groups, and can be mobilized and redirected for various post-war (political) purposes (Christensen & Utas, 2008; Persson, 2012; Themnér, 2012, 2013, 2015; Wiegink, 2015a, 2015b). Christensen & Utas (2008) for example present evidence of political parties and presidential candidates in Sierra Leone using networks and chains of command established during the war to strategically remobilize ex-combatants into "security squads" during the electoral campaigning of 2007.

Second, how – if at all – does the party *indirectly* shape ex-combatants' political participation

by impacting – intentionally or unintentionally – on their sense of identification with the party, feeling of groupness, or more individual self-understanding? Or, in other words, we might ask whether and how it upholds ex-combatants' identification with the party, whether and how it shapes ex-combatants' broader self-understanding, and whether and how it tries to uphold/create "groupness" with its ex-combatants – an "emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group, involving both a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group members" (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 19).

If the party becomes part of institutionalized power and thus the state apparatus, this might lead to important processes of identification in relation to individual combatants – and others – since "(t)he state is a powerful 'identifier', not because it can create 'identities' in the strong sense – in general, it cannot – but because it has the material and symbolic resources to impose the categories, classificatory schemes, and modes of social counting and accounting with which bureaucrats, judges, teachers, and doctors must work and to which nonstate actors must refer" (Brubaker, 2006, p. 43). The party might hence for instance create a formal/legal category of "ex-combatants" – a categorization that is potentially linked to access to specific resources such as pensions, material rewards, targeted employment programs etc. Several studies have noted that ex-combatants do tend to expect to be rewarded for their contribution and sacrifices once the armed group becomes a (ruling) party and gains access to resources (Metsola, 2010; Metsola & Melber, 2007; Sindre, 2016b; Wiegink, 2015b). Such categorization and identification from the part of the party might hence not only impact on ex-combatants' sense of identification with the party – depending on whether or not it meets their expectations of "reward" – but also shape/sustain the individual's self-understanding and social location as ex-combatant (and identification as such by others).

The party might also considerably shape ex-combatants' identification and self-understanding through discourses and historical narratives. Former rebel parties' legitimacy often remains tied to their past war-time achievements – which "are carried over by and defined by former rebel group members" (Sindre, 2016b, p. 208). Namibia is an illustrative case of this. As Metsola (2010) and Metsola & Melber (2007) argue, the ruling party Swapo's legitimacy is strongly based on a nationalist narrative of its liberation struggle, which casts Swapo ex-combatants as national heroes. A similar dynamic was noted by Wiegink (2013) in Mozambique, where the FRELIMO builds "legitimacy and national identity around the credentials of the liberation war", whose veterans are correspondingly "seen as national heroes" (pp. 51-52). Such discourses in themselves might already foster pride in ex-combatants, and nurture their continued identification with the party. Yet, this latter might – due to these very discourses – be particularly inclined to uphold ex-combatants' identification with it, given that they "occupy a strategic position in the dominant narrative of the nation's history" and are hence an important source of legitimacy (Metsola & Melber, 2007, p. 98).

In all this, it seems important to keep in mind the potentially (although not necessarily) strong personal and emotional ties established during the war. Metsola & Melber (2007) for instance highlight how "longstanding, close – often personal – relations" continue to shape relations between the Swapo officials and ex-combatants, with the former referring to the latter as "brothers, sisters, and children" (p. 102).

Methodologically, these ways of direct and indirect political mobilisation of ex-combatants by the former rebel-party through – among others – identification, categorization, and self-understanding, can potentially be studied using different avenues. They might for instance include direct interviews with (former) party officials or political analysts (regarding the applied mobilisation and incentive strategies), the analysis of policies and programs targeting ex-combatants, the analysis of speeches and party documents etc.

3.2. Meso-level: ex-combatant associations, organisations and networks

The meso-level also appears relevant and worth looking at to understand how ex-combatants participate politically, since social networks can be viewed as "predictors of individual participation", as they potentially "increase individual chances to become involved" (Diani, 2004, p. 339). One of the highly likely outcomes of the combatant experience is in fact the combination of having a categorical commonality – being an ex-combatant – and a particular connectedness, namely the emotional bonds and networks between ex-combatants. And groupness is precisely "a joint product of the 'catness' and 'netness' – categorical com-

monality and relational connectedness” (Brubaker, 2006, p. 47).

A first guiding question we might hence want to ask, is how – if at all – ex-combatants are (formally or informally) connected and organised on the meso-level and, relatedly, whether and how such associations and organisations shape their members’ self-understanding, identification and feelings of groupness. Several studies have pointed out that (emotional) ties established during the war generally remain relevant and strong long after the end of the conflict and the formal dismantlement of an armed group (Wiegink, 2015a, 2015b; Christensen & Utas, 2008; Söderström, 2015). In Mozambique for instance, Wiegink (2015b) found that “bonds established during the war were integral to the social network of former Renamo combatants” (p. 10). In the absence of family ties to (re)connect with, the former comrades “offered a network of support for Renamo combatants in their daily struggles, based on interdependency and reciprocity, and simultaneously offered a sense of belonging” (Wiegink, 2015b, p. 10). Similar observations were made by Christensen & Utas (2008) in Sierra Leone, where many ex-combatants “live with other ex-combatants who have shared similar experiences”, in a context otherwise characterised by lacking kinship ties and a general absence of social relations (p. 525). In Liberia, Söderström (2013a) also finds that daily contact with former comrades is the norm among the ex-combatant community, and that “politics was a central component of this interaction” (p. 417). This, she argues, suggests that the ex-combatants “still have coinciding interests and a shared identity” (Söderström, 2013a, p. 417). Such enduring ties not only seem to potentially foster individuals’ identification and self-understanding as ex-combatant, but also a feeling of groupness and belonging.

In many cases, ex-combatants organise themselves in formal or informal interest/lobby groups or associations – such as in Zimbabwe (McGregor, 2002), South Africa (Maringira, 2018), Namibia (Metsola, 2010; Metsola & Melber, 2007), Nepal (Subedi, 2014) or Indonesia & East Timor (Sindre, 2016b). These organisations and associations pursue diverse economic and/or political goals (benefits, compensation, official recognition, specific rights, etc.) on a group basis. In the context of rebel-to-party transformations, “such ex-combatant interest organisations may be closely tied to the mother party, i.e. the former rebel party or, in spite of their shared historical affinity, they may operate in direct opposition to the party”, notes Sindre (2016b, p. 197). A second relevant question regarding the meso-level would hence relate to the interests/goals these associations express and pursue, and their position vis-à-vis the party.

Methodologically, this could be done through an “inventory” of ex-combatants’ associations and organisations, the analysis of documents, press releases or statements, interviews with these organisations’ representatives or members, and participant observation.

3.3. Micro-level: individual ex-combatants

As concerns the individual ex-combatants, we propose two main guiding questions. The first relates to their (forms of) political participation in general – possibly ranging from complete disengagement to militant activism – and their relation and position towards the party more specifically – possibly ranging from loyal membership to total renunciation. Forms of participation can involve representational and extra-representational channels and might include voting, campaigning, demonstrating, participating in (ex-combatant) associations, (party) movements, or NGOs, running for an office or party position, attending (party) meetings or rallies, volunteering etc. The second question relates to the factors that inform and structure this participation and involvement, both in general and in relation to the party. Here, particular (though not exclusive) attention is again directed towards self-understanding, identification, and groupness – and their emotional and cognitive/ideological dimensions.

Methodologically, we suggest to approach this dimension through life history interviews, a method also used by Söderström (2016) in her study on political participation of former M19 combatants in Colombia. This particular method seems well suited since it allows for inquiry into the past – original reasons and motivations for joining the rebel group, the war experience, the (fulfilled or disappointed) expectations after war, the demobilisation and reintegration process – and the present. It hence includes in its scope long-term factors that might structure today’s political participation, as well as changes and continuities over time. The main focus will however be put on the after-war period, since, as notes Söderström (2015), “these

are elements that may be more malleable; this time period represents an opportunity to shape the conditions for ex-combatants' political engagement" (p. 166).

4. APPLYING THE FRAMEWORK: BURUNDI

In the following sections, we will in a very preliminary way apply the proposed analytical framework for the case of Burundi. The small central African country constitutes an exemplary case to study political participation of former rebels. After a protracted civil war, several rebel groups transformed into political parties, with the most important one among them, the CNDD-FDD, becoming ruling party. Several studies have shed light on these transformation processes (Alfieri, 2016; Burihabwa, 2017; Burihabwa & Curtis, 2019; Nindorera, 2012; Rufyikiri, 2016; Wittig, 2016). Yet, the political participation of individual ex-combatants against this specific background has remained largely unexplored. It is this gap that this work in progress wants to address, for the specific case of the CNDD-FDD.

4.1. Conflict background

After independence from Belgium in 1962, Burundi was for almost three decades controlled by a relatively small clique of members of a sub-group of the ethnic Tutsi minority. During that era, the state was characterized by "little separation of power between executive, legislature, judiciary, the single party, and the army" (Uvin, 2009, pp. 9-10). Under the three successive Tutsi military regimes the Hutu ethnic population majority was victimized not only by systematic exclusion from access to all domains of power and public life, but also by repeated large-scale violence – such as in 1965, 1969, 1972 and 1988 – through the Tutsi-dominated army.

In the early 1990s, under growing pressure from the international donor community, Burundi finally initiated a democratisation process. A new constitution, enshrining a multi-party democratic system, was adopted in 1992. In the ensuing elections in 1993 the Hutu Melchior Ndadaye was elected president, and was to become the first Hutu to be head of state of Burundi. Yet, barely three months into office, Ndadaye was assassinated by members of the army, triggering the immediate outbreak of massive violence throughout the country, and eventually leading to a protracted civil war between several Hutu-dominated rebel groups and the Tutsi-dominated army.

The largest and most important rebel movement was the CNDD-FDD, which was officially created in September 1994 by a faction of Ndadaye's FRODEBU party (Burihabwa, 2017; Nindorera, 2012). While the rebellion emerged in immediate response to the assassination of the president and the "sabotage" of the democratisation process, it was also "deeply rooted in Hutu's frustration over the discrimination, exclusion and repeated cycles of aggression to which they had been subjected" (Nindorera, 2012, p. 14). The main goals put forward by the CNDD-FDD were the restoration of democracy and the achievements of the 1993 elections, as well as the reform of the Tutsi-dominated army (Burihabwa, 2017; Nindorera, 2012). The movement hence clearly pursued a political agenda and had "important ideological commitments" (Burihabwa & Curtis 2019, p. 564).

As Wittig (2016) notes, the CNDD-FDD was from the outset characterized by combined politico-violent strategies. Initially, the movement was organized in two separate wings, with the political wing (CNDD) dominating the armed one (FDD). This power-balance was however reversed in 1998, when the restructuring into an integrated "politico-military movement" saw the armed elements gaining predominance over the political ones (Rufyikiri, 2016, p. 12).

Militarily, the CNDD-FDD relatively quickly developed into a potent and effective force. It had managed to assemble and train the various scattered self-defence groups, which had sprung up throughout the country in the aftermath of Ndadaye's assassination, and to integrate them in a rigidly organized, disciplined and coherent military structure (Burihabwa, 2017).

Politically, "much effort was made to mobilise the population and increase popular awareness of the deep-seated reasons for the struggle" (Nindorera, 2012, p. 18). Herefore, country-wide political structures were established, which – apart from political mobilisation – also served the purpose of facilitating

logistical support for the troops (Burihabwa, 2017). The popular support – both materially and morally – by the largely Hutu peasant population was in fact very strong, and contributed decisively to the movement’s strength and effectiveness (Burihabwa, 2017; Nindorera, 2012).

After several years of civil war and tedious negotiations under African mediation – first led by Julius Nyerere, and after his death by Nelson Mandela – the Arusha Peace and Reconciliation Agreement was signed in 2000. It provided not only for a consociational power-sharing system and a reform of the national army, but also for the possible transformation of armed groups into political parties and their inclusion in the national institutions.

The CNDD-FDD was however not among the 19 signatories and rejected the agreement on several grounds. Only due to increasing regional and international pressure on the one hand, and growing war-fatigue among both the troops and the population on the other hand, did the CNDD-FDD in 2002 finally start formal peace talks with the transitional government under South African mediation (Nindorera, 2012, p. 23). These negotiations resulted in several agreements (Vandeginste, 2009, p. 73) in which the CNDD-FDD – thanks to its military strength and the resulting negotiating power – was able to win considerable concessions. The process was finally concluded with the signature of the Global Ceasefire Agreement in November 2003.

The conclusion of its peace process with the transitional government marked the beginning of a threefold (parallel) process for the CNDD-FDD – political integration, military integration, and demobilisation. First, it entered the transitional political institutions, in which it was awarded four ministries and fifteen seats in the National Assembly, amongst others (Vandeginste, 2009, p. 79). At the same time, it set off its transformation into a political party. Second, parts of its troops entered the country’s new Defense Forces, with 8,094 of its combatants integrated into the Army, and another 4,901 into the police force (Burihabwa, 2017, p. 289). The CNDD-FDD was moreover granted 40% and 35% of the positions in the commanding officer corps of the army and the police respectively (Vandeginste, 2009, p. 79). Third, the remaining 5,929 combatants were demobilised to reintegrate civilian society (Burihabwa, 2017, p. 289).

4.2. The CNDD-FDD as (ruling) party

After the CNDD-FDD had concluded its transformation into a political party by adopting its new party statutes in August 2004, it was legally ratified as a political party in January 2005. Shortly after, a new National Constitution was adopted, which was largely based on the Arusha Agreement (Nindorera, 2019). It stipulated a system of consociational power-sharing, containing a number of “provisions aimed at balancing ethnic representation at all levels in the public institutions” (Vandeginste, 2014, p. 268). Most importantly, it introduced quota of 60% Hutu and 40% Tutsi for future governments and parliaments and ethnic parity within the new National Security Forces.

With the new post-transitional Constitution in place and the CNDD-FDD having been officially ratified as political party, the way was paved for general elections, which would mark the end of the political transition. In its electoral campaign, the CNDD-FDD could draw on its wartime shadow administration structures and networks – through which it was firmly entrenched throughout the country – and its strong bond with the rural population established during wartime (Burihabwa, 2017, p. 306; Hirschy & Lafont, 2015; Wittig, 2016). Due to its past as a politico-military movement, the CNDD-FDD, however, not only enjoyed a structural/organizational advantage, but also strong legitimacy based on its achievements. In its campaign, the party hence “insisted on its crucial role in reforming the defence and security forces, and on its ability to defend its electoral gains and any possible sabotage attempt like that on the 1993 democratic experiment”, portraying itself as “a guardian” of security (Nindorera, 2012, p. 27).

The above mentioned strengths of the CNDD-FDD were clearly reflected in the electoral results. The party outperformed its political adversaries by far, winning a majority of seats in the National Assembly and the Senate. In a mere formality, these two bodies then elected the CNDD-FDD’s candidate, Pierre Nkurunziza, as president¹. Ever since 2005, the CNDD-FDD has then steadily consolidated its power. In

[1] While the president of Burundi is usually elected by direct universal suffrage, the first post-transition president was exceptionally elected indirectly by the National Assembly and the Senate (Vandeginste, 2015, p. 625-626).

the 2010 elections, the party won a landslide victory after all major opposition parties had withdrawn from the electoral process over denounced irregularities during the first round of polls at the community level (Vandeginste, 2011). The resulting hegemonic position of the CNDD-FDD allowed the party to tighten its control over all the country's institutions. As Vandeginste (2011) concludes, the elections hence paradoxically resulted in a "democratically' legitimated quasi-return to a single-party rule" (p. 332). This trend was continued in the 2015 elections. After Nkurunziza's announcement to run for a third term – by many regarded as anti-constitutional – had plunged the country into a deep political crisis, the opposition again boycotted the elections (Vandeginste, 2015). The CNDD-FDD again emerged with large majorities in the National Assembly and the Senate, and Nkurunziza was re-elected. In 2020, the party again won large majorities, and former CNDD-FDD party president, Evariste Ndayishimiye, was elected president.

The process of growing political hegemony has been characterized by increasingly authoritarian practices. Especially since 2010, the CNDD-FDD has been accused of oppressing political opponents, civil society activists and journalists; committing human rights violations; restricting political and civil liberties; using political violence; disrespecting the rule of law etc. Several authors have referred to such governance practices of the CNDD-FDD as "reflexes du maquis²" or "maquis practice continuity" (Rufyikiri, 2016; Wittig, 2016). Wittig (2016) and others (Burihabwa & Curtis, 2019; Van Acker, 2015) however note that the CNDD-FDD's authoritarian governance practices are not only a legacy of the rebellion, but also of former authoritarian regimes.

As Hirschy and Lafont (2015, pp. 175-176) and others (Burihabwa & Curtis, 2019) argue, this reproduction and continuation of wartime military logics and authoritarian practices seems to be linked to the fact that former generals of the military wing have come to increasingly dominate the party leadership, whereas (more moderate) civilian cadres have been sidelined or excluded. This, argue Burihabwa and Curtis (2019), explains why the CNDD-FDD's practices have come to contradict its earlier wartime ideological ideals and state visions, revolving around democracy, inclusivity and social justice. Yet, whether this is actually perceived this way by ex-combatants remains an open question.

Authoritarian tendencies do not only seem to characterize the CNDD-FDD's handling of its external environment, but also its intra-party practices. Rufyikiri (2016) – former member of the CNDD-FDD, having served as President of the Senate and Vice-President of the Republic – notes that while officially, "the participation of CNDD-FDD members in deliberation and decision-making is provided", internal "democracy within the CNDD-FDD has been compromised by strong centralization of decision-making, authoritarian practices and a lack of tolerance of divergent ideas" (p. 25).

In many regards, the post-war development of the CNDD-FDD hence resonates with findings of the more general rebel-to-party literature. As a political party, the CNDD-FDD profited from organisational structures and legitimacy established during wartime. At the same time, it has remained anchored in a militaristic culture and has been characterized by authoritarian practices. Against this backdrop, it appears all the more relevant to develop a better understanding of how these developments on the macro-level have impacted on the political participation of the CNDD-FDD's former rank and file combatants.

4.3. Political participation of individual CNDD-FDD ex-combatants

4.3.1. Macro-Level: former rebel party mobilisation

We still have very little systematic knowledge about whether and how the party *directly* and *actively* encourages political participation of its ex-combatants – in the sense of "recruiting" them for certain actions. One of the few indications come from Burihabwa (2017, pp. 306-307) and Wittig (2016, p. 149), who note that in 2005 demobilised ex-combatants were sent into different communities to campaign for the elections. Van Acker (2015) moreover pointed to the fact that "old-boys' networks cross the boundaries between executive institutions, the army, security and intelligence services and party structures, and stretch from the level of high ranking elites close to President Nkurunziza, to the former combatants of the FDD rebellion at

[2] The term maquis (French for "bush") is generally used as an equivalent for "in the rebellion". It specifically refers to the Kibira forest, the heartland of the rebellion where the CNDD-FDD's armed forces initially assembled and organized.

the grassroots level” (p. 7). While these networks are likely important for mobilizing ex-combatants, we lack understanding of the exact nature and purpose of this mobilisation.

We also still lack systematic knowledge on how the party *indirectly* shapes ex-combatants’ political participation by – intentionally or unintentionally – impacting on their sense of identification with the party, feeling of groupness, or more individual self-understanding. What we do know, however, is that the CNDD-FDD’s general mobilisation, legitimisation, and partisan identity building strategies heavily build on its rebel past (Hirschy & Lafonte, 2015; Van Acker, Muhangaje, & Magerano, 2018). Van Acker et al. (2018, p. 76) note that the party’s “rebel legacy is mobilized or operates in various ways to solidify a sense of shared identity around the party’s origins”. The term that designates the party’s militants – *Abagumyabanga* (“those who keep the secret” in Kirundi) – for instance refers “to the clandestine networks of combatants throughout the country during the war” (Van Acker et al., 2018, p. 76). This is only one example of a whole jargon of particular expressions – used in daily conversations or campaign slogans – which originated in the vernacular of the combatants in the *maquis* (Van Acker et al., 2018, p. 76). Its wartime legacy is also visualised in the CNDD-FDD’s “countless ‘monuments’ and structures” throughout the country – such as little huts, small monuments, murals, etc. – many of which carry “slogans referring to the historic struggle” (Van Acker et al., 2018, p. 77). It is hence likely that this “rebellion-inspired” party culture emotionally resonates with ex-combatants and fosters their identification with the party, and potentially upholds a sense of groupness.

A particular example of indirect mobilisation of former combatants is the yearly celebration of the combatants’ week in November. This week, which concerns former CNDD-FDD combatants only, is marked with commemorations for the fallen combatants and festivities to memorize the armed struggle. In 2013, former president Nkurunziza’s speech reflected on the purpose of this week as follows:

“Within the Cndd-Fdd this date will remain sacred, it reminds us of where we came from and that our struggle continues. (...) We took up arms to seek democracy, development and justice. It takes a lot of effort to achieve this, because there are always those who sabotage these projects, but the most important thing is to continue to do so”. (Nkurunziza, as cited in Madirisha, 2013)

Reminding the former combatants (by hinting at specific negative affects towards those who “sabotage” their projects) that their struggle did not end by laying down arms, but does in fact continue, seems an active encouragement for their continued political engagement and participation for the cause. This led Birantamije (2018, p. 30) to view this week as an act of symbolic political remobilisation of former combatants. Yet what are the repertoires used for this remobilisation?

First and foremost, the week seems to be an occasion to uphold a feeling of (militaristic) groupness, an “emotionally laden sense of belonging to a distinctive, bounded group, involving both a felt solidarity or oneness with fellow group members and a felt difference from or even antipathy to specified outsiders” (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000, p. 19). This is for instance done through the sharing of food like in the days of the *maquis*, or through military(-like) parades. In 2020 for instance, local media reported that the closing ceremony started with a parade of a thousand demobilised members of the CNDD-FDD party, some in police trousers and boots, equipped with clubs or dummy rifles (Irakoze, 2020). Yet, specific allusions to dimensions of “groupness” are also visible in the official speeches. President Nkurunziza in 2013 for instance stated that there are things “*only a combatant can understand*”, and that “*it’s understandable that you don’t grasp the full significance unless you’ve been on the battlefield*” (Nkurunziza, as cited in Madirisha, 2013). This seems to reflect a more general rhetoric, identified by Courtois (2017, p. 3), that revolves around the “secret” of the *maquis* – a secret that only former combatants can understand and respect, and that therefore unites them in a common struggle. While such rhetoric allusions to “oneness” seem primarily cognitive, others are more emotional. The former party president and current president of the state, Evariste Ndayishimiye, in 2017 reminded the former combatants that “*during the struggle, the combatants had a profound love. They shared everything*” – and encouraged them to “*keep this love*” (Ndayishimiye, as cited in Hakizimana, 2017).

Another aspect that deserves mentioning is a specific categorization/identification regarding former combatants within the party. The party statutes established a differentiation between founding members (those who have been members when the party was officially created on 8 August 2004), and

adherent members (those who joined the party after). As Rufyikiri (2016) notes, this implicitly made all ex-combatants “*ex officio* members of the party” (p. 20). For Van Acker et al. (2018) the differentiation of membership types moreover reflects “an important distinction between different degrees of party ‘identification’” (p. 77). One of our interviewees (P7) indeed noted that as an ex-combatant, “*you have more value within the party, on the basis of what you have done in the past*”. We do, however, know little about how this specific categorization/identification translates into actual political activities and practices.

The yearly commemoration festivities and the general discourses of the party also seem to foster a very specific emotional legacy of combat: one of pride. The combatants are celebrated as heroes. Heroes for all the sacrifices made, all the hardships endured, all the struggles faced in order to bring the country democracy. The yearly commemorations are hence an occasion, as stated Ndayishimiye in 2017 – to “*salute the bravery*” of the former combatants (Ndayishimiye, as cited in Hakizimana, 2017). This hence likely fosters a specific – positive – self-understanding.

While the ex-combatants hence have a specific and crucial place in the party’s legitimising narratives, there are no indications that ex-combatants – as a formal category – are generally targeted with specific rewards or generalized support or pensions. Ex-combatants in Burundi are in fact generally considered a particularly economically vulnerable category. An ex-combatant representative (as cited in Haburiyakira, 2017) reminded the party leadership during the commemoration festivities in 2017 that its former combatants are “*rotting in poverty*”. This does at least from the outset not suggest they are profiting from “extra care” from the side of the party.

4.3.2. Meso-level: ex-combatant associations & organisations

Even after fifteen years since demobilisation, former CNDD-FDD combatants are still connected and organized in various ways. For one, they are apparently still integrated in what seem to be clear and hierarchical organizational structures. Several authors (Burihabwa, 2017; Courtois, 2017; Van Acker, 2015; Van Acker et al., 2018) have indeed mentioned the continuation of military networks and hierarchies within the CNDD-FDD. Yet, the nature of these structures, the way they operate and mobilise, and the role they play for individual ex-combatants’ political participation is unclear.

Former combatants are also connected through various associations on different levels. Most of our interviewees mentioned being members in local ex-combatant associations. One of the major purposes of these local associations seems to be fostering auto-development and income-generation. Some for instance reportedly farm fish, raise cattle, or work as cooperatives. Yet, these associations were also mentioned as spaces of social contact and communication. One interviewee (P6) affirmed that “*it is true, ex-combatants have exceptional meeting places, exceptionally for them. It allows us to meet each other*”. Even an interviewee (P8) that was only in the rebellion for a short time before deserting, reported being a member in an association that would assemble the local ex-combatants to meet each other and discuss once a month. While such local ex-combatant associations hence seem important and persistent, we still know very little about their nature, purpose and their impact on members’ self-understandings, identifications and feelings of groupness.

The same is true for the different associations that exist on the national level (and possibly on other administrative levels, such as the district level). There is for instance a National Association of Former Combatants, or the Coalition of Ex-Combatants’ Associations for the Maintenance of Peace and Development. One of our interviewees elaborated on the purpose of such associations as follows:

They have been created to serve as a space for expression, a space to meet, a space for exchanging information. In other words, if we want to make a press release, it's feasible. If we want to express our position on a certain subject, it's feasible. (...) our communications must take place in these networks. (P6)

This hence points to the importance of these associations in formulating and expressing ex-combatants' (political) interests and positions. It however also indicates a certain level of control over what individual combatants might be able to publicly express and do. As one interviewee (P7) indeed stated in relation to these associations: *"if someone leaves to join people with bad intentions against the country, he is known"*.

Another aspect of these associations is that they potentially uphold crosscutting links between demobilised ex-combatants and those integrated into the National Security Forces. This might contribute to a continued sense of "groupness" among the different categories of ex-combatants. An interviewee (P7) recounted:

There is a national association of former combatants. Those who are integrated in the police have another association. Those who are integrated in the army also have one. So sometimes we give each other invitations. And we come back to the situation in the maquis.

To sum up, ex-combatant ties, associations and organisations still seem very much intact and active, even after all those years since demobilisation. We do, however, still know very little about what associations exist, how they are organised and linked, what interests and goals they pursue, what political positions they take and express, and how they are positioned towards (and possibly linked with) the party. While in the 2015 run-up to the elections, RFI ("Burundi: les ex-rebelles", 2015) reported that more than 200 CNDD-FDD ex-combatants' representatives from seventeen different provinces assembled in the capital Bujumbura to express their firm support for Nkurunziza's contested third term, and launched a veritable declaration of war on the Burundian opposition and civil society, which fiercely reject Nkurunziza's candidacy, this remains episodic evidence.

4.3.3. Micro-level: individual ex-combatants

The individual level has so far also not been systematically looked at. Episodic evidence, however, indicates that ex-combatants seem to have remained politically active and relevant. In his research shortly after demobilisation, Uvin (2007, p. 24) noted that ex-combatants show a higher degree of politicization, talking more frequently and more critically about politics than the general population. Ex-combatants also seem to have been active in the 2010 elections, amongst others as local electoral observers (Ndimubandi 2013, p. 119). Colombo, D'Aoust & Sterck (2019) moreover found that municipalities with higher polarisation between former combatants of different rebel groups experienced an increased prevalence of electoral violence in 2010. More recently, in 2019, a Burundian media collective reported that demobilised CNDD-FDD combatants manifested – together with other party militants – against the youngest critical reports on Burundi by Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group (Ntumwa, 2019). These are all (although very limited) indications that ex-combatants seem to have remained attached to – and politically active on behalf of – the CNDD-FDD. This was also expressed by one of our interviewees (P6), who stated that what distinguishes the ex-combatants from the general population was their *"firm support"* of the ruling party.

In connection with CNDD-FDD party activities, ex-combatants have particularly often been mentioned in relation to the *Imbonerakure* – the CNDD-FDD's youth wing, which officially accommodates the party's members ranging from 18 – 35 years old. The term *Imbonerakure* (meaning "those who see far" in Kirundi) originates from the *maquis*, where it was used to refer to reconnaissance elements in charge of monitoring enemy positions (Burihabwa, 2017, p. 363; Nindorera, 2012; Wittig, 2016). According to Burihabwa (2017), the *Imbonerakure* from 2007 onwards in fact "developed into somewhat of a safe haven for a growing number of desperate and traumatised demobilised ex-FDD fighters" (p. 363). Van Acker et al. (2018, p. 78) also note that ex-combatants form the "hard core" of the youth movement. While, as Van Acker et al. (2018) state, the *Imbonerakure's* activities can be of a more performative and symbolic nature, they "also involve

everyday governance, resource mobilization and policing public life in the hills in much of rural Burundi” (p. 77). Since 2008, the youth wing has in fact repeatedly stood accused of growing militarization, political intimidation and violence (Van Acker et al. 2018, p. 77; Van Acker 2015, p. 6).

Generally speaking, the episodic evidence hence suggests that many ex-combatants still seem politically active (within the party), and at least in part still ready to engage in violent strategies. Yet, we lack a bottom-up perspective on the diverse forms of political participation of individual ex-combatants on the one hand, and the factors that drive – or in other cases impede – these forms of participation on the other hand.

While this is still very much work in progress, some very basic, initial indications on the structuring factors of participation have already emerged from our pilot interviews. Regarding initial motives for joining the rebellion, almost all interviewees expressed having been driven by strongly felt political motivations – a tendency that has already been noted by several authors (Willems & Van Leeuwen, 2015, p. 324; Uvin, 2009, p. 177; Uvin, 2007). For several interviewees, the loss of parents or other family members heavily contributed – on a profoundly emotional level – to this drive. Several also reported having already been politically active as members of the FRODEBU at that point in time. This sense of fighting for a cause was expressed by one interviewee (P7) as follows:

You are not paid. All the work you do, you do voluntarily, because there is no remuneration. You fight for a real cause, in a dynamic of saying: “It’s because we don’t have this, that I have to do this”. When we (...) went to the battlefield, we had an objective (...) we had no other interest ahead.

The fact that most combatants’ participation in the struggle was politically motivated, might likely have been structuring and informing continued political engagement after the end of the war.

In general, for most of our interviewees, being an ex-combatant still seemed an important part of their self-understanding and of how they socially locate themselves within their communities. Most expressed in some way or another a sense of particular strength, skilfulness, fearlessness, courage and resilience – to some extent seeming to speak to post-traumatic growth theories – distinguishing them from the rest of their community. This feeling seems born out of an experience of combat that was consistently recounted in terms of immense hardship: hunger, exhaustion, injuries etc. As one interviewee (P1) shortly put it: *“Everything was difficult. Nothing was easy”*. This experience appears to have made them feel resilient to any circumstances they may face in life. One interviewee (P2) expressed this as follows: *“The strength that we have, it’s the strength that we had on the day we left the maquis (...). We are used to live through any situation”*.

The feeling of particular strength and resilience seems coupled with a dominating emotional legacy of pride over the (perceived) achievements of the rebellion. As one interviewee (P7) expressed explicitly: *“We are proud of the peace”*. Or, as another one (P6) expressed more implicitly: *“What makes me happy (...) is having fought and having achieved a result. (...) My implication in the rebellion led to something. That makes me happy”*. This feeling of pride and sense of strength appear to translate into a certain *“sense of mission”* – of having a contribution to make to the community and the country. This seems to foster continued (political) participation. One interviewee (P9) for instance stressed: *“It’s us who have to develop this country, because it’s us who know the efforts invested”*. It will hence be relevant to investigate in detail what this means in practice.

While this *“sense of mission”* was sometimes expressed in general terms, it was several times mentioned in particular in relation to the provision of security. The interviewees who did so also seemed to still (to some extent) understand and identify themselves as soldiers. This is expressed in the following narrative of one interviewee (P10):

An ex-combatant is someone who was trained to be a soldier, but left the army, came back and reintegrated into civilian society. But, inside, in conscience, he is a soldier. (...) An ex-combatant is someone who distinguishes himself from the civilian society, because he studied something that the others didn’t study; he lived through a situation that the others did not. The knowledge of how to wage war makes us like soldiers.

We can contribute in case of insecurity against the country. This is what differentiates us from civil society. (...) the population needs us so much when it comes to security. We are the eye of the society. As we have the training, and as we are military, psychologically, we are prepared. So, those who have been in the maquis collaborate with the population by being the eye. Being the eye for them. In terms of mastering information related to security.

While such statements can be read as an expression of continued willingness to use violence, the interviewees themselves framed it on the contrary as willingness to contribute to peace and security – and hence to safeguard and defend the perceived achievements of the rebellion. One interviewee (P6) for instance stated that an “*ex-combatant is someone who significantly contributed to peace*”, and therefore has to safeguard it. Another one (P2) similarly expressed to “*remain at the disposition of the country*” and “*determined to do everything to fight against insecurity in the country*”.

In an interesting contrast to this stood the account of the one interviewee (P8) that recounted the (politically) “weakest” motivations for joining the rebellion – frustrations over poverty and not being able to pay the school fees. This interviewee deserted after a relatively short time, does seem to feel shame rather than pride over having joined the rebellion, and therefore does not like people to know about it. This different identification, self-understanding and emotional legacy does not translate into the same “sense of mission” like described above, as shows the following excerpt:

We (ex-combatants) are not on an equal footing with civilians. (As an ex-combatant) you have techniques that others don't know. In case of war, I have an ability to hide. But also other manoeuvres to disappear, in a military way.

While several others – who expressed stronger political motivations to join in the first place and stronger military self-understandings and identification – hence stressed being ready to use their military skills to actively confront “enemies” and “insecurity”, this interviewee rather envisages using these skills to withdraw from confrontation.

While there hence seems to be a certain tendency towards readiness to employ violence to “safeguard” peace and security, one interviewee (P7) interestingly reasoned that former combatants on the other hand might be more reluctant than others to engage in new warfare, because “*for those that were in the maquis, the maquis is a bad thing. So, maybe, someone who wasn't there, might be tempted to go there, thinking that it was an easy thing*”.

These are however all highly preliminary observations and will need further, systematic inquiry.

5. CONCLUSION

Understanding of the origins of rebel movements, including the motivations that drive individuals to join their ranks, has progressed. Equally, at the macro-level, the dynamics that end rebellions, and civil war in general, are well established and include a growing understanding of the processes that structure rebel-to-political party transformations and their crucial impact on the prospect of sustainable peace. Little is known, however, about the legacy of armed rebellion at the level of individual ex-combatants, in particular with respect to the nature of their political participation in the aftermath of their demobilisation. What forms of political participation do ex-combatants engage in? And what factors drive these forms of participation? This paper aimed to move towards a better, fine-grained understanding of these questions, in particular in contexts of rebel-to-party transformations.

This paper has charted, and aimed to further develop, the conceptual terrain to allow us to unpack the nature of political participation of ex-combatants against the particular backdrop of their rebel movement transforming into a political party. We emphasized the need to scrutinize the factors that structure their political participation that have their origin in the experience as combatant. We suggested to work with a processual understanding of identity through the notions of identification, self-understanding and groupness – constituted by emotions and cognition, the latter comprising ideology – acquired through the experience of combat and military socialization. Evidently, this does not exclude that aspects of iden-

tification, self-understanding or feelings of belonging (groupness) that are not related to the combatant experience, or pre-date that experience, can structure political participation as well. All of this needs to be explored through case studies across a variety of rebel-to-party transformations and at different levels within each case.

While we consider the above processes to be important structuring devices to understand political participation in the aftermath of violence in any given context, we suggest to further substantiate it in relation to the particular context of a rebel-to-party transformation process. We therefore propose to examine these processes at different levels, keeping the individual in focus, but in connection to the meso-level of mediating informal and formal ex-combatant networks/associations/organisations and the macro-level of the former rebel party, its nature, actions and policies.

At the macro-level of the former rebel party, we suggested to ask how – if at all – the party *directly* and *actively* encourages ex-combatants' engagement within and on behalf of the party, and what forms of political participation that concerns. Second, how – if at all – does the party *indirectly* shape ex-combatants' political participation by impacting – intentionally or unintentionally – on their sense of identification with the party, feeling of groupness, or more individual self-understanding? This can be studied using different avenues: key informant interviews with political figures and analysts, documentary analysis of party documents, discourse analysis of speeches of dignitaries or political narratives emanating from party officials and organs.

At the meso-level, we suggested to explore whether and how ex-combatants are connected and organized and to what extent these connections and organisations shape their self-understanding, identification and feeling of groupness. This could be done, from a methodological point of view, by making an inventory of associations/organisations, and by analyzing their operational procedures through document reviews, interviews with representatives or members, or through (participant) observation in their formal or informal activities.

At the individual level, we suggested to explore the nature of political involvement – ranging from active to disengaged – its forms and the channels through which it is enacted. Important is also to scrutinize the relation to the party, on a continuum from (continued) loyalty to renunciation. Subsequently, it appears relevant to explore the roots and factors informing this participation and relation to the party. Since these processes are ultimately part of subjective appreciation, it is important to explore peoples self-reported experiences and perceptions, also over time. Most suitable seem interviews with rank-and-file combatants, including life histories to gauge evolutions and to identify structuring factors over time in relation to pre- and actual combatant experience up to the evolving post-conflict socio-political landscape at the meso- and macro-levels.

Given the fact that little is known about the nature of ex-combatant political participation in general, and even less in the specific context of rebel-to-party transformations, we consider this framework to be a heuristic device that provides guidance to further develop concrete research questions and methodological strategies to inductively explore the empirical dynamics of political participation in particular contexts. Answers to these questions emerging from a variety of socio-cultural and post-conflict contexts with similar or diverging rebel-to-party transformations can allow further theorization and strengthening of the understanding of common underlying processes at work.



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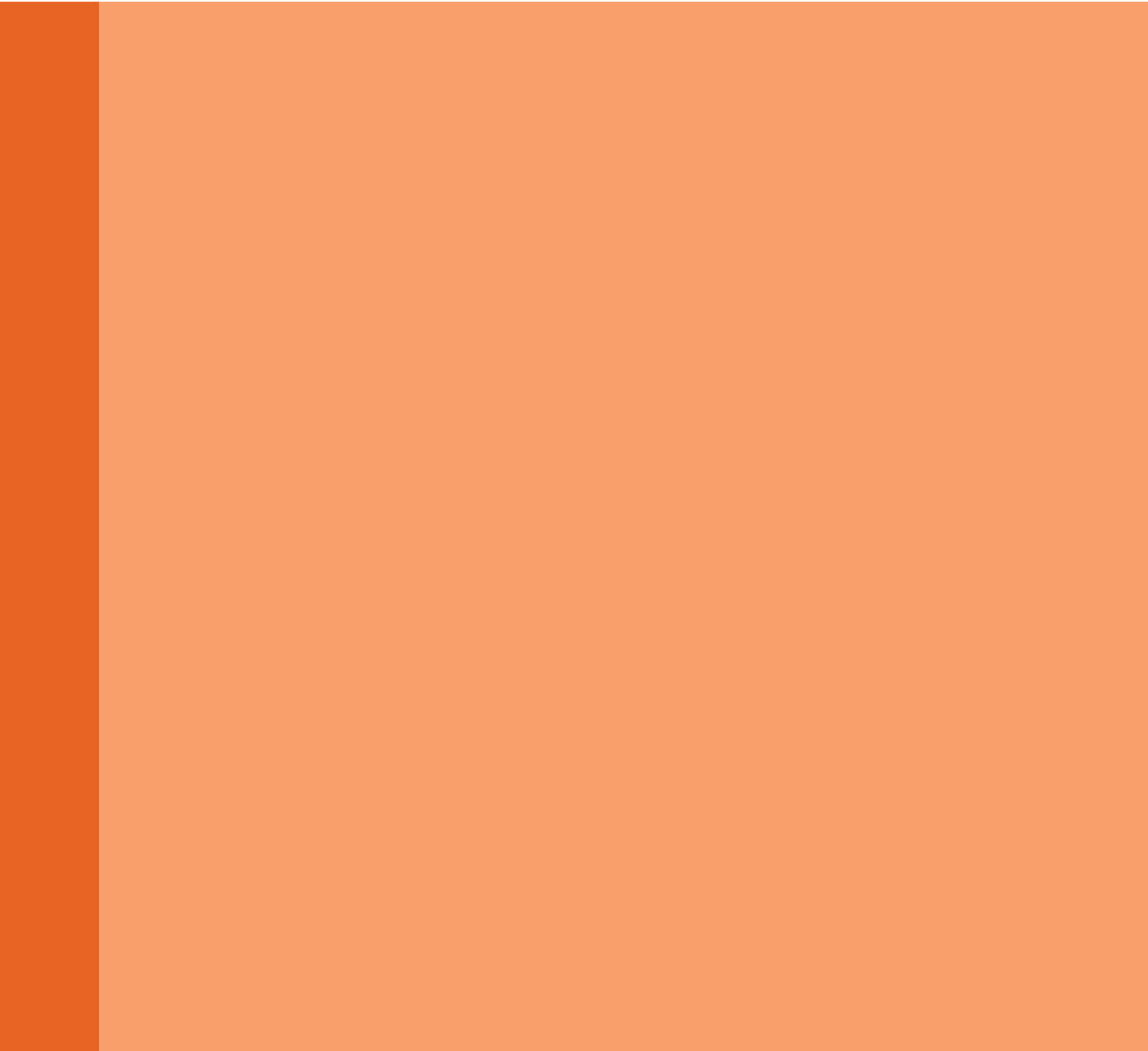
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