

Fragmentation and Cohesion in the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia-
People's Army (FARC-EP): The Cases of the Breakaway Factions During the
Peace Process (2012-2016)

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October 2025

Abstract

Existing scholarship recognises the centrality of peace processes as critical junctures to explain why non-state armed organisations remain cohesive or fragment. However, the intersection of conditions endogenous to the peace process with preexisting sources of cohesion and fragmentation that produce, or not, breakaway factions remains unexamined. To fill this gap, I select four cases of secondary groups of the FARC-EP in which breakaway factions emerged, or not, during the peace process. In doing so, I carefully examine how existing explanations on fragmentation and cohesion—both internal and external to armed groups—in the civil wars and military sociology literatures perform in producing variation in fragmentation and cohesion in terms of proportion, and levels of analysis. These findings draw on life-history interviews I conducted with ex-combatants and other research participants in Colombia, as well as archival and secondary sources. To compare the case studies, I rely on comparison with “ethnographic sensibility” and “casing.” I deploy the “explaining-outcome process tracing” variant to build case-specific combinations of mechanisms, with which I demonstrate different paths toward the observable outcomes. As a result, I introduce my organizationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion, which rests on four pillars: disaggregation, time, coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion, and mechanistic heterogeneity. This approach advances civil wars and military sociology research on the importance of disaggregating non-state armed organisations, deepens our understanding of within-secondary group dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion that unfold before and during peace processes, and can be translatable to other contexts.

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Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Eduardo Álvarez-Vanegas. The fieldwork reported in Chapters 5-8 was covered by the University of Sheffield Research Ethics reference number 044094 of 10 July 2022; and by the University of York – Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology (ELMPS) Ethics Chair reference number 91-22-23 of 2 August 2023.

List of Abbreviations

1 st Front	<i>Frente Primero</i>
10 th Front	<i>Frente Décimo</i>
AUC	<i>Autodefensas Unidad de Colombia</i> [United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia]
CMDA	<i>Columna Móvil Daniel Aldana</i> [Mobile Column Daniel Aldana]
CMTF	<i>Columna Móvil Teófilo Forero</i> [Mobile Column Teófilo Forero]
CWS	Civil War Studies
ETCR	<i>Espacio Territorial de Capacitación y Reincorporación</i>
ELN	<i>Ejército Nacional de Liberación</i> [National Liberation Army]
FARC-EP	<i>Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del Pueblo</i> [Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia – People’s Army]
JEP	<i>Jurisdicción Especial para la Paz</i> [Special Jurisdiction for Peace]
MS	Military Sociology
LH#	Life-history interview
S#	Semi-structured Interview

Author's declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible without the generosity of many people who believed in me and in this project, from my application to the PhD to the moment of writing these lines.

Trying to grasp and explore what the FARC-EP were like from within — a long-standing intellectual pursuit for nearly 20 years — meant spending hundreds of hours speaking with and learning from former combatants of that armed group. Their time, generosity, and willingness to share their lives with me shaped this work. They also challenged and questioned it continuously. Without those conversations in different places of Colombia, this dissertation simply would not exist. Thank you for teaching me so much. Retired and active members of the Colombian Armed Forces helped me understand the state–FARC-EP war from their perspective — often ignored in academic circles. I am immensely grateful to former members of the Colombian government's peace delegation in Havana (2012–2016) and to the local leaders and friends in the field sites where I conducted research. They have taught me more about my country than any book ever could.

To the members of my committee, I owe nothing but gratitude for their advice, critiques, guidance, and unlimited patience. I am aware supervising me was not easy — certainly more challenging than trying to wrap their heads around the early drafts of this dissertation. To Anastasia Shesterinina — mentor, supervisor, friend, confidant — I owe my deepest gratitude to her for her trust, time, and unwavering support. No one believed in this project as she did when I joined the Centre for the Comparative Study of Civil War. Thank you for teaching me that scholars must never become or act like little tyrants, and that above all, we must always strive for ethically driven research. Thank you for showing me that one cannot — and must not — be a lone wolf in academia, and for helping me believe in the value of an academic community. Also, thank you for bearing with me. I am well aware that I can be a nuisance from time to time. Nina Caspersen provided solid and strategic advice during the most challenging personal and academic stages of this project. Her intellectual and emotional support helped me continue when I thought it made no sense to carry on. Christoph Dworschak offered crucial feedback and insights on my (yes, I remember) “unintelligible” early drafts. My sincere thanks also go to Matthew Whiting and Enzo Nussio, who served as external examiners and generously shared their insights, critiques, and time.

This dissertation has benefited immensely from the support of the broader academic and practitioner community, particularly at the Université de Montréal, including its Centre for International Peace and Security Studies (*Centre d'études sur la paix et la sécurité internationale*) and the Montréal Centre for International Studies (*Centre d'études et de recherches internationales*). I thank Theodore McLauchlin for supporting my research and for constantly challenging me to be precise, rigorous, “less messy,” and to situate my project within broader academic and policy-related debates. Marie-Joëlle Zahar shared her wisdom and generously offered valuable suggestions, as well as the courage to keep going when I found myself in a deep, dark mental hole. Lee Seymour, Nicholas Rush Smith, Zachariah Mampilly, Samuel Ritholtz, and José Ciro Martínez encouraged me to put my research in conversation with broader academic, methodological, and political debates. Judith Verweijen introduced me to military sociology. Ana María Arjona opened for me, back in 2005, the unexpected and fascinating world of former combatants of armed groups. Juanita Vélez’s generosity with her time and her contacts made some conversations with former combatants possible. Research assistance was provided by Paula Tobo. Thank you, my dear friend, Boris Ramírez, for the maps in the dissertation. I also would like to thank the Conflict Responses Foundation (CORE) for hosting me during my research visits to Colombia.

Thank you, Michael Taussig — a helluva storyteller. You have shown me the force of stories and the unexpected avenues they open for expanding knowledge through discovery and creativity.

For their constant support, I am deeply grateful to my family — Ana María, Alfonso, Hernando, and Mauricio — and to my friends — David Chaparro, Juan Diego Restrepo, Álvaro Bohórquez, Liliana Silva, Martín Franco, María Andrea Rondón, Daniel Restrepo, and many others. To my partner, Amanda Blewitt, thank you for making this possible.

Financial support for my doctoral studies was provided by the UK Research and Innovation Future Leaders Fellowship, the Université de Montréal Centre for International Studies and Centre for International Peace and Security Studies, Mitacs (Canada), and the University of York, particularly its Faculty of Social Sciences and Department of Politics and International Relations. The conclusions of this dissertation are entirely my own and do not reflect the views of the individuals or institutions acknowledged above.

To my mum, and to my cousin and mentor, Mauricio.

May them both rest in peace.

Chapter 1: Introduction

On June 10, 2016, the 1st Front of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) issued a three-page statement announcing its decision to keep its arms and not take part in the demobilisation and disarmament process. In the statement, the 1st Front asserted that it remained a political actor engaged in armed struggle to address the structural causes of the six-decade long Colombian armed conflict. They denounced the 2016 Peace Accord as a “betrayal” aimed solely at disarming and demobilising the FARC-EP. Days after this statement, the Eastern Bloc, its parent secondary group¹, disavowed the announcement (2016). Months later, the FARC-EP's General Secretariat expelled five mid-level commanders from the 1st, 7th, 16th and 44th Fronts — Iván Mordisco, Gentil Duarte, John 40, Euclides Mora, Julián Chollo, and Giovanny Chuspas (FARC-EP, 2016) — because they subverted the principles of discipline and the organisation's hierarchy by breaking away from the peace process.

More than 92% of the FARC-EP combatants, approximately 13.500², disarmed and demobilised. Amid the celebration and euphoria surrounding what was undoubtedly a historic event — the FARC-EP, founded in 1964, was finally laying down its arms after several failed peace processes since the 1980s — more breakaway factions, in addition to the 1st Front, opted to remain in arms³ between mid-2016 and the disarmament phase in the first semester of 2017⁴. These divergent trajectories of the FARC-EP — the majority demobilised while the rest kept their arms — raises important questions regarding armed group fragmentation *during* peace processes: How do peace processes contribute to fragmentation and cohesion within armed groups and their secondary groups? Should we look to conditions *prior* to the peace process to understand fragmentation and cohesion *during* the peace process? What explains cohesion and fragmentation within the FARC-EP's secondary groups from which breakaway factions emerged, or not, during the peace process and before the disarmament phase?

¹ I adapt Siebold's (2007a) definitions of primary and secondary groups, as I elaborate on in Chapter 2, Section 2.1. See Appendix 1.1 on the FARC-EP's hierarchical military structure.

² See: *Biblioteca Abierta del Proceso de Paz de Colombia* (Library of the Colombian Peace Process): <https://bapp.com.co/infografia-sobre-cese-al-fuego-y-dejacion-de-armas/> (Accessed on February 4, 2022).

³ See ICG (2017) and Álvarez-Vanegas (2018).

⁴ This dissertation does not focus on rearmament or recidivism.

1.1 Puzzle

Existing scholarship in the field of civil war studies recognises the centrality of peace processes as critical junctures to explain why non-state armed organisations remain cohesive or fragment. Fragmentation of armed groups impacts the duration of peace negotiations and agreements (Fjeilde & Nilsson, 2018; Boutellis & Zahar, 2017; Stedman, 1997), which is why cohesion is crucial in these contexts. “An organisation whose leaders cannot control its fighters is not a credible bargaining partner. Disciplined organisations may be able to avoid unexpected spirals of uncontrolled violence, but fractious groups and movements find themselves torn by patterns of outbidding and competitive violence between prospective leaders that make negotiations fall apart.” (Staniland, 2014, 5-6).

Peace processes can also contribute to fragmentation. They often lead to the emergence of splinter factions that support negotiations and those that do not (Stedman, 1997; Reiter, 2006; Cronin, 2006). Spoilers are “leaders and parties who believe that peace emerging from negotiations threatens their power, worldview, and interests, and use violence to undermine attempts to achieve it” (Stedman, 1997, p. 6)⁵. Likewise, fragmentation may occur when a subgroup within a rebel movement abandons collective negotiations to secure a better deal with the government than it would through the group’s joint effort (Zartman, 1995). Peace processes are “external shocks”⁶ to armed groups that create internal contestation over power-sharing, not only negotiating itself (Pearlman, 2009). They create disputes and disagreements over strategy, ideology and leadership among subunits and their leaders (Perkoski, 2019; 2021). Moreover, a peace accord can lead to fragmentation if it does not adopt power-sharing provisions that involve the different factions in an organisation (Plank, 2017). Peace processes can also alter the long-term goals of armed groups and foster internal indiscipline, potentially impacting civilians (Arjona, 2016) and tend to exacerbate pre-existing fault lines in rebel organisations. Splits can come from how the group is organised (its internal structure) or from differences in goals and priorities among its members (Duursma & Fliervoet, 2020).

However, the four case studies of secondary groups of the FARC-EP selected for this dissertation (1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA and CMTF) show that the peace process, as an

⁵ For a revision of Stedman’s work, see Greenhill and Major (2006) and Nilsson and Soderberg (2011).

⁶ I borrow “shocks” from McLauchlin and Pearlman’s study on repression shocks on nationalist movements. For them, “shocks divide a movement’s history into ‘before’ and ‘after’ moments, exposing changes in cooperation and conflict among movement members” (2012, p. 42). In this dissertation, I contend the peace process meant a ‘before’ and ‘after’ moment for the FARC-EP.

external event, is insufficient to understand variation in fragmentation and cohesion outcomes observed across the cases. Existing explanations in the literature on peace processes are inconsistent with what I observe in the four selected secondary groups for this study. As Table 1.1 showcases, fragmentation across the case studies varies in terms of proportion, and levels of analysis. This variation cannot be explained solely with reference to the peace process. Therefore, the question that motivates this study is whether we should look to conditions *prior* to the peace process to understand the emergence of breakaway factions, or not, within the selected case studies of the FARC-EP *during* the peace process. The answer, in brief, developed in this dissertation is that we need to examine the intersection of internal and external dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion to these secondary groups — both endogenous and exogenous to the peace process — that produce, or not, breakaway factions as understood by those who lived these processes.

1.2 An Organisationally Disaggregated Approach to Fragmentation and Cohesion

To address the puzzling variation in outcomes across the selected case studies and better understand the question of armed group fragmentation and cohesion during peace processes more generally, this dissertation develops an approach to the study of fragmentation and cohesion that incorporates the following four elements: disaggregation, time, coexistence of cohesion and fragmentation and mechanistic heterogeneity.

My approach is simple: to explore and understand how breakaway factions emerge in the FARC-EP during the peace process and before the disarmament, we must first **disaggregate** the armed organization into the secondary groups to identify where fragmentation occurs. For this reason, I select four cases in which breakaway factions emerged, or not, during the peace process and before the disarmament phase: 1st Front⁷ (Case Study One), 10th Front (Case

⁷ In 2002, the FARC-EP reached nearly 22,000 combatants (CEV, 2022), not including its urban networks (*milicianos*) and local support networks. The organisation consisted of nine military structures: the tactical combat unit (six individuals); squad (12 individuals); guerrilla (26 individuals, similar to an army section); company (54 individuals plus their commanders, similar to an army platoon); **column**, composed of two or more companies and their commanders (similar to an army company); **front**, comprising more than two columns deployed in specific operational areas (an army battalion); joint command, coordinating the activities of several fronts within a region (an army brigade); bloc, made up of more than five fronts (an army division); and the general command, which coordinated all blocs under the general staff secretariat—the FARC-EP’s highest political and military decision-making body (similar to an army’s general command). (Ferro & Uribe, 2002, pp. 50–51.) This comparison is illustrative: not all fronts, mobile columns, or blocs referred to throughout this dissertation reached their intended size or composition. In contrast, others, such as the CMDA and CMTF, exceeded these nominal quotas.

Study Two), Mobile Column Daniel Aldana (CMDA or Case Study Three) and a negative case of a secondary group that stayed cohesive, the Mobile Column Teófilo Forero (CMTF or Case Study Four). As I show in Chapter 2, the dialogue between civil war studies (CWS) and military sociology (MS) is particularly fruitful for my approach, for the latter provides analytical tools to disaggregate armed organisations into their different levels, namely, the fronts and mobile columns mentioned above.

This dissertation shows that disaggregating the FARC-EP is necessary to get at variation in the observable outcomes. By observable outcome I refer to fragmentation or cohesion and their variation in terms of: (a) the proportion of the breakaway; (b) the level of analysis, that is, where within the selected groups or case studies fragmentation does or does not occur, as captures in Table 1.1.

Case study	Proportion of fragmentation (Observable outcome)	Level of analysis (Where does fragmentation occur)
One – 1st Front	High: one breakaway faction	Front leadership or secondary unit
Two – 10th Front	Low: one breakaway faction	Intra-front or secondary unit
Three – CMDA	High: two breakaway factions – urban.	Intra-mobile column or secondary group
	Low: one breakaway faction – rural.	Intra-mobile column or secondary group
Four – CMTF	No fragmentation - secondary group level	NA
Table 1.1 Variation Case-specific observable outcomes		

When it comes to **time**, I argue we must examine how these secondary groups transform over time—shaped by their internal dynamics and interactions with external actors and their operational environment—to understand better the paths they had followed before the peace process, as well as their organisational situation or conditions at the onset and during the peace process. Peace processes as an external event can contribute to fragmentation, as I detail in Chapter 2. But this existing explanation in isolation is incomplete because it excludes previous dynamics within secondary groups and their broader operational environment. Drawing on the dialogue between CWS and MS, I argue that when shifting from the organisational to the secondary group level, we must examine other internal (e.g., recruitment, socialisation mechanisms, commandership legitimacy) and external (e.g., counterinsurgency, material resources, interactions with local populations and other external actors) dynamics in

combination, and whether and how they contribute to the observable outcomes outlined in Table 1.1. In addition, we must consider different interactions at play: between secondary groups and the organisation, within secondary groups, and between secondary groups and their external environments. These interactions evolve over time and can have multiple, contradictory effects that may emerge at different stages. Therefore, a longer approach to before and during the peace helps us to gain a richer understanding of how internal and external dynamics evolve at the secondary group level, moving beyond monolithic approaches to armed groups.

Furthermore, I argue that **fragmentation and cohesion coexist** within and across the selected secondary groups or case studies. Hence, we must also explore and understand how cohesion contributed to both breaking away from and in favour of the peace process. Fragmentation can be of high proportion, but it needs strong intra-secondary group cohesion in order for that group to break away collectively (1st Front or Case Study One). Fragmentation can be of low proportion, indicating that most of combatants stayed cohesive in favour of the peace process (10th Front or Case Study Two). Fragmentation can be mixed: high-proportion at the level of urban networks and low-proportion at the level of rural mid-level commanders, for example, suggesting there were segments in this secondary group that supported the peace process (CMDA or Case Study Three). Lastly, cohesion can be strong in support of the 2016 peace accord (CMTF or Case Study Four). A careful analysis of the internal dynamics of the four case studies, drawing on lived experiences and other empirical materials (Chapters 5-8), shows that some of the existing explanations that contribute to both fragmentation and cohesion in the first three case studies, instead create cohesion in the CMTF. By demonstrating the multiple, contradictory effects of existing explanations, I contribute to the broader scholarship, as I outline below and elaborate further in the concluding chapter.

In addition to disaggregation, time and coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion, I argue we must carefully examine how existing explanations on fragmentation and cohesion in CWS and MS — both internal and external to armed groups and exogenous and endogenous to the peace process — perform and contribute to variation in the observable outcomes. Identifying how existing explanations perform through their observable implications helps establish interlocking parts that build case-specific mechanisms. **Mechanistic heterogeneity**, therefore, allows us to identify different paths toward case-specific observable outcomes as they unfold before and during the peace process, at the secondary group level. I present the

observable implications of existing explanations in the CWS and MS literatures in Chapters 5-8 and discuss the mechanisms in detail in Chapter 9.

Combined, these four pillars form my organisationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion, which allows me to dig deeper into the internal dynamics of armed groups, more specifically of the selected secondary groups of the FARC-EP in which breakaway factions emerged, or not. As one of the main contributions of this dissertation, this approach provides the analytical tools to examine fragmentation and cohesion at the secondary-group level from a perspective that considers both the peace process and the broader dynamics that preceded it.

1.3 Contributions

This dissertation makes **four types of contributions**. First, to existing scholarship on civil war in general, and on the fragmentation and cohesion of armed groups in particular. The dialogue between CWS and MS helps us to examine fragmentation and cohesion by disaggregating armed organisations — specifically, where fragmentation occurs in practice. This dialogue also contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple existing explanations that shaped the observable outcomes, per the selected case studies. This dissertation also contributes to the organisational turn in civil war studies. For one, it builds on previous calls to move beyond unitary approaches to armed groups to one that captures the internal diversity of an organisation like the FARC-EP at its different levels of analysis. Likewise, it problematises and unsettles the concept of organisation by providing a fine-grained, grounded research on four secondary groups of the same armed organisation through the lived experiences of ex-combatants from those very same groups. This study also contributes to the processual turn in civil war studies by expanding its focus on actors, relations and how they transform over time to the secondary groups level.

Second, this dissertation introduces an organizationally disaggregated approach to studying fragmentation and cohesion. I demonstrate that the four pillars of this approach — disaggregation, time, the coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion, and mechanistic heterogeneity — contribute to a more dynamic understanding of fragmentation and cohesion within both larger organisations and their secondary or smaller groups. **Disaggregation** locates where fragmentation and cohesion occur and how they vary by proportion, and level of analysis. **Time**, understood as a longer approach to before and during the peace process, better

captures the shifting internal dynamics of secondary groups in relation to their ever-changing and co-constitutive operational environments. The third pillar, **coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion**, shows that these processes are not mutually exclusive. Case-specific outcomes demonstrate that: high levels of fragmentation require strong intra-secondary group cohesion (Case Study One); low levels of fragmentation can coexist with cohesion conducive to the peace process (Case Study Two); mixed fragmentation (high and low within the CMDA) coexists with cohesion; and cohesion itself (Case Study Four) may reflect ulterior drivers emerging in post-demobilisation settings. Finally, **mechanistic heterogeneity** tells us that there are different paths toward case-specific observable outcomes at the secondary group level. A careful examination of how existing explanations perform and vary across and within the selected case studies allows us to identify their interlocking parts and build case-specific mechanisms.

Third, methodologically, this dissertation advances our understanding of existing explanations in the literature on fragmentation and cohesion through a close examination of life histories and semi-structured interviews, employing an ethnographically oriented approach to comparison. In Chapters 5–8, I present rich evidence showing that exploring and interpreting the meanings research participants attribute to existing explanations — and how these meanings, identifiable through observable implications, interact and operate in practice — requires careful attention to their multifaceted nature at both the secondary-group and organisational levels. This, in turn, has implications for the observable outcomes identified in the case studies. Chapter 9 demonstrates how this analysis contributes to building case-specific mechanisms and identifying common threads across them.

Lastly, empirically, it deepens our understanding of the FARC-EP through the analysis of four of its secondary groups: the 1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA, and CMTE. This study offers a rich and nuanced understanding of the different pathways toward fragmentation and cohesion within these groups, focusing on the interplay between internal and external dynamics—both endogenous and exogenous to the peace process. Life histories with former combatants, which provided access to the inner workings of these fronts and mobile columns, refine our understanding of the emergence of breakaway factions during peace processes and challenge the common assumption that they kept their arms primarily driven by illicit economies.

Regarding future research and policy implications, this dissertation paves the way for new inquiries into both scholarly and policy questions. The organizationally disaggregated

approach to fragmentation and cohesion introduced here can be applied to other non-state armed organisations and contexts, notably as armed group fragmentation across the Americas presents promising avenues for research and for contextualising policy-related challenges. For instance, this approach can shed light on the fragmentation of Mexican cartels, thereby contributing to a necessary dialogue between the study of cartel violence and civil war studies. Beyond academia, the findings offer valuable insights for peace and security policy agendas. They underscore the importance of organisational conditions within armed groups at different levels of analysis — both at the onset and during peace processes, and the role of mid-level commanders in shaping and sabotaging peace politics. Also, they underscore the need to extend our understanding of organisational boundaries and operational environments at the secondary-group level, as well as their role and relevance for supporting, or not, fragmentation.

1.4 Chapter Organisation

Chapter 2 presents the puzzle of fragmentation and cohesion. It identifies the shortcomings in existing work on fragmentation and cohesion to introduce my organisationally disaggregated approach. I put the organisational turn in civil war studies (CWS) and military sociology (MS) into dialogue, showing how MS enriches CWS by illustrating how a centralised and diversified organisation like the FARC-EP can be disaggregated into secondary groups — the four selected case studies in this research. This advances our understanding of variation in fragmentation and cohesion within the broader organisation and, more specifically, at the secondary group level. The dialogue between CWS and MS also helps me to identify the different existing explanations on fragmentation and cohesion in armed organisations. I argue that these explanations, often treated in isolation, should be combined and analysed not as static factors but as dynamics that interact and evolve over time. These dynamics are both internal and external to the case studies, and endogenous and exogenous to the peace process. Thus, the existing explanations in CWS and MS perform differently at the secondary-group level and can have multiple, contradictory effects that contribute to the case-specific outcomes discussed above.

Chapter 3 outlines the research design. First, it defines the scope conditions and presents my disaggregation strategy for the four case studies or secondary groups of the FARC-EP, in which breakaway factions emerged, or not—the 1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA, and CMTF—varying in terms of proportion of fragmentation and the level of analysis where it occurred.

Second, it presents the data collection strategy, relying on life histories with ex-combatants, semi-structured interviews with research participants from the elite and third sectors, informal conversations, and additional empirical materials. Third, it details the data analysis strategy, which rests on coding, explaining-outcome process tracing and comparison with ethnographic sensibility. Lastly, the analyses in this chapter lay the groundwork for my organizationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion, which rests of four pillars: disaggregation, time, coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion, and mechanistic heterogeneity. Chapters 9 and 10 further elaborate on and expand on this approach.

Chapter 4 looks at the research process, emphasising its non-predetermined nature. It details the steps, decisions, and challenges encountered during fieldwork in Colombia, providing an overview of the five field sites and how the research unfolded. The chapter discusses the difficulties of locating and selecting participants, insights gained from informal interactions and accidental moments, and the importance of constantly adapting and respecting research participants' boundaries and those posed by the field sites themselves. It also addresses security concerns and risks I faced.

Chapter 5 is the first of the four empirical chapters or case studies. These four chapters examine how the observable implications of existing explanations in the literature on fragmentation and cohesion play out and change over time within and across these secondary groups. They further demonstrate that there are different combinations of existing explanations — internal and external to each secondary group, and exogenous and endogenous to the peace process — that contribute to the observable outcomes in each case study — varying in the proportion level of analysis, and in terms of who leads and comprises them. Likewise, the findings in these chapters show consistency with the four pillars of my organizationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion mentioned above. Chapter 5 examines the 1st Front, a secondary group of the FARC-EP in the Guaviare region that broke away from the peace process in mid-2016 in high proportion, led by its commander and joined by rank-and-file and mid-level commanders from other fronts. I argue that commandership legitimacy and strong within-secondary group cohesion, combined with distrust of the Eastern Bloc leadership and rejection of the 2016 peace accord's disarmament provisions, contributed to high-proportion fragmentation.

Chapter 6 shifts to the case of the 10th Front in the Arauca region. Contrary to Case Study One, the 10th Front is a case of low-proportion fragmentation at the level of formerly

imprisoned mid-level commanders, alongside urban and local support networks. I highlight the role of members of urban networks (*milicianos*) and local support networks in both Colombia and Venezuela, who gradually detached from the 10th Front throughout the 2000s and 2010s in response to internal and external dynamics, endogenous and exogenous to the peace process. Similar to Case Study One, this case study also shows the multiple, contradictory effects of existing explanations in the literature—such as discipline—which contributed both to the detachment of *milicianos* and cohesion and subordination to the 2016 peace accord. Thus, this chapter, like Chapter 5, demonstrates that observable implications of existing explanations in the literature also perform in favour of cohesion, which addresses a key aspect of my research: the coexistence of cohesion and fragmentation within secondary groups.

Chapter 7 examines the CMDA, the most challenging case study to research due to fieldwork conditions and because it remains a deeply sensitive topic among former FARC-EP members. This is a case of mixed fragmentation within the same secondary group: high-proportion at the level of urban networks and low at the level of rural mid-level commanders and rank-and-file. I argue that the mismanaged recruitment of former paramilitaries (*Rastrojos*) as *milicianos* — who lacked socialisation — together with disciplinary measures, the 2016 peace accord provisions, and the *milicianos*' social embeddedness and ties to patronage networks, contributed to high-proportion fragmentation. I also demonstrate that social embeddedness, disciplinary measures, commandership illegitimacy at the secondary group level and patronage networks contributed to low-proportion fragmentation. Similar to Case Studies One and Two, this chapter exhibits the coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion and further shows that adopting a longer approach — before and during the peace process — helps us understand how observable implications of existing explanations in the literature can be both endogenous and exogenous to the Havana negotiations. The recruitment of former *Rastrojos*, the CMDA's local support networks and long-standing ties to external actors involved in illicit economies are three examples.

Chapter 8 is the fourth and final empirical chapter. It examines the negative case study, the CMTF, which I incorporated during fieldwork in Colombia (see Chapter 4). Although initially deemed a potential breakaway faction at the onset of the peace process in 2012, due to its economic endowments and leadership, the CMTF ultimately disarmed and demobilised. I argue that commandership legitimacy and post-demobilisation projects contributed to the CMTF's subordination to the peace accord. Similar to Case Study One, commandership

legitimacy created strong intra-secondary group cohesion, but not for breaking away. A careful examination of the observable implications of existing explanations in the literature allows us to understand how the CMTF evolved into one of the most feared, disciplined, and militarily and financially robust secondary groups of the FARC-EP. Recruitment, strict socialisation mechanisms, social embeddedness, and commandership legitimacy at the secondary group level, as they evolved before and during the peace process, created cohesion and therefore the observable outcome in this case study.

Chapter 9 analyses and compares how the case-specific mechanisms I build in this dissertation operate across the four case studies. I derive the mechanisms by deploying the “explaining-outcome process tracing” variant. Identifying the mechanisms for each case study—through an iterative process between the evidence and the existing literature—helps me demonstrate mechanistic heterogeneity, that is, that there are different paths toward the observable outcomes. I derive a total of ten case-specific mechanisms through an iterative process between the evidence presented in Chapters 5-8 and the existing literature discussed in Chapter 2. In the first part of this chapter, I present the mechanism narratives, which link the observable implications of the existing explanations in the literature, endogenous and exogenous to the peace process, with the emergence, or not, of the breakaway factions. In the second part, I present and compare, relying on comparison with ethnographic sensibility, four common threads or recurring elements that appear and operate in a specific way across the mechanisms. This chapter further demonstrates the multifaceted nature of existing explanations. They can have multiple, contradictory effects on fragmentation and cohesion, both within and across cases. They can be internal or external to secondary groups, as well as endogenous or exogenous to the peace process.

Finally, Chapter 10 concludes by summarising my findings, outlining the dissertation’s empirical, theoretical, and methodological contributions, and presenting my organisationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion. It also suggests policy implications and directions for future research.

Chapter 2: The Concepts and Theories of Fragmentation and Cohesion in Armed Groups

The study of fragmentation and cohesion among non-state armed groups has received increasing attention from scholars of civil war and political violence over the past two decades. This shift toward the study of armed organisations, or the “organisational turn”, departs from macro-level explanations centred on the structural determinants of violence at the international or national level (Balcells & Justino, 2014; Parkinson & Zaks, 2018; Shesterinina, 2022). This shift has also occurred alongside the rise in intrastate conflicts between 1949 and 2019, which took place in more than 100 countries around the world (Balcells & Stanton, 2021). Others note, “given the greater material resources and institutional coherence of the state, most research has focused on the dynamics of fragmentation in the opposition” (Fliervoet & Seymour 2023, 166). Scholars also highlight the growing number of armed groups in conflicts between states and non-state armed organisations, or among the latter. Some find that 59 of 149 rebel groups active between 1975 and 2013 emerged from within-group splits (Fjelde & Nilsson, 2018). Others estimate that 216 of 1,661 armed actors are splinters formed by breakaways (Pettersson, 2021) or that 28.3% of 300 armed groups have given rise to splinters (Perkoski, 2022).

In this context, the “organisational turn” in civil war studies has advanced our understanding of the internal dynamics of armed groups, their interactions with others, key outcomes during and after war, and how groups respond to external shocks. An important advancement is on the consequences and causes of fragmentation of non-state organisations (Woldemariam, 2018; Perkoski, 2021; Fliervoet & Seymour, 2023). Scholars recognise the centrality of peace processes as critical junctures to explain why non-state armed organisations remain cohesive or fragment, as mentioned in the puzzle in the introductory chapter. Peace processes can contribute to fragmentation because they lead to the emergence of splinter factions that support negotiations and those that do not (Stedman, 1997; Reiter, 2006; Cronin, 2006). Peace processes create internal contestation over power-sharing, not only negotiating itself (Pearlman, 2009), and can lead to fragmentation if they do not adopt power-sharing provisions that involve the different factions in an organisation (Plank, 2017). Peace processes can also alter the long-term goals of armed groups and foster internal indiscipline, potentially impacting civilians (Arjona, 2016) and tend to exacerbate pre-existing fault lines in rebel organisations (Duursma & Fliervoet, 2020). In sum, cohesive armed groups matter for the

duration of peace agreements and war prevention and violence recurrence (Fjeilde & Nilsson, 2018; Boutellis & Zahar, 2017; Staniland, 2014; Stedman, 1997).

However, as introduced in the puzzle in the introductory chapter, existing explanations in the literature focused on peace processes do not align with my previous knowledge⁸ on these case studies and do not capture what I observed in the evidence I collected during fieldwork in five field sites and archival work in Colombia. My puzzle (Section 1.1) tells the story of the breakaway factions that emerged, or not, within different secondary groups of the FARC-EP between mid-2016 and before the disarmament and demobilisation stages in 2017. I selected four cases of secondary groups in which breakaway factions emerged (1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA) and one negative case (CMTF). Fragmentation across these case studies varied in terms of proportion, and levels of analysis (Table 1.1). Moreover, the research design is set up in a way that captures variation in fragmentation. Additionally, the evidence I present and analyse in Chapters 5-8 tells us that we must explore and understand the dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion within and across these case studies, leading to case-specific observable outcomes. This supposes adopting an approach that incorporates both the periods before and during peace agreements.

In response to this puzzle, I introduce my organisationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion, which includes four pillars: disaggregation, time, the coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion, and mechanistic heterogeneity. To understand the case-specific observable outcomes, we need to disaggregate the FARC-EP into secondary groups in which breakaway factions emerged, or not. Fragmentation did not occur across the organisation. On the contrary, it occurred within specific fronts and mobile columns, as seen in the selected case studies (Section 3.3). Hence, I problematise approaches that treat armed groups as unitary when analysing fragmentation and cohesion.

Concerning time, these case-specific observable outcomes cannot be explained only within the context of the peace process. Therefore, we need a longer approach to fragmentation and cohesion that includes both the periods before and during peace agreements to understand better how the selected secondary groups transformed internally and in constant interaction with their operational environment. Moreover, each case study shows that fragmentation and cohesion are not mutually exclusive. For example, the fact that almost the entire 1st Front (Case

⁸ See Schwartz-Shea & Yanow's "ways of knowing" (2012, p. 25) or George & Bennett's "preliminary knowledge" on case selection (2005, p. 24).

Study One) broke away from the peace process also indicates strong intra-secondary cohesion and groupthink in the decision to remain armed. I offer a more comprehensive approach to the dynamics of cohesion and fragmentation at the secondary group level.

Lastly, mechanistic heterogeneity tells us that there are different paths, at the secondary group level, toward case-specific observable outcomes. That is, we need to examine how existing explanations in the existing literature—both internal and external to armed groups—perform differently, combine, transform, and are conjuncturally triggered by shifting forces and actors at different points in time. Hence, the existing explanation of peace processes is one among many others. I unsettle existing explanation by showing how they operate in practice with multiple, contradictory effects for both cohesion and fragmentation across and within the four case studies.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. In the first, I position my organisationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion in the “organisational turn” and “processual turn” in civil war studies (CWS) and military sociology⁹ (MS). I argue for the importance of a dialogue between these bodies of literature because it helps me to elaborate on disaggregation, the first pillar of my approach.

Building on this dialogue, in the second part I examine the sources of fragmentation and cohesion identified in both CWS and MS. While I draw on existing explanations in these literatures, I argue that to explore, understand and discover the observable outcomes in each case study, we need to examine them differently—one that combines them based on a constant and iterative dialogue with the life histories, semi-structured interviews and additional empirical materials I collected and analysed in this dissertation. In this way, I capture how existing explanations perform over time across and within the four case studies according to the meaning attached to them by research participants. For example, I demonstrate that discipline¹⁰, which is associated with compliance, insurgent-civilian relations and military effectiveness, contributes to both fragmentation and cohesion. The same disciplinary mechanisms (e.g., leadership renewal), adopted to assert control at the secondary group level, can facilitate the detachment of urban networks and cohesion in favour of the peace process (10th Front - Chapter 6). Furthermore, discipline never operates in isolation, as the adoption of

⁹ See Siebold (2007), King (2006, 2013). On the origins of the discipline, see Resteigne (2022).

¹⁰ See Shills & Janowitz, (1948), Castillo (2014) King (2015), Hoover-Green (2018), Kenny (2010), Staniland (2014), Verweijen (2015, 2018).

discipline is always shaped by internal and external dynamics, and has multiple, contradictory effects both within and outside the selected secondary groups. Internal purges, in response to indiscipline and sexual violence committed by members of urban networks of the CMDA (Chapter 7), contributed to their detachment and the formation of a breakaway faction.

Finally, as I briefly discuss in the third section, a close examination of existing explanations in the literature on CWS and MS helps me to elaborate on the other three pillars of my approach—time, coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion, and mechanistic heterogeneity. I demonstrate that existing explanations can perform differently over time and contribute to both cohesion and fragmentation within and across the selected case studies. Additionally, they can help us identify different paths toward case-specific observable outcomes when combined.

2.1 Civil War Studies and Military Sociology: A Necessary Dialogue

In this first part, I bring Civil War Studies (CWS) and Military Sociology (MS) into conversation to trace how both literatures have approached and challenged the understanding of armed groups as unitary actors. While the former challenges the view of armed groups as unitary or monolithic entities, the latter enriches civil war studies by providing analytical tools to disaggregate armed organisations across multiple levels. In this study, I depart from unitary conceptions of armed organisations to disaggregate an organisation like the FARC-EP into fronts and mobile columns, based on the analysis of four selected case studies. In doing so, I demonstrate that fragmentation varies depending on where it occurs within secondary groups, which is the first pillar of my organisationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion.

On the one hand, scholars of civil war and political violence have challenged and moved beyond the assumptions of “unitary” (Kalyvas, 2008; Wood, 2018), “groupness” (Mampilly, 2011; Fliervoet & Seymour, 2023), or “monolithic” (Weinstein, 2007; Bakke et al., 2012; Pearlman, 2011, 2012; Staniland, 2014; Arjona, 2016; Shesterinina, 2019, 2025) understandings of non-state armed organisations. By moving beyond these assumptions, scholars have increasingly focused on organisations, or the “meso-level” (Finkel & Straus, 2012; Pearlman & Cunningham, 2012; Bultmann, 2018; Parkinson & Zaks, 2018), namely, the “processes that take place at the community level or at the level of local social groups and organisations (e.g., local forms of collective action and governance, local institutions, and local

and group leadership)” (Balcells & Justino, 2014, 1345). Research on the organisational level, for instance, has advanced our understanding of variation in the internal structures of armed groups—some being more hierarchical and centralists, others more diversified or a loose networks of factions with diverging interests and ideologies (McQuinn et al., 2018; Giustozzi & Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2010; Parkinson, 2013; Staniland, 2014; Parkinson & Zaks, 2018; Terry & McQuinn, 2018; Pearlman & Cunningham, 2012). These works echo other scholars’ insights, namely, the structures of armed groups are not a given—we need to explore, understand and explain them (Staniland, 2014)—and they matter because “change occurs at the organisational level, and external relations mediate behaviours and group dynamics” (Parkinson and Zaks, 2018, 277).

By incorporating the meso-level into the analysis of armed groups, CWS has advanced out understanding of how these groups operate in practice—namely, as “a collection of factions [that] if we unpack ... we find that they are actually quite different: some are centralised groups with clear war aims, yet others are loose networks of factions with diverging ambitions or ideologies” (Pearlman and Cunningham 2012, p. 6). In doing so, scholars demonstrate variation in different outcomes when moving beyond a monolithic approach to armed groups. Examples of those outcomes are variation in violence against civilian population linked to the process of organizational formation and the initial social and economic endowments of rebel groups (Weinstein, 2007; Tarrow, 2007) and the adoption of formal and informal socialisation mechanisms (Checkel, 2017; Fujii, 2017; Cohen, 2016; Manekin, 2020; Wood, 2018). Others show that factionalism and internal disputes impact the provision of shadow governance by comparing two rebel groups (Mampilly, 2011) or that factions composed of non-local recruits tend to attract their members from geographically dispersed areas, while local armed factions tend to recruit in a more geographically concentrated manner (Daly, 2016). Because groups are not monolithic, “In some cases combatants’ preferences differ from those of the leadership, or leaders are, themselves, not interested in winning the war, but rather in obtaining economic reward.” (Arjona, 2016, p. 45).

On the other hand, Military Sociology (MS)—beginning with early studies on cohesion in primary units—has long argued that military organisations are not unitary. They comprise multiple levels and components, with unity, adherence, and cohesion remaining central objectives. Similar to Civil War Studies (CWS), MS urges us to move beyond dyadic and unitary conceptions of armed organisations. Scholars in this field show that militaries are not

inherently unitary. Even as they strive for cohesion, discipline, and performance, military organisations confront various challenges that undermine cohesion: groupthink (Henderson, 1985), lack of bonding (Siebold, 2007a, 2007b; King, 2006) or projects carried out by on-the-ground commanders shaped by patronage networks (Verweijen, 2015). Moreover, MS adds a crucial analytical element to my study: attention to the levels of analysis and internal components of an organisation. In my research, these correspond to the secondary groups or subunits of a broader insurgent organisation—the FARC-EP—which, over time, developed a hierarchical structure that resembled that of an army.

MS elaborates on the levels of analysis that constitute military organisations (Shils & Janowitz, 1948; Siebold, 1999, 2007a; King, 2006, 2013). This literature explains how cohesion is formed, or not, across different levels of a military organisation, a dimension that Civil War Studies (CWS) has not fully explored. The focus on levels of analysis stems from efforts to understand how military cohesion¹¹ is created and mediated by different relations ranging from small units (e.g., squads or platoons) to larger ones (e.g., divisions or armies). Although the systematic study of cohesion is relatively recent, Siebold's (2007a) *Standard Model* offers a comprehensive framework that distinguishes four interrelated components based on structural relationships, per Table 2.1: horizontal and vertical cohesion (at the *primary group* level) and organisational and institutional cohesion (at the *secondary group* level). At the primary level, cohesion has two dimensions. Horizontal cohesion refers to peer bonding among individuals at the same rank within small, face-to-face units, while vertical cohesion captures the relationships between subordinates and their immediate leaders. At the secondary level, organisational cohesion describes the ties between individuals and their larger operational units (companies, battalions, or brigades). In contrast, institutional cohesion refers to members' identification with, and integration into, the broader military institution (e.g., the army or navy) to which all subordinate units belong.

¹¹ Siebold's approach to primary group cohesion builds on Cooley's (1909) concept of the primary group and, most notably, on the seminal study by Shils and Janowitz (1948) of the German Wehrmacht, which identified the factors generating cohesion at the primary group level (Siebold, 2007a, 2011). Shils and Janowitz elaborated the primary group as a distinct level of analysis—later recognised as the cornerstone for the systematic study of cohesion. As described in the first section, Siebold's Standard Model integrates all levels of a military organisation through four components: horizontal, vertical, organisational, and institutional cohesion. Shils and Janowitz, however, focused their analysis specifically on the primary group unit. Subsequent research by the U.S. Army Research Institute (ARI) emphasised that cohesion is best examined at the squad and platoon levels, rather than at the company level or above (Siebold, 1999, p. 16). Similarly, Henderson (1985, p. 9) argues that cohesion should be studied where it occurs—within the small, face-to-face units.

How is this model relevant to my study of the emergence of breakaway factions at the secondary group level of the FARC-EP? As Table 2.1 shows, Siebold’s model provides an analytical framework that I adapt to examine the level within the secondary groups of the FARC-EP where breakaway emerged, or not. The 1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA, and the CMTA (negative case) are *secondary groups* that are part of larger or parent secondary groups (blocs), which in turn are part of the larger organisation—the FARC-EP. These fronts and mobile columns are secondary groups because they reached quotas of as many members as a company or more, according to Siebold’s model. Considering the organisational characteristics of the FARC-EP, secondary groups are the fronts and mobile columns or case studies I selected, from which breakaway factions emerged. Primary groups in the FARC-EP would be guerrilla (26 individuals) or a company of a front (54 individuals, the equivalent of an army platoon) (Ferro & Uribe, 2002, pp. 50–51). Researching at this level of disaggregation was not feasible, as I detail in the research design (Chapter 3). Within-front and within-mobile column cohesion is similar to that of the primary group, per Siebold’s model—it takes place within and between its subunits, and also between larger units, such as blocs. For this reason, I define *parent secondary groups* as the blocs or the larger units to which my selected cases or *secondary groups* were part of.

It is at the *secondary group* level of analysis that my research on the dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion is motivated, which is why I identify disaggregation as one of the pillars of my approach in response to the puzzle in the introductory chapter. That is, to explore and understand how breakaway factions emerge in the FARC-EP during the peace process and before disarmament, we must first disaggregate it into secondary groups to locate *where* fragmentation occurs.

In military organisations – Siebold’s Model				In the FARC-EP
Levels of analysis	Component	Unit size	Relation	Levels of analysis
Primary Group Cohesion	Horizontal	Squad to platoon	Peer-to-peer Within-stratum	<i>Secondary groups</i> or selected case studies: - 1st Front – Case Study One - 10th Front – Case Study Two - Mobile Column Daniel Aldana (CMDA) – Case Study Three - Mobile Column Teófilo Forero (CMTF)– Case Study Four
	Vertical		Leader bonding Between-stratum	

Secondary Group Cohesion	Organizational	Company Battalion Brigade	Formal or informal exchange between the service members and the larger unit or secondary organization. Relatively open networks.	<i>Parent secondary groups:</i> - Eastern Bloc: 1st Front and 10th Front - Western Bloc: CMDA - Southern Bloc: CMTF
	Institutional	Larger military institution (e.g., army)	A dependable exchange between the service members and the institution	Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia – People’s Army (FARC-EP)

Table 2.1 Siebold’s Model in the case of the FARC-EP

Scholars from both MS and CWS have built on this model to demonstrate that disaggregation helps to explain variation across secondary groups, for example, in how patronage networks affect horizontal, vertical, organisational, and institutional cohesion within the Armed Forces of the Democratic Republic of the Congo (FARDC) (Verweijen, 2015, 2018). Although, to my knowledge, the engagement with Siebold’s model within CWS remains incipient, it has already shown valuable insights concerning the significance of disaggregating armed organisations. For instance, research on rape as a practice shows that the relevant socialisation is horizontal, occurring within primary groups or among peers (Wood, 2018). Other studies demonstrate how social control within the military shapes and normalises participation in violence during both training and deployment, emphasising the control exercised at the field level by commanders of primary groups or small subunits (Manekin, 2020). Similarly, state-led collective targeting increases the number of recruits and strengthens the bonds among members of the same small unit. At the same time, it disrupts coordination, unity, and the broader institutional structures that sustain fighters’ commitment to the organisation’s overall cause (Schubiger, 2023).

Taken together, CWS and MS demonstrate that moving beyond monolithic and unitary understandings of armed groups is both necessary and possible. The former urges us to “dig deeper” (Perkoski, 2022), to “open the black box” (Daly, 2016), and account for “organisational diversity” (Zaks, 2017) to better understand the internal dynamics of armed groups—and, in turn, how these differences shape both internal and external outcomes. Perkoski, for instance, has already argued that we need to understand how and why groups split. One way is by examining “the internal politics that precede organisational splits” (2019; 2022). However, neither his work nor CWS more broadly explains how disaggregation operates in practice, specifically in relation to how the dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion unfold *across* and *within* secondary groups of a larger organisation. For this reason, MS enriches the dialogue

with CWS I present in this section. It shows us that it is possible to disaggregate armed organisations into their levels of analysis, which constitutes the first pillar of my approach. An organisation like the FARC-EP, highly hierarchical, centralised and with defined roles¹²—yet highly diversified, as I demonstrate through the fine-grained evidence I present in Chapters 5-8—allows me to operationalise the standard model of military group cohesion introduced above (Siebold, 2007a). Hence, incorporating disaggregation as one of the pillars of my approach provides a key element for addressing the puzzle: it establishes that four secondary groups—rather than the FARC-EP as a whole—serve as the units of analysis through which I can explore and understand variation in the observable outcomes.

2.2 The Sources of Fragmentation and Cohesion

In addition to disaggregation, the dialogue between civil war studies (CWS) and military sociology (MS) allows me to address the other three pillars of my organisationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion, as outlined in Section 1.1. Time, the coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion, and mechanistic heterogeneity are essential to understanding the dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion at the secondary group level. Knowing that we can and must disaggregate the FARC-EP into the selected case studies of this research, per the previous section, the dialogue between CW and MS also helps me to identify different internal and external sources of cohesion and fragmentation in state- and non-state military organisations, as Table 2.2 summarises:

Internal Sources of Fragmentation and Cohesion	
Socialization	Formal mechanisms: - Recruitment - Discipline - Military training - Political education - Ideology
	Informal mechanisms: - Participation in violence - Participation in sexual violence - “Casting”
Commandership Legitimacy	- Organizational level - Parent secondary group leaders - Secondary group leaders

¹² See Ferro & Uribe, 2002; Cubides, 2006; Gutiérrez-Sanin, 2008 and 2018.

External Sources of Fragmentation and Cohesion	
State	Counterinsurgency: leadership decapitation, local disembedding
Society	- Networks and local population - Material Resources - Patronage networks and elites
Peace processes	- Process itself - Spoilers - Elites in relation to peace processes
Transnational	- State sponsors - Foreign fighters
Table 2.2 Sources of Fragmentation and Cohesion	

In this study, I approach these sources¹³ as dynamics—that is, I examine how they interact and evolve over time, producing multiple, contradictory effects at the secondary group level. Moreover, I demonstrate that these sources, methodologically treated as existing explanations, cannot be taken in isolation, based on an iterative process between the evidence and the literature. Hence, my interest lies in understanding and exploring how these existing explanations—not static factors—interact and evolve over time at the secondary group level. That is, how they perform by identifying case-specific observable implications, which are both internal and external to the selected case studies, and exogenous and endogenous to the peace process. For example, a combination of existing explanations (commandership legitimacy, counterinsurgency and discipline at the secondary group, illegitimacy toward the parent secondary group and rejection of the 2016 peace accord disarmament provisions) contributes to high-proportion fragmentation in Case Study One (Chapter 5). But in other case studies, we need to look for different sets of combinations, as I demonstrate in Chapters 5-8 and the comparative analysis in Chapter 9. Even if counterinsurgency performs in other case studies, it does so through different observable implications and with different repercussions, even facilitating cohesion, as in Case Study Two (Chapter 6). Similarly, the existing explanation of peace processes is often treated as a polarising event or an external shock in the literature. Instead, I argue that we should approach it as one among other existing explanations to better understand the variation in case-specific observable outcomes.

In the following section, I resume the dialogue between CWS and MS. I present the internal and external sources of fragmentation and cohesion, that is, the conceptual framework

¹³ Methodologically, I treat them as existing explanations that help me design my interview plan protocols and guide me on what to ask research participants and what to look for in the data, as detailed in the research design (Chapter 3).

developed for this dissertation. In each subsection, I present the existing explanations in civil war studies and military sociology, listed above (Table 2.2).

2.2.1 Internal Sources of Fragmentation and Cohesion: Existing Explanations

2.2.1.1 Socialisation Through Formal Mechanisms

Socialization is “a process of inducting actors into the norms and rules of a given community, the endpoint of which is internalization” (Checkel, 2017). Scholars of military sociology also show that socialization is part of an “active investment by the military organization in socializing their members into professional discourses and norms, and in promoting identification with and allegiance to the organization” (Arkin & Dobrofsky, 1978, p. 150). Similarly, others refer “social learning.” Its goal is the internalization of recruitment, military training, discipline and political education that instruct armed-group recruits in group norms and rules, with the (perhaps implicit) goal of internalization” (Hoover-Green, 2018, p.39).

Scholars of CWS and MS explain that socializing members of state- and non-state armed organisations “into doing” (McLauchlin, 2020) and “internalize” (Checkel, 2017) what the organization demands for its broader political and military goals is a long-term process that does not emerge overnight. Not a single source contributes to cohesion or fragmentation. On the contrary different socialization mechanisms create “unity” (Siebold, 2007) and “adherence” (Checkel, 2017; Hoover-Green, 2018) to the group’s norms. This process is essential to the achievement of organizational goals based on the creation and maintenance of cooperative efforts (Kenny, 2010). In this sense, socialization creates a sense of belonging to the armed organization by stabilizing “relationship patterns” and providing “a sense outside and above a person that there is something more than just a collection of individuals” (2007a, p. 288). On the contrary, “weak socialization of new members [and] incorporation of these soldiers exacerbate and create tensions and increase the potential for escalation of conflict between the commanders and foot soldiers,” with implications to the degree of integration of armed groups (Staniland, 2014, p. 48).

Formal socialization mechanisms can both create cohesion and fragmentation by transmitting, or not, group norms. Disciplined members, for instance, internalize and learn the goals of the organisation, avoiding deviating behaviours and personal projects (Siebold, 2007a; Verweijen, 2015; 2018) and predatory behaviour toward local population (Wood, 2015;

Checkel, 2017; Hoover-Green, 2018; Manekin, 2020). Formal socialisation mechanisms, furthermore, strengthen internal ties within small units facilitating commitment to the organization and decrease reliance on the civilian population or family (Shills & Janowitz, 1948; Siebold, 2007a). They also help us understand differences in patterns of violence between and among state and non-state armed organizations (Hoover-Green, 2018; Manekin, 2020). In other words, it is not possible to discuss cohesion or fragmentation without considering socialization, which is why, for some authors, cohesion “yields knowledge of the mechanisms of rule application and socialization” (Verweijen, 2015).

Socialization can take place through different mechanisms depending on the levels of analysis or type of secondary group in armed organisations (Seibold, 2007a). For example, in primary groups socialization refers to exposure to norms and habits, whereas in secondary groups, it deals with exposure to regulation, law, reward and punishment, and general standards of behaviour. Scholars drawing on Seibold’s model show that limited socialization can affect vertical cohesion and membership to the larger organization, and negatively impact civil-military relations (e.g., violence against civilians) (Verweijen, 2015, 2018). Furthermore, scholars of civil wars note that strong or weak institutionalization indicates the degree to which groups carry out “norms, routines, customs, and traditions” (Bakke et al., 2012). “Highly institutionalized movements look more like states, in that respected rules coordinate and constrain the actions of the most important organizations in the movement (breadth) through formal rules and structures, including mechanisms for monitoring and enforcement (depth)” (ibid., 269). This reflects military sociology’s view that cohesion depends on social control mechanisms, including reward and punishment systems at multiple levels (Siebold, 2007; Verweijen, 2015).

In the following sections I present the formal socialization mechanisms discipline, military training, political education, recruitment, and ideology. Each subsection includes what these existing explanations suggest what we should look for in the data.

2.2.1.2 Discipline

Scholarship in CWS and MS points out that discipline is one of the formal mechanisms of socialisation in state and non-state armed organisations. Leaders and commanders have a key role in imposing a scheme of punishments and rewards (Shills & Janowitz, 1948; Hoover-Green, 2018; McLauchlin, 2020) and social control systems that trickle down from the upper

echelons to the small units (Siebold, 2007a) through standardised procedures and command systems (Verweijen, 2015, 2018). Adopting control mechanisms that manage the behaviour of armed group members is vital for organisational effectiveness. “Lack of discipline among the rank and file wastes resources, alienates potential supporters, and may undermine military efforts.” (Weinstein, 2007, p. 43; Kenny, 2010). Scholars also note that discipline, mediated by punishment and reward, aims to match the preferences of commanders with those of their subordinates, for “combatants calculate that they will receive greater expected utility for acting as if their preferences match those of commanders.” (Hoover-Green, 2018, pp. 40-41).

Discipline is also crucial for the external relations of armed groups: state and non-state organisations alike need to foster civilian-military relations or create local ties. It is a key component of insurgent-civilian interactions, and regardless of their goals, all insurgents require a minimum level of control and unity to succeed (Staniland, 2010; 2014). Moreover, “integrated organisations are characterised by leadership unity and discipline at the centre and high levels of local compliance on the ground”, notes the same author to compare this organisational trait to those of vanguard, parochial and fragmented types of organisations (Staniland, 2014, pp. 6-7). Discipline also helps explain why some combatants and groups commit many types of violence indiscriminately, while others restrain the forms or intensity of violence they employ (Hoover-Green, 2018). Nonetheless, discipline alone is insufficient. Coercion can backfire, leading to desertion, which is why cause, comradeship, and socialisation interact to build trust (McLauchlin, 2022). It does not account for the need to balance combatants’ willingness to deploy significant violence with restraint when necessary. Political education is likely more important in achieving this balance (Hoover-Green, 2018).

This existing explanation provides crucial insights to analyse the evidence I present in Chapters 5-8. It tells us what we should expect from discipline in armed organisations: compliance, control, restraint, trust, unity, behaviour management, and aligning the preferences of the organisation with those of its members.

2.2.1.3 Recruitment

This socialisation mechanism is another source of cohesion and fragmentation. Recruitment provides new fighters with their first lessons about the group’s expectations and culture and shapes the initial distribution of combatant preferences and informal socialisation processes (Hoover-Greene, 2018, pp. 40-42). This suggests that recruitment entails control and

should be managed in a way that does not disrupt the inner workings of armed groups. Recruitment often takes place through embedded and trusted networks, providing commanders with more and better information as to potential recruits' character, commitment, and competence (Daly, 2016). However, recruitment can be shaped, or not, by local and pre-existing trust-based local networks. It can be selective or random, voluntary or forced, depending on the available population to be recruited. Recruits may not take an oath, and depending on the group, there may be payments and rewards (Hoover-Greene, 2018, p. 40).

Scholars of civil wars show that in vanguard¹⁴ organisations, weak vertical links and the recruitment of loosely connected local strongmen and foot soldiers can create local control problems and exacerbate tensions between commanders and soldiers, especially when socialisation and integration are weak (Staniland, 2014, p. 48). In contrast, parochial¹⁵ organisations rely on deep local embeddedness and strong control over recruitment and information but may maintain only loose ties to central command (Staniland, 2014, pp. 49–53). Nonetheless, mismanaged expansion or incorporating recruits outside the group's social base can also contribute to the fragmentation in integrated organisations (Staniland, 2014, p. 40). Scholarship also acknowledges that accelerated or mismanaged recruitment among militaries can also have implications on violence against the local population (Verweijen, 2015). Moreover, forced recruitment can contribute to sexual violence, including gang rape, because it produces groups with low social trust and an unreliable hierarchy. One way to socialise “abducted” individuals and create cohesion is through gang rape (Cohen, 2016, 2020).

Additionally, scholars also show that recruits' pre-existing networks matter for cohesion. Idealistic insurgencies, Weinstein argues (2007), recruit ideologically motivated individuals, limit their use of violence against civilians and provide public goods, and garner popular support. At the same time, predatory groups attract greedy persons to their ranks, exploit local populations, and fail to obtain civilian support. He further claims that groups may use multiple strategies in practice, and recruiting can vary over time within a conflict or across different regions. (Weinstein, 2007, 100). Similarly, recruitment often takes place through embedded and trusted networks, providing commanders with more and better information as to potential enlistees' character, commitment, and competence, which influences cohesion in non-state organisations that remobilise (Daly, 2016). In the case of state militaries, the forces best able

¹⁴ Organizations with robust central processes of control and fragile local processes of control. Staniland, 2014, p. 6.

¹⁵ Organizations with fragile central control processes and robust local processes of control. Staniland, 2014, p. 6.

to maintain their cohesion grew out of long-standing armed networks and maintained tight standards for recruitment, thereby building strong norms (McLauchlin, 2020). Similarly, favouring one ethnic group in terms of military recruitment for the sake of regime stability has two effects: it tends to increase the cohesion of ethnic out-groups, both within the military itself and in society at large; and solidarity is likely to increase among members of a favoured group as well (McLauchlin, 2010).

2.2.1.4 Political Education

In addition to discipline and recruitment, political education is another important formal socialisation mechanism. Scholars note that discipline often stems from political education (Hoover-Green, 2017, 2018). Political education operates in at least two ways. First, it serves to internalise a “commonality of identification and beliefs” among members of armed organisations (Verweijen, 2015, 2018). This is crucial because internalising norms, habits, respect, and acceptance of peers and leaders helps to override preexisting identities and backgrounds that may otherwise generate divergent beliefs within the organisation. In this sense, political education aligns fighters’ preferences with those of commanders (Hoover-Green, 2018, p. 40). Second, political education varies across groups in terms of whether it is adopted, duration, frequency, and content, and in transmitting the group’s norms, practices, and understandings of the purpose of conflict, among others (Hoover-Green, 2018, p. 42).

A second way in which political education fosters discipline and cohesion is through the extent to which armed organisations behave and represent civilians. In the military, “while the idea of civilians figures almost exclusively in professional discourses used in military trainings and education, the discourses emphasising civilians as a general group of people circulate primarily in unofficial situations” (Verweijen, 2015, p. 117). That is, civilians can be represented in negative or positive ways, with implications for civilian-military relations. Similarly, scholars of civil war note that political education operates in line with those commanders who wish to pursue restraint (Hoover-Green, 2016, 2018).

2.2.1.5 Ideology

Socialisation through ideology is also central to both state and non-state armed organisations. The distinction from political education is subtle but significant for this study. Ideological indoctrination refers to a set of ideas, principles, and beliefs that are more dogmatic and doctrinaire than political education and are open to discussion only at high decision-making

levels. Scholars of civil wars define it as “a more or less systematic set of ideas that includes the identification of a referent group (a class, ethnic, or other social group), an enunciation of the grievances or challenges that the group confronts, the identification of objectives on behalf of that group (political change – or defense against its threat), and a (perhaps vaguely defined) program of action” (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood, 2014, p. 215). Political education transmits those ideas, but its approach can change in response to changing circumstances or new political goals (e.g., negotiating peace). Ideology matters because it is crucial to socialise combatants with heterogeneous motivations into a coherent group and group identity, dampening “individualistic motivations such as adventure seeking and vengeance do not disrupt operations.” (Ibid., p. 218). Military sociology also shows that members of an armed organisation act guided by ideology, beliefs, and identification, as well as a commitment to the group’s political goals (King, 2015). That is, recruits’ prior commitments matter, for compliance with the group is far from automatic, meaning that “socialisation also faces challenges from individuals who actively intend to resist being socialised” (McLauchlin, 2020, p. 10).

Members of some armed groups act on normative commitments in ways not reducible to instrumental reasoning—namely, to the ideology of the organisation (Gutiérrez-Sanín & Wood, 2014). For instance, research on Colombian excombatants finds that ideological indoctrination decreases the likelihood of both side-switching and demobilisation for economically motivated combatants, underscoring the reasons why groups invest heavily in such training. Moreover, ideologically motivated individuals are less likely to switch sides, whereas economically motivated combatants are more likely to switch sides (Oppenheimer et al, 2015).

2.2.1.6 Military training

Scholars of military sociology have long debated the role of military training in fostering cohesion. Some argue that communication drills, formal training processes, and other activities that form “a dense constellation of diverse collective practices” (King, 2007, p. 643) are central to the creation of cohesion. However, others claim that the “locus” of cohesion is “in the relationship, not in the actions or interactions between the service member and the group, organisation, or institution, although such actions or interactions are influenced by and feed back into the relationship.” (Siebold 2007a, p. 288). Contrary to this view, the basis of military comradeship grows out of military proficiency and the performance of collective drills, not in

private and personal exchange, nor in personal motivations (King, 2006, 2007, 2013). The same author further argues, “No matter how familiar soldiers are with each other on a personal and informal basis, if they do not recognise what collective military practices these symbols imply, the soldiers will lack social cohesion; they will be militarily ineffective” (King, 2006, p. 510).

Others agree that military training is important, but when taken in combination with other sources, as those presented above. Training reduces military misconduct and forms part of the “community of experience” that shapes horizontal cohesion (among peers) and vertical cohesion (between subordinates and commanders, including within secondary groups) (Verweijen, 2015). Training is also critical for building cooperation among combatants and commanders, as it is used “to impart a set of skills to prepare soldiers for combat. It can also be used to shape individual behaviours and beliefs around a shared set of expectations about how the organisation will operate” (Weinstein, 2007, p. 136). Similarly, Siebold (2007; 2011) does not downplay the role of group performance in relation to cohesion. For him, training is one element of a broader approach to cohesion that extends beyond peer-to-peer interaction. “Generally, in the military, the bonding process starts with institutional bonding (before entry), then leader bonding (at the start of basic training), and peer bonding within a stable group, and finally, organisational bonding as a service member’s social horizon expands. Primary group cohesion generates the fighter, while secondary group cohesion creates the professional service member” (Siebold, 2007, p. 288).

Additionally, military training varies between groups, in its length, intensity and methods, “but seldom advances the cause of restraint” (Hoover-Green, 2018). For others, participation in counterinsurgency violence depends on the effectiveness of “organisational control mechanisms” during training and deployment. Training transforms ordinary individuals into “a cohesive, aggressive force prepared to wield violence at the service of military objectives,” ensuring both the production and coordination of violence (Manekin, pp. 19–20). However, socialisation mechanisms can fail. During deployment, control becomes decentralised and falls to small units, allowing opportunistic violence to emerge, highlighting the importance of analysing how socialisation mechanisms perform in practice when disaggregating armed groups.

2.2.1.7 Socialisation Through Violence: Informal Mechanisms

The literature also shows that other internal mechanisms can create cohesion and fragmentation. As Checkel notes, “in exploring the mechanisms that socialise to violence, it is important to recognise that both violent and non-violent ones can be at work” (Checkel, 2017, p. 597). Similarly, Wood shows that rape is a socialisation practice and a source to keep military organisations bonded. She draws on Siebold’s standard model to argue that this socialisation practice takes place both at the horizontal and vertical level, that is, at the “unit” level, where the interactions take place face-to-face on a daily basis (2018, p. 518). Cohen also expands the notion of violent socialisation to explore how groups integrate new members and create social ties through “gang rape.” This practice works as an initial “hazing practice” but is also sustained as socialisation mechanism once the norms and beliefs about the utility and symbolism of rape are internalised” (2016, p. 22; 2017). She further shows how gang rape is a form of group violence that increases social cohesion, thus enabling armed groups with forcibly recruited fighters to create bonds of loyalty and esteem. Building on her study of the Israeli Defence Forces during the Second Intifada, Manekin (2020) shows that group leaders employ mechanisms of organisational control—such as hazing and dehumanisation—alongside more formal methods like education, drills, and persuasion. These mechanisms serve as internal sources of cohesion, as they “aim to motivate and direct members to act in ways that advance organisational objectives.” During deployment, they can also generate new practices that are both violent and functional to the organisation (2020, p. 4). Socialisation through violence reveals that it can extend beyond the military and insurgents. Fujii (2017) notes, “unwitting and unwilling participants come to take part” in violent displays through processes of casting, a “process by which actors take on roles and roles take on actors. Roles enable actors to do things they would not normally do” (2017, p. 661). As these practices become normalised, “participants might begin to internalise newly established group norms to the point where putting violence on display is simply the ‘right’ thing to do—not just once, but over and over again” (p. 671). Fujii further argues that “casting” occurred during the Bosnian war and the Rwandan genocide transgressed pre-war norms such as neighbourliness¹⁶.

¹⁶ Following my interview plans (Sections 3.4.2-3.4.3), I asked ex-combatants and other participants from the elite and third sectors (Section 3.4.1) about these existing explanations. However, I obtained no data on them, which is why I do not consider them in this study. Former combatants refused to discuss rape, hazing, or other violent practices involving peers, subordinates, commanders, or victims (e.g., kidnapped persons). Informally, usually after the life-history interviews, they explained that such topics were highly sensitive, exclusively reserved for their appearances before the transitional justice tribunals (the Special Jurisdiction for Peace, JEP). Secondary sources confirm that the FARC-EP committed sexual violence within its ranks and against local population and

2.2.1.8 Commandership Legitimacy

The dialogue between CWS and MS also highlights the crucial role of the legitimacy of commanders in fostering cohesion and preventing fragmentation within subunits or small groups of a larger organisation, as well as in establishing external ties with the local population.

In this study, I specifically draw on the literature on commandership legitimacy within these two bodies of scholarship. I restrict my focus to the sources of commandership legitimacy and how it extends into an armed group's operational environment (Shills & Janowitz, 1948; Wesbrook, 1980; Moore, 1988; Siebold, 2007a; Sikor & Lund, 2009; Bakke, et al., 2012; Malthaner, 2015; Verweijen, 2015, 2018; Brenner, 2017; Podder, 2017).

Commandership legitimacy within armed groups has been a long-standing field of study in MS and CWS. Authors in these bodies of literature build on classic notions of legitimacy (e.g., Weber, 1922 [2019]; Beetham, 1991, 2012) to argue that in the context of state and non-state armed organisations commandership legitimacy refers to the extent to which a commander is recognized by subordinates as having a rightful, appropriate, and credible authority to lead and represent the group, beyond formal rank (Podder, 2017). That is, commandership legitimacy relies on personal qualities, and leader's respect for the impersonal laws investing them with power, as well as in their position as sanctioned by tradition (Verweijen on Weber, 2015, p. 44). As I elaborate on in Section 3.4.2, this distinction is critical. It allows me to explore and understand how former combatants, through their life histories, convey the ways in which commandership legitimacy contributed to cohesion and fragmentation at the secondary group level. In doing so, I focus on the sources and representations of good leadership at this level of analysis that extend beyond the normative criteria sanctioned by the FARC-EP statutes and internal documents. Hence, my focus on how commandership legitimacy was enacted and evolved in practice.

Scholars of both CWS and MS stress that commandership legitimacy takes place at all levels of an organisation (Siebold, 2007a). At the secondary-group level, commanders are those physically most proximate to troops and best placed to exercise social control, enforce discipline and transmit the group's norms, principles and beliefs (Shills & Janowitz, 1948; Siebold, 2007a). For this reason, they have a vital role in developing and internalising shared

kidnapped persons; however, to my knowledge, these accounts do not cover the specific case studies analysed here, nor do they relate to bonding or cohesion.

systems of communication and routines through drills and training (King, 2007), and in enforcing socialisation through top-down techniques (Checkel, 2017), contributing to cohesion, especially if they have prior military experience (Doctor, 2020). Their role is also critical in how they transmit the rules of restraint. On-the-ground-commanders convince their troops, in addition to imposing a system of rewards and punishments, “of the rightness of the group’s cause and the importance of committing only ordered violence” (Hoover-Green, 2018, p. 45). However, they can also enforce cohesion through participation in sexual violence (Cohen, 2016; Wood, 2018).

Moreover, scholarship identifies multiple sources of legitimacy, including commanders being trusted and perceived as competent, caring for the well-being of their troops, and enforcing discipline when necessary (Shills & Janowitz, 1948; Siebold, 2007a; Verweijen, 2015, 2018). They also play a key role in motivating and eliciting dedication to serve (Wesbrook, 1985, p. 264). How commanders are represented and recognised within armed organisations and outside by the local population is also critical for their legitimacy. For instance, the extent to which commanders’ appointments are perceived as legitimate is shaped, in part, by adherence to meritocratic criteria (Wesbrook, 1980).

Another source of commandership legitimacy lies in how subordinates evaluate and represent their commanders. Such evaluations and representations, as they unfold in practice, may prompt subordinates to refuse compliance. That is, they do not necessarily align with ideal notions of immediate commanders nor with the higher hierarchies of the organisation (Verweijen, 2015). In practice, how they treat their peers and subordinates may be more relevant to fostering commandership legitimacy (Brenner, 2017). Organisational cohesion, for instance, is created to the extent to which commanders’ appointment is seen as legitimate, and they fulfil the characteristics of commanders that subordinates find desirable (Verweijen, 2015, 2018; Siebold, 2007a; Wesbrook, 1980). Hence, recognition of a higher authority (Bakke, et al., 2012, p. 270) and perception of the leaders themselves (Brenner, 2017) are key elements for the institutionalisation of commandership legitimacy in larger organisations, including armed groups and resistance movements. If this fails, leadership authority erodes, and internal contestation arises.

Recent research on mid-level commanders (Shesterinina, 2025), commander embeddedness (Martin, 2025), and local cadres (Worsnop, 2025) also highlight the relevance of on-the-ground commanders due to their multiple roles internal and external to armed groups.

I draw on these recent approaches because, as I elaborate on in Chapters 5-8, mid-level commanders' ties and legitimacy among rank-and-file combatants and local populations contributed to the emergence, or not, of breakaway factions. This highlights that commandership legitimacy extends beyond armed groups themselves and can be critical dynamic to foster popular support among local population and other key audiences (Podder, 2017).

CWS and MS show us that during war mid-level commanders develop ties not only within armed groups—with both top leaders and rank-and-file combatants—but also externally with the local population and extra organisational actors (Shesterinina, 2025, p. 6; Kasfir, 2015; Arjona, 2016; Martin, 2025). Building on these ties is a process that results in “exchange relationships” between armed groups and local population, in which commandership legitimacy plays a crucial role (Malthaner, 2015)¹⁷. This means, according to CWS and MS, that legitimacy is not a static phenomenon. Commandership legitimacy is a process, namely, a quality that, “renders it analytically more fruitful to focus on legitimizing practices, or enactments of claims to legitimacy linked to social role performance, than on ‘legitimacy’ as a fixed, absolute property” (Sikor & Lund, 2009, cited by Verweijen, 2015, p 40). In this sense, commandership legitimacy varies over time, and it is the outcome of how on-the-ground or mid-level commanders interact with their operational environment and foster support relationships. Support relationships shaped or mediated by kinship is an important form of legitimacy—“support for an armed group results from the fact that the militants are identified as part of the community and as defending it and fighting on its behalf” (Malthaner, 2015, p. 430). This aspect is critical for understanding the sources of legitimacy among local population, which in turn contributed to the emergence of breakaway factions, as I show in the case studies. Thus, the process of becoming a legitimate commander or leader at the secondary-group level are also a key aspect in the evidence I present in Chapters 5-8 and in the comparative analysis I offer in Chapter 9.

¹⁷ Malthaner distinguishes four forms of support relationships: utilitarian exchange, kinship or patron-client relationships and personal (family/friendship) relations, defensive communal solidarity, and political mobilisation. (2015, pp. 430-431).

2.2.2 External Sources of Fragmentation and Cohesion: Existing Explanations

In addition to internal sources, the dialogue between CWS and MS also identifies external sources of cohesion and fragmentation, including counterinsurgency, networks and local population, material resources, patronage structures, peace processes, and transnational actors. As in the previous section, I outline what we expect to observe in the existing explanations.

2.2.2.1 Counterinsurgency

Civil war studies show that states employ counterinsurgency to gain territorial control and knowledge (Kalyvas, 2006; Worrall, 2014), transform and fragment armed groups (Staniland, 2014a), and disrupt their long-term goals (Arjona, 2016) or screening mechanisms, with implications for internal cohesion (Schubiger, 2023) and ties with the local population (Staniland, 2014; Arjona, 2016). Scholars of civil wars and political violence highlight various counterinsurgency strategies, including coercion, intelligence gathering, imposition of control, armed competition, local disembedding, leadership decapitation, bargaining, and exploiting insurgent vulnerabilities (Kalyvas, 2006; Staniland, 2014; Worrall, 2014; Arjona, 2016; Waterman, 2018; Hazelton, 2021). Moreover, scholars acknowledge that armed groups are “resilient” in the face of counterinsurgency (Parkinson, 2022; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2026).

Regarding cohesion and fragmentation, scholars of civil war and political violence generally refer to are two important mechanisms counterinsurgency campaigns deploy to disrupt the integrity and social embeddedness of armed groups: local disembedding (Staniland, 2014; Worrall, 2014; Kalyvas, 2006; Waterman, 2018) and leadership decapitation (Mannes, 2008; Jackson, 2008; Carvin, 2012; Johnston, 2012; Price, 2012; Jordan, 2009, 2014; Phillips, 2015; Zech, 2016; Waterman, 2018). For these two mechanisms to succeed in fragmenting or wiping out an armed group, their effectiveness depends on whether the group has robust horizontal internal ties and strong vertical ties to the local population. For instance, states facing integrated organisations will need to take out their leaders and disrupt their local ties; against integrated groups, that are deeply socially embedded, states will focus on attacking their social bases and creating internal dissent among their local leaders (Staniland, 2014, pp. 35-55). Furthermore, research on leadership decapitation has produced mixed results depending on the type of organisation. In parochial groups, while it can take out their leaders, the remaining ones can start cooperating under fire (Staniland, 2014, pp. 49-51). Others show that it raises the

probability of government victory over them (Johnston, 2012) or extends their survival (Jordan, 2014). Moreover, recent research has warned against blanket arguments, arguing that it is necessary to look for different mechanisms deployed by states at the macro-, meso- and micro-levels of armed groups and their broader operational environment (Waterman, 2018).

By implementing “local disembedding” (Staniland, 2014), states seek to gain civilian compliance to understand the territory from their perspective (Worrall, 2014), gain information through violent extraction, paid informers, denunciation, and defection (Kalyvas, 2006; Staniland, 2014), and permeate local networks and rebels’ relatives (Waterman, 2018). Moreover, in Arjona’s (2016) theory of wartime social orders¹⁸, counterinsurgency shapes armed groups through its impact on rebel–civilian relations and territorial control. To (re)gain control, states must break both obedience cooperation (compliance with rebel commands) and spontaneous cooperation (voluntary support), along with the resources and networks that sustain them (Arjona, 2016, pp. 44–45). In this view, counterinsurgency seeks to dismantle the ties that underpin each social order.

2.2.2.2 Networks and Local Population

State and non-state military organisations interact with their operational environment, which is critical for their cohesion and structural integrity. Their leaders, for instance, must overcome organisational challenges. Weinstein (2007) identifies two organisational strategies: economic endowments and social endowments. These refer to the resources available to rebel groups in their early stages, shaping how they organise and employ violence. In the latter, or “activist” strategy, cohesion arises from small groups bound by repeated interaction, shared beliefs, and pre-existing networks—horizontal links formed through kinship, neighbourhood ties, or participation in ideological movements¹⁹. Others highlight the social underpinning of armed groups. Staniland (2012, 2014) argues that pre-war social bases often have the political orientation necessary for potential rebellion (2014, p. 17). They can also decrease the risks of pre-emptive state repression and enhance their adaptability during conflict, due to pre-existing networks that can adjust to changing wartime conditions (2014, p. 20)²⁰.

¹⁸ See Arjona, 2016, pp. 6.

¹⁹ Weinstein notes that no group relies solely on social or economic endowments. Instead, “rebel organizations fall along a continuum that captures the extent to which leaders mix these resources as they build their organizations” (2007, p. 50).

²⁰ Ties can be either horizontal or vertical. They are critical to build or sustain political, economic, or social projects in these communities. See, Staniland, 2014, p. 21-22.

Likewise, trust-based networks comprising more ethnically homogeneous individuals are a determining factor in controlling information and preventing government penetration (Lewis, 2020), as well as for recruitment, a strong command-and-control apparatus, and cohesion (Daly, 2016). However, armed groups, including the military, are also embedded in multiple social networks that can affect horizontal and vertical cohesion: “Soldiers are simultaneously tied into a variety of sometimes overlapping and sometimes competing networks both within, outside of and cross-cutting the military (...) In some cases, soldiers rely more on such networks for satisfying crucial material and immaterial needs than on the peers and leaders in their primary group.” (Verweijen, 2015, 256).

Furthermore, quotidian and familial ties, shaped by friendship and kinship, are key to understanding the social embeddedness²¹ of armed groups, including power and legitimacy of field commanders (Martin, 2025). Parkinson and Zaks argue that “relations form the backbone of organisational structure” (2018, p. 274), which can be either formal or informal and are defined in terms of their content, including the social level that includes family ties. For example, Shesterinina calls for a careful examination of the “sources of cohesion and look at the quotidian bases of insurgent organisation survival and success” (2019, p. 22). Parkinson (2013) tells us that quotidian social structures (kinship, friendship) connect mobilisation of networks pre-war-war-post-war. Tracing the emergence and development of clandestine networks shows that dynamic social network interactions represent one source of organisational resilience in the face of state-led violence. Shesterinina (2016) shows that motives for mobilisation, which do not occur in a vacuum, are situated in the embedded social context that includes both micro-level social structures of quotidian family and friendships and macro-level structures of national authority.

2.2.2.3 Material Resources

Research shows that the flow of resources in state and non-state armed organisations contributes to both cohesion and fragmentation. External resources can fragment organisations by disrupting their command lines and capacity to create discipline (Keen, cited by Staniland, 2012, p. 146). Armed groups’ initial mobilisation relying on economic endowments will likely lead to violence against the local population, while ignoring political goals. “Rebel groups that emerge in environments rich in natural resources or with the external support of an outside

²¹ On the concept of “social embeddedness,” see Granovetter, 1985; Staniland, 2014; Hundman & Parkinson, 2019, among others.

patron tend to commit high levels of indiscriminate violence; movements that arise in resource-poor contexts perpetrate far fewer abuses and employ violence selectively and strategically” (Weinstein, 2006, p. 4). However, scholars of civil war and political violence have challenged this approach because of its fixed nature—both economic and social endowments vary over time and overlap—and because armed groups evolve internally and in interaction with its operational environment (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2008; Mampilly, 2011; Staniland, 2014; Shesterinina, 2022).

For example, Gutiérrez-Sanín (2004, 2008) shows us that the flow of resources depends on the organisational context, which includes composition, control, discipline, strong bureaucratic and regulatory restrictions imposed on militants, and proximity to the civilian population. By comparing two armed groups in Colombia, he shows that drug trafficking can be a useful resource for building robust organisations (e.g., FARC-EP) and can also be counterproductive and undermine the organisational consolidation (e.g. paramilitary groups or AUC) (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2004). Furthermore, Staniland claims “all groups have some social underpinning and some resource endowments” (2012, 148). What is relevant is how armed groups interact and shape those resources according to their organisational characteristics and social underpinnings, he further argues. “Organisations built through strong preexisting ties can rapidly absorb and use large resource endowments without losing discipline, whereas fragmented groups built on weak social ties fall prey to military ineffectiveness and internal conflict” (Staniland, 2012, p. 174; 2014). Similarly, local economies show variation in how they influence state armed organisations across their units (Verweijen, 2015).

2.2.2.4 Patronage Networks and Elites

Scholars also highlight the role of external networks in shaping the cohesion and fragmentation of armed groups. Patronage networks, for example, can undermine cohesion and the chain of command by creating parallel patron–client ties with mid-level or field commanders (Verweijen, 2015, 2018). Such networks often rest on horizontal relations and social ties based on ethnicity, profession, religion, or geography (Utas, 2012). These dynamics illustrate how the operational environment can enable local cadres to exercise agency, who pursue projects alongside their mission and that of the broader organisation. These projects—formal or informal—are influenced by both internal dynamics and interactions with civilians (Verweijen, 2015, p. 286).

Research on post-conflict settings shows that patronage networks help elites maintain loyalty and influence in post-conflict settings by, for example, obstructing human rights prosecutions—that is, elites can play a disruptive role by co-opting institutions and armed actors to advance their prewar interests (Lake, 2017). Moreover, Themner (2011) refers to “remobilizers”²² as individuals who have the will, capacity and skills to coordinate organised violence and relationships in post-conflict settings. Such is the case of commanders who are *part of* or *control* their patronage networks to (re) mobilise individuals. Similarly, Utas stress the impacts of these networks on post-conflict settings to argue that conflict networks cannot simply be destroyed as they are institutions governing, protecting and supporting most aspects of life (2012, p. 19), and “clearly demonstrate capacities in the post-war arena (Ibid., p. 21).

2.2.2.5 Peace Processes and Peace Agreements

As stated in the puzzle in the introductory section, existing scholarship in civil war studies highlights peace processes as critical junctures shaping whether non-state armed organisations remain cohesive or fragment. Cohesion is vital, as groups unable to control their fighters lose bargaining credibility, while internal divisions can trigger outbidding and competitive violence (Staniland, 2014). However, peace processes often create fragmentation, and the emergence of “spoilers” that reject negotiations or act against the implementation of peace accords and stabilisation measures (Stedman, 1997; Cronin, 2006; Boutellis & Zahar, 2017). Spoilers — actors who see peace as a threat to their power or interests — may use violence to derail talks. Peace negotiations are external shocks that generate contestation over power-sharing, ideology, and leadership (Pearlman, 2009), especially when agreements fail to include all factions (Plank, 2017). Moreover, Duursma and Fliervoet (2020) argue that peace processes also exacerbate pre-existing fault lines, either structural, reflecting non-unitary organisation, or substantive, rooted in divergent aims.

2.2.2.6 Transnational: External Sponsors and Foreign Fighters

Scholarship shows that transnational actors and dynamics influence civil war, that is, how actors in civil conflict may use or be affected by broader transnational processes and how

²² Remobilizers can be entrepreneurs of violence (political, military, religious or business elites that are in the market for fighters) and intermediaries (individuals situated at the mid-stratum in society who take responsibility for finding recruits on behalf of entrepreneurs of violence). These networks can be connected to the military, politicians, businesspeople, elites, religious and ethnic communities, transnational and criminal (Themner, 2011, p. 21).

transnational actors may intervene to reshape domestic conflict dynamics (Checkel, 2013). Civil wars are not an exclusively domestic phenomenon, for it is necessary to study the linkages and interactions across state boundaries that influence the likelihood of civil conflict (Gleditsch, 2007). Others argue, “international actors develop an array of relationships with both armed and unarmed actors and, thereby, impact the dynamics of civil wars” (Shesterinina, 2022).

External sponsors can contribute to cohesion or fragmentation. Foreign state sponsorship has, in general, been conceptualised as asymmetric, one-way support going from the foreign state sponsor to the rebel group, with the possibility of more symmetrical relationships between state sponsors and rebel groups and their implications for conflict dynamics and outcomes receiving less attention in the literature (Salehyan, 2010). State sponsors can provide significant troop support, directly determine the outcome of intra-group rivalries and empower even internal rivals who lack local power bases. Whereas some state sponsors can strengthen an existing leader or can promote individuals who otherwise would not have been likely to lead a rebel group, others can allocate their resources to enable organisational splits (Tamm, 2016, 2019). Staniland tells us that one of the mechanisms for a parochial organisation to become a vanguard is through “factional fusing”, that is, by relying on external sanctuaries that “provide a relatively safe place for factional elites to interact, discuss strategy, and establish new intra-leadership linkages” (2014, 50). However, he shows “external actors can also choose to undermine cohesion by exploiting divisions between factions.” (Ibid., 50). Thaler, for example, identifies delegation, sponsorship, and autonomy as the types of relationships that these actors can assume and move between (2022). Other scholars, such as San-Akca (2016, 2022) and Tamm (2016), prefer the concept of alliance, implying a greater degree of symmetry between external states and rebel groups. State sponsors can also strengthen groups and provide material support by offering sanctuary, which in turn contributes to institution building, a key element to create a more cohesive organisation (Bakke et al., 2012).

Foreign fighters similarly affect both cohesion and fragmentation. Chu and Braithwaite (2017) show that while foreign fighters can enhance military capacity and address asymmetries, their recruitment does not automatically increase rebel success. Bakke (2013, 2014) highlights the multifaceted influence of transnational insurgents on domestic movements. In her analysis of the Chechen and Syrian wars, she shows that foreign insurgents can strengthen domestic groups by contributing fighters, weapons, expertise, and resources, but they can also undermine

civilian support. Transnational insurgents often introduce new ideas about the struggle and tactics, which may clash with local norms. When the local population resists these foreign ideas, the domestic movement's ability to maintain public support and organisational cohesion—both critical to its strength—can be weakened (Bakke, 2014, p. 185).

2.3 Discussion

The literature on fragmentation and cohesion of state and non-state armed organisations is vast and rich, as the dialogue between civil war studies and military studies I lay out in this chapter shows. However, existing explanations in these bodies of literature fall short when it comes to conceptualising and understanding the emergence, or not, of breakaway factions within secondary groups of the FARC-EP during the peace process. The purpose of this chapter is to unpack the existing explanations on fragmentation and cohesion in civil war studies and military sociology in dialogue. I began this dialogue by bringing back the puzzle of this dissertation. Existing explanations in the literature on peace processes are inconsistent with what I observe in the four selected secondary groups for this study—namely, fragmentation across the case studies varies in terms of proportion, and levels of analysis. This variation cannot be explained solely with reference to the peace process. Therefore, the question that motivates this study is whether we should look to conditions *prior* to the peace process to understand the emergence of breakaway factions, or not, within the selected case studies of the FARC-EP *during* the peace process.

To address this puzzle, this dissertation develops an approach to the study of fragmentation and cohesion that incorporates the following four elements: disaggregation, time, coexistence of cohesion and fragmentation and mechanistic heterogeneity. In this first section of this chapter, I elaborate on a dialogue between civil war studies and military sociology that addresses the first pillar of this approach: disaggregation. Military sociology provides an analytic tool to disaggregate armed organisations into their levels of analysis, which I adapt to disaggregate the FARC-EP into secondary groups or the four elected case studies (1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA and CMTF) and parent secondary groups or the bloc to which these fronts and mobile columns were part of. Disaggregating in this way helps me better locate where fragmentation takes place and demonstrates variation in fragmentation and cohesion outcomes across the case studies—namely, case-specific observable outcomes that vary in proportion, and levels of analysis within secondary groups. In the research design, I detail how I

operationalise disaggregation for the case selection (Chapter 3). In Chapters 9 and 10, I elaborate on the significance of disaggregating for the study of fragmentation and cohesion.

In the second section of this chapter, I continue with the dialogue between civil war studies and military sociology. I unpack the existing explanations on cohesion and fragmentation, internal and external to armed groups. These existing explanations provide the conceptual tools to address the research puzzle in this study. However, existing explanations fall short when it comes to addressing time, coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion and mechanistic heterogeneity, the other three pillars of my organisationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion.

I identify, for example, that existing explanations on peace processes fail to capture change both within secondary groups and their operational environments. Hence, the importance of considering other sets of combinations of existing explanations, including peace processes, I lay out in this chapter to better understand the shifting internal dynamics of secondary groups in relation to their operational environment. For this reason, I argue for a longer approach to fragmentation and cohesion that includes both the periods before and during peace agreements. Furthermore, existing explanations do not address their multiple, contradictory effects across and within secondary groups. The evidence I present in Chapters 5-8 demonstrates that they perform differently in each case study and can also contribute to both fragmentation and cohesion across and within secondary groups. The case-specific observable outcomes demonstrate that they are not mutually exclusive. Lastly, I draw on the dialogue between civil war studies and military sociology to show that we must consider different sets of existing explanations, internal and external to the selected case studies, as they evolve both before and during the peace process. I argue we need to carefully examine how existing explanations on their own—both internal and external to armed groups—perform differently, combine, and transform over time. In doing so, it is possible to identify the interlocking parts that build the ten case-specific mechanisms that I detail in Chapter 9. Mechanistic heterogeneity tells us that there are different paths, at the secondary group level, toward case-specific observable outcomes.

Chapter 3: Research Design

I adopt a case study research design including within-case and cross-case comparison to analyse the broader dynamics of processes of fragmentation and cohesion at the secondary group level. I select four single cases of secondary groups of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People's Army (FARC-EP) in which breakaway factions emerged, or not, during the peace negotiations and before the disarmament phase (2016-2017) in four different regions of Colombia. The case studies are the 1st and 10th Fronts, and the Mobile Column *Daniel Aldana* (CMDA), three secondary groups in which breakaway faction emerged within them, and the Mobile Column *Teófilo Forero* (CMTF), which is the negative case in this dissertation.

To select the case studies, I followed two criteria. First, this study explores variation in fragmentation in terms of proportion and the level of analysis it takes place within each secondary group (see observable outcomes in Chapters 5-8 and Diagrams A-D). For this reason, I select a diverse set of case studies that represent a wide range of variation in fragmentation in terms of proportion and at the level of analysis. This diversity is essential to explore and understand the different sets of internal and external dynamics that contributed to each observable outcome.

Moreover, this diversity shows that fragmentation varies within armed groups, more specifically, across their constitutive secondary groups. Fragmentation can be of high proportion, but it needs strong intra-secondary group cohesion in order for that group to break away collectively. This is the case of the 1st Front (Case Study One), where the breakaway faction emerged at the level of the front leadership. Conversely, fragmentation can be of low proportion, indicating that most of combatants stayed cohesive in favour of the peace process. This is evident in the 10th Front (Case Study Two), where the breakaway faction emerged at the level of urban networks and formerly imprisoned members of the FARC-EP. This diversity of cases also demonstrates that fragmentation can be mixed, with high proportion at the level of urban networks and low proportion among rural mid-level commanders, as in the CMDA (Case Study Three). Finally, cohesion can be strong in support of the 2016 peace accord (CMTF or Case Study Four).

The second criterion for my case selection pertains to the universe of cases within the temporal scope of this study, as well as issues of accessibility and ethical considerations. Because this study investigates the emergence, or not, of breakaway faction *during* the peace

process (2012-2016), I relied on public reports on FARC-EP dissidents published between 2018 and 2021. These reports –specifically Álvarez-Vanegas (2018) and CORE (2021)– provided a universe of breakaway factions that emerged during the peace process, as well as cases of rearmament of remobilization. Regarding the former, which is the focus of this dissertation (see Scope Conditions-Section 3.2), I contrasted the data of the abovementioned published reports with contacts in the security sector apparatus in Colombia and research participants, whose knowledge allowed to triangulate and narrow down the universe of potential case studies, as Table 3.1 shows.

Secondary group: Front or Mobile Column	Region or area of operations
1st Front	Guaviare Department
6th Front	Cauca Department
7th Front	Meta Department
10th Front	Arauca Department
14th Front	Caquetá Department
16th Front	Guainía and Vichada Departments
18th Front	Antioquia Department
29th Front	Nariño Department
30th Front	Cauca and Valle del Cauca Departments
33rd Front	Norte de Santander Department
36th Front	Antioquia Department
40th Front	Meta Department

Mobile Column <i>Acacio Medina</i> (CMAM)	Guainía Department
Mobile Column <i>Daniel Aldana</i> (CMDA)	Nariño Department
Table 3.1 The universe of cases of breakaway factions of the FARC-EP that emerged during the peace process	

In addition to specifying the universe of cases, other factors contributed to case selection in this study. Accessibility, “preliminary knowledge” of the cases (George & Bennett, 2005), logistical, time, and budgetary constraints, as well as ethical and security-related considerations also influenced my selection of the case studies, highlighted in green in Table 3.1, in addition to the negative case — the *Teófilo Forero* Mobile Column. For example, having previous knowledge of almost all the potential case studies allowed me to narrow down the cases in terms of the variation in proportion of fragmentation and the level of analysis where fragmentation occurred. To my knowledge, the 1st Front was the only secondary group that showed high-proportion fragmentation during the peace process. Logistically, in 2022, it was possible to conduct fieldwork in the region. Also, research respondents who could inform this case study were based in Bogotá. Regarding cases of low-proportion fragmentation, the 10th Front ended up being my best choice. Not only were security conditions favourable and former combatants willing to host me at the reincorporation cantonment, but individuals in the region also referred me to several elite and third-sector research participants (see Section 4.1.2). I discarded other potential cases, like the 7th, 29th and 33rd Fronts, due to security and logistical concerns. With respect to cases of mixed fragmentation, the CMDA was, to my knowledge, the only potential case study. Although conducting research on this case became challenging during my fieldwork (Section 4.1.5), I adapted my research strategy to the unfolding circumstances.

As previously explained in the introductory chapter and in Chapter 2, the 1st and 10th Fronts, and the Mobile Column *Daniel Aldana* (CMDA) are three secondary groups in which breakaway faction emerged within them. The Mobile Column *Teófilo Forero* (CMTF) is the negative case in this study. By selecting these cases, my goal is two-fold. Based on my approach to fragmentation and cohesion presented in the introductory Chapter, first, I am to understand the intersection of internal and external dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion to these fronts and mobile columns — both endogenous and exogenous to the peace process — that produce,

or not, breakaway factions as understood by those who lived these processes²³. Second, I identify case-specific mechanisms, demonstrating there are different paths toward the observable outcome in each case study, as I mention in the Introduction and I further elaborate on in this chapter and Chapters 9 and 10. These observable outcomes show variation in fragmentation in terms of proportion and at the level of analysis it takes place within each secondary group. Because of this analytical focus and research purpose, I deploy “explaining-outcome” process tracing, which helps me to produce a comprehensive explanation for each observable outcome (Beach and Pedersen, 2019).

This chapter proceeds in five sections. First, I provide a brief overview of the Colombian armed conflict and its history of armed group fragmentation during peace processes. Second, I present the scope condition, followed by the case selection. The fourth and fifth sections focus on data collection and analysis, respectively.

3.1 The Case of Colombia: Fragmentation and Peace Processes

Colombia has a history of fragmentation during peace processes throughout its armed conflict. In this section, I present an overview of the Colombian armed conflict and a brief account of the fragmentation of non-state armed organizations amidst peace processes in Colombia.

The onset of Colombia’s armed conflict remains contested. According to the Colombian Truth Commission (CTC, 2022), the period from 1920 to 1958 “in a certain way explains the origin and persistence of the war” (CEV, 2022, p. 27). Agrarian conflicts and demands for land reform in the 1920s and 1930s, rooted in colonial legacies, the state’s failure to develop effective political institutions and the persistent obstruction of reform by national elites are key structural conditions (Fajardo, 2015; Molano, 2015; González et al., 2003; González, 2015). The inability of liberals and conservatives to address social demands between the 1920s and 1950s—exacerbated by the assassination of liberal leader Jorge Eliécer Gaitán in 1948—deepened political instability. The ensuing bipartisan violence, or *La Violencia* (1949–1953), claimed nearly 200,000 lives (Oquist, 1978; González, 2013) and culminated in a military dictatorship that sought to pacify the country and eradicate liberal and communist guerrillas, lasting until 1957–58.

²³ I thank Professor Theodore McLauchlin for helping me to phrase this idea in a simpler and clearer way.

Authors identify 1958 as a turning point, when the National Front (NF) consolidated Liberal–Conservative bipartisanship and excluded emerging political movements (CEV, 2022; González, 2013). The late 1950s also saw the rise of new guerrilla groups (Pizarro, 1991; Aguilera, 2014) amid the state’s incapacity to assist those displaced by *La Violencia*. Lasting until 1978, the NF was a power-sharing pact between liberal and conservative elites that institutionalised political exclusion. State repression, Cold War dynamics, U.S. influence, unresolved agrarian conflicts, and growing social discontent among peasants, students, and workers laid the groundwork for the emergence of the FARC-EP. Officially established in 1966, the FARC evolved from the Southern Bloc (1964) and earlier liberal, communist, and peasant self-defence movements of the 1950s–60s. In its early years, it was a marginal armed group (Aguilera, 2014; Pizarro, 1991). In the late 1970s, for instance, it had nearly 800 members (Vélez, 1999). The 1960s–70s also saw the emergence of other insurgencies—ELN, EPL, and M-19—some of which demobilised in the 1990s, while others, such as the FARC-EP and ELN, persisted.

However, in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the FARC-EP experienced its “organisational take-off” (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2006, p. 26). It evolved into a centralised, hierarchical organisation with a defined military structure and internal regulations (Pizarro, 1991; Aguilera, 2014). At the same time, it overhauled its financial strategies, funding operations through illicit crops, illegal mining, kidnapping, extortion, narcotrafficking, and land appropriation (CEV, 2022). From the 1980s on, Colombia’s armed conflict intensified despite the demobilisation of smaller rebel groups²⁴. During the 1990s, private militias evolved into a national paramilitary federation (the AUC)²⁵ tied to the military, political elites, and drug cartels (CTC, 2022; Romero, 2002). The 1980s and 1990s also witnessed the rise of powerful drug cartels, which colluded with paramilitary groups and influenced multiple sectors of Colombian society. Illicit drug production became a crucial source of funding for non-state armed organisations. The FARC-EP, for instance, came to resemble an irregular army that in some regions achieved military superiority over the state’s armed forces (FIP, 2014; Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2018; Nussio & Ugariza, 2021).

²⁴ M-19 in 1990, EPL, MAQL and PRT in 1991 and CRS in 1994.

²⁵ These groups merged in 1994 under the name Peasant Self-Defense Forces of Córdoba and Urabá or *Autodefensas Campesinas de Córdoba y Urabá* (ACCU) and in 1997 formed the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia or *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC). Following a peace agreement, the AUC partially disarmed and demobilized between 2003 and 2006.

In 2000, the United States and Colombia launched *Plan Colombia*, a bilateral initiative to combat drug cartels and insurgent groups amid the failed Caguán peace process (1998–2002). It contributed to the modernisation of Colombia’s armed forces and, in consequence, to the FARC-EP’s retreat in the early 2000s, which created favourable conditions for the Havana peace talks (2012–2016). Despite the 2016 peace accord, conflict persists as the ELN, FARC dissidents, and criminal groups remain active. Rising violence has led some to argue that Colombia faces a new cycle of conflict (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2020). The CTC (2022) estimates that from 1958 to 2022, about 270,000 people were killed, including 25,000 in nearly 4,300 massacres; 38,000 were kidnapped, and 190,000 forcibly disappeared. Over 8.2 million Colombians were internally displaced between 1985 and 2021, and more than 6,400 civilians were victims of extrajudicial executions by state forces between 2002 and 2008.

Armed groups in Colombia have fragmented over time²⁶ despite multiple peace efforts. There have been at least eight cases of fragmentation. Between 1968 and 1989, two occurred because of ideological and internal disputes. From 1989 to 2016, five additional cases emerged during peace negotiations. (Aguilera, 2020: 231-235). The first three involved breakaway factions from the ELN²⁷ and the M-19²⁸ that emerged in the early 1990s but no longer operate. The fourth case was a faction from the former EPL that formed in 1991 and has been dismantled²⁹. The fifth case concerns the breakaway factions of the FARC-EP that emerged during the negotiation process in 2016 and before the disarmament in 2017 (Aguilera, 2020; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018)³⁰. The scope conditions of this dissertation are situated within this last wave of armed group fragmentation.

²⁶ Of all the peace processes since the early 1980s, only three have produced significant results in terms of disarmament and demobilization. The first occurred in the early 1990s, involving the M-19, EPL, MAQL, PRT, and CRS, through which approximately 4,500 combatants demobilized. The second took place between 2003 and 2006 with the AUC paramilitaries, leading to the demobilization of about 30,000 fighters (FIP, 2015). Finally, the 2016 peace agreement with the FARC-EP resulted in the demobilization of roughly 13,000 combatants in 2017—over 92% of the organisation (UN, 2017).

²⁷ *Ejército Revolucionario Guevarista* (ERG) and *Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo* (ERP).

²⁸ *Jaime Bateman Cayón Movement* (JBC in Spanish).

²⁹ *Libardo Mora Toro Front* (FLMT in Spanish)

³⁰ The AUC paramilitaries also fragmented throughout the peace process from 2003 to 2006. In 2007 there were at least 34 factions comprising approximately 4,000 members (CNRR, 2007), which gradually reorganized into larger groups, of which today, a major one survives known as the *Ejército Gaitanistas de Colombia* (EGC). It is the largest armed group in the country.

3.2 Scope Conditions

In line with my approach and research questions, the temporal scope of this dissertation spans from mid-2016, during the Havana peace negotiations, to early 2017, just before the disarmament, when the breakaway factions emerged. Hence, I am not studying recidivism, rearmament, nor remobilisation of armed organisations. Case Studies One, Two and Three are cases of fragmentation, while Case Four is a case of cohesion, or a negative example. I selected a negative example while conducting research in Colombia (Section 4.2.2). The CMTF is a case of a secondary group that was deemed to become a breakaway faction but stayed in the peace process. I selected this case to explore whether the existing explanations in the literature that perform in the other three case studies, contributing to fragmentation, can also create cohesion. Likewise, I build on authors such as Kalyvas who tells us that one of the biases in studying instances of violence is not considering instances of nonviolence (2006, p. 48).

Other potential cases fell within the scope of my research, but I did not select them for several reasons. First, unlike the selected cases, I did not have preexisting contacts and referral networks in those areas. Second, the security conditions in those regions posed risks for both fieldwork and the safety of potential research participants and local contacts. Finally, time and budget constraints limited my fieldwork in Colombia—conducted over six months—to four cases.

3.3 Case Studies Selection

I collected primary and secondary data on four secondary groups of the FARC-EP in which breakaway factions emerged, or not, from 2016 during the last stages of the peace negotiation process in Havana to early 2017 or before the disarmament phase. The four subnational cases (Map 3.1) are the following:

3.3.1 Case Study One: Guaviare – 1st Front

The 1st Front, established in the early 1970s in the eastern lowlands of Colombia (Guaviare Department), was part of the FARC's Eastern Bloc. This secondary group played a key role in securing material resources, coordinating with other fronts operating along the Venezuelan and Brazilian borders, and maintaining strategic positions for rest and retreat deep in the Guaviare jungles. In June 2016, the 1st Front publicly rejected the peace process. Its

leader, Iván Mordisco, together with most of his troops and several seasoned mid-level commanders from other secondary groups within the Eastern Bloc, spearheaded the formation of this breakaway faction.

3.3.2 Case Study Two: Arauca – 10th Front

This breakaway faction emerged in early 2017 and comprised formerly imprisoned mid-level commanders of the organisation, joined by *milicianos* and members of the 10th Front's local support networks. The 10th Front, established in the early 1980s as part of the Eastern Bloc's regional expansion, operated in the Arauca region and along the Venezuelan border. Its mission focused on consolidating military and financial capacities, developing extensive urban networks in both Colombia and Venezuela, and securing the flow of weapons to other FARC-EP fronts.

3.3.3 Case Study Three: Tumaco – Mobile Column³¹ *Daniel Aldana* (CMDA)

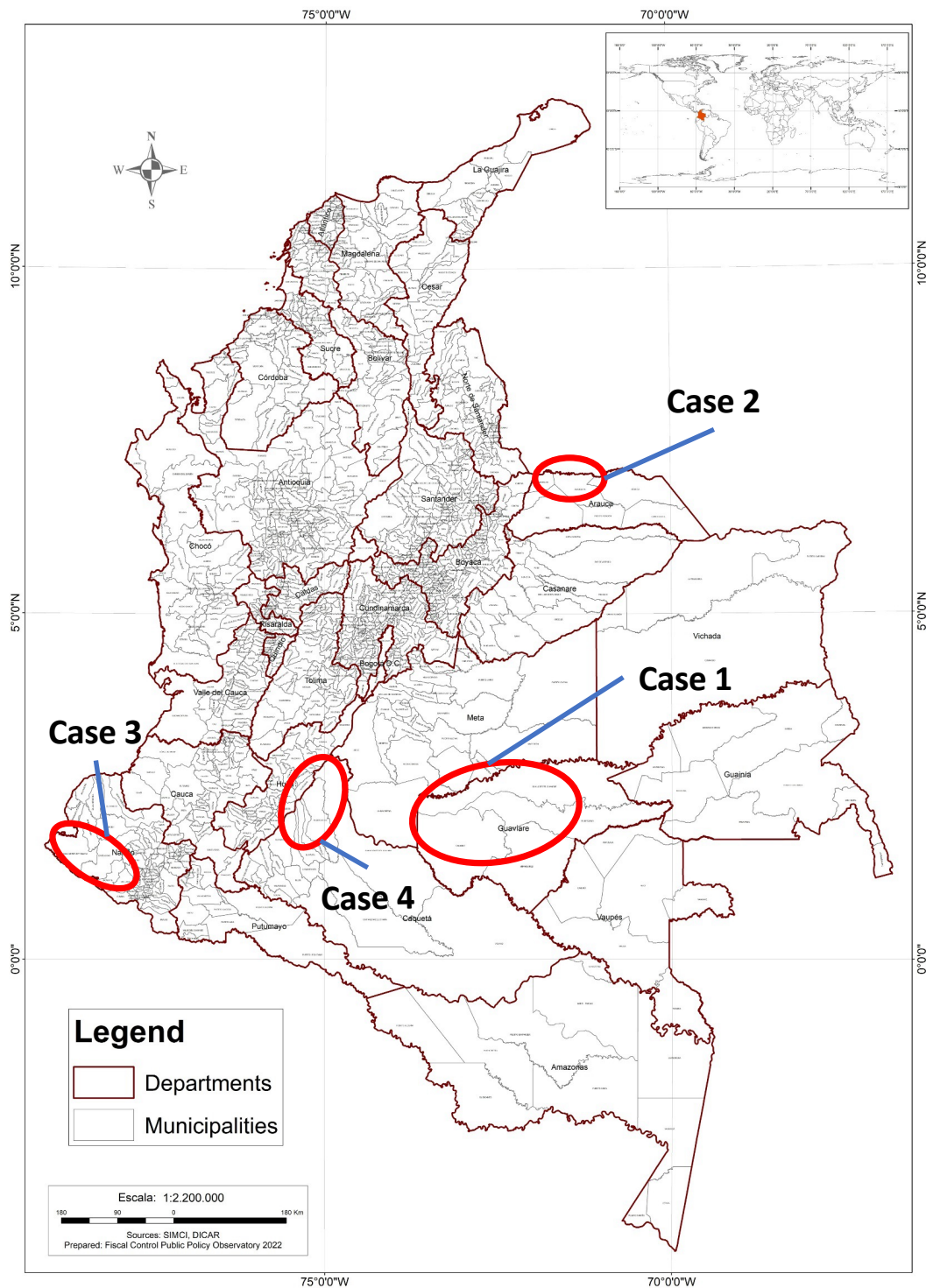
It was formed in the early 2000s to advance the FARC-EP's military and financial objectives in Colombia's southwestern lowlands bordering Ecuador, primarily in the rural and urban areas in the municipality of Tumaco, Nariño Department. Part of the Western Bloc, the CMDA became one of the organisation's largest secondary groups, with strong local ties and significant resources from cocaine production, extortion, and kidnappings. Between late 2016 and early 2017, the CMDA split into three breakaway factions—two comprised *milicianos* and the third mainly rural cadres.

3.3.4 Case Study Four: Caquetá – Mobile Column *Teófilo Forero* (CMTF)

Established in the early 1990s, this secondary group initially was the personal guard of high-ranking members of the FARC-EP in the southeast Andes region of El Pato-Balsillas, in the Caquetá Department. By the early 2000s, it had evolved into a disciplined and cohesive mobile column operating in one of the FARC-EP's historical strongholds, with extensive local ties and trust-based networks. It also developed a robust network of urban networks—known for their predatory activities and notoriety in the Caquetá and Huila departments. It also carried

³¹ It comprises two or more companies, each with its commander, along with urban and local support networks. These units are mobile, serving as links between different fronts across, and are known for their military readiness and capabilities.

out nationwide military operations with international repercussions, including mass kidnappings, terrorist attacks, and mid-flight hijackings.



Drawing on the puzzle I present in Chapter 2, I disaggregate the FARC-EP into the four secondary groups mentioned above. Diagram 3.1 shows the secondary groups (red rectangle), part of parent secondary groups or blocs (blue rectangle), within the FARC-EP (black rectangle). For each case study, we see the portion of the breakaway faction (red diagonal stripes) and the portion that stayed in the peace process (blue diagonal stripe). Outside the FARC-EP (black triangle), I place the breakaway factions (red dashed triangle) and the negative case of cohesion (light blue rectangle) connected to the parent secondary group by red dashed lines and by a light blue solid line, respectively. For all case studies, I include mid-level commanders and rank-and-file from other secondary groups (asterisks *** inside red dashed rectangles) that joined the breakaway factions.

Moreover, per Diagram 3.1, the case studies show variation in their specific observable outcomes—namely, in the proportion of fragmentation and level of analysis where it occurs. 1st Front or Case Study One shows high-proportion fragmentation at the level of front or secondary group leadership (red diagonal stripes) and a low proportion demobilised (diagonal blue stripes). 10th Front or Case Study Two shows low-proportion fragmentation at the level of urban networks and formerly imprisoned mid-level commanders (red diagonal stripes). In contrast, a high proportion stayed in the peace process (diagonal blue stripes). The CMDA, or Case Study Three, exhibits mixed fragmentation: high fragmentation in urban networks (two breakaway factions) and low fragmentation among rural mid-level commanders (one breakaway faction). The CMTF or Case Study Four shows cohesion. Mid-level commanders and rank-and-file from other secondary groups (asterisks *** inside red dashed rectangles) joined the breakaway factions in Case Studies One, Two, and Three (red solid lines).

This dissertation shows that disaggregating the FARC-EP is necessary to get at variation in the observable outcomes. As explained above, drawing from military sociology and the organisational turn in civil war studies, disaggregating is one of the criteria for selecting cases in which breakaway factions emerged, or not. For one, disaggregating makes it possible to capture the variation in the outcome of fragmentation at different levels of analysis, and proportion. Disaggregation also shows that, in each case study, existing explanations have contradictory effects on fragmentation and cohesion when combined, as explained in Chapter 2. By disaggregating, I show that each combination of explanations is case-specific, thereby laying the groundwork for building case-specific mechanisms. My selection of the “explaining-outcome process tracing” variant (Beach and Pedersen, 2019), thus aligns with my organizationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion, as detailed in Section 3.5.2.

In Chapters 5-8, I present the evidence for each case study. I examine how the observable implications of existing explanations in the literature on fragmentation and cohesion (Chapter 2) play out and evolve within and across these secondary groups. In doing so, I demonstrate that there are different combinations of existing explanations—internal and external to each secondary group, and exogenous and endogenous to the peace process—that contribute to the observable outcomes in each case study. In Section 3.5, I detail how I analyse the data and compare the case studies by deploying the “explaining-outcome” variant of process tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2019) and relying on comparison with ethnographic sensibility (Simmons & Smith, 2021) and casing (Soss, 2021).

3.4 Data Collection

In this section, I present the criteria used to select research participants and the strategies employed to locate them. I then describe my approach to life histories and semi-structured interviews, along with their respective interview guides. Finally, I outline the triangulation strategy adopted in the study.

3.4.1 Selection of Research Participants

My data collection is based on the life histories of FARC-EP former combatants and semi-structured interviews with elite³² and the third sector³³. I located and was referred to potential participants from both sectors following different strategies, as I explain in Section 4.2.3.

My participant selection strategy was purposive — “focused on intentional and mindful selection of participants” (Fujii, 2009, p. 30)— to locate individuals who met specific criteria regarding the scope of this dissertation. These criteria included being members of the secondary groups, or selected case studies, and parent secondary groups of the FARC-EP, from which the breakaway factions emerged. Additionally, I selected participants with specific knowledge and experience concerning interpretations of the breakaway factions during the peace process (2012–2016), both internal and external to the FARC-EP; the organisation’s transformations throughout the armed conflict, as experienced by ex-combatants and external observers; and the Colombian military’s approach to confronting the FARC-EP.

In this sense, my selection of potential participants was not a random sample or process (Fujii, 2018, 37). I did not select ex-combatants solely based on their membership in the FARC-EP. Instead, I located individuals within the secondary and parent secondary groups of the FARC-EP (fronts and blocs, respectively), from which the breakaway factions I study in this dissertation emerged.

Regarding participants who were members of the peace negotiation team in Havana, I sought those who had worked on security guarantees, disarmament, and demobilisation. I applied the same criteria when selecting participants from the military and intelligence community. I identified individuals who had studied the FARC-EP’s transformations and analysed the secondary groups from which the breakaway factions emerged. For instance, I conducted interviews with former members of the intelligence community who had studied in detail the 1st Front and the CMDA and CMTF. These conversations provided invaluable insights into this secondary group’s transformations.

³² Former members of the negotiating team in Havana, former members of the government negotiating team, active or retired members of the armed forces and envoys who discussed security issues and risks associated with breakaways with their FARC-EP counterparts in Cuba.

³³ Researchers, academics, practitioners, public officials, civil society organizations, and local key figures who lived or still live in the regions where the breakaway faction emerged.

My strategy was also *targeted* (Shesterinina, 2016; 2021) in that, as I show in Chapter 4, the life histories and semi-structured interviews progressively incorporated case-specific elements that required participants with particular forms of expertise. For instance, to examine in detail the effects of aerial bombardments on the FARC-EP (critical in Case Study One), I interviewed active and retired members of the Colombian Air Force and Army. Similarly, I located former ex-combatants and participants from third- and elite-sector groups with whom I could focus on specific themes for each case study. Such was the case of the role of urban networks in Case Study Three. This targeted selection strategy also extended beyond formal interviews to informal conversations or interactions (Krause, 2021).

Similarly, the selection of participants was an “iterative process” (Fujii, 2018: 38). I considered all potential participants who could inform my case studies and pose questions, criticisms, and suggestions and even prevented potential missteps during my fieldwork (Section 4.2.4). Staying open and flexible to incorporate new elements into my dissertation also resulted in selecting potential participants as a process rather than a “set of prior criteria” (Fujii, *ibid.*). As a result of this approach, I added a negative case (CMTF or case of cohesion) that shows my research was not predetermined, as I detail in Chapter 4.

Finally, in conducting life-history interviews with former combatants, I distanced myself from victim-perpetrator dichotomous narratives. On the contrary, in my life-history interviews, I adopted the principles of treating them with dignity and respect (Fujii, 2018) and “empathy with wartime participants” (Shesterinina, 2019). On the one hand, neglecting their perspectives and the meanings they attached to the events informing this study would have limited my ability to explore and understand cohesion and fragmentation in the FARC-EP. On the other hand, had I limited myself to pre-existing moral categories of victim and perpetrator (Ibid.: 197), I would have overlooked the complexities of life trajectories before, during, and after the war—stages that form the basis of my “interview plans” (Shesterinina, 2021), as I outline in the following section.

3.4.2 Life Histories

Through life histories with ex-combatants, I collected data on the four case studies. In this dissertation I approached life histories in the following way. First, I used meanings conveyed by ex-combatants in their life histories to decide what to focus on in each case study. As I show in Chapters 5-8, these meanings helped me to understand how existing explanations

in the literature perform with implications for the observable outcomes in each case study. For example, meanings on commandership legitimacy in life histories with ex-combatants in Case Studies One and Four are essential to understand how and why the leader of the breakaway faction facilitated group thinking to break away or created cohesion to stay in the peace process, respectively.

Second, life histories allowed me to identify broader transformations within the FARC-EP during the armed conflict, both at the organisational and secondary group levels. For instance, former combatants helped me explore and reconstruct how the secondary groups transformed over time. Understanding these transformations at the secondary group level, which resulted from internal dynamics and interactions with the operational environment, was critical for two reasons. First, it allowed me to incorporate time into my approach to fragmentation and cohesion. I demonstrate that adopting a longer approach to fragmentation and cohesion that includes both the periods before and during peace agreements helps us better understand the broader processes of fragmentation and cohesion within the FARC-EP—namely, at the secondary group level. Second, capturing such transformations through life histories with ex-combatants also helped me to identify the different paths, at the secondary group level, toward case-specific observable outcomes.

Third, through life histories, I also captured how ex-combatants “think of phenomena”—the breakaway factions or lack thereof— and “make sense of them” (Fujii, 2018: 2). The meanings conveyed by former ex-combatants about how and why the breakaway factions emerged, or not, helped to understand and uncover specific dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion at the secondary group level. By uncovering and exploring such dynamics, I demonstrate that there are different paths toward the observable outcomes. Each of these outcomes, which show variation in proportion of fragmentation and level of analysis where it takes place in secondary group (Chapter 9 and Diagrams A-D), are a result of zeroing in on how former combatants “convey [their] worlds and how they experience, navigate, and understand” fragmentation and cohesion (Fujii, *ibid.*: 17) not as static factors but as dynamics that changed over time and interact with each other.

Lastly, through life histories, I gained a deeper “understanding of the complex interactions between individuals’ lives and the institutional and societal contexts in which they exist” (Cole & Knowles, 2001: 126). In this dissertation, “complex interaction” refers to capturing former combatants’ organisational and social contexts or operational environments

while prioritising the *discursive mode of interaction* (Shesterinina, 2016: S8) over a strictly chronological or linear perspective (Söderström, 2020; Parkinson, 2021). Many ex-combatants I interviewed had been members of the selected secondary groups in this study at the time of the emergence of the breakaway factions. In contrast, others had been part of these groups at different stages of their wartime trajectories. This diversity allowed me to fill empirical gaps, deepen insights, and contrast findings within and across cases. For instance, one former combatant who joined the FARC-EP in the early 1970s did not know much about the breakaway faction in the Arauca region. However, he was deployed in that region during the FARC-EP–ELN war (2005–2010), crucial for understanding fragmentation in the 10th Front (Case Study Two).

Life histories with former combatants allowed me to identify what implications interactions between secondary groups and state security forces had implications for the emergence, or not, of breakaway factions. The meanings of counterinsurgency conveyed by ex-combatants, for example, show that leadership decapitation or local disembedding (two existing explanations of counterinsurgency in the literature) had multiple and different repercussions at the secondary group level, with implications for the emergence of breakaway factions in different proportion and level of analysis. It was by systematically analysing such meanings in the life histories that I demonstrate that counterinsurgency facilitated fragmentation, as in Case Study One, or the creation of cohesion in favour of the peace process, as in Case Study Two.

Life histories allow me to capture three key elements. First, “context-specific nuances of meaning” (Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2014) and how former combatants “make sense” (Fujii, 2018) of the breakaway factions. Some elite and third-sector participants, less familiar with the internal dynamics of the FARC-EP or its splinters, interpreted these factions as products of ongoing illegal economies. Ex-combatants, however, understood their emergence as the result of a broader set of internal and external dynamics. “If you dig into what the organisation [*la organización*] really was, you’ll see that illicit economies are just an oversimplification,” an ex-combatant told me before our first conversation³⁴.

Second, the meanings (Schatz, 2009; Wedeen, 2010; Simmons & Smith, 2021) attached to the existing explanations in the literature by former combatants and how and whether they

³⁴ Field note, June 2022, Bogotá.

contributed to the emergence of the breakaway factions. Participants reflected on these existing explanations through anecdotes that illustrate, for instance, aerial bombardments, discipline or lack thereof and commandership legitimacy would look like within each case study.

The third element is the links between different stages of the conflict, the transformations within both the FARC-EP and the selected secondary groups, and their broader social context. As discussed in the scope conditions and as I further elaborate throughout this dissertation, exploring and understanding the broader dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion necessitates a longer approach that comprises both endogenous and exogenous conditions to the peace process. My conversations with former combatants elicited a reflexive, nonlinear dialogue about their life trajectories before, during, and after the war (Fujii, 2018; Söderström, 2020; Shesterinina, 2021)³⁵. This allowed me to identify watershed moments in their lives, which extend beyond the individual sphere, for they illuminate the internal dynamics of the selected secondary groups. The informal incorporation of *milicianos* in Case Study Three is a clear example (Chapter 8).

3.4.2.1 Interview Plan

I relied on a life-history interview plan to “guide rather than determine the course of the conversation” (Shesterinina, 2021: 31). This plan consists of four parts, each including a non-exhaustive list of questions (see Appendix 3.1), usually prompted by open-ended statements (“tell me about”, “in your opinion”, “please explain to me”).

Part 1 focuses on ex-combatants’ lives before joining the FARC-EP. Beginning here—rather than directly with cohesion, fragmentation, or breakaway factions—helped ease some participants whose nervousness or doubt surfaced through questions, gestures, or silences (Fujii, 2010). These life histories provided insights into their social contexts, including whether they grew up in FARC-EP-dominated regions or within families closely tied to the organisation³⁶. Participants also reflected on the FARC-EP they joined versus the one that signed the 2016 peace agreement, revealing perceived transformations discussed in the scope of this dissertation.

³⁵ Life histories “are particularly concerned with understanding specific life paths, and transitions between different trajectories and parts of life” (Söderström, 2020: 5).

³⁶ All my participants joined the FARC-EP in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

In Part 2, I explore recruitment processes and wartime experiences. I collect data on how participants joined the organisation. According to them, the FARC-EP accelerated the recruitment of “outsiders” to meet strategic goals, which contributed to indiscipline and vulnerability to state intelligence infiltration. Participants described their wartime trajectories, roles, and the secondary groups they were members of, and their commanders. I followed up with questions such as “Were all units disciplined?” and “What do you remember about that front commander?” These conversations reveal how mid-level commanders’ legitimacy shifted as a result of leadership renewal or state-led violence.

Part 3 examines the internal and external dynamics of cohesion and fragmentation. I asked former combatants how and whether such dynamics transformed within the secondary groups they were part of, and which they considered more relevant. Learning their lexicon was essential for framing questions. For instance, referring to “the documents” [*los documentos*—FARC-EP norms and statutes] prompted reflections on changes of discipline, socialisation, and commandship legitimacy. I also asked how they recalled the onset and conclusion of the peace process, which revealed fears and uncertainties about disarmament, security conditions, preexisting tensions between secondary and secondary parent groups, and internal fractures within the FARC-EP that surfaced during the Havana negotiations. Finally, questions about top commanders killed in military strikes led participants to reflect on the organisational effects of counterinsurgency.

Part 4 focuses on the emergence of breakaway factions or lack thereof (case study four). I asked open-ended questions such as “What do you think happened to those who kept their arms?” and “How do you interpret the CMTF’s subordination to the peace agreement?” Former combatants regarded the emergence of breakaway factions as expected. Some of them personally knew the leaders of these groups, offering valuable insights into the internal dynamics of the secondary groups where these factions emerged, or not, such as their motives, fractures with the FARC-EP command, and external forces. In the case of the CMTF, participants reflected on the internal and external dynamics that created cohesion, which in other case studies contributed to fragmentation. Through these conversations, I collected detailed accounts from mid-2016 to early 2017, the temporal scope of this study.

3.4.3 Semi-structured Interviews

I conducted these types of interviews with participants from the elite and third sectors. Based on my selection criteria, I located individuals whose professional and personal backgrounds could offer insights into all or specific themes of my interview plan (see box in Appendix 3.2).

The elite sector included former members of the Havana negotiating team who worked on security issues and risks related to breakaway factions, as well as active or retired armed forces and intelligence personnel with experience analysing the FARC-EP or the selected case studies. They provided first-hand knowledge on the transformations of the FARC-EP before and during the Havana talks (2012–2016). Elite participants also included individuals with personal connections—such as relatives in the FARC-EP—whose experience during demobilisation and disarmament (2016–2017) prompted a “rich talk” consisting of stories, experiences, memories, reflections, and opinions (Magnusson & Marecek, 2015: 47) regarding the emergence of breakaway factions and the history of the FARC-EP in the selected four regions. I located these participants through multiple strategies (Section 4.2.3).

The third sector included researchers, practitioners, public servants and local leaders, among others, in the five field sites. I collected context-specific data on the FARC-EP and examined dynamics contributing to the formation of breakaway factions. For example, in Guaviare, public servants who worked in FARC-EP-controlled areas during the peace negotiations recalled rumours about the 1st Front leadership’s commitment to the process. Comparing these accounts with those from the elite sector and ex-combatants allowed me to focus, for instance, on Iván Mordisco’s legitimacy (1st Front’s leader) at the secondary group level and why he rejected the 2016 peace accord. Moreover, five years into the peace process, some participants had opportunities to reflect on, work with, and collect data relevant to my study, demonstrating that my research was iterative, integrating multiple layers of meaning from the same events, even amid contradictions and overlaps (Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012; Galleta & Cross, 2013). I located these participants through various strategies (Section 4.2.3).

3.4.3.1 Interview Plan

The interview plan has two parts (Appendix 3.2). In Part 1, I asked participants about their biographical backgrounds to understand when and how they first learned about the FARC-

EP, collect contextual information about the selected four regions of the case studies, and zero in on the period when breakaway factions emerged. Some participants studied the FARC-EP in specific regions during the peace process, while others, including both former and active members of the intelligence community, have studied the organisation for decades.

As I detail in Chapter 4, my prior personal and professional connection with some research participants from the elite and third sectors helped me frame and focus interviews on specific themes. In Part 1, I asked about participants' professional trajectories and when they first encountered, studied, or fought the FARC-EP—in the cases of local leaders, practitioners, and military personnel, respectively. I followed up with questions such as, “What do you remember of the FARC-EP in [year]?” and “Was it different from the FARC-EP that began the peace negotiations in 2012 or demobilised in [region] in 2017?” The responses were detailed, often overlapping, disagreeing, or converging on the transformations of the FARC-EP in Colombia and the regions I visited. For example, participants in Tumaco (Case Study Three) described the CMDA in 2012 as militarily and financially robust but changed, for it incorporated former paramilitaries. In Arauca, participants portrayed the 10th Front as a secondary group that made many mistakes and lost local support, unlike the disciplined FARC-EP of the 1980s and 1990s. In these accounts, I engage with a “repertoire of possibilities” (Galleta & Cross, 2013) by exploring diverse themes according to participants' backgrounds and positionalities in relation to my research questions.

Part 2 focuses on the internal and external sources of fragmentation and cohesion before and during the negotiation process. I examine changes within and outside both the FARC-EP and the selected secondary groups. By referring to the breakaway factions, I asked questions such as, “Was it something you anticipated?” and “Were you surprised?” The Havana negotiations revealed that the CMTF's subordination to the peace process (Chapter 8) and the fragmentation of the 1st Front in Guaviare (Chapter 5) were unexpected outcomes, contrasting with that of the CMDA in Tumaco (Chapter 7). Military personnel drew on intelligence, while some locals brought up their close ties to leaders who formed the breakaway factions.

During the semi-structured interviews, participants gradually explored different dynamics that might have contributed to fragmentation and cohesion. I asked open-ended questions, such as “Why do you think they rejected the peace process?” “What can you tell me about the breakaway faction's leadership?”. Depending on the field site, they reflected on both endogenous and exogenous dynamics related to the selected secondary groups, adding layers

of interpretations and additional elements as our conversation progressed (Galleta & Cross, 2013; Fujii, 2018). Some participants who initially focused solely on the influx of material resources (an existing explanation in the literature on cohesion and fragmentation) moved on to others, such as peace process provisions, mismanaged recruitment, external networks, and commandership legitimacy, among others, depending on the case study.

In addition to life histories and semi-structured interviews, I conducted over 70 informal conversations with individuals who preferred informal discussions (Section 4.2.5). Altogether, formal and informal interactions allowed me to collect data on the dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion at the secondary-group level, how they evolved over time, both within and outside the selected case studies and before and during the peace process. I present the data in Chapters 5-8 and compare and analyse it across the case studies in Chapter 9.

3.4.4 Triangulation

I add a “level of validation” (Shesterinina, 2016: S13) and multidimensionality by enriching the interviews with multiple perspectives and contexts (Hastings, 2012; Schwartz-Shea, 2014). I draw on documents, transitional justice rulings, news archives, published reports, and specialised publications. Following Davenport and Ball, who note that “each source pays attention to diverse types and aspects” (2002, p. 427), I use these materials to examine each case study from multiple perspectives.

These sources include unpublished studies, declassified intelligence on the FARC-EP, internal FARC-EP documents, as well as documents and videos related to the breakaway factions (see References-Secondary Sources). They provide chronological accuracy, historical context, and a lexicon that guided my questioning. Documents on the emergence of breakaway factions informed follow-up questions. For example, I asked participants for their views on the 1st Front’s June 2016 declaration, which labelled the peace process a betrayal, prompting reflections on the breakaway faction leadership and preexisting dynamics within the peace process at the secondary group level. I also used transcriptions of public appearances by former FARC-EP members before the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP). I attended these events to collect background information and examples of loss of control and command between secondary and bloc levels and the top echelons within the FARC-EP. These events were

particularly useful for tailoring questions or lines of questioning, drawing on insights from former top commanders about the organisation's internal dynamics. JEP rulings were vital for a better understanding of the CMDA (Case Study Four, Chapter 7).

3.5 Data Analysis

To analyse the life-histories, semi-structured interviews and notes from informal conversations, I follow a three-step process: 1) Coding, 2) Process-tracing, and 3) Comparison with ethnographic sensibility.

3.5.1 Coding

I transcribed 28 life histories to ex-combatants, 49 semi-structured interviews to research respondents from the elite (30) and third sectors (19) from Spanish into English. I kept notes from informal conversations in my field diaries and used them in Chapters 5-8 as a source for triangulating transcribed and coded data. I analysed nearly 250 hours of interview materials manually and using NVivo software, following a three-step process. First, I coded themes based on existing explanations in civil war studies and military sociology on fragmentation and cohesion of armed groups. Second, I identified combinations of words for observable implications as expressed by participants in the life histories and semi-structured interviews related to the existing explanations as they perform within each case study (see Appendix 3.3). For example, “killing of Mono Jojoy” or leadership decapitation is an observable implication of counterinsurgency that performed differently in Case Studies One and Two but contributed to the observable outcomes, as I show in Chapters 5 and 6, respectively, and I further elaborate on in Chapter 9. Third, I classified and selected illustrative key quotes relevant to each case study. In some cases, research participants referred to more than one case study, reason why some life histories and semi-structured interviews are quoted throughout Chapters 5-8. Finally, I quote life histories as LH#, semi-structured interviews as S# and informal conversations in footnotes as “Field note/month/year/place or field site.”

After coding the evidence and selecting the most relevant and illustrative quotations, I traced the observable implications of existing explanations in the literature for each case study. I present this evidence in Chapters 5-8. In these four chapters, I examine how the observable implications play out and evolve within and across the 1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA and CMTF. Each chapter begins with a brief overview of the findings, identifying which existing explanations in the literature are relevant and in what ways. Each concludes with a discussion

that summarises the findings, explains their significance for understanding the case-specific observable outcome in that chapter, and highlights the case-specific mechanisms, which I model and analyse in Chapter 9.

3.5.2 Process Tracing

In this dissertation, I adopt elements of a maximalist understanding of mechanisms (Beach and Pedersen, 2019, 37-41). First, by *mechanism* I understand a chain of interlocking parts—existing explanations as they manifest through their case-specific observable implications—that link them to the outcomes of interest. Second, I unpack each chain of interlocking parts in the form of a narrative for each mechanism (Chapter 9, Sections 9.1.1–9.1.4). These narratives show what the mechanisms consist of—its interlocking parts, how they interact and evolve over time, the proportion of fragmentation, the level of analysis at which it occurs, and who leads the breakaway factions. Third, these narratives detail how observable implications of existing explanations in the literature perform within each case study (Section 9.1; Diagrams A-D).

Through careful analysis and systematisation of this evidence, I identify the sets of case-specific explanations that, in combination, constitute the mechanisms underlying each outcome—varying in the degree of fragmentation and the analytical level at which it occurs (Table 3.1; Diagram 3.1). Because I model case-specific mechanisms, I employ “explaining-outcome process tracing,” a variant of process-tracing methods that produces case-focused explanations (Beach and Pedersen, 2023, 11–12; 269–278). This variant allows me to explore and analyse different combinations of existing explanations—internal and external to the secondary groups and endogenous and exogenous to the peace process—to build specific combinations of mechanisms that explain the observable outcome for each case study.

Consequently, as I detail in Chapters 9-10, one implication of my dissertation is that the findings are not generalizable, because the mechanisms under comparison are “contingent, partial, and situated” (Simmons and Smith, 2025, 2). This leads to what Beach and Pedersen term “mechanistic heterogeneity,” (2019, 37) that is, ten case-specific mechanisms (Table 9.1). In this sense, I do not expect these mechanisms will apply in the same way in other contexts, either within or outside Colombia. Instead, my goal is for my approach to fragmentation and cohesion to be translatable to other contexts. Recent literature on “comparing for translations” in political science (Simmons and Smith, 2021b; 2025) reminds us that “translation allows us

to focus on the places where cases do not map neatly onto one another but where we still see enough that is similar to bring them into conversation and develop theory from resulting frictions” (Simmons and Smith, 2025, 5). For these reasons, this dissertation advances an organisationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion, applicable to other contexts. As I discuss in the concluding chapter, this approach sheds light on fragmentation beyond Colombia—for instance, in the study of cartel and gang fragmentation in Mexico and Ecuador, respectively. Thus, one of the main contributions of the dissertation is to make this approach “intelligible or recognisable in a different context” (Simmons and Smith, 2021b, p. 232). This organizationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion rests on four pillars:

1. Disaggregating non-state armed organisations (whether insurgencies, criminal groups, or cartels) into secondary groups or smaller units. This approach assumes that armed groups are not unitary actors. Disaggregation is a promising way to exploring and understanding how armed groups transform at different levels of analysis, from the organisational level to the secondary and primary group levels, in multiple ways, fragmenting and/or becoming more cohesive even after breaking away. In this dissertation, I demonstrate that disaggregating the FARC-EP into secondary groups reveals variation in fragmentation within and across the case studies I examine. I elaborate on disaggregation as one of the pillars across the four case studies in the concluding chapter.

2. Time. Adopting a longer approach to before and during peace agreements helps us better understand the dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion over time. The observable outcomes and their variation — high fragmentation in case study one, low fragmentation in case study two, mixed outcomes in case study three, and cohesion in case study four — are the result of examining how existing explanations in the literature perform over time within each case study. Examining both the pre- and during-peace process periods helps identify key aspects of the social embeddedness and operational environment, and the internal workings of the 1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA, and CMTE.

3. Fragmentation and cohesion coexist at different levels of analysis within and across armed groups. By zeroing in on the internal dynamics of the four selected case studies or secondary groups of the FARC-EP, based on a close examination of lived experiences and other empirical materials, I demonstrate that fragmentation and cohesion are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, Case Study One exemplifies that breaking away in high proportion requires

some degree of within-group or secondary group cohesion. Case Study Two shows that low proportion fragmentation at the level of urban networks and formerly imprisoned members of the organisation coexists with high proportion cohesion of mid-level commanders and rank-and-file. In contrast, Case Study Three is a case of mixed fragmentation (high at the urban networks level and low at the level of rural mid-level commanders) and cohesion of other mid-level commanders and rank-and-file. Case Study Four is the negative case in this dissertation, namely, a case where fragmentation did not take place. This case study exemplifies how existing explanations that contribute to both fragmentation and cohesion in other case studies create cohesion in the CMTF—and how cohesion serves post-demobilisation goals.

4. Mechanistic heterogeneity. By identifying the different sets of interlocking parts that form case-specific mechanisms³⁷, I demonstrate that we must carefully examine how existing explanations—both internal and external to armed groups—perform differently, combine, transform, and are conjuncturally triggered by shifting forces at different points in time. Discipline is a good example. In Case Study One, discipline fosters cohesion after military operations against the 1st Front that took place before the peace process. However, it also contributes to the secondary group commandship legitimacy and groupthink during the last stages of the negotiations in Havana. In Case Study Two, discipline during the peace process contributes to the detachment of urban networks from the 10th Front and the split of its local support networks. It also fosters cohesion through subordination in favour of the peace process before the signing of the peace deal. While discipline is case-specific in both case studies, it interacts with other interlocking parts, such as commandship legitimacy and counterinsurgency (1st Front) or peace process and social networks (10th Front) (also internal and external to the fronts and mobile columns).

3.5.3 Comparing with Ethnographic Sensibility

In this study, I compare how the case-specific mechanisms that I build in this dissertation operate across the four case studies (Chapter 9). I derive the mechanisms and their observable implications through an iterative process between the evidence and the existing literature. Identifying the mechanisms for each case study helps me demonstrate there are different paths toward the observable outcomes. In Chapters 5-8, I detail how existing explanations in the literature perform in each case study based on the life histories, semi-

³⁷ Discussion Sections in Chapters 5-8, Chapter 9, Table 9.1 and Diagrams A-D in Section 9.1.

structured interviews, and additional empirical materials. To compare the case-specific mechanisms, I draw on comparison with ethnographic sensibility, an approach that emphasizes “meaning-making” (Schatz, 2009; Simmons and Smith, 2021), how concepts emerge from the field (Wedeen, 2010; Schwartz-Shea & Yanow, 2012) within and across cases, and “translation” (Simmons and Smith, 2021a; 2021b; 2025).

The evidence I present in Chapters 5-8 shows how existing explanations play out in practice and unfold over time, contributing—or not—to fragmentation in each case study. By examining how existing explanations perform in each case, I uncover their multiple meanings to the participants who lived through the events. Lived experiences allow us to explore and understand “the meanings that the people under study attribute to their social and political reality” (Schatz, 2009, 6; Wedeen, 2010). The *legitimacy* mechanism offers again a good example. This mechanism, present in Case Studies One and Four (Chapters 5 and 8), is made up of existing explanations that are both internal and external to the 1st Front and the CMTF, as well as endogenous and exogenous to the peace process. But the observable implications of these explanations have different, case-specific meanings (Sections 9.1.1 and 9.1.4, respectively). Through short immersions in the five field sites and a systematic analysis of the evidence (Chapters 5 and 8), I demonstrate how these multiple meanings emerge.

A comparative approach with an “ethnographic sensibility” pays close attention to “how individuals’ perceptions of the world are embedded in their interactions with others” (Simmons and Smith, 2021b, 234). By focusing on the lived experiences of research participants and the empirical materials, I demonstrate, for instance, how discipline has multiple meanings *within* and *across* cases, contributing to both fragmentation (in different proportions) and cohesion at different levels of analysis. The 10th Front case study illustrates how discipline fostered cohesion in support of peace. Yet disciplinary and control mechanisms—both exogenous and endogenous to the peace process, and in response to internal and external dynamics—also contributed to the detachment of urban networks and the split of support networks. By incorporating meaning into my findings and analysis, first, I embrace the ambiguity and contradictions inherent in how existing explanations play out in each case, and second, I add depth to the logics and variations of fragmentation and cohesion across cases. Had I selected cases with consistently similar explanatory characteristics or similar outcomes, I would not have uncovered the different sets of existing explanation that combine into the mechanisms,

which generate different outcomes. Mechanistic heterogeneity reflects this, as I expand below and elaborate on in Chapters 9 and 10.

Comparing with ethnographic sensibility adds another key element to my approach to fragmentation and cohesion. In the comparative chapter, variation in the observable outcomes and the mechanisms I build for each case study result from “casing”—namely, an ongoing process of actively constructing the objects of analysis through a discovery-oriented approach, in which cases are treated as analytic constructs rather than predetermined or “found objects that happen to fall within their natural boundaries of a conceptual class” (Soss, 2021, 89; Simmons and Smith, 2021a). For example, casing allows me to discover how existing explanations perform within each case study, contributing to the observable outcomes in each case study. Through casing, discovery entails creating new, cased-based interpretative opportunities by putting the evidence into dialogue with the historical and social context of each secondary group (1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA, and CMTF) and the lived experiences of research participants. For example, I use the existing explanation of “social networks” as a guide or lens for exploring and understanding the social embeddedness of each secondary group and whether it contributes, or not, to the observable outcomes (Table 1.1). In Case Studies Two and Three, I demonstrate that social networks allow us to understand the historical, social, and cultural intricacies of the detachment of *milicianos*, resulting in low- and high-proportion fragmentation, respectively. However, “casing” in the 10th Front leads us to discover that social networks evolved over decades alongside the establishment of the FARC-EP in the Arauca region. In doing so, I analyse the repercussions of [name redacted #4] dismissing the social networks of the 10th Front *milicianos*—that is, an empirically grounded standpoint to interpret the interaction between disciplinary measures and social networks. In the CMDA, the same existing explanation orients us toward a better understanding of the *milicianos*, or former *Rastrojos*’ social and cultural contexts centred in their extended families in the Tumaco region—instrumental to the FARC-EP and other external actors with ties to illicit economies.

For this reason, my research design is not predetermined, even though my study focuses on a single armed organisation—the FARC-EP. Instead, I adopt an iterative process that moves back and forth between the evidence (life histories, semi-structured interviews, and other empirical material) and theory as a heuristic tool. In doing so, I elaborate on an organizationally disaggregated perspective on fragmentation and cohesion, introduced above, and which

comprises four pillars: disaggregation, time, the coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion, and mechanistic heterogeneity.

Chapter 4: Research Process

In this chapter, I outline the steps and decisions made during my fieldwork in Colombia (June–December 2022) to collect data for this dissertation. Drawing on Wood (2006) and Thomson (2013), I discuss field conditions, my role and limitations as a researcher, and the “stories behind findings.” In this case, such stories also encompass my decisions, rejections, and the methodological, logistical, and personal challenges I faced across five field sites. I reflect on how I continually adapted (Ansoms, 2013; Malejacq & Mukhopadhyay, 2016; Fujii, 2009, 2018) and on how surprises, missteps, and “accidental moments: (Fujii, 2014; Shesterinina, 2021a) generated findings and lessons, revealing that my research design was not predetermined. Ethical concerns about honesty and transparency (Arjona, Mampilly & Pearlman, 2018) also guided this reflection.

This chapter proceeds in two parts. The first presents a summary of the interview data, including formal interviews and informal conversations, followed by an overview of the five field sites. The second part details how the research process unfolded. In both sections, I have anonymised all field notes and excluded any information that could reveal the identities of participants, non-participants, local contacts, or drivers. This includes fieldwork dates, names, ranks, and personal or professional details (Shesterinina, 2021b).

4.1 Field Sites Overview

I conducted 75 formal interviews during my research in Colombia from June to December 2022, following my selection criteria (see Section 4.3.3). Of these, 28 were life histories with former FARC-EP combatants, 30 were semi-structured interviews with research participants from the elite sector, and 19 were with participants from the third sector. I also had 77 informal interactions with individuals who did not accept to be research participants but accepted to speak with me informally, as discussed in Section 4.2.2. Life histories lasted on average between 120 and 180 minutes, semi-structured interviews between 60 and 90 minutes, and informal interactions between 30 and 75 minutes. Table 4.1 provides a summary of the interviews and informal interactions.

			Total
General information	Life Histories		28
	Semi-structured to elite sector		30
	Semi-structured to third sector		19
	Male		66
	Female		9
	Age	25 – 34	2
		35 – 44	31
		45 – 54	25
		55 – 64	13
		64 – 74	2
	Total life histories and semi-structured interviews		75
	Informal conversations or interactions		77*
Bogotá	Life Histories		9
	Semi-structured to elite sector		20
	Semi-structured to third sector		7
	Informal conversations or interactions		43
Arauca	Life Histories		4
	Semi-structured to elite sector		2
	Semi-structured to third sector		3
	Informal conversations or interactions		5
Caquetá and Huila	Life Histories		8
	Semi-structured to elite sector		3
	Semi-structured to third sector		2
	Informal conversations or interactions		11
Guaviare	Life Histories		6
	Semi-structured to elite sector		1
	Semi-structured to third sector		4
	Informal conversations or interactions		8
Tumaco	Life Histories		1
	Semi-structured to elite sector		2
	Semi-structured to third sector		3
	Informal conversations or interactions		10

Table 4.1. Interview Data: Research in Colombia. June-December 2022; February, April, October 2024; February, July 2025. See Annex 4.1

Notes:

* Calculated based on 75 individuals with whom I talked informally for the reasons described in section 3.2.2

Table 4.1 indicates that 51% of all formal interviews and informal interactions occurred in Bogotá, as discussed in Section 4.1.1. Guaviare and Caquetá–Huila I show higher interactions (22 and 24, respectively) than Arauca and Tumaco (14 and 10) because I spent more time there, allowing me to locate more participants. I conducted one life-history interview in Tumaco for the reasons outlined in Section 4.1.5. Informal interactions (56%) primarily took place in Bogotá, where I had more time to identify participants and present my research. In other sites, their number reflected security conditions and participants’ preferences rather than

time spent. In Caquetá and Huila, 45% of interactions were informal for the reasons explained in Section 4.1.3.

In terms of the representativeness of the respondents' selection criteria, all 28 former combatants I interviewed were part of the selected secondary groups or parent secondary groups in which breakaway factions emerged, or not. In Bogotá, all research participants from the elite sector (22) were former peace negotiators, retired military personnel, and members of the intelligence community. In contrast, at the other field sites, these participants (8) were individuals with detailed knowledge of the FARC-EP's history due to their personal and political backgrounds.

4.1.1 Bogotá

In the Colombian capital, I conducted 35 interviews with former FARC-EP combatants and participants from the elite and third sectors, both before and after my four field trips between June and December 2022 outside Bogotá to Arauca, Caquetá, Huila, Guaviare and Tumaco. Additionally, I conducted 43 informal conversations

[REDACTED]

As discussed in Chapter 3, most of the ex-combatants who meet my selection criteria live in Bogotá for security reasons or due to their occupation and political activities. Research participants from the elite sector, especially former members of the Colombian negotiating team in Havana and retired military personnel, also live in Bogotá. Some of the third-sector interviewees have also relocated to Bogotá or visited it frequently. In Bogotá, I conducted “multiple interviews” (Fujii, 2009) and built “working relationships” (Fujii, 2018) with participants who required more than one session.

[REDACTED]

In 2022, 2024, and 2025, I conducted archival research in Bogotá to collect primary and secondary data. I also attended five public hearings of the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), where ex-FARC-EP combatants discussed crimes committed by this organisation. These hearings provided valuable insights into the FARC-EP's acknowledgement of the loss of command and control between the top echelons and secondary groups. This is key to understanding FARC-EP organisational diversity and the necessity of disaggregating armed groups, as I discuss in Chapter 3 and further elaborate on in Chapters 9 and 10.

4.1.2 Arauca

Following my selection criteria, I conducted four life-history interviews with former combatants in the ETCR³⁸ and five semi-structured interviews with elite and third-sector participants in Arauca city (Map 6.1), as well as five informal conversations with well-informed individuals about local armed groups. [REDACTED]

Before travelling to Arauca, I spoke with three research participants and had two informal conversations with Arauca residents living in Bogotá. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] In Bogotá, I conducted a life-history interview with a former FARC-EP combatant who had been active in Arauca for over 25 years. After visiting Arauca, I interviewed a practitioner in Bogotá and conducted a second interview with a former combatant familiar with the FARC-EP's history in the region.

My first field trip was to the Arauca region for different reasons. [REDACTED] had an extensive network among ex-combatants of the 10th Front from which the breakaway faction emerged. Based on my selection criteria, my contact helped arrange meetings with former combatants in the ETCR. Additionally, an ex-combatant in Bogotá referred me to other

³⁸ Territorial Space for Capacitation and Reincorporation or *Espacios Territoriales para la Capacitación y la Reincorporación* (ETCR, in Spanish). These are villages where the FARC-EP demobilised, disarmed, and began their reincorporation process. I also refer to ETCR as reincorporation cantonments interchangeably.

ex-combatants in the ETCR. [REDACTED] also advised taking advantage of the dry weather. Otherwise, it would have been impossible to travel to the ETCR. Finally, my previous visits to Arauca (2015–2020) facilitated reconnecting with elite and third-sector individuals for informal conversations.

4.1.3 Caquetá and Huila

[REDACTED]

I travelled to the ETCR, where I stayed for over a week. Unlike field trips one, three, and four, this ETCR has accommodations built for ecotourism reincorporation projects. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

I then returned to SVC and travelled to Florencia, Caquetá's capital. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

I concluded the field trip in Neiva, Huila, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

³⁹ I had planned to conduct 12 life-history interviews with ex-combatants; however, five arrived in the ETCR after I left.

4.1.4 Guaviare

In San José del Guaviare, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. Eight individuals (two ex-combatants and six third-sector participants) declined formal participation due to security concerns, given the presence of the 1st Front breakaway faction (Map 5.1). Prior to this trip, I had collected data through five life-history interviews with former combatants in Arauca and Caquetá, two interviews in Bogotá with ex-combatants who witnessed the formation of the breakaway faction in 2016, six semi-structured interviews, and four informal conversations⁴⁰.

In Bogotá, I held two informal conversations [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED].
[REDACTED] In San José del Guaviare, I conducted five semi-structured interviews with elite and third-sector participants [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I also held six informal conversations with individuals who declined formal participation due to security or personal reasons.

In San José del Guaviare, [REDACTED] referred me to four ex-combatants. Two agreed to be research participants, whom I interviewed at their homes, always accompanied by a local contact. Each interview lasted 120–180 minutes, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I had informal conversations with the other two: one for 45 minutes on the 1st Front's history and leadership, and another for 60 minutes, who intended to participate later but had to cancel due to health issues, referring me instead to former combatants in ETCR 2.

I visited ETCR 2 [REDACTED]. On the first day, I conducted two life-history interviews, each lasting 90–120 minutes. The following day, [REDACTED]

⁴⁰ A retired intelligence officer, an ex-combatant —rank-and-file— who demobilized in 2007 from the 1st Front, an analyst from the Ombudsman's Office, and an officer from an international organization who lived in Guaviare between 2018 and 2020.

[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED] In San José del Guaviare, a local contact referred me to an ex-combatant living in Bogotá, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

4.1.5 Tumaco

For this case study, I conducted one life-history interview in *La Variante* ETCR (Map 7.1) and five semi-structured interviews with elite and third-sector participants in Tumaco and Bogotá, as well as eight informal conversations. Tumaco posed significant security and logistical challenges. Although I previously conducted non-academic research there (2008–2009, 2015–2018), my local contacts had left, with one relocating to Bogotá. Since 2017–2018, security in the ETCR and surrounding areas has undergone significant changes: former combatants have scattered throughout southeast Colombia, and others have rearmed and joined breakaway factions or other armed groups. Armed groups have proliferated, and rural Tumaco has consolidated as one of the central cocaine production clusters in the world.

Given these challenges, which I refer to in Chapter 7, I located three ex-combatants of the FARC-EP's Western Bloc, CMDA's secondary group, in different Colombian cities, but all declined to participate. They welcomed me to visit but stated the war was behind them and refused to help locate other ex-combatants. Additionally, two ex-combatants in Bogotá reacted negatively to my focus on the CMDA—rejections I treated as data, as discussed in Section 4.2.5. In 2025, two former combatants from the CMDA, appearing before the JEP, agreed to talk informally. Moreover, in Bogotá, I conducted six semi-structured interviews [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

In Tumaco, I conducted five semi-structured interviews with elite and third-sector participants [REDACTED], as well as three informal conversations [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]. Four rural leaders could not travel due to restrictions imposed by armed groups. I travelled to the ETCR to conduct two life-history interviews with former CMDA members, [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] I

returned to Tumaco city and conducted previously arranged semi-structured interviews. In consequence, this case study relies more heavily on primary and secondary sources than the others, as I detail in Chapter 8.

4.2 Research Process Discussion

In this part, I describe how my research process unfolded in Colombia by focusing on seven themes that are common to all the field sites. I elaborate on these themes in the following sections.

4.2.1 Formal Interviews

With all research participants, I followed a thorough “consent process” (Wood, 2006; Section 4.2.4 below). They agreed to participate as research respondents for various reasons. In the case of ex-combatants, because an academic was eager to learn about the “organisation” [*la organización*], as they referred to the FARC-EP. As one put it in Bogotá in early July 2022: “If you tell me it’s for academic purposes, not journalism, and not to speculate about our lives, I will gladly help you, because I also want people to understand what we were like on the inside [*cómo éramos por dentro*]”⁴¹.

In 2022, five years after demobilisation, former combatants had already reflected on their lives as part of their commitments to transitional justice institutions, making it easier for them to speak confidentially and provide formal consent. My prior experience illustrates the contrast: during visits to ETCRs in 2016–2018, most ex-combatants were distrustful and confrontational, making access difficult. Over the past five years, they have become accustomed to visitors and welcomed me to speak with anyone I wished. Some agreed to participate because, as they explained, few had previously shown interest in their lives. Others wanted to speak with someone other than their lawyers, a sentiment expressed across all field sites. Many ex-combatants in the ETCRs thanked me “for my time,” though I was the privileged one, as this research would not have been possible without them. In Arauca, one ex-combatant expressed interest in learning “how to conduct interviews” for his sociology thesis.

⁴¹ Field note. July 2022. Bogotá.

At the same time, a seasoned female former combatant said she participated because she learned from others that I was respectful, patient, and attentive⁴².

Ex-combatants' willingness to speak also reflected their desire to demonstrate that, despite the existence of breakaway factions, they themselves remained committed to the peace process. At one field site, one explained that he agreed to be interviewed because he had witnessed the formation of the breakaway faction—today composed of “our comrades still in arms,” as he said, referring to friends and relatives who rejected the peace process—while he remains fully committed, leading reincorporation projects and complying with transitional justice institutions. Concerning Case Study Four (Chapter 8), a former combatant said to me over the phone: “We in the CMTF never — ever! — thought of abandoning the peace process. We subordinated to the peace accord. We have nothing to hide. I comply with my obligations to peace and to the Special Jurisdiction for Peace. Welcome, and we are glad a scholar wants to visit and meet us.”⁴³

Motivations among elite and third-sector participants varied. Retired military personnel agreed to speak because some knew me from my military service in 2000, others from my research in Colombia since 2005, and some expressed gratitude that an academic was engaging with members from the armed forces. My dissertation does not focus on intelligence operations requiring secrecy, and, like former combatants, they were eager to share their experiences. One officer remarked, “It is strange that an academic wants to interview us,” while another said, “The armed forces — not politicians — defeated the FARC-EP, broke their will, and forced them to negotiate.” Many deemed the interviews an opportunity to gain recognition for their achievements.⁴⁴

My background in Colombia also helped me locate former combatants and participants from the elite and third sectors. Some also referring me to others in Bogotá and other field sites. In Bogotá, where I was based, I built “working relationships” (Fujii, 2018: 15) and conducted “multiple interviews” (Fujii, 2009: 35), enabling me to explore broad and specific themes, deepen and contrast findings across interviews, and receive suggestions for upcoming interviews or informal conversations. For example, I conducted three interviews with a retired army officer, who also referred me to other respondents and suggested questions and themes

⁴² Field note. August 2022. Arauca.

⁴³ Phone conversation. August 2022.

⁴⁴ Field note. July 2022. Bogotá

for exploring with other officers and FARC-EP combatants. I also conducted three interviews with a practitioner involved in the peace process (2010–2016), focusing on both general transformations of the FARC-EP and specific themes related to my case studies and the emergence of breakaway factions.

In Bogotá, I sat with a former combatant on three different occasions. With almost 40 years of experience in the FARC-EP and curious about my interests in learning about the organisation's internal dynamics, he noted it was impossible to cover everything in one sitting. A former instructor, he described our conversations as a “boot camp” on FARC-EP history. Relying on the “multiple interview” strategy, I explored both broad transformations from the 1980s to the peace negotiations and specific themes, including the 1st Front's history, transformation and the reasons that led to its rejection of the peace process.

In Arauca, Guaviare, Caquetá, Huila, and Tumaco, I conducted interviews with some elite- and third-sector participants before and after visiting the ETCRs, allowing me to contrast and deepen findings from the ETCRs and previously collected data in Bogotá. For example, a research participant respondent in SVC (Caquetá) had first-hand knowledge of the CMTF's origins and leadership and personally knew the FARC-EP's general secretariat. He suggested themes for my interview guides before visiting the ETCR, and upon my return, he expanded on topics we had not covered in the first interview. Due to former combatants' busy schedules and logistical and security constraints (Section 4.2.6), I conducted multiple life-history interviews only in the Miravalle and SJG ETCRs. In Arauca, Guaviare, and Tumaco, which I visited only during the day for safety reasons, I conducted a single life-history interview with each ex-combatant, typically lasting 90–120 minutes, though some extended up to four hours.

In Bogotá, I met research participants in comfortable, private spaces, often during off-peak hours. Elite and third-sector respondents usually invited me to their homes or offices, while ex-combatants preferred locations ensuring anonymity and safety—restaurants or coffee shops in upscale neighbourhoods. In the field sites, I met with participants at local contacts' offices or private hotel rooms, as agreed with research participants as informants from breakaway factions or other armed groups were present. In the ETCRs, interviews with former combatants took place in their homes or private rooms.

4.2.2 Learning from Informal Interactions and Accidental Moments

By “informal interactions” (Krause, 2021), I refer to the 75 conversations I had outside the life histories and semi-structured interviews, which produced findings that informed adjustments to my initial research design. These interactions involved acquaintances, research participants, local contacts, drivers, former combatants, and locals who approached me at public events. Also, individuals who declined formal participation due to security concerns, distrust, lack of interest or knowledge, boredom with interviews, or negative experiences with academics. I also count rejections as informal interactions.

In these interactions, I collected data and identified emerging themes for the four case studies. For example, I inquired about specific events related to the armed conflict, such as the killing of FARC-EP top leaders by state forces and their implications on the 1st Front’s breakaway faction. Notably, including the CMTF as a negative case (Case Study Four) in this dissertation emerged from accidental or “unplanned moments outside formal interviews” (Fujii, 2015: 526) during informal interactions. Its relevance became apparent in “mundane moments” (Fujii, 2015), such as small talk with acquaintances or research participants after interviews. Incorporating this negative case also demonstrates that my research design was not predetermined.

In this dissertation, I treat rejections as informal interactions that provided data and guided the logistics of my fieldwork. Rejections were “accidental moments” that, though seemingly “non-data,” became data on the scope of my research and the contexts I navigated to locate participants (Fujii, 2015). Some interactions were brief conversations or laconic WhatsApp texts (“Not interested.”). Others involved individuals I knew prior to my doctoral studies who declined to participate. Some were “fed up” (*mamados*) with interviews, negative experiences with scholars, or an unwillingness to engage in the consent process. In all cases, I respected boundaries (Fujii, 2018, p. 25), including non-responses and last-minute cancellations. For example, a rejection in early June informed Case Study Three (CMDA). I presented my project to a former mid-level commander of the FARC-EP, with whom I had a prior working relationship. He refused to help, noting that no one would speak about the CMDA, as its former combatants had left the ETCR and scattered. He added that the CMDA had always been “a problem” for the FARC-EP because its members “dollarised” [*se*

dolarizaron] who “deviated” [*se desviaron*]⁴⁵. Being an old acquaintance did not automatically make him a research respondent⁴⁶.

Nevertheless, expressions such as “dollarised” and “deviated” helped me to locate meaning — namely, possible observable implications of discipline or lack thereof, as discussed in Chapter 2. I incorporated these expressions in my questions for research participants and future informal interactions to explore how existing explanations of discipline in the literature could perform in this case study and the others. While arguing that the CMDA had always been a problem for the FARC-EP, he inadvertently also provided insights into its origins and evolution and emphasised the need to disaggregate armed organisations into secondary groups, as the CMDA may have begun fragmenting before the peace process (Chapter 7). This example highlights the importance of “accidental moments” over planned methods (Fujii, 2014) in addressing challenging fieldwork conditions.

Informal interactions ranged from 10 to 15 minutes with locals at public events to 60 to 70 minutes with former combatants, intelligence personnel, and local leaders. They took place in coffee shops, main squares, local contacts’ offices, and private hotel rooms. Although these conversations were informal and outside the consent process, I always sought approval to take notes, assured interlocutors that no sensitive or risky questions would be asked, emphasised anonymity, and clarified that the conversation could be stopped at any time. In this dissertation, I cite these interactions as “field notes.”

4.2.3 Locating Research Participants

My professional experience in Colombia since 2005 has yielded a contact network that proved invaluable to this research, with most contacts agreeing to participate. In Bogotá, in early June, I began interviewing individuals from the elite and third sectors whom I already knew, while focusing on locating or being referred to potential research participants also in Bogotá and the other field sites. Being in Bogotá allowed me to conduct multiple interviews with participants before and after my field trips, which helped me to contrast, deepen, or focus on specific themes. I interviewed former members of the negotiating team in Cuba, experienced

⁴⁵ Field note. June 2022. Bogotá.

⁴⁶ As these examples show, pre-existing “cognitive” or “emotional” trust was not enough for individuals to agree to participate. I draw on Norman (2009: 72–74), who explains that cognitive trust relies on a reasoned assessment of who or which institutions are trustworthy, distrusted, or unknown, whereas emotional trust is rooted in personal relationships rather than rational evaluation.

FARC-EP researchers, and retired military personnel with 25 to 35 years of experience. Their insights helped me explore broader transformations in the FARC-EP, including the internal and external sources of cohesion and fragmentation that may have contributed to the formation of breakaway factions, the risks posed by these factions during the 2012–2016 negotiations, and the impact of the peace process on their internal dynamics.

Analysts I knew were also in Bogotá, which facilitated data collection on the four case studies before and after my field trips. They also referred me to research participants in the field sites. As discussed in Section 4.1.5, Case Study Three posed security challenges. Therefore, in Bogotá, I conducted semi-structured interviews with elite- and third-sector participants focused exclusively on the CMDA. My previous military service, from 1999 to 2000, also helped me locate retired military personnel, including officers I had met before my doctoral studies. In multiple interviews, these retired officers addressed broader themes, such as the impact of armed forces restructuring on the FARC-EP, as well as specific topics like the relationship between counterinsurgency operations and the FARC-EP's military retreat.

I employed five strategies to locate former combatants who met my selection criteria (Section 3.3.3)⁴⁷. I contacted ex-combatants I knew in Bogotá, sought help from elite- and third-sector participants, and relied on local contacts to access ex-combatants in Bogotá, other field sites, and ETCRs⁴⁸. Ex-combatants also referred me to some of their former comrades. Acquaintances⁴⁹ following informal interactions connected me to others, which was crucial for planning all my field trips.

Not knowing most of the research participants beforehand meant I had to rely on intermediaries to introduce myself and my project, ensuring initial and verbal consent⁵⁰. This was essential for gaining access to ETCRs and for ex-combatants to accept brief phone conversations about my research. I never contacted anyone without a referral. My experience working with vulnerable populations in Colombia taught me that unsolicited contact can appear

⁴⁷ I did not rely on the National Reincorporation Agency to locate former combatants because formalizing an agreement could take up to six months—the entire duration of my fieldwork in Colombia in 2022.

⁴⁸ Some local contacts met combatants during the armed conflict through human rights, humanitarian, or research work, while others worked with them during the 2012–2016 negotiations and the 2017 disarmament and demobilization phases in 2016–17.

⁴⁹ Journalists who occasionally covered the peace process, artists who have supported reincorporation projects in the regions of my field sites and officers from international organizations who, through their work in the implementation process of the Peace Accord, have an extensive network of contacts with ex-combatants.

⁵⁰ On “working through intermediaries,” see Fujii, 2009. 36.

suspicious and is often declined⁵¹. By June 2022, over 320 ex-combatants had been killed and hundreds threatened, making referrals necessary to respect ethical obligations and participants' vulnerabilities (Wood, 2016; Fujii, 2018).

To avoid misunderstandings, I sent potential participants a text introducing my project, always including my business card, and only contacted those who agreed to a call or meeting. Respecting refusals allowed me to observe "boundaries" (Fujii, 2018) and protect my reputation (Krause, 2021), while also being ethically aware to the risks and social dynamics vulnerable populations, including ex-combatants, navigate daily, even in Bogotá with security details (Wood, 2006; Campbell, 2017; Fujii, 2018; Driscoll & Schuster, 2018). Commuting in cities like Bogotá, Arauca, Neiva, and Tumaco required participants to coordinate with their details, who sometimes joined or stayed nearby during conversations. Some research participants even told me, after the second or third interview, that they first needed to test the waters with me to see who I really was, and I did not pose any threat.

4.2.4 Presenting my Project and the Consent Process

In two informal interactions in Bogotá in early June 2022, two participants cautioned me about my lexicon when presenting my project. Terms like "dissidents" and "fragmentation" could confuse former combatants, as they were not part of the FARC-EP language. Using "factionalism" [*fraccionalismo*] could also be problematic, for it might suggest I was labelling the breakaway factions in advance⁵². Adapting my lexicon helped me avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations (Fujii, 2018: 4–5). In Guaviare, for instance, using the word "dissidents" would have implied taking sides, as the active armed group claims to be the FARC-EP's continuation⁵³. Lexicon choices also served to empathise and shape interactions (Shesterinina, 2019)⁵⁴. Interviewing military and intelligence personnel required

⁵¹ For example, one person whom I contacted through a local contact declined to be a respondent and even meet with me informally. This person, from the third sector, did so because [deleted gender] had a negative experience with a foreign academic [name omitted] that put [deleted gender] life at risk.

⁵² Field notes, Bogotá, June 2022.

⁵³ During my PhD, peace talks began between the Colombian government and the first breakaway faction that emerged in 2016. In several interviews, leaders of this group — known as the General Staff FARC-EP (*Estado Mayor Central de las FARC-EP*) — rejected the label "dissidents." They argued that they could not be dissidents from a process they had never joined, claiming instead to be the legitimate continuation of the FARC-EP.

⁵⁴ My personal and professional experience in Colombia before and during the peace process made me aware of language that could offend ex-combatants. For instance, "reintegration" carried associations with deserters and counterinsurgency policies, so I used "reincorporation," reflecting the 2016 Peace Agreement's lexicon. Schmidt (2021) has recently addressed this discussion, noting that "loyalists" refers to combatants who stayed in their group until they were ordered to demobilize, whereas "deserters" are those who fled their group without permission.

careful attention to language and observing hierarchies. Terms like “commanders” [*comandantes*] were unacceptable to refer to former FARC-EP leaders, as it equated them with the military. They preferred “*cabecillas*” [ringleaders], which I discarded. Therefore, I consistently used “ex-combatants” [*exguerrilleros*].”

Respecting boundaries was as crucial with both former military personnel and ex-combatants. During the consent process, they emphasised they would not disclose intelligence or classified information, even under confidentiality. At times, participants’ “metalanguage” (Fujii, 2010) signalled unease: they evaded questions, fell silent, or crossed arms or legs. While no one requested that I stop or pause the interview, a typical response was, “I can’t talk about that.” In such cases, I either changed the subject or moved on to another theme.

During the consent process, I emphasised that my project focused on those who did not continue in the peace process during the negotiations and before the disarmament in 2017. I avoided asking about events after 2017 to avoid giving the impression that I was conducting intelligence on the whereabouts of active armed groups. I explained that my goal was to understand the organisation through dialogue rather than fixed questions, following Fujii’s advice: “data [is] jointly produced through back-and-forth exchange” (2018: 3). While I adapted my language, I remained open and honest about my dissertation’s focus on breakaway factions and broader FARC-EP processes during the conflict up to 2017 (Gallagher, 2009; Sluka, 2012). However, in Case Study Four, I adjusted my project presentation to explain that my focus was on the history of the FARC-EP in the region and the CMTF, as seen through the life histories of ex-combatants who remained in the peace process. This lexicon acknowledged that the CMTF had never been a breakaway faction, even if some of its members had rearmed as of late 2017. Through intermediaries, I received voicemails from two CMTF ex-combatants at the ETCR, agreeing to a phone conversation. I presented my project with these modifications, and both accepted my visit and suggested potential research participants.

Emphasising dialogue rather than an interview was critical with ex-combatants for two reasons. First, I emphasised that I was not seeking mere “information,” a term often associated with intelligence by them. Second, I made it clear that I was not interested in any details of their wartime experiences that could jeopardize their judicial status before transitional justice tribunals. My interest was in how they interpret those who kept their arms— “insights into actors’ lived experiences” (Wedeen, 2010, p. 261)—not in factual accuracy. With this approach,

I captured anecdotes and lived experiences to identify observable implications of existing explanations in the literature.

The first greeting with research participants was crucial. Following Fujii (2018: 22–28), I always asked how to address ex-combatants—by their proper name, *nom de guerre*, or another name. Some did not care; others preferred their *nom de guerre*. A few, seeing the war as behind them, even showed their national ID as proof of a new life. For active and retired military personnel, I used ranks unless told otherwise⁵⁵. Through small talk and impromptu exchanges, I learned how to introduce myself, the importance of greetings, the value of patience, and when to begin an interview. I avoided rushing, signalled acceptance of rejections, and emphasised confidentiality, focusing only on events before 2017. As ‘meta-data’ (Fujii, 2010), gestures such as gentle smiles, nodding, and relaxed arms signalled the research participants’ comfort and highlighted the importance of confidentiality, as well as the fact that my research only covered up to 2017. Small talk helped put participants at ease; former combatants shared their lives, families, and experiences with the reincorporation process, while local leaders expressed their frustrations with the implementation of the peace agreement.

I only placed notebooks, pens, tape recorders, and phones on the table after participants gave consent, as these objects could create tension or resemble an interrogation. Rushing my project presentation could give the impression that I was gathering information rather than encouraging a meaningful dialogue. I have made these mistakes in the past, which led to me being “typed” or “labelled” (Fujii, 2009, 2018) as an intelligence officer or a spy posing as a journalist. At times, some participants requested that I keep my presentation brief because of their busy schedules. Consent forms were signed before the interviews, and all respondents agreed to being recorded and for me to take written notes⁵⁶.

4.2.5 Adaptability and Respecting Boundaries

The context of my research in Colombia was not that of the researcher and his subjects, in which one has complete control of the field or the interviews (Das, 1990). My research process was “uneven at best” and required me to adapt to reality “as encountered rather than as

⁵⁵ Which I learned serving in the military in 2000 and conducting research in Colombia.

⁵⁶ I always clarified that I would only take notes if participants felt uncomfortable with being recorded. I also explained that accurate recordings were essential for the coding analysis of my research. Additionally, I assured them that I would not use their real names or *nom de guerre* during the interviews, and that if either was mentioned by accident, I would delete those segments immediately or after the interview.

expected” (Krause, 2021) and “roll with the ups-and-downs” (Thomson, 2013: 5) in the five field sites. Hence, acknowledging “unanticipated and ambiguous situations for which one has no clear behavioural plan at all” (Sluka, 2012: 318) was a guiding principle for my research.

First, adaptability meant remaining open to modifying my initial selection of three case studies by adding a negative one. As discussed in section 4.1.3 and in the research design, incorporating the case of the CMTF became increasingly relevant as fieldwork in Colombia progressed, demonstrating that my research design was not predetermined. Initially, I omitted the CMTF before travelling to Colombia. Based on my 2018 fieldwork in Caquetá and secondary sources, I knew that FARC-EP rearmament had occurred after the demobilisation process, which fell outside the initial scope conditions of this dissertation. However, studying the CMTF was repeatedly suggested by two non-participants and five research participants in Bogotá during June and July. The CMTF was a secondary group deemed a potential breakaway faction during the peace process (2012–2016) due to its leadership and ties to illicit economies but ultimately remained cohesive. I initially doubted including this case. The CMTF was an elite and highly disciplined unit whose ex-combatants, cautious and distrustful, remained isolated in a remote ETCR, as I observed during two visits in 2019. However, as discussed in section 4.1.3, this was the only ETCR where I stayed for over a week, and ex-combatants proved exceptionally supportive of my research.

Secondly, adaptation also led me to modify my selection criteria for former combatants, taking into account their availability and dispersion across the country. Initially, I assumed I would only conduct life-history interviews with ex-combatants who had demobilised from the primary groups in which breakaway factions emerged. As my research progressed, I learned that locating former combatants from parent secondary groups (Eastern and Southern Blocs) would provide me with a broader perspective on the history and transformations of the FARC-EP, as well as specifics about the primary groups from which breakaway factions emerged. This was the case with seasoned ex-combatants who were in the FARC-EP for over two or three decades and, for that reason, had in-depth knowledge about specific aspects of my case studies. Nevertheless, I also located former combatants who spent their time in the FARC-EP only in the regions of my case studies.

Additionally, early in my doctoral research, I learned in informal conversations that the dispersion of ex-combatants was far greater than I had anticipated before beginning my PhD. As I discuss in Section 4.3.7, this was one reason I opted for “limited immersions” and shorter

stays across the four field sites while being based in Bogotá, where I located over half of my research participants and conducted more than 55% of informal conversations (Table 4.1). For case study three (CMDA in Tumaco), the unavailability of former combatants—due to shifting security conditions, recidivism into armed groups, or dispersion across Colombia—led me to rely primarily on participants from the elite and third sectors, and additional empirical materials (see Section 4.1.4).

Third, I adapted to shifting national and local political contexts. I observed the “boundaries” drawn by research respondents and the context itself (Fujii, 2018, p. 25), avoiding topics “not relevant to the research” (Sluka, 2012). My fieldwork coincided with Colombia’s 2022 presidential elections and the inauguration of Gustavo Petro’s presidency. Before travelling, I consulted local contacts to assess how Petro’s plans to negotiate with or prosecute non-state armed groups—including some of my case studies—might affect my research. I was advised that there would be no issues if I focused strictly on events up to 2017 and avoided questions about dissidents and other armed groups. These topics fell outside my scope and could pose risks for participants and me (Campbell, 2017). Additionally, because some respondents are appearing before transitional justice tribunals, I avoided questions about war crimes or crimes against humanity. When ex-combatants or others inadvertently mentioned such matters or their legal status, I paused the interview and reminded them of the consent protocols in place.

Finally, I remained flexible in response to changing security conditions, which limited the number of formal interviews I could conduct in the field. In such circumstances, pursuing interviews or asking people to travel would have violated the “do no harm” principle (Wood, 2006; Fujii, 2018) and created an exploitative dynamic that prioritised data collection over safety (Cronin-Furman & Lake, 2018). Therefore, I adapted my methods, relying more on informal conversations and interactions, as armed groups and their informants operated in both urban and rural areas. I prioritised the safety of my contacts, myself, and those who spoke informally or could not meet in person. For example, security conditions in Tumaco (Chapter 7), particularly in ETCR’s surroundings, forced me to shorten my stay. In Huila (Chapter 8), I was unable to interview three ex-combatants because it was too risky for them to travel from their city to Neiva.

4.2.6 Security Conditions and Observing Potential Dangers

Security conditions and unforeseen events during my fieldwork in Colombia also shaped the research process. Except for Bogotá and Neiva, my field sites were in conflict-affected regions that can be described as zones of “intractable conflict with varying degrees of active and latent violence” (Norman, 2009, p. 74)⁵⁷. Nonetheless, it was generally safe to travel to the ETCRs, conduct life-history interviews with ex-combatants, and visit rural areas. I never entered unauthorised territories—commonly referred to as “red zones”— as they posed a real risk of direct violence.

However, the field trip to Tumaco was different. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Hence, unlike my previous field trips, security conditions directly impacted my research for Case Study Three. Furthermore, when I was advised not to return to the ETCR by my local contacts, I took it seriously. Following Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay (2018), I acknowledged my limitations in this context and prioritised the advice of my respondent and local driver over my assumptions.

During my field trips, I had to follow a range of local rules, including curfews imposed by armed groups. Depending on the region, I had to leave the ETCR by 4:00 p.m., and in some areas, no later than 1:00 p.m. These time restrictions, together with my respondents’ busy schedules, limited the number and length of interviews I could conduct—except in Caquetá, where I stayed for over a week. I travelled with local drivers whom I had previously hired or who were recommended by trusted contacts. Drivers needed to be well-known in the region, and we had to observe other informal rules, such as slowing down at specific road sections, keeping our faces visible, and rolling down the car windows. Informants routinely monitored who entered or left the ETCRs. On one occasion, while stopping for breakfast in a small village en route to an ETCR, my driver advised me to sit facing the road so that local informants could see me.

I did not stay overnight at any ETCR, except in Caquetá, where accommodations are available for visitors. During another field trip, my local contact and driver advised me against

⁵⁷ I use Norman’s (2009) five forms of conflict zones: a) ‘hot’ conflicts characterized by open, direct violence; b) intractable conflict with varying degrees of active and latent violence; c) situations of state oppression of citizens; d) post-conflict situations; and e) humanitarian situations resulting from conflict, such as flows of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs).

staying at the ETCR, as doing so would have raised suspicions—it is unusual for outsiders to spend the night there. Had I stayed, it would have drawn attention, as people would have noticed my driver, a local, and my contact returning without me. Even ex-combatants did not offer accommodation. In another ETCR located in a region where breakaway factions operate, I also chose not to stay overnight, due to both security concerns and the limited availability of former combatants, despite some expressing interest in speaking with me. In that case, I returned the following day, spoke with those available, and prioritised respecting the ETCR’s “social norms” (Fujii, 2018) by not disrupting daily routines and adapting to the conditions I encountered (Malejacq & Mukhopadhyay, 2016).

In informal interactions, I assessed security conditions both before travelling and while in the field, particularly when deciding whether to seek out individuals who were vulnerable⁵⁸ or potentially posed security risks to me⁵⁹. For instance, in two field sites, I chose not to locate ex-combatants mentioned in interviews or informal conversations after being advised that they might be under intelligence surveillance, which could jeopardise their and my safety. I was also advised against travelling to an ETCR in the Meta Department, despite the likelihood of interviewing former combatants for Case Study One. In early 2023, FARC-EP dissidents threatened and forcibly displaced the entire ETCR. Likewise, I refrained from contacting individuals who had recently received threats, survived assassination attempts, or lived in rural areas where armed groups might target those who spoke to me. In these cases, I prioritised the “do no harm” principle over data collection (Wood, 2006) and avoided exposing myself, my contacts, or participants to danger (Sluka, 2012). I also faced challenges from potential participants who sought to instrumentalise me. In Bogotá, a retired military officer and an intelligence official agreed to be interviewed only if I shared findings on the whereabouts of FARC-EP dissidents. I declined. As Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay observe, researchers “are not exempt from becoming political resources ... especially when political elites are the subjects of concern and elite interviews serve as a central research instrument” (2016: 1014).

I faced similar challenges with ex-combatants, reflecting what Malejacq and Mukhopadhyay describe as “power asymmetries” between researchers and those holding privileged knowledge (Ibid.: 1013). One ex-combatant offered to participate only if his life-history transcript could be used to fulfil his obligations before the transitional justice tribunals

⁵⁸ Threatened local leaders and ex-combatants.

⁵⁹ Mainly former combatants who are said to be leading double lives — still participating in the reincorporation process while simultaneously working with armed groups.

—to “save some time.”⁶⁰ Another proposed to support my research and refer me to other ex-combatants on the condition that I help him write funding proposals for his NGO and arrange meetings with international cooperation officers⁶¹. Among those who became respondents, one ex-combatant in Bogotá asked about a former comrade’s whereabouts in one of my field sites. I replied jokingly: “I can’t tell you that because of my ethical protocols. Imagine academic research were ruled by compartmentalisation, as in the FARC-EP. If I broke that rule, could you trust me?” He laughed, said he understood, and we began our fourth life-history interview.⁶²

4.2.7 Being Labelled and Positionality

During my research, I was “typed” in the sense described by Fujii, whereby “our field sites present daily opportunities to see how people make sense of us, the researchers” (2014: 529). My physical appearance and the objects I carried often reminded participants and others of foreign troops, spies, or wartime events. Having encountered myself in similar situations before starting my doctoral studies in Colombia, I drew on Driscoll and Schuster’s concept of “situational awareness,” which highlights how researchers “self-define their role with a great deal of self-awareness and awareness of how their roles might be viewed from the outside” (2018: 425). I always identified myself as a Colombian researcher based at a UK university who was interested in the history of the FARC-EP and the breakaway factions. Despite this I was labelled or typed through humour and jokes. I recognised these interactions as ways in which participants and bystanders conveyed and reinterpreted their lived experiences of armed conflict.

During my research in Colombia, my positionality and identity (Fujii, 2009, 2018)⁶³ shifted in relation to each participant’s background. With retired armed forces officers, I mentioned my voluntary military service from 1999 to 2000, which allowed me to reference the counterinsurgency modernisation of the armed forces and the subsequent counterinsurgency campaign from the late 1990s on that prompted the FARC-EP’s retreat. Asking, “While I was learning drills in 1999, what were you doing?” situated them at a key

⁶⁰ Field note. June 2022. Bogotá

⁶¹ Field note. June 2022. Bogotá

⁶² Field note. October 2022. Bogotá

⁶³ For Thomson researchers are a “plurality of selves” (2013: 4). Fujii claims “positionality takes many forms” (2018: 17).

moment in the conflict and opened deeper discussions on counterinsurgency as an existing explanation of fragmentation (Chapter 2).

During one field trip, a local at a public event looked me up and down, laughed, and said I resembled a *gringo*⁶⁴ officer from the nearby anti-narcotics base. My local contact jokingly replied that I was Colombian-born and raised. The comment was not meaningless. Many locals earned their living from coca cultivation and had been affected by aerial fumigation, which they associated with U.S.-sponsored counter-narcotics campaigns since the late 1990s. On another trip, upon arriving at an ETCR, a former combatant and research participant asked about my nationality. Doubting my answer, he handed me a document and asked me to read it aloud to test my accent. When I began reading, he burst into laughter and said it was a joke, explaining that it was a tactic once used to detect foreigners or *gringos*. While presenting my project at an ETCR, a seasoned former combatant interrupted me to ask if my watch had a GPS like those used by the military. He explained that such watches could record conversations and reveal locations for strikes. I wondered if he was testing me or if he suspected me of something. I calmly explained it was a fitness watch with the GPS disabled, then turned it off and set it aside. He smiled, and we proceeded with a two-hour life-history interview, discussing, among other topics, chips and technological warfare as perceived external sources of fragmentation.

Similarly, being aware while interviewing, observing, travelling with local drivers, and interacting with people in their everyday lives meant not only choosing my questions carefully but also being mindful of my demeanour. A single misstep could “disturb the local social fabric regardless of [my] intentions [and] all precautions taken” (Ansoms, 2013: 47–48). I therefore avoided any behaviour that could resemble espionage or attract attention from armed groups, which could endanger not only me but also research participants, their families, and my local contacts (Driscoll & Schuster, 2018). At the ETCRs, I never wandered or peeked into other’s homes. I followed local routines, joined activities only when invited, followed my contacts’ advice and always tried stay close to ex-combatants. I listened, observed, and respected what people chose to share during small talk, meals, or walks around reincorporation projects. I remained quiet and cautious, and when asked, I was always open and honest about my research and myself (Sluka, 2012).

⁶⁴ Term widely used in Latin America to refer to foreigners, often from the United States.

With former combatants, my presence often sparked curiosity. In the field, I was a Colombian who, to many locals, did not appear to be one—a perception that, as noted above, sometimes evoked wartime memories. My identity and appearance became a “source of wonder” (Fujii, 2009) to the extent that in the ETCRs, some ex-combatants approached me out of curiosity. Although I was conducting fieldwork in my country and therefore felt like an insider (a Spanish-speaker Colombian who knows the local lexicon and colloquial expressions), I was more of an outsider (Pacheco-Vega & Parizeau, 2018). Adapting to such realities and their potential impacts on the content of my interactions was critical. Reiterating that I was Colombian and had visited the ETCRs or the field sites in the past was a way to engage more positively and demonstrate my familiarity with the region and the peace process. Before formal or informal conversations, I asked questions about the reincorporation process or engaged in small talk about the field site’s history and the implementation of the peace agreement. This helped show that, even as an outsider, I was familiar with the historical and socio-political context at both national and regional levels.

Discussion

Two insights stem from this chapter. First, the difficult and constantly shifting conditions under which I conducted fieldwork were shaped, in no small part, by Colombia's broader security landscape — one that has undergone profound transformation since the signing of the peace accord in 2016. Beyond the emergence of breakaway factions, the country has witnessed the rise and fragmentation of new armed groups, some of which have gone so far as to target and kill their former comrades. Likewise, between 2024 and 2025, three ETCRs were forcibly displaced by these armed groups, prompting ex-combatants and their families to look for a safe place to remake their lives. Second, despite these challenges, this chapter highlights the advantages of adopting a non-predetermined research design. This helped me adapt to shifting realities and to collect the rich evidence I present in the following four chapters.

In the following four empirical chapters, I present the findings of my research on the case studies of the 1st Front, the 10th Front, the Mobile Column *Daniel Aldana* (CMDA), and the Mobile Column *Teófilo Forero* (CMTF). The evidence stems from the systematisation of **28** life histories with former FARC-EP combatants (LH#), **49** semi-structured interviews with research respondents from the elite and third sectors (S#), and **77** informal conversations (Table 4.1). To add a level of validation, I triangulate them with additional empirical materials, such as FARC-EP documents, declassified documents, transitional justice rulings, academic literature on the Colombian armed conflict, official documents, reports from NGOs and newspaper archives (See References).

Each chapter examines how the observable implications of existing explanations in the literature on fragmentation and cohesion (Chapter 2) play out and evolve within and across these secondary groups. In doing so, I demonstrate that there are different combinations of existing explanations — internal and external to each secondary group, and exogenous and endogenous to the peace process — that contribute to the observable outcomes in each case study, which vary in proportion of fragmentation, and levels of analysis, as outlined in Chapter 2 (see also, Table 9.1). A careful analysis of the observable implications of existing explanations in the literature lays the groundwork for building case-specific mechanisms, demonstrating different paths toward observable outcomes. I compare these mechanisms in Chapter 9.

Chapters 5 through 8 follow the same structure: an introduction, a historical background of the secondary group, the findings, and a brief discussion.

Chapter 5: Case Study One. 1st Front. A Foretold Breakaway Faction?

“We inform the Colombian people that the First Front will not demobilize. We believe the Colombian state and its allies seek only the disarmament and dismantling of the guerrillas. We will continue the struggle. To die, yes — betrayal, no.”
-Public statement, 1st Front, 10 June 2016

The quote above is emblematic of the 1st Front's history. It confirmed what locals had long suspected, and what both the Colombian state and the FARC-EP delegations in Havana had come to fear during the final stretch of the peace negotiations — that Iván Mordisco regarded the Havana peace process as a betrayal of the FARC-EP's revolutionary history and the legacy of its founders. Although his public declaration dates to mid-2016, in this chapter, I demonstrate that the breakaway faction was the outcome of a combination of internal and external dynamics to the 1st Front, endogenous and exogenous to the peace process.

Through a careful examination of the observable implications of existing explanations in the literature, I argue that leadership decapitation and leadership renewal of the 1st Front (observable implications of counterinsurgency and discipline, respectively) paved the way for Iván Mordisco to rise through the ranks before and during the peace process. In this process, he gained legitimacy and created cohesion and group thinking, crucial for breaking away. Likewise, Mordisco rejected the 2016 peace accord disarmament provisions, driven by deep distrust in some FARC-EP negotiators, whom he deemed illegitimate (observable implications of peace processes and commandership legitimacy), and who had risen to the top positions in the organisation after the killing of Mono Jojoy in 2010 before negotiations in Havana (observable implication of counterinsurgency). For Mordisco and other seasoned mid-level commanders who joined him, disarmament symbolised betrayal — both of fallen comrades (as the top commander, Jojoy) and of the FARC-EP's founding principles. Moreover, external factors such as geographical conditions, support networks and long-standing ties between seasoned mid-level commanders and illicit economies also contributed to the fragmentation of the 1st Front.

In this chapter, I present data on how the existing explanations in the literature, laid out in the theoretical puzzle (Chapter 4), perform in this case study. This evidence stems from 14

life-history interviews with former combatants of the FARC-EP, 25 semi-structured interviews with research participants from the elite and third sectors (former negotiators in Cuba, retired military personnel and local leaders, and additional empirical materials⁶⁵). As outlined in my research design (Chapter 2), I selected research participants based on specific criteria — their understanding of the internal dynamics of the 1st Front and its parent secondary group⁶⁶ or Eastern Bloc, and their operational environment. As detail in the research process chapter (Chapter 4), studying a case of high-proportion fragmentation made it particularly challenging to locate former combatants who had demobilized from the 1st Front. I was nonetheless able to speak with five ex-combatants who had been members of the 1st Front at various points during their time in the FARC-EP, three of whom had not broken away and had gone on to demobilize. I also interviewed six ex-combatants from the Eastern Bloc, whose life histories shed light on the broader transformations undergone by both the FARC-EP and the Eastern Bloc, and their trickle-down effects on the 1st Front.

Through the systematisation and analysis of the data, I show that that counterinsurgency, formal socialization mechanisms, commandership legitimacy and illegitimacy, and the peace process contribute to the emergence of the 1st Front breakaway faction. An analysis of how these existing explanations in the literature perform in this case study allow us to identify the combination of observable implications that form the *legitimacy* and *distrust and betrayal* mechanisms, which, in turn, lead to the observable outcome of high-proportion fragmentation at the 1st Front leadership level, including rank-and-file and mid-level commanders from other secondary groups of the Eastern Bloc⁶⁷. Specifically, counterinsurgency aimed at the 1st Front or secondary-group level but also at the parent secondary group or Eastern Bloc. Both, however, had multiple, contradictory effects that contributed to the commandership legitimacy of Iván Mordisco and his distrust of some of the top commanders of the FARC-EP who negotiated the disarmament provisions. Similarly, discipline performs two-fold. For one, as a control measures to reorganise and foster cohesion within the 1st Front after following a successful military against this secondary group. But discipline was also a way for Iván Mordisco to establish himself a legitimate leader. Moreover, unlike the other three case studies, the rejection

⁶⁵ FARC-EP documents, declassified documents, judicial records, academic literature, reports, newspaper archives.

⁶⁶ I use “secondary groups” and “parent secondary groups” drawing on Siebold (2007) and Perkoski (2022), respectively.

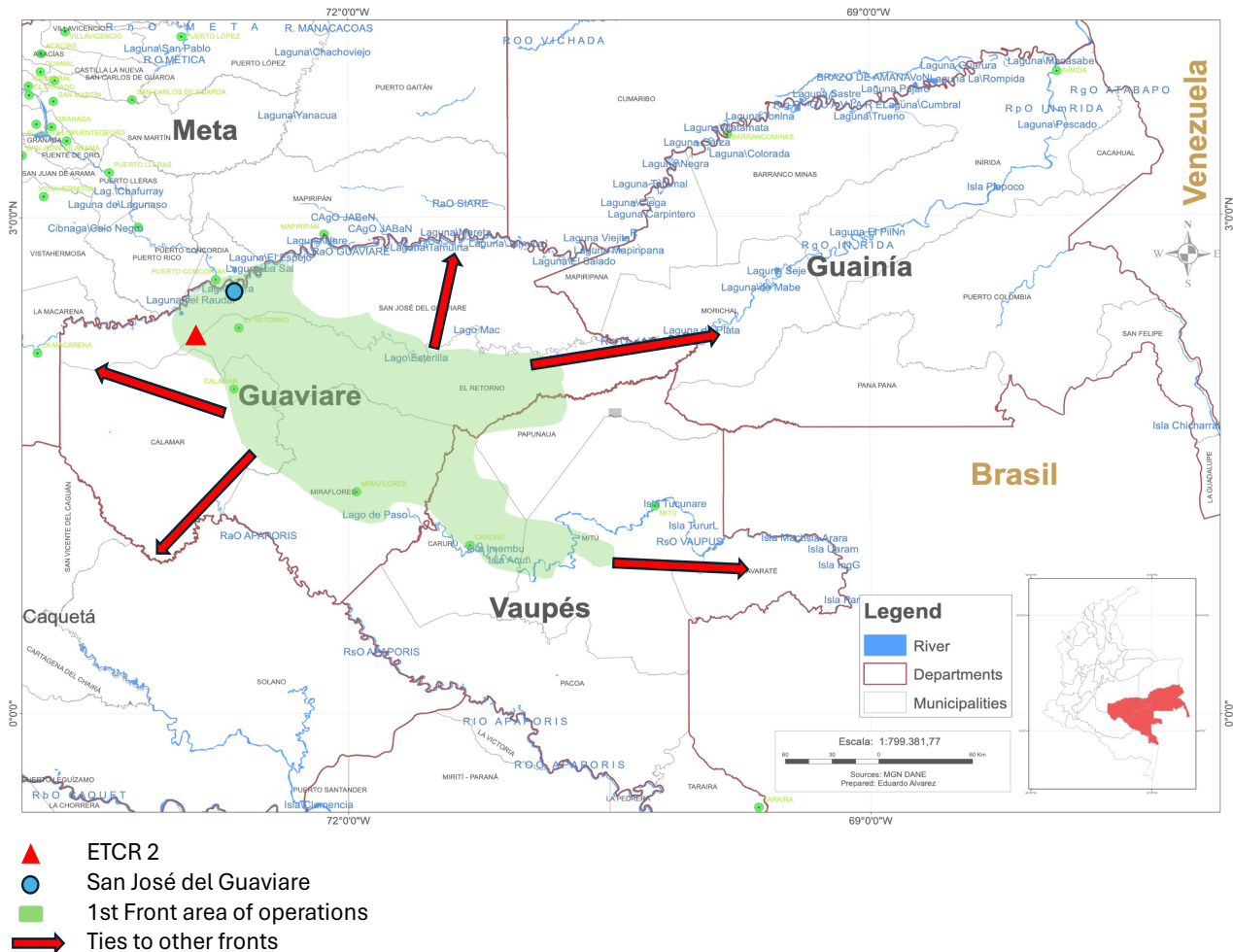
⁶⁷ In Chapter 9, I elaborate on both mechanisms and compare them across the four case studies.

of the disarmament provisions is a key observable implication that also contributes to the observable outcome.

This chapter proceeds in three parts. In the first, I provide a brief historical context of the 1st Front. In the second, I examine the internal and external dynamics that contribute to its fragmentation. Finally, I briefly discuss the findings in this chapter, highlighting the mechanisms that lead to the observable outcome in this case study.

Historical Context

The FARC-EP established the 1st Front in 1974 as part of its effort to expand the military units formed initially in the 1960s. Known as a “mother front,” it gave rise to several other front across Eastern Colombia and the border regions with Venezuela and Brazil from the 1980s through the 2010s. Its historical significance lies in being one of the first three fronts created after the FARC-EP’s military reorganisation in 1974. Initially based in the Meta Department, the 1st Front shifted its operations to the Guaviare and Vaupés Departments in the early 1980s. From its inception, its mission included securing financial resources, recruitment, safeguarding kidnapped individuals, and political as well as organisational work. Its expansion coincided with the settlement of Colombians —many with liberal and left-wing backgrounds— who had been forcibly displaced throughout the 20th century by bipartisan and state-led violence. This context proved critical for the front’s mass work and political activities. The 1st Front’s social embeddedness deepened as the FARC-EP moved from opposing coca cultivation to controlling parts of the production chain, recognising both the strategic financial benefits and the peasants’ dependence on coca as a livelihood. In parallel, the 1st Front advanced the self-government project “Nuevo Poder Popular de la Nueva Colombia” in its areas of influence, fostering rebel governance in coordination with local support networks. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the 1st Front took part in some of the FARC-EP’s most renown military operations against state forces. However, the 2000s brought significant setbacks, due to counterinsurgent operations which prompted the 1st Front’s internal reorganisation and the rise of new leaders like Iván Mordisco.



Internal and External Dynamics: Fragmentation of the 1st Front

In this section, I present evidence on the observable implications of existing explanations in the literature that allow us to understand the emergence of the 1st Front breakaway faction. I examine the Eastern Bloc leadership's adoption of disciplinary measures, such as leadership renewal, in response to the 2008 military operations that targeted this secondary group. From that year on, Iván Mordisco established himself as a disciplined and legitimate leader, fostering cohesion within the 1st Front. However, following the killing of his mentor, Mono Jojoy, in a 2010 airstrike, Mordisco began detaching, prompting intra-secondary group thinking in opposition to the broader organisation's decisions, norms, and rules—particularly regarding the 2016's peace accord disarmament provisions. In addition, I present data indicating that secondary-group commandship legitimacy, as well as illegitimacy at the

organizational level (e.g., toward certain top FARC-EP commanders), also contributed to the observable outcome in this case. I further provide evidence on the role of mid-level commanders from Eastern Bloc secondary groups who joined Mordisco, together with their ties to external actors and material resources—which, in some cases, developed during the 1990s and 2010s.

As in Case Studies Two, Three, and Four, I adopt a longer approach to before and during the peace process, and to the internal dynamics of the organisation and more specifically its secondary groups—the 1st Front in this case study. By presenting the evidence through this approach, we can see, for example, that rejection of the disarmament provisions was not solely endogenous to the peace process. Instead, a combination of internal and external dynamics to the FARC-EP and the 1st Front at different moments of the armed conflict contributed to it. Discipline constitutes another example, to which I now turn in the next two sections.

In the following two sections, I present evidence on the adoption of disciplinary measures in response to counterinsurgency in 2008 and on the consolidation of strong intra–1st Front discipline between 2009 and 2015. The dynamics of discipline within the 1st Front evolved both before and during the peace process and largely shaped by counterinsurgency, which needs to be understood within the broader context of the evolution of Colombia’s armed conflict in the 2000s and 2010s.

5.1 Internal Dynamics

5.1.1 Discipline in Response to Secondary-Group Leadership Decapitation

In 2008, the Colombian security forces carried out Operation *Jaque*⁶⁸, which resulted in the liberation of 15 high-profile hostages held by the 1st Front. In response, data indicates that the Eastern Bloc leadership, whose most visible figure was Mono Jojoy, implemented three disciplinary control mechanisms — internal reviews or *balances*, troop recalls, and the appointment of both interim and permanent leaders. These measures were a direct reaction to state-led actions that contributed to the leadership decapitation of the 1st Front.

The first measure involved assessing why *Jaque* had been successful. According to former combatants (LH024; LH025; LH027), through “*balances*,” the Eastern Bloc leadership

⁶⁸ For an account of *Jaque*, see Torres, J.C., 2008.

commissioned seasoned and trusted fighters to investigate the circumstances that enabled the Colombian military to rescue a former presidential candidate, three U.S. contractors, and 11 members of the Colombian security forces. One ex-combatant recalls: “I spent 17 years in the 1st Front, from 1983 to 2000. When I was appointed to another unit, it was a strong, cohesive, and disciplined Front⁶⁹. It really fell apart after *Jaque*. Mono [Jojoy] sent us to find out what happened and to reorganise it—to talk to the existing leadership to find out who was in the Front, the finances, everything. To recall the front companies and the commissions” (LH024; LH025; LH207). This ex-combatant referred to the “Work Plan for Arsenio, Severiano,” a 12-point document signed by Mono Jojoy. This document set out orders to reassert authority, and enforce discipline, political education and ideological alignment over the 1st Front. The plan also called for an inventory of all assets and war materiel, the standardisation of codes and communications, and the delivery of USD 600,000 for arms procurement (Genesis, XVI, 509–514; LH024; LH025; LH207).

The plan mentioned above also called for a thorough investigation into the defection of the 1st Front leaders responsible for the hostages (Genesis, XVI, 509–514; LH024; LH025; LH207). Operation *Jaque* effectively resulted in the decapitation of the 1st Front’s leadership: César, its top commander, was extradited to the United States, while Gafas, the mid-level commander in charge of the company guarding the high-profile hostages, was imprisoned in Colombia. For the Colombian state, *Jaque* was a successful military operation, as I detail in Section 5.2.1. For the FARC-EP, however, *Jaque* was a betrayal by the 1st Front’s leaders. According to a former combatant, “After assessing the situation and contrasting intelligence, we concluded that *Jaque* was, in reality, a handover of hostages, not a successful operation; a negotiated surrender between the armed forces and César and Gafas.” (LH025; LH024; LH207). Following *Jaque*, the FARC-EP released a press statement declaring: “The escape of the 15 prisoners of war last Wednesday, July 2, was a direct consequence of the despicable conduct of César and Gafas, who betrayed their revolutionary commitment and the trust placed in them” (*El Espectador*, 2008).

⁶⁹ Former combatants often describe a strong and cohesive 1st Front by emphasising the role of trust-based networks and family ties vis-à-vis recruitment between the 1970s and 1990s. “Strangers would not join the FARC-EP” (LH018), recall one former combatant. Potential recruits were considered trustworthy if they were “well-known”, “local”, or “native” (LH001; LH018; LH024, among others), contributed to daily chores or logistical support, had friends or relatives already in the FARC-EP (LH001; LH018; LH021; LH022; LH023), or had been educated and sent by the Communist Youths (JUCO) or the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) (LH001; LH014; LH024; LH027). For a detailed overview of the PCC and the FARC-EP, see, for example, Aguilera, 2015; Medina, 2010; Pizarro, 1991.

The balance and recall of troops not only allowed the FARC-EP to reach these conclusions. The 1st Front, given its area of operations, was tasked with guarding hostages, securing weapons, and maintaining connections with other secondary groups both within the country and along the borders with Venezuela and Brazil (LH001; LH014; LH024; LH025). Former combatants, local leaders, and ex-military personnel recall that this secondary group was mostly isolated and “was not notable for participating in major military operations—it was like the warehouse of the Eastern Bloc” (LH025). As one ex-military officer adds, “The 1st Front was located deep in the jungle, and we had to be very careful not to risk the lives of high-profile kidnapped persons” (S132–S133). Nonetheless, geographic isolation may have contributed to other findings in the balance. The seasoned combatants at the time found evidence of indiscipline and a lack of political training. Some observable implications of this lack of discipline included mid-level commanders were not well versed in the political education documents, noncompliance with internal regulations and statutes, and urban networks or *milicianos* in small towns abusing the local population (LH024), and “debauchery” or *libertinaje*, namely “behaviours contrary to those of a revolutionary, such as owning houses or armoured cars, which led to a decline in political commitment and widespread neglect” (LH023). Moreover, for those who conducted the balance, Operation *Jaque* was just the tip of the iceberg of more serious issues within the 1st Front.

According to ex-combatants, *Jaque* was a watershed moment in the history of the 1st Front. Its “prestige and credibility” were called into question by the FARC-EP and the Eastern Bloc leadership (LH024; LH025). “Even Mono [Jojoy] was asking us how it could be that Gafas had turned against us, given that he was a trusted man in charge of highly sensitive areas, such as guarding the hostages” (LH025; LH027). To address the deep crisis following *Jaque*, the Eastern Bloc leadership appointed the abovementioned seasoned combatants to form a provisional leadership and prioritise discipline and political education. “After *Jaque*, I went to the 1st Front and stayed for more than a year teaching courses because we saw problems with political education,” tells a former combatant (LH027).

Ultimately, the provisional leadership and the Eastern Bloc appointed a new leadership for the 1st Front in 2009. “Mono Jojoy sent Arsenio Kokoriko as commander and left other seasoned combatants from the provisional leadership. Kokoriko came directly from Jojoy’s Security Companies—a trusted and highly experienced man,” remembers an ex-combatant (LH022; LH007; LH025). Additional empirical evidence shows that from that year on, Iván

Mordisco became part of the 1st Front's leadership (Génesis, XIX, 47; LH001; LH014). As I demonstrate in the following section, between 2009 and 2015, Mordisco rose through the ranks of this secondary group. A defining characteristic of his leadership was his adoption of the 1st Front's reorganisation plans, including the enforcement of strict discipline.

5.1.2 Intra-secondary Group Discipline

In practice, discipline was also implemented through Iván Mordisco's initial participation and ultimate leadership of the military, financial, and political reorganisation plan of the 1st Front. In this section, I show that discipline did not consist solely of adopting top-down control mechanisms imposed by the Eastern Bloc in response to state-led violence, such as balances, troop recalls, and the appointment of provisional and permanent leadership. Discipline was also endogenous to the 1st Front itself, playing a constitutive role in Mordisco's emergence as a legitimate leader with both the authority and the capacity to break away, taking the majority of the 1st Front with him.

Following the 2009 leadership renewal, Iván Mordisco appeared as fifth in command, under Kokoriko. As one former combatant remembers, “[A new leader] arrived in 2009. We thought that being trusted by Jojoy, he would carry the 1st Front on his shoulders,” adding: “But he really did not dedicate himself to advancing the front or trying to make it appear as more than the warehouse of the Eastern Bloc. He remained in command for two years, but we never saw any change in terms of giving it relevance or carrying out significant military actions. He was more sedentary” (LH025). Between 2010 and 2012, however, Mordisco rose to second in command because of turnover among other mid-level leaders — some left for medical treatment in Venezuela, while others deserted (Génesis, XIX, 50–57; LH001; LH024). Former combatants noted that, unlike the [new leader] mentioned above, Mordisco displayed far less passivity, deeming him disciplined and strictly adhering to the organisation's regulations, norms, and statutes⁷⁰. His discipline extended to interactions with the local population, particularly through support networks that commanders like Gafas had previously undermined.

⁷⁰ Statutes “Formulate the ideological foundations of the FARC-EP, define its organizational structure, the command regime, the duties and rights of combatants and other basic principles of the organization.”; Disciplinary regime regulations, “Addresses essential issues of military order.”; Internal rules of command, “Daily routine of the of the FARC-EP units” FARC (1993) Eight Conference - Conclusions.

This approach also reinforced vertical ties⁷¹ with the community in a region where the FARC-EP had been operating since the early 1970s (LH001; LH018; LH022; LH024; S132).

The years 2010–2013 were critical for Mordisco’s rise within the 1st Front.

On the one hand, he became the top commander of the 1st Front after the FARC-EP’s top echelons recalled the [new leader] mentioned above for disciplinary reasons (Génesis, XIX, 55; LH001; LH014; LH018). Likewise, the 1st Front fell under the command of the new inter-front coordination, which also comprised the 16th, 39th, 44th, 56th and the Acacio Medina Fronts. Between 2011 and 2012, the FARC-EP leadership established these inter-front coordinations to optimise military, political, and logistical operations, as well as communication and mutual support among fronts, to strengthen cohesion and overall effectiveness. The inter-front functioned as a buffer between the Eastern Bloc leadership and fronts. Former combatants also explain that the inter-front coordination also aimed to foster cohesion and facilitate top-down communication of progress in the peace process, during both its exploratory phase (2010–2012) and its public phase (2012–2016).

On the other hand, in 2010, the Colombian military killed Mono Jojoy in an airstrike. As I show in Section 5.2.1, his killing was one of the most significant military blows to the FARC-EP due to Jojoy’s prominence, his commandership legitimacy, and long-standing role in the organisation. The point is that a confluence of events — the death of Mono Jojoy (whom Mordisco regarded as a father figure; LH024; LH025), the rise of new leaders in the Eastern Bloc leadership (deemed illegitimate by other mid-level commanders), and Mordisco’s own promotion within the 1st Front — was decisive in prompting Mordisco’s growing distrust of the new leadership. These leaders were also part of the FARC-EP negotiating team in Havana. They made decisions regarding the disarmament provisions, as I detail in Section 5.1.3.2, contributing to the high-proportion fragmentation of the 1st Front.

As the top commander of the 1st Front, Iván Mordisco distinguished himself by emphasising the cohesion of this secondary group. A former 1st Front combatant tells, “Iván maintained unity internally and with the population. In the years following *Jaque*, he stressed unity, the need for the troops to be educated and trained, and that the front should be as one man, a single unit” (LH022; LH001; LH018; LH024; S132). When I asked former combatants about Mordisco’s leadership, they consistently compared it to that in place before Operation

⁷¹ On vertical and horizontal ties: Staniland, 2015

Jaque. They recalled mid-level commanders who failed to maintain vertical ties with the local population, engaged in thuggish behaviour, in sharp contrast to Mordisco's discipline. "There were front commanders who had bars and discos, drank expensive alcohol, wore jewellery, gold watches, and rings while talking about the proletariat. I never saw Iván involved in such things," a former combatant note (LH018; LH022).

On the contrary, Mordisco showed discipline by strictly adhering to norms and rules regarding military training and political education⁷² and by ensuring the compartmentalisation of information to avoid another *Jaque* (LH018, LH021, LH024). According to former combatants, failure to do so had been one of the main reasons the Colombian security forces were able to successfully carry out *Jaque* (LH023, LH027). He implemented the discipline, control mechanisms, and reorganisation plans. As one ex-combatant says, "After the 2008 balance, we saw that the 1st Front was no longer the same as the one I left in 2000. We found people who drank and wasted goods and money. It lacked command and political education. We found inexperienced commanders, but brave militarily" (LH024; LH027; LH018). Mordisco was the opposite. He showed respect toward his peers and subordinates and led by example. The same applied to local support networks⁷³. "He was so strict that if you borrowed a hose, it had to be last resort, and you had to make a record when you had returned it" (LH018), illustrates an ex-combatant.

In addition to these observable implications of discipline, Mordisco also adopted adaptation strategies to the Colombian state's counterinsurgency campaigns launched from the late 1990s on. These strategies, tantamount to following the organisation's norms and rules, included greater mobility in smaller groups, avoiding prolonged stays in the same camps, storing and monitoring all goods away from the camps, and enforcing discipline among both troops and urban networks to prevent infiltration by state intelligence (LH011; LH014; LH021, LH022, LH023; LH025; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2026).

The data also shows that during the peace process, Mordisco demonstrated a strong commitment to the rules and norms of the FARC-EP, specifically the organisational principles he deemed correct. His rejection of the 2016 peace accord disarmament provisions was, in practice, a way of expressing his commitment to the principles of the organisation's leaders

⁷² See Sections 2.2.1.4 and 2.2.1.6.

⁷³ Triangulated with informal conversations with locals and former combatants. Field notes, Guaviare Department, October 2022; Bogotá, September-November 2022, June 2024, July 2025.

and founders who had died, whether of natural causes (Manuel Marulanda in 2008) or in military operations (Mono Jojoy or Alfonso Cano in 2010 and 2011, respectively). As one former combatant recalls, “He believed that the FARC’s ideology and the legacy of its leaders could not be betrayed. In the camps he would stress that disarming was a betrayal to the memory of Manuel and Mono” (LH023; LH001; LH021; LH022). Hence, for Mordisco discipline also involved honouring principles that, in his view, were not embodied by some of the FARC-EP negotiators in Cuba who settled the disarmament agreement — specifically [named redacted #2], a top leader of the organisation who gained greater prominence in the Eastern Bloc after the killing of Mono Jojoy and whom other mid-level commanders distrusted and considered illegitimate, as I detail in Section 5.1.3.2.

By disseminating the FARC-EP’s principles regarding the role of arms in a peace process, Mordisco contributed both to groupthink within the 1st Front and to high-proportion fragmentation. At the same time, local leaders note that Mordisco’s rise through the ranks of the 1st Front between 2009 and 2014 provided him with the opportunity to demonstrate his commitment to the FARC-EP principles, which he believed had been betrayed by the peace agreement (S132–S133, S135). On a rhetorical level, these claims are evident in his 2016 statement denouncing the peace process as a surrender (FARC-2016a; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018). In sum, the evidence suggests that, as a newly promoted leader within the 1st Front, Mordisco fostered discipline and reinforced intra-secondary group cohesion. However, in doing so, he also detached from the new FARC-EP leadership’s decisions and directives regarding the peace process. He accomplished this by constructing a “we vs. them” dichotomy, in which “we” embodied the correct path and stood in opposition to “them” — those who, in his view, had betrayed the legacy of the organization’s founders and historical figures, namely the FARC-EP negotiating team in Havana (LH001; LH014; LH021; LH023; LH024; LH025; LH027).

As I show in the next section, these claims, among others, are sources of commandship legitimacy and illegitimacy, which also contribute to high-proportion fragmentation in this case study.

5.1.3 Commandship Legitimacy and Illegitimacy

In this section, I present evidence on the sources of Iván Mordisco’s commandship legitimacy as well as the sources of illegitimacy toward the Eastern Bloc leadership following the death of Mono Jojoy in 2010, and among certain members of the FARC-EP negotiating

team in Havana. The sources of commandership legitimacy help us understand and explore Mordisco's process of *becoming* a legitimate leader with the capacity to mobilise nearly the entire 1st Front. Conversely, the sources of illegitimacy allow us to examine what Mordisco reacted *against*, while also contributing to groupthink and high-proportion fragmentation.

5.1.3.1 Iván Mordisco: On Becoming⁷⁴ a Legitimate Leader or “*ser un buen guerrillero*”

The evidence indicates that at least three sources contributed to Mordisco's commandership legitimacy: his treatment of his troops and the way they perceived him as embodying the qualities of a “good fighter” or *buen guerrillero*; his close relation to Mono Jojoy; and his self-perception as the custodian of the legacy and principles that, in his view, some FARC-EP negotiators had betrayed in Havana.

Regarding the first source, data indicates that Mordisco joined the FARC-EP in the mid-1990s, was disciplined, formed both politically and militarily, and developed close ties to Mono Jojoy (LH024, LH025; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018). Although he was not part of the founding generation or those who joined the FARC-EP in the 1970s or 1980s—like Mono Jojoy or some of the mid-level commanders of other secondary groups who later joined him in June 2016 to break away from the peace process—former combatants remember him as “well-trained” (LH001; LH014), a “tropero” or battle-hardened fighter (LH022), and “brave” (LH025)—all qualities of a “good fighter” or *buen guerrillero*. He also took part of the largest military operations of the FARC-EP against the Colombian state in the 1990s⁷⁵, which bestowed prestige and respect. Mordisco's qualities also included his leadership skills, strict adherence to the internal rules and norms of the FARC-EP, and respect for local populations. When Mordisco assumed command of the 1st Front following *Jaque*, he likely adopted a leadership style similar to that of Mono Jojoy. This style, resembling a father figure, contributed to intra-secondary group cohesion and fostered a stronger sense of belonging to the 1st Front than to the FARC-EP. As one former combatant remembers: “Mordisco's leadership had a lot to do with [breaking away]. When he became front leader, comrades saw Mordisco as the person who changed their

⁷⁴ I borrow this from Shesterinina's (2025) analytical framework to study the processes of *becoming* a mid-level commander.

⁷⁵ In these operations, the Eastern Blocs mobilised thousands of troops against military bases. Some resulted in the kidnapping, if not killing, of dozens of military personnel. Some were held hostage for over a decade (Aguilera, 2015; CTC, 2022).

wardrobe and equipment, which bonded them. Messing with a member of that front was like messing with the whole front” (LH025; LH023; LH024).

Being a “good fighter” or *buen guerrillero* also involved building close horizontal and vertical ties with his troops within the 1st Front. An observable implication of commandship legitimacy, according to former combatants, is that he would not shy away from combat. “On the military side, that man was competent and very brave. He went into combat like any other rank-and-file. He would not say ‘go and do’; he’d say, ‘let’s go,’ and enter the fight himself. He earned much respect for that” (LH025; LH001; LH018; LH022), tells one ex-combatant. Similar to El Paisa in Case Study Four (Chapter 8), displaying “bravery” contributed to secondary-group leadership, sense of belonging and intra-unit cohesion. The difference, as I detail in Chapters 2 and 8, is that in this case study, cohesion contributed to high-proportion fragmentation. In contrast, in Case Study Four, it contributed to cohesion in favour of the peace process. Other former combatants highlighted Mordisco’s leadership qualities that subordinates found desirable—enforcing discipline while caring for the wellbeing of his troops, as the following quotes illustrates:

“He always allowed comrades a certain degree of freedom when it came to personal needs. For example, one might say, “*Boss, it’s been so long since I’ve seen my brother, my mother, my family.*” He would ask, “*Where are they?*” and one would reply, “*I don’t know.*” “*Alright, we’ll take care of it. What are their names, or at least where do they live? We’ll make sure to find them.*” Iván himself would then draw on his local contacts: “*They’re probably around San José del Guaviare or Calamar. The person’s name is this, they look like this—go find out.*” Within two or three months, they would have located the family. Then he would tell one, “*We’re going to bring your mother, or we’ll arrange a meeting place where you can spend 8 or 15 days together.*” They would even provide some financial support.” (LH023; LH014; LH018; LH022; LH027).

To further explore the commandship legitimacy sources that contributed to Mordisco’s intra-secondary group authority, I asked former combatants how he was different from other, even more experienced mid-level commanders from the Eastern Bloc or adjacent operational environment in the Meta and Guaviare Departments. “[Name anonymised] didn’t allow himself to be spoken to. People did not like him, let alone by his own troops. Iván was the opposite” (LH022). Another respondent described the same anonymised commander as follows:

“Paradoxically, he had the capacity to lead them to comply with the peace process and disarmament, not to make them keep their arms. Iván could have done both” (LH023).

In addition to being regarded as a “good fighter,” a second source of commandership legitimacy for Iván Mordisco was his association with Mono Jojoy’s line of training and leadership.

Life histories and semi-structured interviews indicate that the most prominent military and political cadres of the Eastern Bloc, who joined the FARC-EP during the 1980s and early 1990s, were deeply influenced by Jojoy’s persona—his military achievements, financial acumen, command of the largest bloc, organisational standing, direct ties to the FARC-EP founders, and unwavering principles regarding peace negotiations and the role of arms, including whether such matters could ever be subject to negotiation. Many believed he might one day have risen to become the organisation’s top leader, had he not been killed by the military in 2010. By participating in the implementation of the plan to reorganise the 1st Front—first as part of the leadership of this secondary group and later as its top commander—Mordisco emulated Mono Jojoy, particularly in enforcing military discipline and strictly adhering to the organisation’s statutes—practices that had been gradually neglected in the 2000s before the 2008 *Operation Jaque*. As one former combatant recalls: “Mono [Jojoy] trusted Iván a lot. That stuck in his head. He was always at Mono's side; even all the weapons caches were always kept in the 1st Front’s area because of that trust. Iván was Mono's radio operator” (LH023)⁷⁶. Another adds, “I met him when he arrived at the 1st Front. He was a true fighter—disciplined and organised” (LH024).

A third source of commandership legitimacy was the inspiration that Iván Mordisco drew from Mono Jojoy and the founders of the FARC-EP. Former combatants and local leaders refer to his discipline, conduct toward civilians, beliefs, motivation, competence, military achievements, and concern for the troops, as well as the way he enforced political education, training, and ideological commitment (LH001; LH014; LH018; LH019; LH021; LH023; LH024; S103; S104; S112; S135; S136). For example, “locals like him” (LH014) and “he understands his troops” (LH024) are two expressions former combatants used during my fieldwork in 2022, as well as people I talked to informally, to refer to Mordisco. Following the death of Mono Jojoy in 2010 during an air raid (*Operation Sodoma*⁷⁷), his significance became

⁷⁶ Intelligence officers informally confirm this. Field notes, Bogotá, December 2022

⁷⁷ For an account of *Sodoma*, see Duncan, G. 2021.

even more evident in terms of his commandership legitimacy, which extended to secondary groups such as the 1st Front. “When Mono died, you felt like your dad had died, the loneliness, as if he was part of your family. And that was very hard for all ... Mono was like the head of the FARC. He was always involved in all the military actions, he instructed us all,” tells a 1st Front former combatant (LH023; LH001; LH018; LH022; LH024). The data further shows that Mono Jojoy was regarded as a legitimate leader because he was born and raised within the organisation, recruited through trusted networks, and rose through the ranks meritocratically—ultimately becoming a “father figure” (LH018; LH022).

Former combatants and other interlocutors emphasise that Mono Jojoy’s death was decisive in fuelling clashing views inside the Eastern Bloc regarding the FARC-EP’s red lines on what could, and could not, be subject to negotiation (LH001; LH007; LH014; S102; S131). These divisions had direct implications for the 1st Front’s high-proportion fragmentation. Likewise, elite and third-sector respondents noted that such clashes were evident during the Havana peace talks among members of the FARC-EP negotiating team (S110; S112; S121; S144). While some advocated for a swift negotiation — including the laying down of arms and the handover of assets — others insisted on a phased process, conditioning disarmament on the verifiable implementation of the peace accord (LH001; LH018; S114; S121; S131; S133). Among the latter were cadres aligned with Mono Jojoy and Manuel Marulanda’s red lines. As I detail in the next section, these disagreements eventually reached Iván Mordisco’s ears. Mid-level commanders who travelled to Cuba (e.g., Gentil Duarte, also close to Mono Jojoy) returned expressing doubts about the peace negotiations, underscoring that there was no unanimous position on disarmament⁷⁸. Evidence suggests that these disagreements became more visible between 2015 and 2016, when Mordisco himself began voicing concerns about the provisions on disarmament within the 1st Front and local support networks (LH001; LH018; LH021; S103; S104; S112). Thus, his capacity to mobilise troops and commandership legitimacy mentioned above was reinforced by his rejection of the very idea of negotiating a swift handover of weapons. Moreover, rejecting disarmament was also shaped by the top commanders he deemed illegitimate, a perception that unfolded before and during the peace process, as I show in the next section.

Iván Mordisco’s alignment with Mono Jojoy and his rejection of disarmament enabled him to construct a rhetoric of betrayal. According to former combatants, between 2015 and

⁷⁸ In Case Study Two, I show the opposite happened with [name redacted #4], commander of the 10th Front.

2016, he began to argue in internal discussions within the 1st Front, as well as in meetings with clandestine support networks, that the FARC-EP had been betrayed in Havana (LH001; LH003; LH014; LH021; LH023). “When discussing the conclusions of those meetings, we began to realise that comrade Iván was not on board with the peace process. He would say: ‘*This is total submission,*’” remembers a former combatant who was in those meetings (LH003; LH021; LH025; LH027). When the disarmament provisions were signed in Havana, “Iván said to his troops *we are going to the slaughterhouse, they are going to turn us in, they are going to betray us*. With few exceptions, they all followed him. They saw him as their father,” tells another ex-combatant (LH025; LH023; LH024). In his June 2016 statement, in which he officially announced that the 1st Front was breaking away from the peace process, Mordisco further articulates this rhetoric of betrayal. The statement framed the group as a political reality still engaged in the armed struggle to address the structural causes of the armed conflict. It condemned the Peace Accord as a “betrayal” designed merely to achieve the guerrilla’s disarmament and demobilisation (FARC-EP, 2016a). His absence from the FARC-EP’s last conference in September 2016—where the organisation gathered to internally ratify the peace agreement and prepare its transition to legal politics—further underscored this position (LH001; LH017)⁷⁹.

The evidence suggests that this rhetoric of betrayal contributed to the emergence of intra-secondary group thinking, shaped by divergent views of the peace process. This underscores the importance of examining the coexistence of high-proportion fragmentation at the level of the 1st Front leadership and cohesion against the peace process. In doing so, we can have a better understanding of how this rhetoric gained traction when we consider Iván Mordisco’s process of *becoming* a legitimate leader—both before and during the peace process—and how he gradually distanced himself from the Eastern Bloc leadership following Mono Jojoy’s death in 2010. Because he considered this new leadership illegitimate, it is necessary to examine the sources of commandership illegitimacy at the parent secondary group level in the next section.

5.1.3.2 Sources of Commandership Illegitimacy

Why is commandership illegitimacy at the parent–secondary group or Bloc level relevant for understanding Iván Mordisco’s rejection of the disarmament provisions? Moreover,

⁷⁹ Ex-combatants, local leaders, and other research respondents who attended that conference recall that one of the most contentious points was precisely the provisions on disarmament, particularly among those who still opposed it. “*Some of us even considered taking over the conference and holding a court-martial against those who approved the FARC-EP’s disarmament, because that was a betrayal*” (LH001; LH007; LH014; LH018).

was this illegitimacy only endogenous to the peace process—arising solely from what Mordisco perceived as a betrayal in the disarmament provisions—or was it also exogenous to it? To answer these questions, in this section I present evidence that demonstrates commandership illegitimacy at the highest levels of the Eastern Bloc was one of the many consequences of leadership renewal following the killing of Mono Jojoy in 2010 by the Colombian armed forces (leadership decapitation, an observable implication of counterinsurgency). Commandership illegitimacy also stems from how mid-level commanders, including Mordisco and others in the Eastern Bloc, perceived and evaluated the new leadership. These two sources of commandership illegitimacy—leadership renewal and contested representations of new leaders—combined with the negotiation and approval of the 2016 disarmament provisions by leaders already deemed illegitimate before the peace process, ultimately help us understand Mordisco’s decision to keep his arms.

Following Operation *Sodoma* in 2010, which killed Mono Jojoy (top leader of the Eastern Bloc), new leaders, such as [name redacted #1] and [name redacted #2], assumed command of this parent secondary group. Regarding the emergence of the 1st Front breakaway faction in June 2016, mid-level commanders such as Iván Mordisco judged both new leaders to be inexperienced and untrustworthy (LH001; LH014; LH022; LH023; S132; S144). Data suggest that [name redacted #1] was deemed illegitimate by other mid-level commanders of the Eastern Bloc leadership and its fronts due to his lack of military capabilities and combat experience, as well as his unwillingness to establish horizontal and vertical ties with the troops (LH001; LH014; LH022; LH023; S132).

When I asked former combatants to compare the new Eastern Bloc leadership to anyone they deemed legitimate, their response was unanimous: Mono Jojoy. As one ex-combatant explains, “Mono reached the position he did by first being a pioneer in the Communist Youth; he understood what it meant to be a grassroots member [*ser de base*], to prepare food for the entire troop (“*ranchar*”), and to go into combat ... he had all the experience in the world and earned the respect of others because he possessed both moral and practical authority” (LH018; LH001; LH002; LH003; LH005; LH022; LH023; LH025; LH027). In contrast, another former combatant tells, “One had previously collaborated with [name redacted #1], but he was nobody, and when you least expected it, he was Mono's replacement. You cannot compare him to Mono

in any way. We recognised him out of subordination, not because he was the right person to do the job. There were better candidates” (LH023; LH001; LH014; LH022; LH027).⁸⁰

With [name redacted #1] as commander of the Eastern Bloc, former combatants and elite interviewees indicated that seasoned mid-level commanders began to distance themselves, though not entirely, as complete detachment could have led to court-martial. This distancing was not only due to [name redacted #1] lack of military experience or his inability to fill Jojoy’s shoes, as noted above. Another factor was that the new Eastern Bloc leadership began appointing politically and militarily inexperienced combatants to key positions (LH027; LH024; LH022; LH001; LH014). One former combatant explained, “There were many cadres who knew the FARC-EP and understood what needed to be done” (LH022). But “[name redacted #1] started appointing young men to lead fronts without knowing how to manage troops” (LH027; LH023). A former member of the Eastern Bloc leadership also recalls an exchange with [name redacted #1]: “I told him: Comrade, you are a commander, and I respect you as the commander of the Bloc. But you are not our real commander—you were imposed. You do not have the political capacities, and much less the military ones” (LH001; LH014).

Regarding [name redacted #2], second in command of the Eastern Bloc after [name redacted #1], the data suggest that then-combatants also deemed him illegitimate. While they acknowledge [name redacted #2]’s military accomplishments—such as organising and leading Eastern Bloc urban networks in the 1990s, known as the Urban Front Antonio Nariño (LH001; LH014; Génesis, XV, 188)—they frequently cite his lack of military experience. “We were aware that comrade [name redacted #2] was not like Mono, but we knew of his accomplishments in urban areas. You can’t expect a manager trained in an office to run a dairy farm if he doesn’t know how to milk,” tells an ex-combatant (LH022; LH001 LH014; LH017). Similarly, internal FARC-EP reports suggest that [name redacted #2] may have collaborated with the  “That came to light after the peace process; they say he was involved in the killing of Mono” (LH022; LH023; LH027; LH001; LH014; S135)⁸¹. This, in addition to his

⁸⁰ Secondary sources indicate that, in addition to his lack of military experience and low profile compared to Mono Jojoy, Mauricio faced a precarious financial and military situation when he was appointed the Eastern Bloc’s new number one, due to pressure from the Colombian state military. This new reality could have impacted his leverage and capacity to lead. (Génesis, Tomo XV, p. 194. Also, FIP, 2015.)

⁸¹ Also consistent in informal conversations I had with former combatants and former intelligence officers. Field notes, 2022, 2024, and 2025.

role with the remnants of Manuel Marulanda—founding member of the FARC-EP, who died of natural causes in 2008—as I detail Chapter 8.⁸²

[Name redacted #2] is a key figure because, according to former combatants and elite interviewees—including government negotiators in Havana—he advocated for a swift negotiation of the disarmament provisions. As mentioned above, [name redacted #2] commandship legitimacy had already been questioned before the peace process by Mordisco and other mid-level commanders. The leadership changes within the FARC-EP during the 2000s and early 2010s led mid-level commanders like Mordisco to distinguish between two types of leaders in Cuba: those committed and loyal to the FARC-EP's political goals and principles, and those who betrayed the organisation by negotiating disarmament, such as [name redacted #2] (LH001; LH014; LH021; S132). These divergent views were evident in Havana, according to other mid-level commanders who joined Mordisco in mid-2016, having previously travelled there as representatives of different fronts. One was Gentil Duarte, who played a key role in conveying to Mordisco that clashes were occurring between those opposing rapid disarmament and those advocating a gradual process. "Through Gentil, Iván understood that the negotiations were not going well," tells an ex-combatant of the 1st Front, and adds: "Iván alerted the Front and said: *'We are going to be betrayed by the State ... I will not tell you not to participate in the peace process because the Secretariat is involved, and we will respect it. Those who want to continue in the peace process, go ahead—nothing will happen. I will not leave; those who are going to continue the struggle, stay with me.'*" (LH022; LH001).

In sum, leadership renewal within the Eastern Bloc, following leadership decapitation, had multiple repercussions. It demonstrated the FARC-EP's capacities and degree of institutionalisation to replace leaders. At the same time, the new leaders were not necessarily regarded as legitimate by their subordinates. I show that sources of commandship illegitimacy can include lack of experience, questionable capabilities and merit, and distrust stemming from wartime actions. These sources, however, can be further exacerbated when leaders decide on contentious issues such as disarmament during the peace process. As one former combatant puts it: "If comrade Manuel or Jorge Briceño (Mono Jojoy) were alive, we

⁸² In informal interactions with former combatants in the five field sites where I conducted fieldwork in Colombia, some referred to him as a "mole", "grass," and "a person I don't want to mention." Others hold a grudge against him for having forgotten his former troops when he became a Colombian Senator. During my fieldwork in Colombia, I encountered several internal divisions within the Political Party *Comunes*—the political successor to the FARC-EP since 2017—in which [name redacted #2] has a considerable influence. Members of this party who are research participants or who referred me to some of them blame him for "acting like the politicians we despised as revolutionaries."

would not have handed over our weapons” (LH018; LH001, LH008; LH010; LH013; LH021; LH022).

5.2 External Dynamics

In the previous section, I present evidence on the internal dynamics and transformations within the 1st Front, highlighting their implications for high-proportion fragmentation in this case study. I show that the 2008 leadership renewal allowed Iván Mordisco to rise through the ranks and become a legitimate leader capable of mobilising nearly the entire 1st Front to break away from the peace process. Similarly, the new leaders who assumed command of the Eastern Bloc in 2010 (the parent secondary group of the 1st Front) were deemed illegitimate by Mordisco and other mid-level commanders, contributing to the observable outcome in this case study. These dynamics unfolded both before and during the peace process. They interacted with external dynamics, such as leadership decapitation—an observable implication of counterinsurgency—at the level of the secondary group (1st Front) and its parent secondary group (Eastern Bloc). In addition, the peace process itself, particularly its disarmament provisions, was rejected by Mordisco.

However, counterinsurgency and the peace process were not the only external dynamics shaping the emergence of the 1st Front breakaway faction, which I briefly revisit in this section in Sections 5.2.1 and 5.2.2. We also need to explore and understand, first, the role of mid-level commanders from other secondary groups within the Eastern Bloc, who maintained strong ties to external actors involved in illicit economies in Colombia, Venezuela, and Brazil; and second, the extent to which networks and the local population may have contributed to the emergence of the breakaway faction in this case study. Sections 5.2.3 and 5.2.4 examine these two dynamics.

5.2.1 Counterinsurgency and Leadership Decapitation

Leadership decapitation following the *Jaque* (2008) and *Sodoma* (2010) military operations (Sections 5.1.1 and 5.1.3) was part of the evolution of the Colombian state’s counterinsurgency campaign against the FARC-EP from the late 1990s through the 2010s (Álvarez-Vanegas, 2026).

By the late 1990s, after nearly 40 years of activity, the FARC-EP had reached the height of its military power. From a “marginal guerrilla” (Aguilera, 2014) in the 1960s and 1970s, over the next two decades it transformed into an “army-like organization” (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2018), boasting extensive economic resources and approximately 21,000 members (CTC, 2022). This military and economic expansion was primarily driven by the implementation of the Strategic Plan for the Seizure of Power (FARC-EP, 1982). Through this plan, the FARC-EP diversified its financial resources, and expanded its recruitment base and territorial influence (Aguilera, 2014; Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2018). Additionally, it gained military initiative and even “military superiority over the armed forces through war of movements” in certain regions, according to a retired army officer (LH114). Another acknowledges, “They came close to seizing Bogotá due to the military power of the FARC-EP, which is what the top generals recognized in the late 1990s” (LH120). At its military peak, the FARC-EP carried out successive and successful military strikes against the Colombian army, mobilizing hundreds and thousands of troops for a single operation. “In the late 1990s, we held tremendous power, capturing military bases and units. The Colombian military failed to respond effectively” (LH001), tells an ex-combatant. Some of these military offensives resulted in dozens of soldiers being killed or held captive for years (CTC, 2022).

Between 1999 and 2001, the FARC-EP and the government of Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) attempted to negotiate a peace deal. The El Caguán peace process failed, but during those years, the Colombian military apparatus underwent an unprecedented modernization backed by the United States. The modernization of the armed forces prioritized air power, mobility and readiness, inter-service cooperation, centralized intelligence, and the professionalization of regular troops (S104; S112; S131; S32; S144; Delgado, 2015; Mezú, 2020; CTC, 2022). It emphasized regaining territorial control, cutting the FARC-EP off from urban centres, having a sustained presence of the Colombian army in the jungles, implementing demobilization programs, and breaking the encirclement that this armed group had on the Colombian capital (Ospina, 2016; Mora, 2022; CTC, 2022). The use of GPS-guided weapons enhanced the leadership decapitation strategy of FARC-EP leaders and contributed to massive demobilizations (Delgado, 2015). For example, the FARC-EP’s numbers dropped from 21,000 members in 2002 to less than 9,000 in 2008 (Nussio and Ugariza, 2021). Despite the counterinsurgency campaign, while the FARC-EP did not bounce back to its late-1990s military capabilities, it regained momentum from 2008 on (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2018; Nussio and Ugariza, 2021). However, retired military personnel—both in life histories I conducted and other

empirical materials (Delgado, 2015; Mora, 2022)—defined military victory as breaking the FARC-EP’s will to fight, ultimately forcing them to negotiate in Cuba between 2012 and 2016.

This brief overview of the FARC-EP and the Colombian state’s counterinsurgency (Álvarez-Vanegas, 2026) highlights a key point: leadership decapitation targeting the 1st Front and the Eastern Bloc, with implications for the leadership renewal and the rise through the ranks of Iván Mordisco (Section 5.1), occurred within a broader context of the Colombian state-FARC-EP war. Military operations against the 1st Front and the Eastern Bloc were significant blows to the FARC-EP, but they were not the only ones. For example, in March 2008, one of the organisation’s founders and top leaders, Manuel Marulanda, died of natural causes, while Raúl Reyes, a member of the FARC-EP’s General Secretariat, was killed by the Colombian Air Force in Ecuadorian territory. These successive events have been coined as “Black March” (CTC, 2022). Months later, Operation *Jaque* took place. As the evidence suggests, leadership decapitation can target different levels of an armed organisation and produce multiple, contradictory effects.

According to research respondents and other empirical materials, Operation *Jaque* in 2008 was a watershed moment with trickle-down effects on the 1st Front. It prompted mid-level commanders, such as Mordisco, to ascend the chain of command. In interaction with subsequent military strikes, including the killing of Mono Jojoy in 2010 (Operation *Sodoma*), it enabled Mordisco to gain greater responsibility and commandship legitimacy, while at the same time becoming distrustful of the new leadership that replaced Jojoy. Examining leadership decapitation across different organisational levels shows that while counterinsurgency targeting the secondary group level can have effects endogenous to that specific group, this is not necessarily the case when it targets parent secondary groups, such as the Eastern Bloc, or key commanders within the organisation.

The killing of Mono Jojoy was critical for the FARC-EP and the Eastern Bloc. Data shows that former combatants described the event in deeply personal terms, referring to it as “what was lost” (LH002), “the saddest day” (LH005), or “as if one’s father had died” (LH023; LH001; LH002; LH014; LH021; LH022; LH027). The following excerpt illustrates how his death was experienced:

“The death of *Mono* was a sad day—a sombre day—because we all thought of him as a father figure. The entire camp fell silent. I was two hours away, so I didn’t

witness the bombing itself, but at around 2:00 a.m., we were forced into the trenches because the planes were flying right over us. At any moment, if they spotted us, they could drop more bombs. The ground shook under the weight of the bombardment—seventy tons of explosives unleashed on Mono’s camp. It was terrifying, the jungle and the Macarena mountains⁸³ reverberating with the blasts. After that, everything was sadness. And when we saw the helicopter, we said to ourselves, *that’s where they’re taking him.*” (LH005)

He not only oversaw the most significant military offensives against the Colombian armed forces in the 1990s—“likely one day the head of the FARC, because he had great capacity, managed half of the organisation (the Eastern Bloc), and enjoyed credibility even with the General Secretariat” (LH027; LH011; LH002; LH004; LH006; LH014; LH18; LH019; LH021; LH022; LH023). Likewise, elite interviewees refer to him as the “military muscle in the FARC” (S112; S129; S136; S144). Bringing up Mono Jojoy often stirred deep emotions among former combatants. Some had known him personally; others had patrolled alongside him for years, served in his security detail, or survived the air raid that killed him. In my interactions, some asked for a few minutes, as their voices broke. In these conversations, I wondered how the death of Mono Jojoy was perceived by mid-level commanders such as Iván Mordisco. According to some, “those who arrived” (LH001; LH014)—a reference to [name redacted #1] and [name redacted #2] — “were not welcomed by Iván Mordisco. [Name redacted #2] himself has acknowledged that he faced resistance from certain mid-level commanders after his appointment to the Secretariat and to the Eastern Bloc’s General Staff. Both seemed to come out of nowhere” (LH014; LH024; LH027), and “neither had much of a soldier’s spirit” (LH002). Similar was the case with other seasoned mid-level commanders (e.g., Gentil Duarte or John 40, discussed below), who pursued their own personal projects even while formally subordinated to the new Eastern Bloc leadership.

The evidence shows that when the peace process began in 2012, the 1st Front was undergoing an internal reorganisation under [name redacted #1] leadership. The Eastern Bloc was also readjusting, with “power struggles” emerging among mid-level commanders over the new leadership (LH001; LH018; LH021; S131; S144). Timochenko, who became commander of the FARC-EP in 2011 following the killing of Alfonso Cano (leader from 2008 to 2011), was a central figure in this transition. Although there is no evidence to suggest that Timochenko’s

⁸³ Isolated mountain range located in the Meta Department.

appointment contributed to the emergence of the 1st Front breakaway faction, there is evidence of its appointment on mid-level commanders within the Eastern Bloc. “Even Mono Jojoy called him a *guerrillero de pavimento* (armchair fighter) for lacking military experience and because there were reports of his indiscipline [REDACTED]. We learned that from intelligence and interviews with demobilised combatants,” tells one research participant (S104; S133; S144; LH011; LH014). Another adds that after the deaths of Mono Jojoy and Alfonso Cano, “the struggle between the pro-Jojoy, Iván Márquez⁸⁴, and Santrich⁸⁵ lines versus those of [name redacted #2] and Timochenko⁸⁶ became much more evident” (S002; S133; LH001). As I show in section 5.1.3.2, these struggles manifested, for example, in divergent approaches to disarmament.

Examining these tensions and distrust at different levels of the organisation—resulting from leadership reshuffles following military operations—helps us understand that they already existed before the peace process. Indeed, the peace process is an existing explanation in the literature that may contribute to the fragmentation of armed groups⁸⁷. In this case study, the peace process, and specifically its provisions on disarmament, serves to deepen these preexisting tensions, with implications for the emergence of the 1st Front breakaway faction.

5.2.2 Peace Process and Disarmament Provisions

The peace process between the Colombian state and the FARC-EP consisted of an exploratory and confidential stage (2010–2012), followed by public negotiations in Havana (2012–2016). During the final two years of negotiations, the parties reached six partial agreements⁸⁸, which together formed the 2016 peace accord. Among these, the “End of Conflict” agreement was particularly significant, as it established the provisions for disarmament. Unlike the other case studies, disarmament provisions contributed to high-proportion fragmentation, in combination with Mordisco’s commandship legitimacy and his rejection of commanders

⁸⁴ Member of the General Secretariat of the FARC-EP from 1990 to 2016. In 2019 he rearmed and helped to create *Segunda Marquetalia*, at that time the second largest FARC-EP dissident group. See, CORE, 2021; FIP, 2022.

⁸⁵ Member of the Central General Staff of the FARC-EP from 2009 to 2016. In 2019, he rearmed, following Márquez, mentioned above. He was killed in a military operation in Venezuela in 2022.

⁸⁶ Timochenko, whose real name is Rodrigo Londoño, was also member of the FARC-EP General Secretariat from 1986 to 2016.

⁸⁷ Stedman, 1997; Reiter, 2006; Cronin, 2006; Bakke, et al, 2012; Duursma & Fliervoet, 2020; Zartman, 1995; Arjona, 2016; Pearlman, 2009.

⁸⁸ Rural reform, political participation, end of conflict, illicit economies, victims and verification. See: link to the peace agreement/English version. See also the Peace Process Repository at: <https://bapp.com.co/en/inicio-english/>

he deemed illegitimate. Reintegration lists and provisions on the handover of assets were decisive for the outcomes in Case Studies Two, Three and Four.

Did the exploratory stage contribute to the emergence of the 1st Front breakaway faction? Evidence suggests it did not directly influence Mordisco. Between 2010 and 2012, he was rising through the ranks and likely learned of the secret talks through internal documents and meetings (LH019; LH024). However, mid-level commanders, including Iván Mordisco, were sceptical due to the failures of previous peace processes in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as concerns about security guarantees amid ongoing armed groups or new armed actors entering their operational regions (LH001; LH014; LH018; LH019; LH023; LH024). Distrust of the government was widespread, particularly after the Colombian armed forces killed FARC-EP top commander Alfonso Cano in 2011 (LH018; LH021).

The peace process entered its public phase in 2012, and the negotiating parties agreed on specific provisions. Data indicate that Iván Mordisco viewed the 2016 disarmament provisions as “surrender,” “betrayal” and “treason” (LH001; LH022; LH023; LH025; LH027). Although retired military personnel considered the FARC-EP “militarily defeated”⁸⁹ — arguing that the group had lost its will to fight and was therefore forced to negotiate (S103; S113; S120; S131; S138; S144; S145) — Mordisco believed otherwise. He convinced himself and his troops that the FARC-EP was “surrendering” and, as a result, would lose bargaining power, be “disarmed and killed” (LH024; LH027), and face uncertainty over whether the Colombian state would uphold the peace agreement. “He wanted to lay down arms but keep them under our supervision. If the government fails, we retake the weapons. And we handled them,” tells an ex-combatant (LH023; LH001; LH022).

Moreover, for Mordisco, the disarmament provisions were also a “betrayal” and “treason” to the legacy of Manuel Marulanda, founding member of the FARC-EP, and Mono Jojoy. Both leaders had advocated a peace process without disarmament due to distrust of the state (LH022; LH023; S135). Colombian government negotiators recall debates in Havana: “A faction led by Márquez, from the same line as Jojoy, wanted to retain the weapons and oversee, while still in arms, the implementation of the agreement. [name redacted #2] was more pragmatic after all the military blows by state forces.” (S129). And a former combatant explains, “Márquez, Santrich, Duarte, and Mordisco wanted peace, but not the 2016 peace agreement.

⁸⁹ In line with Hazelton’s (2022) approach. See also Mora, 2007; 2022.

First, the government would implement the accord, and then the weapons would be handed over. The weapons were our guarantee. After they disarm us, they kill us” (LH027; LH001; LH014; CTC, 2022).

For the government, disarmament was a “red line” (S113; S102). As I detail in Section 5.1.3, tensions reached Mordisco through Gentil Duarte, leader of the 7th Front who also later broke away and joined Mordisco in mid-2016 (LH001; LH014; LH021; LH022; S112). Despite pedagogical efforts within the 1st Front (LH023), former negotiators report confusion about disarmament among mid-level commanders and rank-and-file: “When the FARC-EP negotiators carried the message to the 1st Front, they were shocked. Some said, ‘*But you told me all this time that we were not going to hand over the weapons, and now you tell me that we must*’” (S112). In Case Study Four, for example, I show that a similar sense of surprise surfaced, but it did not lead to fragmentation (Chapter 8).

Local leaders and former combatants corroborate that Iván Mordisco and some of the 1st Front’s local support networks were not convinced of disarmament unless it was implemented gradually by both parties. Due to wartime dynamics (e.g., violence by paramilitary squads⁹⁰), there was also a lack of trust in the state and in some FARC-EP delegates in Cuba (LH001; LH023; S135). This lack of trust relates to what I detail in Section 5.1.3.2 on sources of commandship illegitimacy, and to data showing that during the peace process, no cohesive message was conveyed to the on-the-ground commanders and rank-and-file of the 1st Front regarding disarmament (LH014; S102; S112; S113). Data does not return evidence regarding who did, or not, transmit updates on the progress of the peace process. Information flowed from the front commander to his troops through the inter-front commander. This was the case in the 1st Front, despite Iván Mordisco consistent opposition to disarmament.

In addition, other FARC-EP decisions — assigning mid-level commanders to other regions (e.g., Romaña, Chapter 8) or renewing leadership with personnel aligned with the transformation of the FARC-EP into a political party (e.g., [name redacted #4], Chapter 6) — further undermined Mordisco’s trust (LH001; LH018; LH023). Mordisco perceived these actions as attempts to silence dissent (LH001; LH014). Former combatants further report widespread perceptions among Eastern Bloc mid-level commanders that the disarmament was negotiated in secrecy by the FARC-EP’s top echelons (LH001; LH014; LH021; LH022; LH023;

⁹⁰ United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (*Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* or AUC hereafter).

LH024; CTC, 2022). A former combatant recalls: “For Iván, the disarmament was rushed and lacked guarantees. It was a betrayal of the Secretariat itself by [named redacted #2] and [name redacted #3]. It was not unanimous. Had there been an open and transparent discussion, they would not have approved the laying down of arms with such eagerness” (LH022; LH001; LH014; LH017).

5.2.3 Mid-level Commanders (or “Loose Cannons”?) and External Actors

Evidence indicates that at least six mid-level commanders from other Eastern Bloc fronts joined the 1st Front's breakaway faction — John 40 and Julián Chollo (Acacio Medina Front), Gentil Duarte (7th Front), Giovanni Chuspas (16th Front), Euclides Mora (62nd Front), and Calarcá (40th Front). They brought experience, manpower and ties to external actors linked to illicit economies, which evolved before and during the peace process as part of the FARC-EP's financial and border policies. To a varying degree, they also mobilised other mid-level commanders and rank-and-file from their respective Fronts. A common feature among them is that they were all part of secondary groups operating along Colombia's borders with Venezuela and Brazil, where, from the 1990s through the 2010s, they built ties with drug traffickers and transnational networks connected to illicit economies (LH001; LH018; LH021; LH023; LH027; S104; S132; Génesis, XIX, XX, 2016; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018; CORE, 2021).

Why is the role of these mid-level commanders important to better understand high-proportion fragmentation in this case study? Although I do not present detailed evidence on each of them, data shows that Gentil Duarte and John 40 were particularly relevant. Both were seasoned combatants who had joined the FARC-EP in the 1980s through the Colombian Communist Party (PCC) and rose steadily through the ranks during the 1990s and 2000s. They became close cadres of Mono Jojoy, contributing to the military and financial backbone of the Eastern Bloc (established in 1987), and took part in major military operations against the Colombian armed forces. John 40 led two Fronts — the 43rd from 1997 to 2008 and the Acacio Medina from 2008 to 2015 — while Gentil Duarte commanded the 7th Front for thirteen years (2000–2013) (Génesis, XIX, 2016; ICG, 2017; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018).

Their experience provided Mordisco an organizational and financial niche. John 40 and Gentil Duarte, and their inner circles, assured Iván Mordisco with critical material resources and access to national and transnational networks. Both also regarded the peace process as a threat to their personal and financial interests (LH001; LH021; LH024; LH025; LH027; S104;

S112; S132; S144). Evidence does not return data on whether John 40, unlike Duarte, explicitly rejected the disarmament provisions alongside Iván Mordisco. As I detail in Section 5.1.2.3, Gentil Duarte travelled to Havana, where he relayed to Mordisco the disagreements and tensions within the FARC-EP negotiating team regarding disarmament. John 40, by contrast, appears to have been primarily concerned with judicial guarantees. His reservations about the 2016 peace accord stemmed from his deep involvement in the drug trade and the likelihood of extradition to the United States (LH025; LH027). Gentil Duarte, for his part, initially even helped organize logistics for a reintegration cantonment in Guaviare Department but ultimately broke away (LH001; LH014; LH019; S101; S104; S105; S112; S130).

Moreover, before and during the peace process, Mordisco and the 1st Front coordinated military and financial activities with both Gentil Duarte and John 40, due to their missions and areas of operation. These connections spanned vast territories across the Meta, Guaviare, Vichada, Vaupés, and Guainía Departments, reaching the borders with Venezuela and Brazil (LH021; LH027; S131; S133; S147). For instance, while the 1st Front was one of the 7th Front's rearguards (Génesis, XIX, 61), the Acacio Medina Front worked with the 1st Front to secure finances and weapons for the FARC-EP and to establish evacuation routes for wounded combatants, given the former's presence on the Venezuelan and Brazilian borders (LH011; LH014; LH023; LH027; Génesis, XIX, 293–295; Insight Crime, 2023). It is also likely that Iván Mordisco already knew members of the Acacio Medina Front, since it was created in 2009 from fighters drawn from the 1st Front. Furthermore, when Mordisco travelled to Venezuela between 2014 and 2015 for medical treatment (LH001; LH014; LH022; LH023), he and John 40 “defined how they would coordinate after breaking away,” according to a former combatant with first-hand knowledge of these meetings (LH027).

John 40 and Gentil Duarte's life trajectories before and during the peace process are also crucial to understanding the 1st Front's breakaway faction. Despite their similar backgrounds and extensive experience within the FARC-EP, evidence indicates that both went rogue. They pursued parallel projects alongside their formal organizational commitments and established horizontal networks with drug lords. These networks ensured a steady flow of material resources when Mordisco decided to keep arms and break away in mid-2016. Over time, both commanders shifted from ideologically driven combatants to cocaine brokers, leading informal projects that relied on their prominence within the Eastern Bloc and close ties to Mono Jojoy (LH003; S104; S121; S132; S144).

John 40 became an undisciplined yet instrumental mid-level commander within the FARC-EP (LH027; LH021; S112). Although he carried out the tasks assigned to him by the Eastern Bloc's leadership — still under Mono Jojoy — particularly in the procurement of finances and weapons, he simultaneously pursued personal projects. Former combatants and elite interviewees described him as a “loose cannon” (LH014; LH021; LH027) and a “drug lord” (LH003; S112; S144; S147), noting his “anti-revolutionary behaviours” (LH014; S112; S144). At the same time, he consolidated contacts with transnational networks, non-state armed organizations in other countries, and Venezuelan authorities at the subnational level, ensuring a steady flow of finances for the FARC-EP (S104; S112; LH025). In the case of Gentil Duarte, former combatants consistently recognize both his commandship legitimacy and his financial and political acumen (LH014; LH019; LH021; LH022). However, others also recall that his main concerns about the peace process cantered on the provisions regarding the handover of assets, given that one of the 7th Front's key sources of income was not only drug trafficking but also cattle and land (S112; S144). Duarte ultimately rejected the disarmament provisions—partly out of fear for his life, and his ideological commitment to Mono Jojoy's stance on the matter (LH001; LH014; LH019; LH021; S104; S144).

Because Mordisco's interactions with Duarte and John 40 extended beyond the battlefield, a key factor in their relationship before and during the peace process was how they coordinated tasks along the cocaine supply chain — rooted in organisational decisions dating back to the 1970s and 1980s.

The FARC-EP's “economic endowments” (Weinstein, 2007) were of the expansion and diversification of its finances, alongside role specialisation, hierarchy, and formal procedures (CTC, 2022; Aguilera, 2014; Pizarro, 2010). Initiated at the Sixth Conference (1978) and reaffirmed in the Seventh (1982) and Eighth (1993), this strategy secured steady revenues from kidnapping, extortion, bank raids, and investments in illegal mining, cattle, and land. Crucially, the coca economy enabled expansion into established cultivation areas, integrating the FARC-EP into illicit networks. By the 1980s, it controlled local coca markets as intermediary and taxing⁹¹ authority (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2018; 2006; Jaramillo, 1986). A former combatant explains: “As a revolutionary, you can't tell a peasant to rip out their crops without an alternative — that's the State's responsibility. The FARC cannot take away the economy

⁹¹ Or *gramaje*: “A payment of around 10% to 15% of the negotiated price in each transaction involving coca paste or base” (Aguilera 2014, 148). See also, Ciro, E., 2019; Vásquez, T., 2012; Reyes, 2009; Ferro, J.G., 2004; Cubides, F. et.al., 1989.

peasants depend on, and that economy is coca. To survive, they harvest and sell it. But who buys it? The FARC regulates who buys and at what price, collecting a tax for the armed struggle” (LH010). By regulating illicit markets, the FARC acted as a buffer between traffickers and peasants, controlling criminal activity and deciding who could trade (LH001; LH002; LH014; LH015; Aguilera, 2014; CTC, 2022).

The 1st Front’s operational environment since the 1970s–80s evolved in this context. It became a key actor in the cocaine supply chain, alongside other mid-level commanders like Duarte and John 40, as I note above and in the following paragraphs. Unsurprisingly, the flow of material resources to the 1st Front did not cease during the peace process. As one former combatant explained: “They never stayed put. They secretly continued preparing militarily and training. They stocked up on weapons, clothing, medicines” (LH023), referring to Mordisco and other Eastern Bloc mid-level commanders (LH001; LH014; LH018; LH027). These activities, however, were not a secret among locals. A local leader recalls: “The 1st Front was one of the leading money suppliers and recruiters for the FARC-EP, which did not stop during the peace process” (S135; LH027; S101; S111; S112; S133; S135; S137). In sum, these economical endowments and key actors associated to them—both internal and external to the organisation—unfolded before the peace process, providing the 1st Front breakaway faction with a solid financial foundation from the outset.

Iván Mordisco's interactions with Duarte and John 40 unfolded both before and during the peace process. When he broke away in mid-2016, he also relied on their wartime trajectories and ties to external actors in Venezuela and Brazil. An example is John 40’s relationship with drug lords such as El Loco Barrera — “the closest thing Colombia has had to a modern Pablo Escobar” (Insight Crime, 2020a). Captured in 2012 and extradited to the United States, Barrera was sentenced in 2016 to 35 years in prison. Over the years, he collaborated with several armed groups in Colombia. With the FARC-EP, specifically, he became a trusted supplier of material resources from the late 1990s on, in exchange for purchasing coca base from John 40 and other mid-level commanders. Even Mono Jojoy even referred to him as a “friend” and “loyal to the organization” (El Espectador, 2012). The point is that John 40, by both fulfilling the FARC-EP’s financial policies⁹² and simultaneously advancing his personal agendas before and during

⁹² Approved by the Eighth National Guerrilla Conference of 1993 and the Plenary Meetings of the EMC in 1997 and 2000. For example, in the conclusions on finances of the Eighth Conference, the FARC-EP defined the finance policy as the set of norms that indicate the political and military behaviour that we should assume in terms of obtaining, spending, investing, and controlling the movement's resources". (FARC-EP, 1993). The FARC-EP also issued Law 002 of 2000 on taxation, by means of which it resolved in three articles: "*ARTICLE ONE: To charge*

the peace process, played a central role in ensuring that the 1st Front's breakaway faction secured a steady revenue stream (LH003; LH027; S132).

Lastly, the role of mid-level commanders such as John 40 also deals with his responsibility for establishing relations with authorities in Venezuela at the subnational level, and non-state armed groups in Venezuela and Brazil. These connections facilitated arms procurement, cocaine and rare metals trade, and the provision of safe havens (LH001; LH014; LH024; LH027; S132; S133). Venezuela's role as an external sponsor of the FARC-EP dates to the 1980s — first informally and then, from the 2000s on, formal under the presidency of Hugo Chávez (Palma, 2013; Trejos, 2015; Álvarez-Vanegas & Shesterinina, 2026). During this period, the FARC-EP consolidated its presence along the Colombia–Venezuela border, particularly through secondary groups such as the 16th Front (established in 1983) and the Acacio Medina Front (created in 2009). As noted above, the 1st Front's interactions with these two groups provided Mordisco with both financial and transnational ties when he broke away from the peace process.

5.2.4 Local Population

A possible additional source of Iván Mordisco's commandership legitimacy may be found externally, in the local population. 1st Front former combatants suggest that the local population expressed fear about the potential demobilisation of this secondary group. These fears stem from the dismantling of the 1st Front's system of regulation and governance institutions, and the risk of other armed groups, mainly paramilitaries, moving into the area. The extent to which these two factors contributed to high-level fragmentation is unclear. Nonetheless, the following evidence indicates that, to a degree, 1st Front's local support networks supported Mordisco's decision to keep arms.

With respect to the first point, in some regions of Guaviare, the 1st Front established rebel governance institutions. These included security and justice provisions, the enforcement of social norms, conflict mediation, regulation of local economies (notably the harvesting of coca leaves and their processing into coca paste), and basic health and infrastructure services. As one ex-combatant recalls, "We were the authority. We solved all kinds of problems—

the tax FOR PEACE to those natural or juridical persons, whose patrimony is greater than one million US dollars; ARTICLE TWO: as of the date, those covered by this LAW, must present themselves to comply with this obligation. A second call will increase the amount of the tax; ARTICLE THREE: those who do not comply with this requirement will be retained. Their release will depend on the payment to be determined."

anything from marital disputes to helping coca leaf scrapers who had fallen behind... we even provided wedding services” (LH027; LH018; LH022). The 1st Front even issued IDs to control locals and keep at bay intel agents: “Every adult had to carry an ID at all times, and it had to be approved by us. Coming to the region required a sponsor, a well-known local, who was held responsible” (LH021). During my fieldwork in the Guaviare Department in 2022, where the breakaway faction operates, ex-combatants and local leaders emphasised that these governance institutions persist. “Mordisco’s people still enforce these rules. For example, if I bring an outsider to, I am responsible” (LH018; LH001, LH014, LH021; S135; S136). My fieldwork confirms this reality: accessing certain areas required the permission of local commanders. As I detail in Chapter 3, fieldwork was further constrained by a strict 1:00 p.m. curfew set by Mordisco’s troops.

Significantly, when the disarmament provisions were announced in Havana, some sectors of the local population feared the dismantling of the 1st Front’s regulatory system. Some in the Front’s local support networks — formed before and during the peace process — expressed their support for Iván Mordisco’s decision to break away. “There were people who told him, ‘*The state will kill you,*’ and they were troubled by the surrender [disarmament],” recalls an ex-combatant, adding: “When you have support from the civilian population and an armed group with experienced people, it is not difficult to start again. Iván relied on that”—preexisting local support networks (LH022; LH018; LH021; S135). Other notes that some locals even spoke up in public meetings, saying to Iván Mordisco: “After you got us into this peace process and we helped you, you are going to leave, and the government will come and screw us over. You will be civilians without weapons, and the paramilitaries will come and kill us all” (LH023). These locals were peasants whose livelihoods depended on the coca economy—regulated by the FARC-EP, as I detail in the previous section.

Regarding other armed actors, including state forces, the evidence suggests that state-led violence in regions adjacent to those where the 1st Front operated may have contributed to the local population’s support of Iván Mordisco in keeping his weapons and rejecting the peace process. Life histories and semi-structured interviews indicate that local perceptions of the Colombian state in FARC-EP-controlled areas of the Guaviare Department are shaped mainly by violence perpetrated by state agents, particularly through coca crop eradication campaigns and paramilitary activity during the 1990s. When I asked respondents about those fears, they would refer to massacres committed by paramilitaries. One, the Mapiripán massacre, which

took place from July 15 to 20, 1997, resulting in over 50 people killed, and the Puerto Alvira massacre, where the same group killed more than 20 people on May 4, 1998 (CTC, 2022b).

Although I sought to understand how these massacres, and whether the enduring fear they generated might have influenced the 1st Front's breakaway faction, respondents primarily expressed, formally and informally, distrust toward the Colombian state, which they associated with paramilitary violence (S131; S132; S135; S136; S137)⁹³. According to former combatants and locals, paramilitary violence and the disruption of local coca-cocaine economies by state forces led many people to join the FARC-EP en masse (LH001; LH014; LH018; LH024). Paramilitary activity in Colombia during the late 1990s involved assassinations and massacres carried out in collusion with the Colombian armed forces, regional elites, and other state agents (CTC, 2022b; CNMH, 2014). Although the 1st Front was not directly affected due to its activities deep in the jungles of the Guaviare Department (LH018; LH025; LH027; Génesis, XIX), the incursion of paramilitary squads into the Meta and Guaviare Departments left a lasting impact that persisted throughout the peace process. The extent to which Mordisco relied on these fears and threats from external actors to justify his decisions to break away is evident in the 1st Front public statements from mid-2016. In them, Mordisco emphasise issues such as the "end of paramilitarism" and the need for "a lasting solution for peasant coca leaf cultivators". They highlight Mordisco's appeal to long-standing unresolved issues in the region.

Finally, the data suggest that local support for the 1st Front's breaking away from the peace process was relative. External support varied depending on the Front's wartime behaviour. In some areas, the 1st Front relied on trust-based networks built over decades, while in others, its commandship legitimacy was undermined by members' lack of discipline. In more isolated regions, there are documented cases of sexual violence, forced recruitment⁹⁴, and confinement of Indigenous communities in the Vaupés Department (CTC, 2022c, 102; 107–108). Notably, in November 2016, Colombia's Ombudsman reported that the 1st Front was forcibly recruiting Indigenous minors in Vaupés (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2016). Residents in

⁹³ Field notes, Guaviare Department, October 2022.

⁹⁴ For example, the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP in Spanish or transitional justice tribunals resulting from the 2016 Peace Agreement) determined that the FARC-EP forcibly recruited 18,677 minors between 1996 and 2016. As I discuss in the Research Process chapter, former combatants consistently denied forced recruitment in life-history interviews and informal conversations during my fieldwork, even though public records indicate otherwise. Moreover, news reports from 2013 indicated that, according to accounts from individually demobilized combatants, over 70% of the 1st Front comprised forcibly recruited minors from Indigenous communities (El Tiempo, 2013). This secondary group allegedly also assassinated female minors who had deserted and were forcefully recruited (El País, 2013).

such areas felt “relieved” when they learned of the partial disarmament agreement, as they could “finally take off their shoulders” both the FARC-EP and the army (S136).

Discussion

The findings in this chapter show that commandership legitimacy and strong within-secondary group cohesion, combined with distrust of the Eastern Bloc leadership and rejection of the 2016 peace accord’s disarmament provisions, contributed to high-proportion fragmentation. Likewise, this outcome also relied on external factors that extend beyond both the 1st Front and the FARC-EP itself.

These findings are consistent with the four pillars of my organizationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion I outline in Chapter 3 and I further elaborate on in Chapters 9 and 10. First, by disaggregating, I show that fragmentation varies both in proportion (high) and in where it occurs within the organisation (led by its commander, rank-and-file, and other mid-level commanders from this and other secondary groups). Second, adopting a longer approach—before and during the peace process—helps us better understand how observable implications of existing explanations in the literature can be both endogenous and exogenous to the Havana negotiations. For example, when Mordisco invokes “betrayal” in his anti-disarmament rhetoric, he refers not only to the peace process but also to external and internal dynamics rooted in the 2000s and early 2010s. Third, fragmentation and cohesion coexist: Mordisco broke from the peace process with nearly an entire front by relying on groupthink and a cohesive secondary group. Lastly, the mechanisms I build in this case—*commandership legitimacy*, and *distrust and betrayal*—which I elaborate on in Chapter 9, demonstrate that there are case-specific paths toward the observable outcome. These four pillars also apply to Case Studies Two, Three and Four.

A close examination of the observable implications of existing explanations in the literature shows that leadership renewal following Colombian military operations against the 1st Front that decapitated its leadership (observable implications of discipline and counterinsurgency, respectively) contributed to Mordisco's process of becoming a legitimate mid-level commander. Although intended to restore internal discipline and control, leadership renewal had contradictory effects. It helped reconstruct vertical and horizontal ties within the secondary group. In this process, however, Iván Mordisco also gradually detached from the Eastern Bloc after the death of his mentor, Mono Jojoy. Understanding how Mordisco rose

through the ranks and consolidated commandship legitimacy thus requires considering external dynamics — particularly state-led violence before the peace process. Furthermore, leadership renewal of the top echelons (Eastern Bloc and the Secretariat) also disrupted organisational ties, fostering distrust among military and political cadres with implications for creating consensus on disarmament during the peace process.

In line with the above, these findings indicate that a longer approach to the peace process, both before and during, reveals that the rejection of disarmament provisions was not solely endogenous to the peace process. By zeroing in on the sources of commander illegitimacy at the Bloc and General Secretariat levels, I demonstrate that rejection followed multiple paths. One stemmed from leadership readjustments in the top echelons after the killings of Mono Jojoy and Alfonso Cano by the Colombian security forces in 2010 and 2011, respectively. The former is key to understanding how illegitimacy shaped Iván Mordisco's rejection of disarmament, mediated by distrust toward those who negotiated the partial agreement. The latter, although not the primary focus of this chapter, illustrates the broader consequences of leadership transformations in armed groups — namely, how they become more salient during peace negotiations over contentious issues, even if long embedded within the FARC-EP.

The analysis and systematisation of evidence reveal multiple paths toward high-proportion fragmentation. While recognising the relevance of external factors such as material resources, local populations, the strategic advantages of the 1st Front's operational environment, and the long-standing ties of seasoned mid-level commanders with external and even transnational actors, my evidence suggests that we need to look beyond them. Had I not explored the sources of commandship legitimacy and illegitimacy, and the multiple repercussions of disciplinary measures in response to counterinsurgency aimed at both the 1st Front and the Eastern Bloc, I would not have uncovered the different combinations of existing explanations that combine into the *commandship legitimacy* and *rejection and distrust* mechanisms, which I turn my attention to in the Comparative Analysis Chapter (Chapter 9).

In the next chapter, I present evidence on the 10th Front (Case Study Two), showing variation in fragmentation, its proportion, level, and the coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion, both to break away from and in favour of the peace process. The 10th Front also demonstrates multiple paths to an observable outcome, but different from that in this chapter:

low fragmentation at the level of formerly imprisoned mid-level commanders, alongside urban and local support networks.

Chapter 6: Case Study Two. 10th Front. Urban Networks, Former Prisoners, and Resentful Supporters: The Triad Behind the Breakaway Faction

[Name redacted #4] causes three ruptures — with the community, with the social bases of the FARC, and among then-combatants.

-Local leader, Arauca, August 2022

There is a subordination principle: one is governed by the General Secretariat. If they are negotiating a peace deal, it is because that is the way it must be. It is not a betrayal; it is a reality that they assimilate better.

-Former combatant, Arauca, August 2022

At the root of the emergence of the 10th Front breakaway faction are the urban networks (*milicias* or *milicianos* hereafter), along with social bases and combatants released from prison. The quotes above highlight these two simultaneous dynamics within the 10th Front before and during the peace process. The first is the detachment of this secondary group *milicianos* and the split of its local support bases, many of whom joined and supported the combatants released from prison who led the breakaway faction in 2017. The second is emblematic of the cohesion and subordination to the peace process by all 10th Front fighters and an unspecified number of *milicianos* backed by social support networks. This explains the low fragmentation in this case study at the level of urban networks and formerly imprisoned mid-level commanders.

Although the breakaway faction became more visible in media and secondary sources after disarmament (2017–2018), the evidence suggests that it had emerged earlier, shaped by both internal and external dynamics, endogenous and exogenous to the peace process. It was led by former combatants who had been released from prison but, due to their wartime actions, lacked the legitimacy to mobilise a larger group of armed fighters, contributing to low-proportion fragmentation. This breakaway faction also relied on the support of *milicianos*, who had detached before and during the peace process, and some sectors of the FARC-EP's support networks in the Arauca region. In this case study — unlike the 1st Front (Chapter 5) and the CMDA (Chapter 7) — the evidence does not return data on the 10th Front's mid-level combatants or rank-and-file who had joined the breakaway faction before the 2017 disarmament. Subordination may have played a key role, resulting from different paths before

and during the peace process: strong intra-secondary group leadership aligned with the peace process, the absence of competition or divergent opinions following the state's killing and arrest of other mid-level commanders, and the repercussions of the 2005-2010 war with the National Liberation Army (ELN, in Spanish) on the 10th Front's social, political, and military capabilities.

In this chapter, I demonstrate that a combination of disciplinary measures, the interplay of legitimate and illegitimate commandship, counterinsurgency aimed at the secondary-group level, specific peace provisions of the peace accord, and the long-standing relations of the 10th Front with its urban and local support networks contributed to low-proportion fragmentation. An analysis of how these existing explanations in the literature perform before and during the peace process allows us to identify the specific combinations of observable implications that form the *detachment and split*, and the *dismissal and exclusion* mechanisms, which I elaborate on in Section 9.2. This analysis further shows that some of the abovementioned existing explanations also contributed to cohesion in favour of the peace process of most of the 10th Front, highlighting the coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion at the secondary-group level.

The evidence in this chapter stems from eleven life-history interviews with former combatants, nine semi-structured interviews with research participants from the elite and third sectors (former negotiators in Cuba, retired military personnel and local leaders), as well as field notes from informal conversations and additional empirical materials. According to my research design (Chapter 3), I selected research respondents based on specific criteria: their understanding of the internal dynamics of the 10th Front and its parent secondary group or Eastern Bloc, and their operational environment. Compared to Case Studies One and Four, I interviewed fewer research respondents. While conducting fieldwork in Colombia, I assumed that more former combatants would be available to interview because the 10th Front is a case of low fragmentation, unlike cases one (high fragmentation) and three (mixed proportion). However, locating them presented at least three challenges, as I detail in the Research Process Chapter. First, had I spent more time in field site two, I would have had the opportunity to interview more former combatants. However, this was not feasible due to budget and time constraints. Second, considering my selection strategy was purposeful and targeted, most ex-combatants in field site two did not have the specific knowledge that could inform my research questions. In other cases, they did not want to talk either formally or informally. Accepting and

respecting rejections was also part of my ethically driven approach to fieldwork (Section 4.2.2). Lastly, the 10th Front's former combatants had scattered throughout Colombia for security reasons and disbelief in the peace process, making it impossible to locate them.

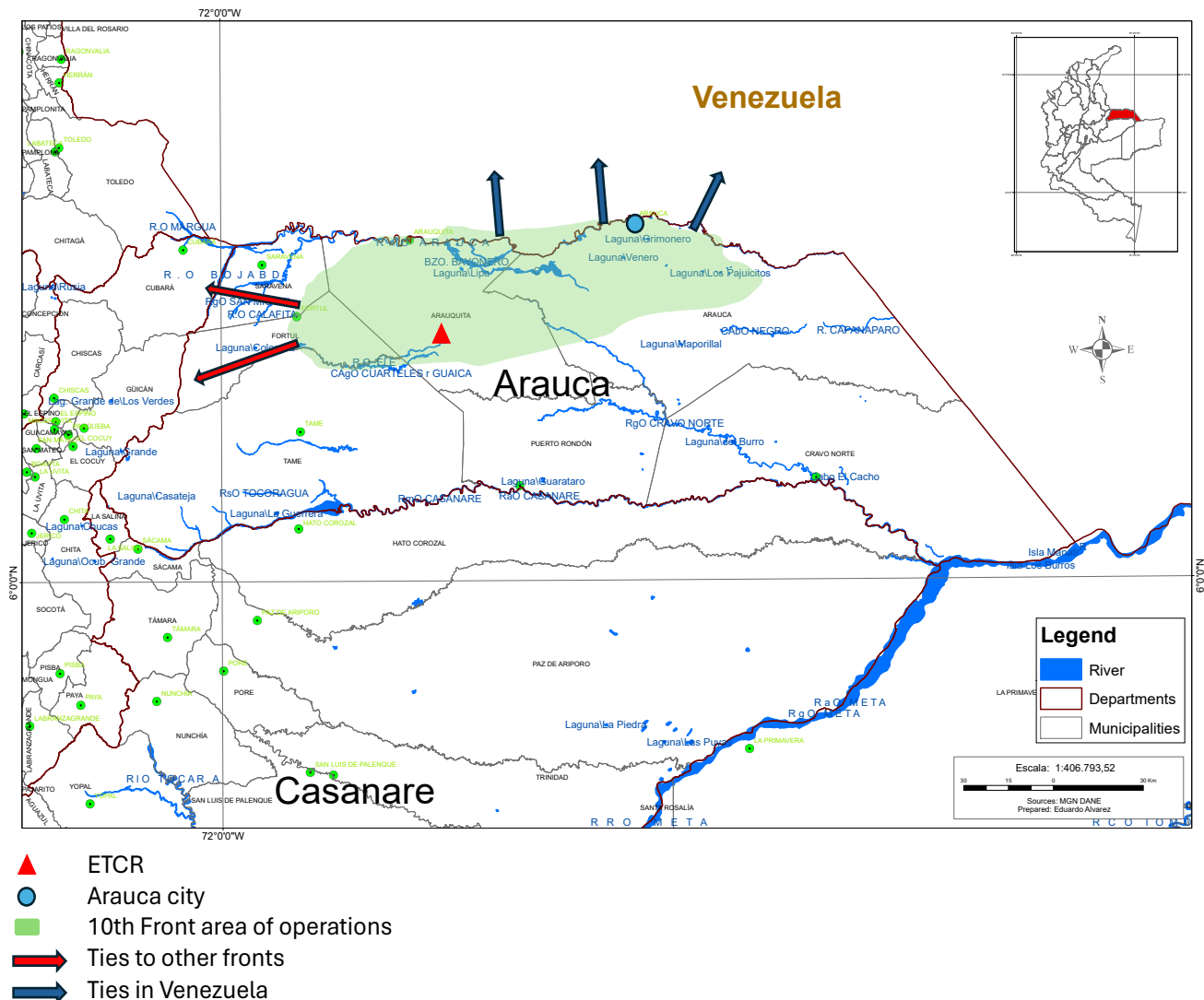
This chapter is divided in three sections. First, I offer brief historical context of the 10th Front. In the second, I examine the internal and external dynamics that contribute to both its low-fragmentation and subordination to the peace process. Finally, I briefly discuss the findings in this chapter, highlighting the mechanisms that lead to the observable outcome in this case study.

Historical Context

The FARC-EP established the 10th Front in 1978 to create a strategic stronghold in the Piedmont of the Arauca Department, located on the Eastern Andes Range. Initially, the Front consisted of combatants and cadres of the Colombian Communist Party. From the late 1970s to the 1980s, it consolidated its presence in the region by recruiting locals, conducting mass work, and establishing a robust network of *milicianos* and social bases. (Vicepresidencia, 2007; González, 2012; CNMH, 2013; Génesis, XIX, 2016; CTC, 2022). The Front's inception coincided with settlement processes and agrarian mobilisations that shaped the FARC-EP's political work and vertical ties in Arauca. Its social embeddedness is essential to understanding the role of the *milicias* and social bases in the emergence of the breakaway faction. The 10th Front exercised authority over local disputes, undertook tasks such as road construction, and gradually expanded its finances and military capacities in the 1980s and 1990s by taxing oil companies, livestock, contraband networks and cocaine brokers, as well as through a vast network of arms dealers in Colombia and Venezuela. It also maintained contacts with Venezuelan authorities. During the 1980s and 1990s, the 10th Front expanded its organisational structure, giving rise to the 28th, 38th, 45th, and 56th Fronts in the Arauca, Boyacá, and Casanare Departments (hereafter, the ABC Region) (Vicepresidencia, 2007; González, 2012). It also established *milicias*, social bases, camps, and safe havens in Venezuela, becoming strategic both during the Colombian state's counterinsurgency campaign in the 2000s and for safeguarding the 10th Front's pro-peace leadership in the 2010s.

Between the 1990s and 2000s, however, the Front endured two internal crises, resulting from indiscipline and internal tensions among its leadership, which weakened its internal cohesion and ties to support networks — some of which later aligned with the breakaway

faction. During this same period, the 10th Front fought three major wars: against the Colombian military, paramilitary squads, and the ELN. The war with the ELN was especially decisive for explaining both the emergence of the breakaway faction and the low fragmentation in this case study. In 2017, the 10th Front laid down its weapons, except for an unspecified number of *milicianos* and former prisoners of the FARC-EP who kept their arms.



Internal and External Dynamics: Fragmentation of the 10th Front

In this section, I present evidence on the observable implications of existing explanations in the literature that allow us to understand the emergence of the 10th Front breakaway faction. The data shows that a low proportion of Front 10 combatants formed the

breakaway, compared to Cases Studies One (high fragmentation), Three (mixed fragmentation) and Four (no fragmentation). Despite the observable outcome in this case study, I argue that the emergence of the breakaway is a more complex phenomena that goes beyond the availability of material resources and the strategic advantages of the border with Venezuela. This oversimplification overlooks the 10th Front's internal dynamics, which, like those of the other case studies, unfold before and during the peace process. They also interact with the FARC-EP's operational environment, extending beyond economic endowments to its social embeddedness and its relations with both armed and non-armed actors in Colombia and Venezuela.

Specifically, leadership renewal of the 10th Front following two internal crises deepened internal divisions and alienated *milicianos*. For example, in 2011, the Eastern Bloc appointed [name redacted #4] and his trusted circle — comprising mid-level commanders and rank-and-file from the Meta Department — to command the 10th Front. [Name redacted #4]'s mission was to restore discipline and foster cohesion after the ELN-FARC-EP war from 2005 to 2010, and to align the 10th Front in favour of the peace process, as it eventually happened among combatants, local communities and most of the local support networks. Nonetheless, certain disciplinary measures and not being local further alienated *milicianos* and deepened divisions among local support networks, whose members deemed him illegitimate for being a "stranger," and his post-demobilisation political ambitions (observable implications of commandship legitimacy and illegitimacy). Moreover, [name redacted #4] faced internal competition from other local mid-level commanders, who were largely responsible for the war with the ELN. But after they were arrested or killed by the Colombian security forces, [name redacted #4] seized the opportunity to create cohesion in favour of the peace process, mediated by his political aspirations.

I also show that the role of *milicianos* was key for the breakaway faction leaders. Over decades, the 10th Front built strong vertical ties with the local population and with local support networks key to the 10th Front's mass work and other actors tied to illicit economies in Colombia and Venezuela. *Milicianos*, deeply socially embedded, who detached in the 2000s and 2010s — together with those excluded by [name redacted #4] from the reintegration lists between 2016 and 2017 — later joined formerly imprisoned members of the FARC-EP, such as Jerónimo. Nonetheless, Jerónimo's actions during war and his time in prison deemed him

an illegitimate leader among the 10th Front troops, which also led [name redacted #4] to reject and expel him from the reintegration cantonment, contributing to low-proportion fragmentation.

6.1 Internal Dynamics

In this section, I show evidence on the multiple effects of control measures (observable implications of discipline). The Eastern Bloc implemented such measures to reorganise the 10th Front after two internal crises in the 1990s and 2000s — the assassination of three U.S. citizens and the war with the ELN from 2005 to 2010. It also adopted discipline to ensure subordination for the peace process. I also present evidence on how commandership legitimacy and illegitimacy contributed to low-proportion fragmentation. Commandership legitimacy, for example, allows us to understand subordination to the peace process. Commandership illegitimacy deals with mid-level commanders who left prison before disarmament, due to the peace accord provisions, and were not deemed legitimate to break away with a large group, like in Case Study One.

6.1.1 Discipline in Response to the First Internal Crisis

Control mechanisms had multiple, contradictory consequences. Regarding the first crisis, they deepened the differences between seasoned and “regionalist”⁹⁵ leaders and those appointed by the Eastern Bloc leadership (LH002; LH003; LH006; LH017). “Regionalists” leaders, according to former combatants, are those who led patronage networks and pursued personal projects in Colombia and Venezuela. These projects unfolded before and during the peace process and were instrumental for the leaders of the breakaway faction.

The assassination of three U.S. indigenous human rights defenders in February 1999 triggered the first crisis in the 10th Front, with implications for the subsequent internal tensions among mid-level commanders throughout the 2000s. The Eastern Bloc, parent secondary group of the 10th Front, and the FARC-EP leadership and the top echelons of the FARC-EP, imposed two disciplinary measures: sanctions and the relief of the 10th Front commander, Grannoble, and the appointment of an interim leadership.

⁹⁵ Or *regionalism*, which resembles Võ Nguyên Giáp’s “localism, self-interest, and individual heroism.” In *People’s War, People’s Army* (1961, 200).

Ingrid Washinawatok, Larry Gay Lahenae, and Terence Freitas were taken hostage under the orders of Mono Jojoy, commander of the Eastern Bloc, accused of working for the CIA and gathering intelligence for the United States (LH017; S119; Génesis, XIX, 112). Jojoy initially instructed “a commission to receive and relocate them in Venezuela and take care of them” (LH017). However, Grannoble, reportedly drunk, ordered their execution (LH017; S119; Génesis, XIX, 112). “For Mono [Jojoy], that kidnapping would pressure U.S. authorities to establish a communication channel with them,” recalls an ex-combatant (LH017; LH014). The U.S. government had designated the FARC-EP a terrorist organisation in 1997, and the kidnapping and killing of three U.S. citizens alarmed the group’s leadership. Weeks later, the FARC-EP General Secretariat announced internal investigations, apologised for the incident, and expressed condolences “to the government of the United States, to the American people, and to the families of the victims of the deplorable event” (FGN, XIX, 112; *El Tiempo*, 1999).

6.1.1.1 Sanctioning and Relieving Commanders

The evidence shows that the Eastern Bloc adopted discipline by relieving and sanctioning Grannoble for one year for “premeditated failure to comply with orders or determinations or insubordination,” in accordance with the organisation’s statutes (FGN, XIX, 106). Stationed far from Front 10’s area of operations, he oversaw the FARC-EP’s main hostage camp, where kidnapped members of the Colombian security forces were held (LH017; FGN, XIX, 106).

Nonetheless, Grannoble leveraged being Mono Jojoy’s brother. Mono Jojoy, the Eastern Bloc commander, privileged his sibling’s accomplishments in the border region during the 1990s (e.g., material resources and liaison with Venezuelan authorities) over adherence, or lack thereof, to the FARC-EP’s statutes and norms (LH004; LH006; LH014; LH017). As a result, Grannoble was promoted to lead inter-front coordination in the ABC Region in the early 2000s. Grannoble became a loose cannon (LH002; LH003; LH006; LH017; S115; S119). He fractured the 10th Front by creating parallel patronage networks, and his indiscipline contributed to the war with the ELN, as detailed in Section 6.1.2. Moreover, the financial acumen, further strengthened throughout the 2000s and 2010s, would prove instrumental to his role as a “remobilizer” (Themner, 2012) for the breakaway faction’s leadership.

In addition to sanctioning and relieving (two observable implications of discipline) the Eastern Bloc “appointed” a provisional leadership for the 10th Front 10. Its main task:

conducting a "balance" (LH001; LH006; LH017) or assessing the internal state of the front and its vertical ties with local population.

6.1.1.2 Provisional Leadership

Seasoned combatants from the Eastern Bloc leadership carried out a “balance,” similar to the 1st Front, following the arrest and extradition of its leaders (Section 5.1.1). In this case study, they concluded that the assassination of the three U.S. citizens was just the tip of the iceberg. According to ex-combatants and local leaders, under Grannoble the 10th Front was “in disarray”. It had fallen into “debauchery” [*libertinaje*] — combatants drinking with the civilian population, members of the urban networks being abusive and arbitrary with the local population (LH001; LH006; LH014; LH017; S119). In all my interactions with former combatants in the five field sites where I conducted fieldwork, *libertinaje* was a widely used expression to describe, for example, “lack of education,” “mismanagement”, or “squandering money”, “foul language,” and “disregard for the FARC-EP’s Strategic Plan⁹⁶” (LH003; LH014; LH017). There were even cases of fratricidal violence. “A commander shot a comrade I trusted. A good man. On a whim. That was forbidden in the FARC-EP. There were norms. Everything under Grannoble,” recalls a former combatant (LH004; LH006; LH017).

The provisional leadership also found out that Grannoble began pursuing personal projects since he was appointed to command the 10th Front in 1995. Initially, his mission was to procure material resources for the FARC-EP through taxing cocaine brokers, contraband networks on the border, livestock, extortion and kidnappings. In theory, Grannoble should have followed the Front 10’s internal regime, in line with the FARC-EP statutes. He put forth two parallel agendas, nevertheless. While he yielded profits for the organisation by abiding by its financial policy, he also became a loose cannon. Former combatants of the 10th Front recall he began showing “regionalist” attitudes (LH006; LH014; LH017). “They were local commanders with family in the region who would dare to say *I’m not leaving here because I’m from Arauca; I’m not going to go to Meta*,” (LH006).

The problem with this situation was that Grannoble’s growing power — rooted in his financial acumen, his kinship with Mono Jojoy, and an operational environment geographically distant from the Eastern Bloc’s leadership — also fostered “regionalist” attitudes. Former combatants described “regionalism” as an “evil” among Front 10’s mid-level commanders,

⁹⁶ Adopted in 1982. See Section 5.2.1

which led them to adopt anti-ELN positions and clash with the leaders of this guerrilla organisation (LH005; LH014; LH017). Informal conversations with members of the ELN's local support networks⁹⁷ confirm that Grannoble's main objective was to demonstrate the FARC-EP's capacity to dominate the region by expanding its border control, promoting coca cultivation, and extending influence over oil revenues. As I show in the next section, the ELN deemed this a direct threat to its long-standing influence in the Arauca region, dating back to the 1960s (S115; S116; S118; CNAI, 2012; González, 2012; CNMH, 2014).

The 10th Front's provisional leadership lasted from 1999 to 2002. During these three years, it reorganised the secondary group's chain of command and exercised authority over the *milicias* (LH006; LH014; LH017). Nonetheless, Grannoble returned to the region, as leader of the ABC inter-front coordination, while Arcesio Niño took command of the 10th Front (Genesis, XIX, 115). According to ex-combatants, Grannoble's return was a setback for the 10th Front. He retained influence over some mid-level commanders, split the newly appointed leadership, and displayed the "regionalist" attitudes mentioned above (LH017; LH014). He pursued the same strategy with urban networks in Colombia and Venezuela, some of whose members later detached from the 10th Front during and after the war with the ELN, as the conflict targeted the support networks of both armed groups and local populations. This detachment process continued after new leadership took command of the 10th Front in 2011 under [name redacted #4].

The Eastern Bloc also implemented control mechanisms to reorganize the Front 10 after the second crisis. Appointing a new Front 10 leadership disrupted its ties to the *milicias* before and during the peace process. *Milicianos* gradually detached from the FARC-EP and, in 2017, some joined the breakaway faction.

6.1.2 Discipline in Response to the Second Internal Crisis

Between 2005 and 2010, the FARC-EP and the ELN waged war across several regions of Colombia, including Arauca. Evidence shows that all FARC-EP fronts in this region were involved in the conflict (LH002; LH003; LH004; LH006; CNAI, 2012; CNMH, 2014). In its aftermath, the Eastern Bloc leadership adopted three disciplinary measures on the 10th Front: relieving and sanctioning Arcesio Niño and Grannoble as commanders of the 10th Front and the ABC inter-front coordination, respectively; appointing a provisional leadership to conduct

⁹⁷ Field notes, Arauca Department, August 2022.

a *balance* of the 10th Front and stabilising FARC–EP–ELN relations; and, in 2010, appointing [name redacted #4] as the new leader of this secondary group.

Examining these three measures, or observable implications of discipline, shows us that they perform in at least two ways, with implications for the low-proportions fragmentation and subordination to the peace agreement. The first two helped to end the war with the ELN and foster cohesion within the 10th Front, as well as identify the sources of this conflict within this secondary group. The third measure, appointing [name redacted #4], was a double-edged sword. On the one hand, his appointment worsened divisions within the front 10 — among its leadership, between the leadership and the urban networks, and between the leadership and local support networks. These divisions, mainly the second and third, which evolved before and during the peace process, contributed to the emergence of the breakaway faction. As I show in Section 6.1.3, [name redacted #4] was also deemed illegitimate by some segments of the *milicianos* and segments of the local support networks. On the other hand, his appointment also created cohesion among the majority of the 10th Front troops as the Havana peace process moved forward, and as dissenting leaders (Arcesio and Misael) were killed or arrested by state forces in 2012.

6.1.2.1 Sanctioning and Relieving Commanders

After the war with the ELN ended, the Eastern Bloc, now under the command of Mauricio Jaramillo (Section 5.1.3.2), “sanctioned” and “relieved” both Arcesio Niño, commander of the 10th Front, and Grannoble, coordinator of the ABC inter-front (LH006; LH014; LH017; S116; S119; Génesis, XIX, 133-136). Arcesio Niño was sent to a command training course— “a demotion” for a front commander (LH017)—where he died in a military operation in 2012 (LH006; LH017, Génesis, XIX, 143). Grannoble was “relieved” of command (LH003; LH017). In addition, the Eastern Bloc and the FARC-EP top echelons ordered him to attend a command meeting, but he refused. “If he had stayed in Arauca, surely he would have gotten killed. He moved to Venezuela,” tells an ex-combatant (LH003; also, LH014; LH017). He also feared being court-martialled. Eventually, the FARC-EP top echelons ordered his execution after an *in absentia* revolutionary trial (LH017; S119; [ArcoIris, 2012](#)).

6.1.2.2 Provisional Leadership

The Eastern Bloc leadership also “appointed” an interim leadership for the 10th Front and the ABC inter-front coordination. Comprised of seasoned combatants, its mission was to

settle the war with the ELN through the "Pact of Coexistence" or *Pacto de Convivencia* (LH001; LH002; LH003; LH004; LH006; LH014; LH017; S116; S119; Génesis, XIX, 133) and conduct a "balance" (LH001; LH003, LH014; LH017) of the internal state of the 10th Front. "It was in critical shape: no balances, no plans, no finances, no training, no political education, poor recruitment" (LH017), tells a former combatant. Similarly, other recalls that the Front was "degraded" — "comrades swearing, drunks, prostitutes in the camps, STDs. That was not proper of a revolutionary movement" (LH006).

In addition to the lack of discipline, the interim leadership, some of whose members had over 20–25 years in the FARC-EP, also faced a divided command between Arcesio Niño (appointed in 2001) and Misael, his second-in-command. *"If Arcesio and Misael met even twice, it was a lot. They went their own way"* (LH006; LH014; S119). Grannoble deepened this division when he returned to the region in 2002, as noted above. Former combatants recall that he sabotaged the 10th Front's efforts to implement reorganisation plans following the first crisis (Section 6.1.1). Instead, he pursued his own projects, building networks in Colombia and Venezuela with some of the 10th Front's mid-level commanders and *milicianos*. He ordered selective killings and appropriated FARC-EP finances (LH006; LH014; LH017). As one ex-combatant put it: "Grannoble calls members of the 10th Front leadership to make plans against the front and to occupy its areas. This makes it difficult for Arcesio to manoeuvre, and that's why the front divides" (LH017). The situation escalated to the point that Mono Jojoy asked the FARC-EP's top leadership *"to recall Grannoble [for] his extensive damage to the organisation, his decisions without consultation, and for having stepped out of line"* (Génesis, XIX, 107). Likewise, mid-level commanders of other secondary groups in Arauca avoided "socialising with the 10th Front because they were degraded people," according to a former combatant (LH006; LH002; LH003; LH014; LH017).

Other findings of the provisional leadership concern the FARC-EP–ELN war in the region between 2005 and 2010. Data indicate that this confrontation stemmed from multiple sources.

What may have irreversibly triggered the war was the 2005 assassination of El Che, second-in-command of the 45th Front, operating in the Piedmont of Arauca (LH003; LH004; LH006; LH014; LH017; S104; CTC, 2022, 171). "He was a highly respected and well-prepared man. They killed him in the most cowardly way — they called him to a meeting, and

as he was getting into the car, the ELN shot him in the back. That was the last straw,” recalls a former combatant (LH003).

This incident, however, reflects tensions that had already been building between the two armed groups in the region. These tensions deal with indiscipline among some mid-level commanders during the first half of the 2000s. Ex-combatants and local leaders described this indiscipline in different ways: “regionalism,” “personalistic behaviour,” and “anti-ELN mid-level commanders” (LH003; LH006; LH014; LH017; S119). Regionalism refers to the view of certain mid-level commanders that they were immovable from the regions where they operated, even resisting reassignment elsewhere. Personalistic behaviour describes those who prioritise their personal agendas and projects over the broader goals and norms of the organisation. “Anti-ELN commanders” is the label used by research participants for members of the 10th Front who pursued their own agendas, thereby disrupting agreements on territorial control, rents, and respect for the ELN’s local support networks and families. According to the balance conducted by the interim leadership, Grannoble displayed such behaviours (observable implications of indiscipline) and encouraged other members of the 10th Front to do the same. In urban networks, this indiscipline escalated into bar fights that ended in shootings and assassinations (LH002; LH003; LH014; LH017; S116; S119). On other occasions, ELN members stole FARC-EP arms caches (CTC, 2022).

The demobilisation of paramilitary squads in Arauca in 2002 also contributed to tensions between the FARC-EP and the ELN. These tensions deepened over territorial control, alliances with local politicians left behind by the paramilitaries, and oil rents. Conflicts also emerged between mid-level commanders of the FARC-EP and the ELN over taxing merchants, oil companies, contractors, and cocaine brokers (LH003; LH006; LH017), as well as over coca leaf cultivation (LH001; LH017; S116). The latter issue is particularly significant because it reveals a fundamental difference between the groups. Secondary sources note that the ELN, in its 4th Congress (ELN, 2005), reaffirmed its ban on coca as a source of financing — a stance that contrasted sharply in other regions. In Arauca, while Grannoble pushed to expand coca cultivation in the foothills — an ELN stronghold since the 1960s — the ELN began eradicating coca crops (CNMH, 2013; Génesis, XIX, 133; CTC, 2022). Thus, the killing of *El Che* was a manifestation or symptom of deeper tensions. Grannoble, following orders from the Eastern Bloc (CTC, 2022) waged war on the ELN.

The problem with this war was that both armed groups waged it through their militias, local support networks, and relatives, using selective assassinations, massacres, disappearances, and forced displacements, as well as targeting local leaders who opposed either side (LH002; LH003; LH004; LH005; LH017; CNMH, 2014; CTC, 2022). “The *elenos*⁹⁸ wiped out my whole family,” recalls one ex-combatant (LH005). Another adds: “After hours of fighting, we found dead ELN comrades who had been our acquaintances and schoolmates. We killed each other among brothers” (LH004). A local interviewed for a report on the FARC-ELN war in Arauca recalls: “The ELN would kill two from the FARC, and then the *farianos*⁹⁹ would come and kill four from the ELN, and so it went on. It was like doubling the blow so the other side would feel it more, and innocent people were caught in the middle, because it was one thing when it was between the armed groups, but they were just peasants” (CNMH, 2014, 139). The same report notes that the conflict extended beyond Colombian territory into Venezuela’s Apure state, where both armed groups were also socially embedded (CNMH, 2014, 141).

One of the implications of this war was the gradual detachment of *milicianos*. An unspecified number left Arauca and remained in hiding in Colombia and Venezuela. They joined those who had already broken away to work in parallel with Grannoble. This process of detachment unfolded between the 2000s and the early 2010s and is key to understanding why [name redacted #4] excluded them from the reintegration lists in 2016–2017 (Section 6.2.3), a decision that contributed to their joining the breakaway faction.

The data also indicates that the war left the 10th Front and the FARC-EP in Arauca increasingly isolated from their local support networks. “The ELN won this war” (CTC, 2022), and its repercussions extended beyond the battlefield: the 10th Front lost political influence in several regions as the ELN disrupted their local support networks (LH003; LH004; S115; S116; S117; S119). Former combatants and secondary sources further suggest that the ELN forged alliances with the Colombian army against the FARC-EP in Arauca (Semana, 2009; Verdad Abierta, 2010; CTC, 2022). One ex-combatant recalls: “We knew the ELN masses, and they knew ours—how they acted, where they were. That is why we fought so hard, and in practice, the civilian population bore the brunt. At the end of the war, the masses told us: ‘The FARC-EP is pointless.’ We took stock and realised we had moved backwards thirty years” (LH003).

⁹⁸ Members of the ELN.

⁹⁹ Members of the FARC-EP.

The aftermath of the war created favourable conditions for re-establishing channels of communication with the ELN. After several meetings (LH001; LH003; LH014; LH017; S115; S116), both armed groups laid out the "Pact of Coexistence" (*Pacto de Convivencia*) (LH001; LH002; LH003; LH004; LH006; LH014; LH017; S116; S119). Unfavourable military conditions following the war with the ELN — acknowledged by all research respondents — may have contributed to the subordination of the 10th Front's mid-level commanders and rank-and-file. As I show in the next section, the appointment of [name redacted #4] also facilitated the peace process. It also had implications for the low level of fragmentation in this case study.

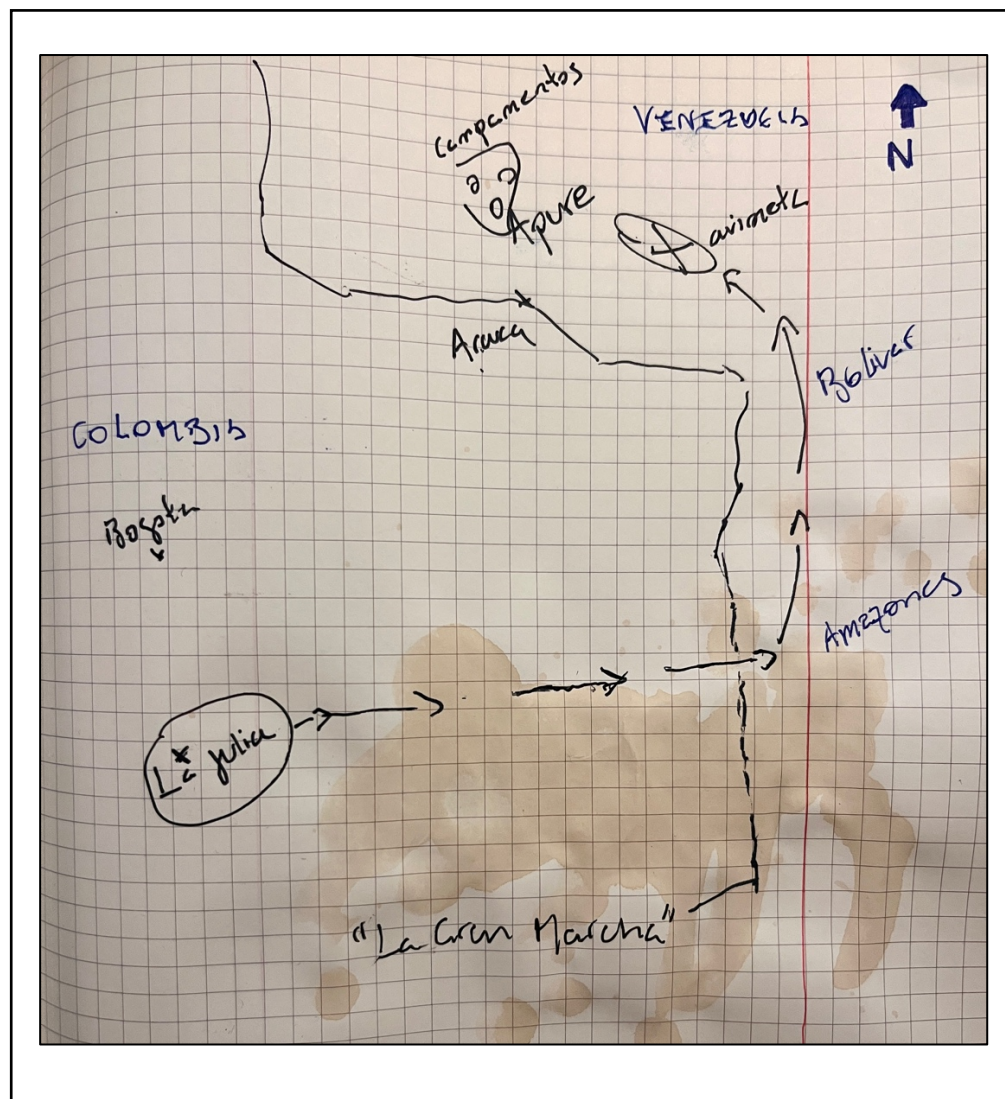
6.1.2.3 Appointment of a New 10th Front Leadership

Armed groups also enforce discipline by appointing commanders to manage the behaviour of their members and enforce rules and norms toward the goals of the broader organisation. By appointing commanders, the top echelons of armed organisations ensure that social control norms trickle down the organisation. In the context of this case study, Mono Jojoy, leader of the Eastern Front, appointed [name redacted #4] in 2010 to command the 10th Front (LH005; LH014; LH017). Initially, his appointment sought to "put order" in the 10th Front, "calm the waters" with the ELN and ensure that the "Pact of Coexistence" with the ELN had no setbacks (LH002; LH003; LH004M LH005; LH006; LH014; LH017; S116; S118; S119). Also, to "stop debauchery [*libertinaje*]" (LH006), regain control of the *milicias*, implement the plan to reorganise the Front 10 that the interim leadership set up (FGN, XIX, 138), and restore relations with the 10th Front local support networks.

[name redacted #4] arrived in Arauca with approximately 70 troops who had long fought under his command and were accustomed to his discipline and leadership style (LH002; LH005; LH017). They respected him for his seniority—he had joined the FARC-EP in the 1970s and later became part of the Eastern Bloc from its establishment in 1987 (LH005; LH014; Génesis, XIX; EL Tiempo, 2021). Most importantly, as one ex-combatant recalls, "He was from the school of Mono Jojoy. He had that same fighting spirit, dedication 24/7" (LH002). Evidence further indicates that [name redacted #4] was highly disciplined and strict. Known as "Stalin" (LH006; LH014; LH017), he adhered to the FARC-EP's statutes and norms and subordinated to the new leadership of the Eastern Bloc that replaced Mono Jojoy (LH002; LH005; LH006)—unlike Iván Mordisco in Case Study One. As I show in Sections 6.1.3 and 6.1.4, these traits, among others, fostered cohesion, enhanced his commandership legitimacy

within this trusted circle, and contributed to subordination for the peace process among members of the 10th Front.

Noteworthy, the Venezuelan state sponsorship of the FARC-EP — *de facto* in the 1990s, then *intentional* in the 2000s and 2010s (Álvarez-Vanegas & Shesterinina, 2026) — was crucial for [name redacted #4]’s arrival to the region. He and his troops walked large swaths of Colombia and Venezuela’s territory. “We reached Arauca by way of Venezuela, after a journey that stretched over three months. We called it the Long March, or *La Gran Marcha*. From La Julia, in the Meta Department, we pressed into Amazonas State in Venezuela, following the tributaries of the Orinoco, then drifted down the river itself until we reached Bolívar. From there, we crossed the savannahs by car. We arrived with nothing. Our weapons came later, dropped from a mafia plane onto the Apure plains, just north of Arauca,” illustrates a former combatant (LH005 - Image 2; Génesis, XIX).



Upon arriving in Arauca, [name redacted #4] restructured the 10th Front, appointing mid-level commanders who had accompanied him from the Meta Department, which created tensions among some mid-level commanders (LH002; LH004; LH005; LH006; LH017). For instance, he conflicted with the second-in-command, Misael, who aspired to be the top leader, resulting in “two feudal lords” competing for power (LH006; LH017; S115). Externally, [name redacted #4] pursued predatory practices, such as taxing merchants and ranchers in Venezuela, stealing goods in Colombia to sell across the border — “not FARC-EP policy” (LH017) — and killing locals he suspected, without evidence, of collaborating with the army (LH014; LH017). As I show in Section 6.1.4, [name redacted #4]’s actions did not undermine his commandership legitimacy among most mid-level commanders (except Misael) or the rank-and-file of the 10th Front. However, among the *milicianos* and local support networks, some regarded him as illegitimate.

Moreover, [name redacted #4] failed to “read how the guerrillas work in Arauca” (S119; S115; S117). He clashed with the 10th Front’s *milicias* and local support networks. His attempt to retake control of the *milicias* and social bases (observable implications of discipline) ultimately led to the detachment of the former from the FARC-EP and the split of the latter. Although the war with ELN partly stemmed from the *milicias* lack of discipline, as discussed above, evidence shows this secondary group operated in “a territory with hardly any jungle, unlike what [name redacted #4] was used to in Meta,” as one former combatant recalls (LH005). Another explains: “In Arauca, the guerrillas had to be close to the people, but [name redacted #4] demanded otherwise: distant from civilians, like guerrillas, not narcos” (LH003).

Attempting to “put order,” [name redacted #4] disregarded local realities. He “recalled” the urban networks, insisting they be disciplined and “encamped” (LH004; LH017). As another ex-combatant notes: “He gave them one option: camps. The *milicias* said no — *we have our statutes; you can’t do that. We are milicias*. Historically, in Arauca, the *milicias* were the real authority. We had experienced *milicias* commanders of 20–25 years. They ruled over the combatants” (LH006; LH002; LH004; S115; S119).

By “underestimating the *milicias*” (LH006), including those operating in Venezuela, which also comprised Venezuelan nationals (LH003), [name redacted #4]’s mission backfired. *Milicianos* began to surreptitiously detach from the FARC-EP during [name

redacted #4]'s leadership (2011-17) and eventually from the peace process. They rejected the disciplinary measures that [name redacted #4] tried to implement, such as recalling them to camps. Left in the shadows, many stayed in their villages; others left the region or went to Venezuela. However, according to research respondents, an unspecified number joined those who led the breakaway faction, working as urban networks.

Regarding the splitting of the 10th Front 10's local support networks, some ended up backing *milicianos* and formerly imprisoned mid-level commanders who broke away. They did so through material resources and intelligence and liaised with other breakaway factions from 2017 on (S115; S119). The FARC-EP–ELN war undermined the FARC-EP's legitimacy among the local population, including its social bases, as mentioned above. According to the data, [name redacted #4] tried to de-escalate tensions between the social bases of the FARC-EP and the ELN, known as “*cívicos*” and “*sociales*,” respectively (LH005; LH006; S115; S116; S117). However, like with the *milicias*, he misinterpreted the local context. “He sought to control *sociales* by imposing norms over their finances and internal dynamics, which fractured them—one sector with [name redacted #4] and the other against him,” says a local leader (S115; S116; S117; S118; S119).

[Name redacted #4] even ordered the killing of members of local support networks because “they did not align with him or he accused them of being informants,” recalls a former combatant (LH017; S115; S116). Some of these networks, together with the breakaway faction’s *milicias*, rejected [name redacted #4] and became a serious security problem after 2017. Evidence indicates that disenfranchised individuals from the FARC-EP’s social bases sought revenge against him for the mistreatment they had suffered following his arrival in Arauca. Confronted with death threats from the breakaway faction, [name redacted #4] eventually left the region in 2018 (S115; S117; S119). “Thinking of his political future after disarmament, [name redacted #4] played politics, favouring some organisations over others. That fractured them,” adds a former combatant (LH005; S119).

This illustrates the co-optation of the peace process, a thread across Case Studies Two, Three and Four, and to extent Case Study One, and on which I elaborate on in Chapter 9. In this case study, subordination to and support for the peace process also allowed mid-level commanders like [name redacted #4] to advance their post-demobilization political agendas. This, in turn, affected the long-standing ties between the 10th Front and its local support networks.

The implications of misreading the 10th Front's operational environment, as I detail in Section 6.2, are that [name redacted #4], in practice, dismissed the FARC-EP's social embeddedness in Arauca dating to the late 1970s. This illustrates that while the disciplinary measures discussed so far were responses to the 10th Front's interactions with external actors (the ELN) before the peace process, their adoption also had internal repercussions at the secondary-group level and extended to its support networks, contributing to low-proportion fragmentation during the peace process.

6.1.3 Discipline in Favour of the Peace Process

The appointment of [name redacted #4] coincided with the exploratory and public phases of the peace process in Havana. With the public phase beginning in 2012, [name redacted #4]'s mission shifted to fostering cohesion in support of the peace process. Unlike Case Study One, the killing of Mono Jojoy did not have implications for [name redacted #4]'s subordination to the peace process. His subordination, however, may have been mediated by his political ambitions, as I detail in Chapter 9.

Data shows that [name redacted #4] and his trusted circle enforced peace politics, similar to Case Study Four. Although his initial mission was other, as I detail above, [name redacted #4] quickly turned his energies to convey the advancement of peace talks in Havana among the 10th Front troops and the local population. “[Name redacted #4], as I did, worked with all comrades for the peace process and created unity among the leadership and rank-and-file. We did so through communications and documents with the FARC-EP delegation in Cuba,” tells an ex-combatant (LH006; LH002; LH003; LH014; LH017). “There were doubts about the disarmament, but [name redacted #4] explained everything. We did not have an Iván Mordisco in Arauca (LH017; LH005).

Amid the peace process, evidence suggests that political education was repurposed as a pedagogical tool to communicate the progress of the Havana talks. In this context, political education transformed: under [name redacted #4]'s discipline and pro-peace leadership, it aligned the values and beliefs of 10th Front members with the broader organisational goal of peace rather than prolonging the war. Thus, appointing [name redacted #4] contributed to advancing the FARC-EP's broader political objectives. Together with other mid-level

commanders, he implemented top-down political education mechanisms, known as *gemas*¹⁰⁰, designed to keep all 10th Front members informed about the decisions, setbacks and progress of the negotiating team in Havana (LH003; LH004; LH006). [Name redacted #4] ordered mid-level commanders to “report on the discussions, advances, setbacks in Cuba” to all mid-level commanders and rank-and-file, recalls an ex-combatant (LH003; LH002). Local support networks also actively engaged in disseminating updates on the negotiations, working closely with mid-level commanders (S115; S116; S118). In Case Study Four, political education functioned similarly, whereas in Case Study One, it contributed to fear and uncertainty about disarmament, reinforcing groupthink.

[Name redacted #4] consolidated the leadership of the 10th Front with his inner circle to ensure there were no dissenting voices. “After he returned from a meeting of mid-level commanders in Cuba, [name redacted #4] said, *we had to consolidate the leadership* so that no one would leave; there was that fear also” (LH006), tells an ex-combatant, showing that the opposite role than that of Gentil Duarte in Case Study One (Section 5.1.3.1). There were dissenting voices, nonetheless. The most notable, according to the data, was that of Misael, who was part of the leadership of the 10th Front for over 15 years. The fears about him were his “personalist” and “regionalist” behaviour, and responsibility for the war with the ELN. However, Misael was captured in 2012 by the Colombian army, which allowed [name redacted #4] to “manoeuvre more calmly” (LH005). Likewise, Rafael, the ABC inter-front coordinator who replaced Grannoble, rejected the “disarmament provisions” (LH001; LH014; LH017), prompting the Eastern Bloc leadership to sanction and demote him. He left the region and demobilised. Grannoble is another example. However, after his brother’s death, he lost support in Colombia and relocated to Venezuela, where he pursued activities linked to licit economies and sought medical care (LH001; LH002; LH004; LH005; LH014; LH017; S115; S116; S119).

Moreover, per all the research respondents, there was cohesion regarding the peace process among almost all local support networks, regardless of how [name redacted #4] treated their leaders. “He created cohesion for the peace process and with the FARC-EP first and foremost, even if he daydreamed about becoming a political leader, which did not happen,” tells a former combatant (LH004). The problem for some members of the local support

¹⁰⁰ *Gemas* were encrypted documents that the FARC-EP delegation in Cuba sent to the blocs, which then relayed them to the fronts to communicate the progress of the peace process (LH003; LH006; LH014; S113). “The front commanders received them daily or weekly, and then we would carry out pedagogy with everyone,” tells a former combatant (LH006; LH002; LH003; LH004).

networks was [name redacted #4] being deemed illegitimate, not the peace deal itself, as I detail in Section 6.1.4. Local support networks, with their long-standing ties to the FARC-EP, also aimed to advance their collective agendas within the context of the peace process. Supporting [name redacted #4] may have stemmed from their interest in the process itself, rather than from his political ambitions, let alone his attempts to control them, as noted above. “He backed the peace agreement. We saw that commitment in meetings we had with him. When he asked us to support the peace deal, we did,” (S116) recalls a social leader. Unlike Case Study One, [name redacted #4] was not a leader who created cohesion to break away but to follow and transmit orders regarding the peace process. “[Name redacted #4] died defending the peace agreement. After the disarmament, if someone spoke ill of it, he would defend it,” says an ex-combatant (LH003; LH005; S116; S118; S119).

To create cohesion and subordination in favour of the peace process, [name redacted #4] also drew on his commandership legitimacy that extended to his trusted circle of combatants from the Meta Department, and most of the members of the 10th Front, as I show in the next section.

6.1.4 Commandership Legitimacy and Illegitimacy

What were the sources of commandership legitimacy and illegitimacy, and how did they perform? Moreover, how did they contribute to fostering cohesion in support of the peace process? In this section, I show that [name redacted #4] drew on the legitimacy he had with his trusted circle of combatants from the Meta Department, which eventually extended among most members of the 10th Front. However, the evidence also indicates that [name redacted #4] was deemed illegitimate by milicianos and some segments of local support networks, contributing to their detachment and split, respectively. Similarly, illegitimacy also helps us understand how formerly imprisoned members of the organisation failed to mobilise a large breakaway faction.

6.1.4.1 Sources of Commandership Legitimacy

The data shows that [name redacted #4]’s commandership legitimacy contributed to foster cohesion and subordination, for not a single combatant from the 10th Front broke away

before the disarmament and demobilisation process (LH001; LH002; LH003; LH004; LH005; LH006; LH014; LH017; S115; S116; S117; S118; S119)¹⁰¹.

[Name redacted #4]'s trajectory in the FARC-EP, extensive experience, and close ties with Mono Jojoy were qualities of commandship legitimacy acknowledged by combatants who arrived with him in 2011 and Front 10 combatants (LH002; LH003; LH005). Trustworthiness and discipline are two additional qualities. “We trusted [name redacted #4] because of his discipline. There was no other way with him,” says a former combatant (LH005), and another: “He applied the concept of general leader: you do as you are told” (LH004). Combatants who arrived in Arauca with him were not unfamiliar with his commandship qualities as commander of Front 27 in the Meta Department (LH002; LH005; LH006). “He was used to commanding large groups; in Arauca, they were smaller; he was used to dealing with hundreds of men,” illustrates a former combatant (LH005). Front 10 combatants subordinated to him and regarded his leadership style as necessary to “bring order” (LH003; LH005) and “apply FARC-EP norms” (LH002; LH006; LH014; LH017; S117).

By his leadership style, ex-combatants refer to [name redacted #4]'s behaviour toward the 10th Front's troops present in the region before his arrival (LH002; LH003; LH005; LH006; S115; S116; S117; S118; S119). “Insults” and “despotic” attitudes became the new standard in his mission of disciplining 10th Front and finessing the situation with the ELN. “He insulted seasoned commanders in front of everyone. That is unacceptable. How I address and command my subordinates are virtues that commanders should exhibit; we had rules of conduct in our statutes,” recalls one ex-combatant (LH004; LH006; S117; S119). Imposing orders without deliberation also created tensions within the front (LH017; S115; S119). “Several then-combatants never saw him as their natural leader,” recalls one social leader (S119). Data also suggest that [name redacted #4] spent more time in Venezuela than in Colombia; he was “distant” from the troops, the social bases, and the local population. Then-combatants and militias “did not forgive him that while they were busting their asses against the ELN and the army, [name redacted #4] was not in the region or stayed calmly in his camp in Venezuela,” explains a social leader (S119; LH005, S115, S116).

Despite these behaviours, the evidence does not return data on whether combatants of the 10th Front broke away. Instead, it suggests that subordination to the organisation's rules

¹⁰¹ However, former combatants of the 10th Front's rearmed from 2018 on. My dissertation does not focus on rearmament or recidivism.

and broader political objectives — signing a peace deal and transitioning to a political party — prevailed. This may indicate that political education in favour of the peace process, the reorganization of the 10th Front after the war with the ELN and not having dissenting voices among mid-level commanders (e.g., Arcesio and Misael) contributed to subordination and low-proportion fragmentation. Also, previous socialization into the FARC-EP's principles and the consequence of the war against the ELN and the Colombian state. As one combatant puts it when I asked whether [name redacted #4] leadership style had any repercussions on the 10th Front's members to break away or not:

“There is a principle of subordination — a Leninist principle: one is governed by the General Secretariat. If they are negotiating a peace deal, it is because that is the way it must be. It is not a betrayal; it is a reality that they assimilate better. Besides, it was already clear that we no longer had any real possibility of taking power. That was a lie” (LH003; LH004; LH002)

Another quality admired by both combatants and local support networks was [name redacted #4]'s commitment to the peace agreement. “He brought us together, the entire leadership of the front, and told us: *we have to change our mindset because the peace process has no reversal*,” recalls a former combatant (LH002). Social leaders also emphasised that, despite the tensions, [name redacted #4]'s political ambitions, his commitment to peace was undeniable (S115; S116; S117; S118; S119). “He had money, all sorts of resources, the border. He did not break away. He backed the peace process. He believed in a unified FARC-EP,” tells another ex-combatant (LH004; LH005; S115; S116; S118).

However, [name redacted #4] was also deemed illegitimate by *milicianos* and some segments in the 10th Front's local support networks. In the following section, I present evidence in that regard.

6.1.4.2 Sources of Commandership Illegitimacy: Urban and Local Support Networks

Former combatants acknowledge that the 10th Front needed new leadership, but not one that would further alienate the *milicianos* or undermine local support networks (LH006; LH014; LH017). “Most of the *milicianos* did not welcome [name redacted #4] because he wanted to change their habits,” recalls a former combatant (LH005; LH006). [Name redacted #4]'s leadership approach backfired. As one explained: “[Name redacted #4] said either they come to the camps, or they come to the camps [*se vienen o se vienen*]. The militias replied, “No,

we have our statutes; we cannot do that." Historically, in Arauca, the militias were in charge (LH006; LH002; LH004; LH005; LH017). Additionally, [name redacted #4] demoted or reassigned mid-level commanders to retraining courses, like Misael and Arcesio, who had built vertical ties and trust to urban networks. As a result, these ties broke down, prompting the *milicias* detachment from the organisation by 2011. Their detachment was not new, as I show in Sections 6.1.1 and 6.1.2.

The evidence also indicates that *milicianos* believed the 10th Front's new leadership lacked the skills to engage with its troops. [name redacted #4], for instance, favoured fighters from the Meta Department and disregarded the FARC-EP's long-standing social embeddedness in Arauca (LH003; LH005; LH006). As a result, they deemed [name redacted #4] and the new leadership as "outsiders" and "strangers" (LH002; LH005; S116). Operating clandestinely facilitated their gradual detachment from the 10th Front between 2011 and 2016, a process that escalated between 2016 and 2017, as I discuss in Section 6.2.x. This detachment was both public and surreptitious. Public, insofar as [name redacted #4] "discharged" some members (LH005; LH006); surreptitious, in that "hundreds," according to research participants (LH006; S115; S119), withheld their identities from what they considered an "alien" leadership. According to informal conversations with former *milicianos*—who are not members of the breakaway factions—they resent an "experienced leader" ([name redacted #4]) who, in their words, wanted to "put us in a cage [*en un corral*] to expose us and our families." As one former combatant puts it: "A breakaway formed because the *milicianos* did not accept [name redacted #4]'s way of exercising command" (LH004; LH005; LH006; LH017; S117; S118; S119).

[Name redacted #4] also applied his approach to the 10th Front's local support networks, or *cívicos*¹⁰², contributing to their split and eventual support for the breakaway faction leaders. Those who sided with the breakaway faction regarded [name redacted #4] as illegitimate.

The data show that [name redacted #4] disrupted the vertical ties between the 10th Front and its support networks during his mission to "put order" and for having "demoted" mid-level commanders who locals or sent them to retrain courses (LH006; LH017; S115; S116; S118; S119). Misael, 10th Front's number two, is mentioned by all research respondents. "[name redacted #4] arrives and confronts other commanders with his people, and the front splits into

¹⁰² This was a particularly sensitive issue during my fieldwork, as I detail in the Research Process Chapter. Some members of the demobilised FARC-EP's local support networks continue working with dissident factions, many of which are at war with one another, as well as in conflict with the ELN, the Colombian army, and Venezuelan security forces. For ethical and safety reasons, I chose not to examine this matter in depth.

two groups: [name redacted #4]'s people and Misael's," explains a research participant (S118; also, LH004; LH005; LH006; LH015; LH017). Even if his mission was disciplining the 10th Front and he was following orders, "The dynamics that existed between the FARC-EP and *cívicos* were disrupted" (S115; S118) because "there is no longer *a* Misael" for them to liaise with the FARC-EP. The Colombian army's arrest of Misael paved the way for [name redacted #4] to consolidate his leadership. Informal conversations hint that [name redacted #4] may have facilitated Misael's capture¹⁰³.

Moreover, [name redacted #4] seeks to control the finances of social organisations and favours those who support him (S115; S118; S119), presumably with political aspirations in mind after the signing of the peace agreement (S115; S117; S119). He also distances himself from some sectors of the local support networks (S116). He indiscriminately accuses some of its members of being ELN or army moles [*infiltrados*], even killing, disappearing, and forcibly displacing them (LH017; S117; S117; S119). These interactions divide the social bases "between those who agreed with [name redacted #4] and those who ended up backing the dissidence" or breakaway faction (S117; LH017, S115; S119).

6.1.4.3 Sources of Commandership Illegitimacy: Formerly Imprisoned Members of the Organisation

The breakaway leaders lacked the commandership legitimacy to mobilise a large number of fighters. The most visible among them was Jerónimo, a mid-level commander who had been released from prison under the provisions of the peace agreement. He led the breakaway alongside Front 10's *milicianos* and key members from its local support networks. Referenced to all the life histories and semi-structured interviews, Jerónimo was a combatant with a record and trajectory in the FARC-EP that did not grant him the commandership legitimacy to lead a breakaway comparable to Iván Mordisco in Case Study One.

Jerónimo was considered illegitimate by former combatants of the 10th Front and local leaders for being "undisciplined" and a "deserter" (LH002; LH003; LH004; LH005; LH006; LH014; LH017; S115; S118; S119). He was an experienced mid-level commander who led the 56th Front between 2001 and 2005 in the Casanare Department piedmont (Génesis, XXI, 101). However, within the FARC-EP, it is widely known that Jerónimo was undisciplined, having failed to adapt to the Colombian state's counterinsurgency campaign, which effectively wiped

¹⁰³ Field note, August 2022.

out the 56th Front (LH002; LH003; LH006; LH017; Génesis, XXI, 132). He also displayed "debauchery" or *libertinaje*: "He frequented villages for cockfighting, music, and drinking, even abandoning his troops in combat before deserting," tells a former combatant (LH003; LH005; LH006). In 2011, the Eastern Bloc disbanded the 56th Front. According to secondary sources, the army captured Jerónimo in 2004 (Génesis, XXI, 106; [El Tiempo, 2004](#)), although ex-combatants say he "deserted" or "surrendered" to state authorities (LH002; LH003; LH005; LH017). Having turned himself in or having been captured is equally delicate. The first denotes that he betrayed the FARC-EP— "he became a *reintegrado*¹⁰⁴, that is treason" (LH017); "he turned himself in with several weapons" (LH003). The second indicates that Jerónimo got sloppy—he did not meet the qualities expected of a mid-level commander in terms of following the rules, setting an example, and not prioritising his individual needs over those of the organisation (LH003; LH005).

The evidence shows that Jerónimo's "treason" went on in prison. He served time in the paramilitary ward and not in that of the rebels or "political prisoners" (LH002; LH003; LH005; LH017; S118; S119). There, he befriended paramilitary commanders, archenemies of the FARC-EP. He also engaged in government demobilisation and reintegration campaigns (LH003; LH004; S115; S119), regarded as a counterinsurgency mechanism by the FARC-EP. When he was released from prison in 2017, Jerónimo reportedly stayed at a paramilitary ranch (S119). When he arrived at the reincorporation cantonment in Arauca, FARC-EP leaders rejected him (LH004; LH005; S115) for being a "traitor" (LH003; LH004; LH005). He stayed in the adjacent zones trying to convince excombatants before the disarmament process to carry on with the 10th (LH002; LH003; LH005). They did not follow him. He lacked commandship legitimacy. "Who would follow a traitor?" (LH003) asks a former combatant. His conduct in the FARC-EP and in prison were compelling reasons, despite his military experience, access to material resources, and connections with networks in Colombia and Venezuela, as I detail in Section 6.2.

Misael is another example. Evidence indicates that Misael, 10th Front second in command, captured in 2012 by the Colombian army, was released from prison in 2017 as part

¹⁰⁴ In the context of the 2016 peace agreement's demobilization and disarmament process, FARC-EP ex-combatants consistently distinguished between two terms: reincorporation and reintegration. The former referred to the collective process of laying down arms, whereas the latter denoted individually surrendering to state authorities and being disarmed as defeated. This distinction in terminology became a highly contentious issue during the peace negotiations in Cuba. As a result, under the 2016 peace accord, the state institution previously responsible for "reintegration" formally abandoned the term, replacing it with "reincorporation."

of the peace agreement provisions. Locals welcomed him for being from the region (S115; S119). His comrades, not so. [name redacted #4] had rearranged the 10th Front leadership, and there was subordination to the peace agreement among mid-level commanders and rank-and-file, as noted above. Although Misael always aspired to be a commander, he never achieved this goal, as mentioned in other sections. Research respondents say he intended to reorganise Front 10 and breakaway, but "no one followed him" (LH002). Another recalls, "He arrived without the command he had, like any other rank-and-file; [name redacted #4] did not accept him" (S118) and ended up living in a hut near the reintegration cantonment as "any other peasant [*campesino*]" (S115). commandership illegitimacy in the case of Misael also stems from his deeds in the 2000s, for combatants and the community did not forget his responsibility in igniting the war with the ELN (LH002; LH004).

Misael clashed with [name redacted #4] and other emerging leaders from the former rank-and-file because he sought to reclaim a leadership role (LH006; S115; S118). In this context of leadership renewal, however, sick and wounded from the war, he lacked both the internal and external support needed to form a breakaway. Former combatants and *cívicos* were also unwilling to risk tensions with the ELN by granting Misael visibility or importance, given his past conflicts with that guerrilla (LH006; S119). Informal conversations further suggest that Misael¹⁰⁵ refused to approach Jerónimo¹⁰⁶, whom he regarded as a traitor and deserter.

Both examples demonstrate that sources of commandership illegitimacy are not necessarily endogenous to the peace process. On the contrary, a careful examination of the evidence demonstrates that Jerónimo and Misael's deeds before it largely contributed to his inability to break away in a higher proportion. The problem, however, was when *milicianos* and some individuals from the 10th Front local support networks joined Jerónimo (LH002; LH003; S115; S117). Among them were those who gradually detached from the 10th Front amidst the two internal crises (Sections 6.1.1 and 6.1.2) and when [name redacted #4] assumed command of this secondary group in 2011. Also, those who detached in response to [name redacted #4]'s handling of the reincorporation lists in 2016-17 (Section 6.2.3). Thus, formerly imprisoned members, despite their illegitimacy, interact with the long-standing

¹⁰⁵ He was killed in 2018 ([LaVozDelCiraruco, 2018](#))

¹⁰⁶ Former combatants avoided speaking formally about the relationship or lack thereof between Misael and Jerónimo. They explain informally that the two met on the 56th Front because Misael was its interim leader in 2011 before Jerónimo assumed command. Secondary sources corroborate it (Génesis, XXI, 106).

detachment of urban networks, which unfolds before and during the peace negotiations, shaped by both external actors and internal dynamics within the 10th Front.

In the following section, I present evidence on the external dynamics that contributed to low-fragmentation at the level of formerly imprisoned mid-level commanders of the FARC-EP, joined by *milicianos* and members of the 10th Front local support networks.

6.2 External Dynamics

In this chapter, I highlight the role of *milicianos* and local support networks in the emergence of the breakaway faction. The previous section showed that the 10th Front and the Eastern Bloc adopted disciplinary measures in response to two internal crises. While the leadership renewal prompted by the war with the ELN fostered cohesion in support of the peace process among most 10th Front troops, it also contributed to the gradual detachment of *milicianos*—which had been evolving since the early 2000s—and the split of local support networks in the final phase of the peace process. Thus, even when disciplinary measures are adopted in response to the repercussions of the interactions with external actors, and which aim to foster cohesion at the secondary-group level, they can also disrupt—unintendedly or not—the 10th Front’s vertical ties with the local population.

By zeroing in on the role of *milicianos* and local support networks, this section presents evidence of the 10th Front’s social embeddedness, which contributes to low-proportion fragmentation. I discuss these findings in Section 6.2.1. Other external dynamics also matter for this observable outcome: leadership decapitation and local disembedding, and reintegration lists—observable implications of counterinsurgency and the peace process, respectively. I briefly discuss these findings in Sections 6.2.2 and 6.2.3. I also present evidence on material resources and transnational actors, which cut across the following sections.

6.2.1 Networks and Local Population

The social embeddedness of the 10th Front contributed to low-proportion fragmentation. Leaders of the breakaway faction, such as Jerónimo, leveraged this secondary group’s *milicianos* and local support networks. Both provided trust-based ties, mediated by family ties and long-standing with the FARC-EP, as well as deep local knowledge and connections to

external actors in Colombia and Venezuela. For one, by adopting disciplinary measures to control and encamp militias, [name redacted #4] disrupted the ties between the 10th Front and its *milicias*—the very local population through which the FARC-EP had established its social embeddedness over decades since the 1970s.

The 10th Front relied on *milicias*, local support networks, and grassroots organisations in the Arauca Department and the borderlands with Venezuela to carry out mass work. “There were more *milicianos* than combatants in arms because of the region’s history and because the ELN evolved similarly — more *milicias*, more masses,” tells one ex-combatant (LH006; LH003; LH005; S115; S117; González, 2012; CNMH, 2014). The 10th Front evolved alongside peasant-led colonisation and agrarian mobilisation processes. Since the late 1970s, this secondary group prioritised political work with the local population, gaining support through local political secretaries of the PCC¹⁰⁷ (LH003; LH005; S115; S116). As one local leader recalls, “It worked very closely with the people; we all knew who they were. Combatants and *milicianos* were born and raised in the local communities” (S116; S115; S117; S118; S119).

In addition to these observable implications of recruitment, data indicates that this social embeddedness allowed the 10th Front to build trust-based networks and recruit locals — often from “well-known families” (LH006; LH014; S117) — as in Case Studies One and Four. Only some became FARC-EP *milicias* (LH002; LH004; LH005; S116; S119). They were “born and raised in the same villages [*salido del pueblo*]” (S116) or “relatives of so-and-so” (LH005). Trust, kinship, and family ties strengthened both horizontal and vertical ties among *milicianos* and between them and the 10th Front. As one local leader puts it, “I met entire families who were FARC-EP militants” (S116). Recruitment of *milicianos* also followed a strict process: “They were aware that you either came from a leftist or reputable family,” notes one ex-combatant (LH004; LH002; LH003), referencing the FARC-EP recruitment guides of popular and bolivarian *milicianos*.

The 10th Front also relied on *milicianos* to conduct intelligence, collect taxes, resolve local disputes, administer justice, and carry out selective killings and terrorist attacks on both sides of the border (LH004; LH005; S115; S117; S119). “They were our buffer [*primer círculo*] with the locals; they lived among them,” tells a former combatant (LH002). Because the 10th

¹⁰⁷ The FARC-EP severed ties with the CCP in 1993. In that same year, at the FARC-EP Eight Conference, they created the Clandestine Colombian Communist Party or PC3 to continue political action and mass work through its local support networks. See Aguilera, 2014, among others.

Front primarily operated in flat, open terrain—unlike the 1st Front, the CMDA, and the CMTF—geographical conditions shaped this secondary group’s social embeddedness and organisational traits—namely, more *milicianos* than armed combatants, as all research respondents emphasise.

Milicianos were also crucial to the 10th Front’s material resources. To secure its economic endowments, the 10th Front controlled crossing points along the Colombia–Venezuela border. One way to do so was by populating these areas with *milicianos* who, in coordination with combatants and “special border commissions” (LH002; LH003; S116; CTC, 2022, 129), consolidated routes for arms purchases and secured financing through the taxation of contraband and cocaine brokers (LH003; LH006; LH014; LH017). “Almost all of the ammunition and weapons entering Colombia came through border crossings controlled by the 10th Front militias,” notes one social leader (S117; S115; S118; González, 2012; CTC, 2022).

This operational environment was further shaped by evolving relations between the FARC-EP and Venezuelan authorities at both subnational and national levels, beginning in the 1980s and later formalised under the Chávez and Maduro governments during the 2000s and 2010s (LH001; LH005; LH00; LH014; IISS, 2012; CTC, 2012). “We had people in both countries. Both Venezuelans and Colombians joined Jerónimo. We relocated many *milicianos* in Venezuela for security and health issues, or because they had been forcibly displaced during the FARC-EP–ELN war,” tells a former combatant (LH006), referring to safer havens and rest and retreat areas. Similar was the case of *milicianos* from the 10th Front’s border commissions, who were locals with social and subnational ties to Venezuelan authorities (LH006; LH003; LH004; S115; S117). “In less than a year, the 10th Front had over 100 troops, armed to the teeth and threatening us,” recalls another ex-combatant (LH005; LH006; S115; S116; S119), emphasising the 10th Front’s social and economic endowments that evolved before and during the peace process.

In line with the above, when the breakaway faction emerged in early 2017, the *milicias* and social bases had already been active in the region for nearly four decades. As this chapter demonstrates, they gradually detached from the 10th Front during the 2000s and 2010s, amid two internal crises (Sections 6.1.1 and 6.1.2). Grannoble established patronage networks with some of them in the early 2000s. During the war with the ELN, others relocated to different regions or crossed into Venezuela for security reasons. Their detachment deepened under [name redacted #4]’s command of the 10th Front, as he attempted to control them. The

process continued when [name redacted #4] excluded many from the reincorporation lists (Section 6.2.3). [name redacted #4] “underestimated” (LH004; LH006) the historical significance of the *milicias* in Arauca. Some had been in the FARC-EP for more than two decades. “In Arauca, it was more masses than combatants. He ignored that. He did not know how to command them,” recalls a former combatant (LH006).

An unspecified number of *milicias* joined the leaders of the breakaway faction, along with some leaders from the 10th Front’s local support networks. Their financial, political, and logistical knowledge proved invaluable (LH002; LJ003; LH004; LH006; S115; S117; S119). “The people who support Jerónimo have known each other all their lives. They were relatives, *compadres*. Those ties provided Jerónimo privileged information,” tells one social leader (S117; S118; S119). The *milicias* kept long-standing ties to external actors and illicit economies, as noted above. They knew which productive sectors and individuals to “tax” or extort, the location of weapons and money caches on both sides of the border, and the properties of demobilised mid-level commanders (LH002; LH003; LH006; S115; S119). For example, “Very early on, in 2017, they started smuggling with marijuana. Then came cocaine,” tells one social leader (S115). Local leaders¹⁰⁸ aligned with Jerónimo also knew which grassroots organisations sided with [name redacted #4]. This knowledge translated into intelligence for the breakaway faction and, in turn, undermined [name redacted #4] and his supporters’ political aspirations in Arauca through threats and assassinations (S117; S119). “Those same people and the breakaways were the first to put [name redacted #4] and his people on a death list,” explains another social leader (S117; S115; S119).

6.2.2 Counterinsurgency

State-led violence intensified after 2002 following the failed Caguán peace process (Section 5.1.3). In Arauca, initially under a state of exception between 2002 and 2003, operations against the 10th Front targeted its urban and local support networks (González, 2012; CNMH, 2014; CTC, 2022). Former combatants acknowledge that the 10th Front was severely weakened by desertions, infiltrations, electronic warfare, the capture and killing of mid-level commanders and rank-and-file members (LH001; LH002; LH003; LH005; LH006; LH014;

¹⁰⁸ Research respondents and informal conversations indicate that in 2017 members of the 10th Front local support networks met in Colombia and Venezuela with emissaries from other breakaway factions to discuss an alliance (S115; S119; Field notes, August 2022, October 2022).

LH017; S116), and paramilitary groups, which the FARC-EP and ELN contained (CTC, 2022, 142).

Why, then, is counterinsurgency important, and how did it contribute to the 10th Front's low-proportion fragmentation? The evidence suggests that leadership decapitation and local disembedding (two observable implications of counterinsurgency) ultimately contributed to [name redacted #4]'s leadership and this secondary group's subordination to the peace process. At the same time, however, counterinsurgency also contributed to the detachment of *milicianos*, showing it can have multiple, contradictory effects (Álvarez-Vanegas, 2026).

On the one hand, decapitation contributed to the consolidation of [name redacted #4]'s leadership. In 2012, the army captured Misael, 10th Front number two, after bombing a camp that killed between 40 and 50 rebels (LH002; LH003; LH006; LH017; Génesis, XIX, 143). That year, the 10th Front underwent a leadership renewal with [name redacted #4]'s arrival, which created tensions with Misael (Section 6.1.2.3). With Misael out of the picture — namely, without an “experienced mid-level commander always eager to be number one” (LH003) — [name redacted #4] faced less resistance and competition within this secondary group. He consolidated the new leadership after the war with the ELN and during the Havana peace talks.

Misael's capture, however, deepened the fracture between the newly appointed 10th Front leadership and the *milicias*. They continued detaching because of the disruption of their vertical ties with Misael, in addition to their rejection of [name redacted #4]'s disciplinary measures (Section 6.1.2.3). The *milicias*' distrust of [name redacted #4] worsened after Misael's capture (LH004; LH005; S115; S119) because they no longer had anyone to liaise with in that secondary group. An unspecified number of *milicianos* remained clandestine in the region or relocated to other parts of Colombia and Venezuela, as noted in Section 6.2.1 (LH003; LH004; LH005; LH006; S115; S118; S119). Following the 2016 peace accord, some moved to the reintegration cantonment to be recognised as FARC-EP members, but [name redacted #4] rejected and excluded them. As I show in the next section, this contributed to their joining the breakaway faction.

On the other hand, counterinsurgency also aimed at the 10th Front's urban and local support networks, though local disembedding, contributing to their detachment. State forces infiltrated and intercepted communications, conducted arbitrary detentions and mass arrests, committed forced disappearances and extrajudicial executions, restricted mobility (S115; S116;

CNMH, 2014; CTC, 2022). Notably, research respondents and secondary sources indicate that in the Arauca Department, the ELN collaborated with the Colombian army against the FARC-EP (Section 6.1.2.2), effectively making the ELN part of the counterinsurgency strategy. For example, they shared intelligence on the 10th Front's camp locations as well as on the identities of *milicianos* and members of local support networks (S115; S116; S119). Thus, simultaneously fighting the ELN between 2005 and 2010—with social, political, and military repercussions (Section 6.1.2)—and the Colombian state throughout the 2000s and 2010s was devastating for the 10th Front (LH003; LH006; S115; S116). This may have contributed to the subordination of the majority of the 10th Front under [named redacted #4]'s leadership, contributing to low-proportion fragmentation. The end of the war with the ELN in 2010 and the “Pact of Coexistence” (Section 6.1.2.2) did not prevent *milicianos* from fleeing to Venezuela or from refusing to return to Arauca out of fear of ELN retaliation (S115; S116; S118; S119).

Just as counterinsurgency and [name redacted #4]'s dismissal of local networks and populations with long-standing ties to the 10th Front contributed to the detachment of *milicianos* and the disenfranchisement of local support bases, specific provisions of the 2016 peace accord further exacerbated this situation. In the following section, I present evidence to this effect.

6.2.3 Peace Process

One provision of the 2016 peace accord was the reincorporation lists¹⁰⁹. Evidence shows that mid-level commanders had discretion to include or exclude FARC-EP members based on several criteria: effective participation as combatants or *milicianos*, loyalty to the organisation (e.g., not deserting or informing while in prison), and attendance at pedagogy meetings. According to respondents (S102; S113; S121; S130; S146), this provision rested on two principles: discretion and temporality. Discretion meant that local FARC-EP leaders in each cantonment were responsible for drawing up the lists; temporality referred to the 180-day

¹⁰⁹ “The FARC-EP, via a delegate expressly appointed for that purpose, shall submit to the National Government a list of all of the members of the FARC-EP. This list shall be received and accepted by the National Government in good faith, in accordance with the principle of legitimate expectations, not withstand the corresponding verifications. In drawing up this list, the FARC-EP shall be responsible for the veracity and accuracy of the information contained therein (...) For the purposes of accreditation, once the FARC-EP has submitted the list of all members which make up its organization, including the milicias, the National Government shall begin the process of reviewing and corroborating the information contained therein.” (OACP, Peace Agreement, 2017, p. 74).

deadline to complete them. In practice, however, even when members met these criteria, mid-level commanders sometimes excluded them for personal reasons or because they lacked knowledge of the FARC-EP's history in their assigned regions—decisions that fuelled the emergence of the breakaway faction. This case and Case Study Three (Section 7.x) illustrate this reality. Unlike Case Study One, the data does not return evidence on whether the disarmament provisions contributed to fragmentation. This shows that different observable implications of the peace process perform across the case studies.

In the case of the 10th Front, [name redacted #4] played a crucial role. He excluded *milicianos* and formerly imprisoned members of the organisation (e.g., Jerónimo) from the reincorporation lists. As cantonment coordinator, he had the discretion to include or exclude combatants, *milicianos*, and those released from prison. However, as detailed in sections 6.1.4.2 and 6.1.4.3, he misread both the 10th Front's operational environment and the importance of its urban networks. In particular, *milicianos* detached from the 10th Front to work with Grannoble, remained in hiding in Colombia and Venezuela during or after the war with the ELN out of fear of retaliation, and relocated to other regions of Colombia and Venezuela after [name redacted #4] assumed command in 2011 — whom they considered illegitimate—and following Misael's capture in 2012. “The preparation of the lists relied on the discretion of the commander and his advisors. This discretion systematically resulted in the exclusion of individuals who should have been included. As a consequence, there was a surplus of *milicianos* left unaccounted for,” tells a research participant (S102; S101; S113; S130; S147). In consequence, an unspecified number of *milicianos* joined Jerónimo and others who led the breakaway faction.

Former combatants and local leaders recall: “Many people started to show up, saying *I am from the 10th*. But [name redacted #4] did not know them because he arrived late in the region. Some comrades, however, confirmed: *Yes, he was from our unit. They left when the command changed in 2011*. [name redacted #4] did not accept them. Many were left out” (S115; LH006; S116). This was also the case for *milicianos* who had gone to Venezuela for medical treatment or for security reasons after the war with the ELN; some of them also joined the breakaway faction (LH006; S116). Rivalries between [name redacted #4] and Misael also took a toll on the reincorporation lists. “On day, I saw between ten and twelve *milicianos* arriving at the cantonment. They have been with Misael for years, but [name redacted #4] refused to accept

them due to his bad blood with him. Some ended up with Jerónimo,” tells a local leader (S119; S116).

Exploring the paths that *milicianos* followed before and during the peace process—resulting from both internal and external dynamics of the 10th Front—shows that their rejection was not temporarily confined to the peace process itself. According to former combatants and local leaders, [name redacted #4], in 2016-17, accused *milicianos* of being “undisciplined,” “deserters,” and “traitors” (S115; S116; S119), for refusing to obey him after he assumed command of the 10th Front in 2011. *Milicianos* did not cease being FARC-EP members, “something that [name redacted #4] did not understand”, according to informal conversations with some who did not join Jerónimo¹¹⁰. Illegitimacy played an important role. They did not recognise and trust [name redacted #4] for “fracturing” the 10th Front upon his arrival (LH006; S115), how he treated Misael (who liaised with the *milicias*), and for being an “outsider” and “stranger,” as I show in Section 6.1.4.3. As a local leader puts it, “For [name redacted #4], it was inconceivable that *milicianos* had left and wanted to be on the lists. Following their rejection, they left and joined the breakaway faction” (S116)¹¹¹.

A similar situation unfolded with combatants released from prison under the terms of the peace agreement. [name redacted #4] rejected several, including Jerónimo, citing his conduct as leader of the 56th Front, before the peace process, and his time in prison (Section 6.1.4.3). For [name redacted #4], imprisonment itself meant indiscipline for having been captured, or treason for desertion. Former combatants acknowledged the difficulty of accepting those who had deserted or fraternised with paramilitaries. However, excluding them fuelled resentment, contributing to low-proportion fragmentation with implications for the security of ex-combatants. Some research respondents witnessed, “Jerónimo arriving in the cantonment to be included on the lists. When [name redacted #4] saw him, he shoved him out, yelling, *you are a paramilitary, you are nobody here, go away!*” (S119; LH006; S115). Another reflects: “The exclusion of those who left prison and *milicianos* led to significant resentment. [name redacted #4] made a serious mistake. We were also pressed for time,” referencing the 180-day deadline for the lists. Given the distrust toward [name redacted #4], that window was far too

¹¹⁰ Field notes, August and October 2022.

¹¹¹ Informally, ex-*milicianos* note that as conflicts over the lists escalated, [name redacted #4] deepened the wartime divisions between those who had arrived with him from the Meta Department (Section 6.1.2.3) and those who opposed his leadership or aligned with Misael. Moreover, he may have shown favouritism in distributing material goods and in assigning responsibilities for the cantonment coordination. Field note, August 2022.

short to reconnect with all members. As one put it: “[name redacted #4] never fully grasped the scale of the people he had in the 10th Front” (S119; LH004, LH006; S115; S116).

Discussion

One of the central insights of this chapter is that the observable implications of existing explanations in the literature — both internal and external to the 10th Front, and both endogenous and exogenous to the peace process — perform on two levels. On the one hand, they help us understand the low-proportion fragmentation in this case study. Discipline is one example. After the two internal crises, the Eastern Bloc implemented multiple measures to address indiscipline and rearrange the leadership of this secondary group. These measures backfired because they affected the integrity of the 10th Front, contributing to a progressive detachment of *milicianos*. Arcesio Niño faced internal resistance from Misael. Grannoble sabotaged his plans by creating patronage networks with *milicianos*. The war with the ELN and [name redacted #4]'s intentions to encamp them ultimately alienated them even more. In addition, counterinsurgency (arrests and killings of mid-level commanders who liaised with the *milicias*) accelerates their detachment but also paves the way for [name redacted #4] to consolidate its leadership and minimise internal dissent. These control mechanisms also split the 10th Front local support networks during the peace process, mediated by [name redacted #4]'s commandership illegitimacy and his post-demobilisation political aspiration. The same occurs with the peace agreement provisions. [name redacted #4] excludes *milicianos* and formerly imprisoned mid-level commanders from reincorporation lists. In the case of the latter, had I not explored their trajectories, I would not have identified the sources of their illegitimacy and why combatants did not join them, thus contributing to low-proportion fragmentation. Case Study Three demonstrates that the adoption of disciplinary measures, such as appointing new leaders, also backfired, contributing to fragmentation.

On the other hand, observable implications of existing explanations in the literature also help us identify cohesion in favour of the peace agreement as the only path forward for the 10th Front. Breaking away was not feasible considering the social, political and military repercussion of the war with the ELN, despite the availability of material resources and ties to external actors in Colombia and Venezuela. Likewise, [name redacted #4]'s commandership legitimacy contributed to fostering cohesion and discipline in favour of the peace accord among armed combatants in the 10th Front — unlike among urban and support networks, which also

show why they joined the breakaway faction leaders. Subordination to organisational-level rules and decisions regarding peace, as well as to the 10th Front leadership responsible for transmitting them, also contributed to low-proportion fragmentation. In Case Study One, I demonstrate that subordination to the parent secondary group (Eastern Bloc) and the organisation transforms as a result of leadership renewal and whether new leaders are deemed legitimate. These transformations have implications for strong intra-secondary group cohesion and groupthink against the peace process, and high-proportion fragmentation.

The insights that follow from these materials contribute to our understanding of the processes of fragmentation and cohesion. They support my organizationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion and its four pillars, which I outline in Chapter 3 and further elaborate on in Chapters 9 and 10. First, by disaggregating, I show that fragmentation varies both in proportion (low) and in where it occurs within the organisation, led by formerly imprisoned members of the organisation, with the support of members of urban and local support networks. Second, adopting a longer approach — before and during the peace process — helps us better understand how observable implications of existing explanations in the literature can be both endogenous and exogenous to the Havana negotiations. For example, when [name redacted #4] dismisses the social embeddedness of the 10th Front, he is ignoring the history and trajectories of the FARC-EP in Arauca. Rooted in the 1970s and 1980s, they are to a great extent mediated by their vertical ties with the local population and their networks, which, in turn, shape the organisational traits of this secondary group. Third, fragmentation and cohesion coexist. This case study shows that there is intra-secondary group fragmentation, albeit low, and cohesion in favour of the peace process. Lastly, the mechanisms I build in this case — *detachment and split* and *dismissal and exclusion* — which I elaborate on in Chapter 9, demonstrate that there are case-specific paths toward the observable outcome, as in Case Study One.

In the next chapter, Case Study Three, I present evidence on the *Columna Móvil Daniel Aldana* or CMDA, which is a case of mixed fragmentation: high within urban networks but low among rural cadres.

Chapter 7: Case Study Three. Mobile Column *Daniel Aldana* (CMDA) Not Truly One, but Truly Two¹¹²: Fragmentation in Urban Networks and Rural Local Units

The FARC should not have turned their backs on us
-Former CMDA *miliciano*, Bogotá, July 2025

They remained Rastrojos, wearing FARC armbands
-Local leader, Tumaco, October 2022

It's disheartening and frustrating for someone who spent 20 years working in their area to suddenly be told they can't do anything anymore — that Romaña, the new boss, someone who just arrived and knows nothing about the place, will now be in charge.
-Former combatant, Tumaco, October 2022

The emergence of the breakaway factions from the *Columna Móvil Daniel Aldana* (CMDA) stems from two coexisting organizational attributes within this secondary group: its urban networks and rural units. The quotes above illustrate these dynamics. The first two quotes capture the urban dimension — specifically, the recruitment of former members of *Los Rastrojos*¹¹³ as members of their urban networks or *milicianos* in Tumaco¹¹⁴ and other towns along Nariño's Pacific coast. This marked a turning point in the CMDA. "This group went from being a cohesive, mostly rural plus some *milicianos*, to incorporating these new members — a loose cannon that never truly fit into the Daniel Aldana," (S140) illustrates a local leader. After defeating *Los Rastrojos*, the CMDA recruited the new *milicianos* without undergoing formal socialization or political and ideological training. These *milicianos*, nonetheless, served the strategic goals of the CMDA: territorial control in urban areas and revenue generation. However, during the final stages of the peace process, they became a source of contention and embarrassment for the newly appointed CMDA leadership and the FARC-EP top echelons. Following internal purges, disciplinary measures, and rejection by the new CMDA leadership, these urban networks fragmented in high proportion into two armed groups in 2016: *Gente del*

¹¹² I borrow this from *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* by Robert Louise Stevenson.

¹¹³ Armed group that began operating in 2006 following the partial demobilization and subsequent fragmentation of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC, by its Spanish acronym). It took control of some urban areas formerly held by the AUC, including neighbourhoods in Tumaco. However, due to clashes with the CMDA between 2010 and 2012, internal violence, and state intervention, *Los Rastrojos* lost power, and many of their members ended up joining the FARC-EP as *milicianos* (Rocha, 2014; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018).

¹¹⁴ A coastal city and Colombia's second most important port in the Pacific.

Orden-Guerrillas Unidas del Pacífico (GO-GUP) and *Gente del Orden 2.0* (GO 2.0) (Figure 7.1). Both were led by urban network leaders who had become increasingly detached from the CMDA, pursuing personal projects tied to illicit economies, and who had served as street-level leaders (*jefes de barrio*) for *Los Rastrojos* until 2012.

The third quote highlights tensions in the CMDA's rural strongholds. During the final stages of the peace process, efforts by the FARC-EP's commanders to reassert control over the CMDA, by appointing a new leadership that engaged in deals with local drug lords, alienated rural local cadres. This discontent led to the formation, between 2016 and early 2017, of the *Frente Oliver Sinisterra* (FOS). In this case, fragmentation is low at the level of mid-level rural commanders and rank-and-file (Figure 7.1).

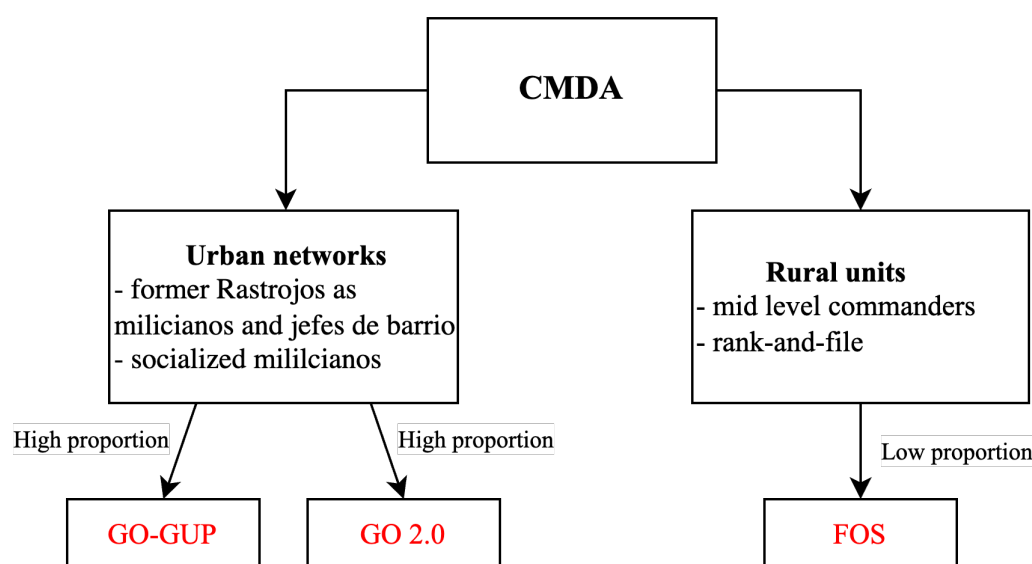


Figure 7.1 Fragmentation – Case Study Three: CMDA

The CMDA is a case of mixed fragmentation: high-proportion at the level of urban networks and low at the level of rural mid-level commanders and rank-and-file. On the one hand, I provide evidence that mismanaged recruitment of former *Rastrojos*, lack of political education and ideological indoctrination, disciplinary measures, 2016 peace accord provisions, and the social embeddedness and ties to patronage networks of *milicianos* contributed to high-proportion fragmentation. On the other hand, I demonstrate that social embeddedness, disciplinary measures, commandship illegitimacy at the secondary group level and patronage networks contributed to low-proportion fragmentation. An analysis of how these existing explanations in the literature perform before and during the peace process allows us to identify

the specific combinations of observable implications that form *instrumental incorporation* and *personal agendas and threat* mechanisms — high fragmentation (Sections 9.1.3.1 and 9.1.3.2) — and the *betrayal and discontent* and the *bypassing and personal agendas* mechanisms — low fragmentation (Sections 9.1.3.3 and 9.1.3.4). I also present evidence on the subordination on the subordination of the CMDA and other troops to the peace process, highlighting the coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion at the secondary-group level.

The evidence in this chapter stems from five life history interviews with former combatants — two from the CMDA and three from other FARC-EP units — 16 semi-structured interviews with elite and third-sector actors, field notes from informal conversations, and additional empirical materials. As I detail in the Research Design Chapter, I selected participants based on their knowledge of the internal and external dynamics of the CMDA, its parent secondary group (Western Bloc), and the broader operational environment. However, locating former CMDA combatants proved far more challenging than in other cases. Many had joined breakaway factions or scattered across the country, and most whom I reached out to decline to participate, preferring to discuss their lives after laying down their arms. Some had demobilised from GO-GUP, GO 2.0, or FOS, but the Colombian Reincorporation Agency provided no support. Others were imprisoned or appearing before the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), and their lawyers advised against interviews — except for one (LH028 hereafter). Due to these difficulties, much of the data in this chapter relies on semi-structured interviews with elite and third-sector research participants and secondary materials. Of particular importance are the JEP proceedings, which have prioritised the CMDA's area of operations. In 2023, one year after I conducted fieldwork in Tumaco, the JEP issued a ruling on the FARC-EP in Nariño. This document is central to the chapter, as it helps triangulate the evidence on observable implications discussed in the existing literature (e.g., recruitment or the CMDA's violence against Afro-Colombian communities).

The CMDA remains a deeply sensitive topic within former FARC-EP members. For example, one who operated in Nariño and Cauca informally says, “Asking about *Daniel Aldana* is a problem for us. That unit caused a lot of trouble — it targeted the Afro-Colombian population, recruited paramilitaries as *milicianos*, and was fully involved in the cocaine business. The U.S. is still after some of them,” tells informally an ex-combatant¹¹⁵. The CMDA is also subject to an internal pact of silence. “It was the cash cow for much of the organisation.

¹¹⁵ Field note, Bogotá, July 2022.

It supported our strategic goals near the Ecuador border and financed operations. But it was more contaminated by *narcos* than any other unit.” What emerges from these exchanges is a sense of “enforced silence”¹¹⁶ surrounding the CMDA. Not only did members of its leadership continue in breakaway factions, rearmed¹¹⁷ or die in military operations¹¹⁸, but some were extradited to the U.S.¹¹⁹ According to messages I exchanged with former leader of the Western Bloc, the CMDA is only addressed in formal settings — namely, before the JEP or in conversations with victims¹²⁰. At the time of these exchanges, while I was conducting fieldwork in Colombia, Rambo (CMDA's commander from 2000 to 2015) conceded interviews to national media. He deemed Timochenko, FARC-EP's last number one, “a traitor” for questioning his loyalty to the organisation ([BluRadio, 2022](#)). All of this underscores the contentious nature of researching the CMDA.

This chapter proceeds in three sections. First, I provide a brief historical context of the CMDA. In the second, I examine internal and external dynamics that contribute to high- and low-proportion fragmentation. Finally, I briefly discuss the findings in this chapter, highlighting the mechanisms that lead to both observable outcomes in this case study.

Historical Context

In 1999, the FARC-EP established the CMDA, initially known as the *Llanos del Yarí* Column, after the Yarí region in Caquetá. After a year moving through Huila, Cauca, and Putumayo, the group settled in Nariño's lowlands between Barbacoas and Tumaco. There, the Western Bloc commander appointed Rambo — then leading the 8th Front in Cauca — as its leader. The column was renamed Daniel Aldana in honour of Iván Darío Suaza (“Daniel Aldana”), a FARC-EP combatant killed by police that same year (S139; S140; S142; Génesis, XXXIV, 2017, 65-67). The CMDA emerged amid intensifying state pressure from counterinsurgency campaigns in the east and the launch of Plan Colombia¹²¹. Its creation also

¹¹⁶ Field note, Bogotá, July 2025.

¹¹⁷ For example, Romaña, whom I reference throughout this chapter. After leaving Tumaco in November 2017, due to security reasons, he returned to the region where he had operated to continue his reincorporation process. However, in August 2019, he rearmed and became one of the leaders of the *Segunda Marquetalia*—at the time, the second most significant dissident faction, led by former top commanders and mid-level leaders of the FARC-EP. He was killed in Venezuela in 2022 during military operations. A similar case is that of El Tigre, one of the few urban network leaders socialised into the FARC-EP's political goals, norms and beliefs.

¹¹⁸ Guacho, first leader of the FOS.

¹¹⁹ Rambo, CMDA top leader from 2000 to 2015. He was extradited to the U.S. in 2022.

¹²⁰ Field notes, Bogotá, November 2022; October 2024; July 2025.

¹²¹ Binational initiative launched in 1999–2000 under Presidents Andrés Pastrana (Colombia) and Bill Clinton (U.S.) to combat drug trafficking and insurgency through military and social assistance, including the eradication

marked the FARC-EP's expansion into areas where it had lacked a sustained presence, including Alto and Bajo Mira and Frontera, in rural Tumaco (Vicepresidencia, 2009).

The CMDA was a secondary group linking the 29th Front in Nariño and Cauca with the Mariscal Sucre Mobile Column (CMMS), established in 2000. The region offered key geostrategic advantages. From the late 1990s, coca-growing peasants displaced by Plan Colombia settled, sparking conflicts with Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities. The CMDA backed settlers as part of its mass-organising strategy and regulated the expanding coca economy in the region from the 2000s on (García, 2011; Rodríguez, 2015; Aponte and Benavidez, 2016; JEP, 2023). The fraught relations with Afro-Colombian communities both before and during the peace process are key to understanding the adoption of disciplinary measures in 2015, contributing to high-proportion fragmentation (Section 7.1.3.1). Tumaco's natural corridors to the Pacific and Ecuador made it a hub for retreat, cocaine trafficking, and arms inflows (LH026; LH028; Génesis, XXXIV, 2017; JEP, 2023). The CMDA's interactions with external actors tied to illicit economies since 1980s also facilitated the emergence of the three breakaway factions (Figure 7.1).

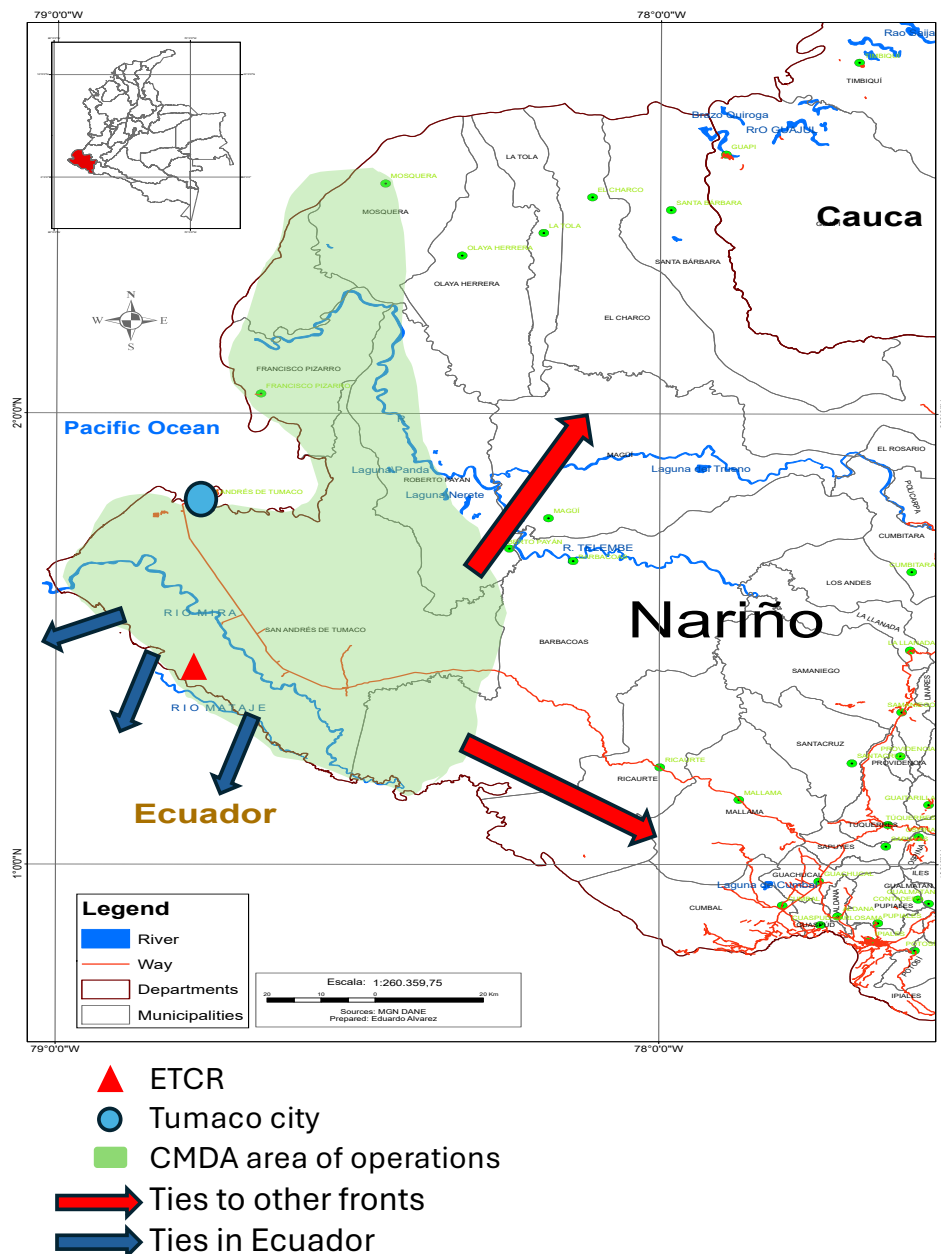
In the 2000s and 2010s, the CMDA consolidated its organisation and finances under Rambo, who established recruitment and finance commissions and gained commandship legitimacy among settlers. He brokered peace with the ELN¹²², fought off paramilitaries, and turned the CMDA into a major revenue source through drug trafficking, illegal mining, and extortion. By 2010–2012, however, the unit reached a turning point: entrenched in rural zones, it clashed with Los Rastrojos over Tumaco¹²³. After defeating them in 2012–2013, Rambo secured urban control by forcibly recruiting, displacing, or killing them and their families. These recruits, often ill-socialised into FARC-EP's norms and beliefs, marked a decisive shift in the CMDA's trajectory, critical for understanding high-proportion fragmentation at the level of urban networks in 2016–2017.

of illicit crops. Over time, the plan evolved, shifting its focus toward security, counterterrorism, and strengthening military and paramilitary forces, albeit with varying approaches to cocaine production. See Ramírez (2011) and Leal Buitrago (2006), among others.

¹²² As part of a broader agreement between the two guerrilla organizations in Colombia, similar to what happened between the 10th Front and the ELN in Arauca. See Case Study Two, Section 6.1.2.2.

¹²³ In 2000, AUC paramilitaries, coordinating with the army, traffickers, and local elites, advanced into the region (Verdad Abierta, 2009; Rocha, 2014). They clashed with the CMDA over cocaine production. The AUC seized urban centres, the coast, and *cristalizaderos* (facilities for processing cocaine), while the CMDA held foothills, rural areas, river corridors, and coca fields (García, 2011; Rocha, 2014).

During the final stages of the peace process, in 2015-16, the Western Bloc and FARC-EP leadership removed Rambo and appointed a new leadership to discipline the CMDA's *milicianos* and align them with the peace process. These disciplinary measures, however, had multiple implications, as in Case Study Two. They contributed to the CMDA fragmentation, for most rural units demobilised in 2017, while urban networks remained active. By late 2016 and into 2017, breakaway factions either allied (GO 2.0–FOS) or clashed (GUP against GO 2.0–FOS).



Internal and External Dynamics: Fragmentation of the CMDA

In this section, I present evidence on the observable implications of existing explanations in the literature that allow us to understand mixed fragmentation—the observable outcome in this case study. I demonstrate that they do not perform evenly across at the two levels of analysis where fragmentation occurs—urban networks and rural cadres. For example, mismanaged recruitment and lack of political education and ideological indoctrination—observable implications of socialization mechanisms—contribute to the fragmentation of *milicianos*. Commandership legitimacy and illegitimacy contributed to both fragmentation and cohesion. Likewise, transnational dynamics and illicit economies—which evolved before and during the peace process—contribute to the detachment of the *milicianos* and to within-secondary group competition between the newly appointed CMDA leadership (as of 2016) and its local on-the-ground commanders.

7.1 Internal Dynamics

During the final stage of the peace process in 2016, the Western Bloc, CMDA's parent group, implemented disciplinary measures that exposed socialisation failures among *milicianos*. In 2016, the FARC-EP sought to control and subordinate urban networks that, until 2012–2013, had been members of paramilitary groups. These measures included appointing a new CMDA leadership. These “unknown” and “not local leaders” purged urban networks from the CMDA and excluded them from the reincorporation lists (LH026; LH208), contributing to their detachment and the emergence of the GO-GUP and GO 2.0 (Figure 7.1). Thus, understanding the emergence of the two breakaway factions at the level of urban networks requires examining the interaction between discipline and the socialization dynamics (or lack thereof), both exogenous and endogenous to the peace process socialisation.

The CMDA's victory over *Los Rastrojos* between 2010 and 2012 was a turning point for this secondary group, as I show below. It incorporated members of *Los Rastrojos* between 2012 and 2013 as *milicianos* without relying on trust-based networks or well-known individuals and families, as in Case Studies One, Two and Four. Nevertheless, the CMDA instrumentalized their social embeddedness, extended families¹²⁴, and local knowledge in cities like Tumaco, among others. At the same time, former *Rastrojos* joined the CMDA driven

¹²⁴ On “extended family,” see Agier (1999), Wade (1993) and Arocha (1998), among others.

primarily by prestige, survival and instrumental reasons. Likewise, their recruitment bypassed rules for “popular” and “Bolivarian” *milicias* and omitted both political education and ideological indoctrination. In practice, they continued to operate as hitmen, or *sicarios*, and neighbourhood bosses or *jefes de barrio*.

7.1.1 From Foes to Comrades — or Mutual Benefit?

After the CMDA defeated *Los Rastrojos* in 2012-13, it incorporated most of their members as *milicianos* without educating and indoctrinating them into the FARC-EP's history, political goals, norms and beliefs (Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018; JEP, 2023). Unlike the recruitment of other CMDA members, especially in rural areas, mismanaged recruitment and poor socialisation of the former *Rastrojos* created weak ties with the CMDA leadership. Research respondents rarely refer to these individuals as “*milicianos*,” but rather as neighbourhood bosses or “*jefes de barrio*” (S105; S106; S108; S114; S139; S142; S146). This indicates an extension of what they had already been doing for *Los Rastrojos* and other armed groups. Moreover, these individuals lacked ideological motivations and had prior commitments with other actors before joining the FARC-EP (drug traffickers, emissaries of national and international cartels), making their socialisation even more taxing.

The recruitment of these individuals contrasted with that of rural troops and, exceptionally, a few *milicianos* who settled in Tumaco in the 2000s. During those years, the CMDA relied on kinship and trust-based networks. Its first combatants came from Meta, Caquetá, Putumayo, Cauca, and the Nariño highlands in the early 2000s (LH139; LH140). They were later joined by Bolivarian and popular militias, as well as coca-growing peasants displaced to Tumaco's foothills and lowlands by Plan Colombia in the late 1990s and 2000s (Rocha, 2014; Rodríguez, 2015) “to expand both their numbers and territorial presence” (LH143). These recruits supported CMDA's territorial and social control, including violence against Afro-Colombian communities resisting the FARC-EP (Section 7.2.1). In the 2000s, the CMDA also recruited displaced populations fleeing paramilitary groups, and Afro-Colombian *raspachines* working in coca fields (LH026; S140). This recruitment dynamic contributed to strong vertical ties between rural units and CMDA leadership, unlike those with former *Rastrojos*. Evidence suggest that their recruitment stemmed from mutual benefit.

The CMDA, following FARC-EP top echelons' orders (JEP, 2023), recruited these individuals to maintain territorial control of Tumaco's neighbourhoods and estuaries to move

cocaine to international markets (security for the departure of small boats loaded with cocaine; expand revenue sources (extortion, kidnappings); and consolidate control over urban areas or *barrios*. These decisions strengthened the CMDA's presence in both rural and urban Tumaco (Rocha, 2014; Rodríguez, 2015). During the 2000s, it operated mainly in rural Tumaco and Barbacoas, including rivers connecting the Western Andes foothills with the Pacific Ocean, and the border with Ecuador (S106; S139; S140; Rocha, 2014). The incorporation of ex-*Rastrojos* reinforced this rural-urban connection during the exploratory (2010–12) and early public (2012–16) phases of the Havana peace talks.

The CMDA leveraged former *Rastrojos* know-how it lacked in urban settings. For example, many continued working as *sicarios* under the CMDA. “Most were criminals who worked for the highest bidder, much like *Los Rastrojos*. That’s why they joined the FARC. They were delinquents, extortionists, hitmen, muggers,” tells a local leader (S141; S140; S142). The CMDA also relied on their street smarts and knowledge of Tumaco. “Rambo understood there was a highly valuable workforce for the Daniel Aldana — score-settling, intelligence — because they truly knew Tumaco” (LH146). In addition, the CMDA leveraged the extended families of former *Rastrojos*, mostly Afro-Colombian populations with large kinship (LH028; S105; S106; S139; S140; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018). Extended families facilitated the CMDA's urban control in Tumaco and other towns. Former combatants before the JEP acknowledge that through *milicianos* the CMDA “managed to control up to 90% of Tumaco’s neighbourhoods” (2023, 91). Likewise, those who led the breakaway factions at the urban networks level relied on these social endowments and local knowledge (Section 7.2.2).

Milicianos’ pre-CMDA trajectories and skills, combined with the lack of political education and ideological motivations, undermined their adherence to the CMDA. Local CMDA cadres and former *Rastrojos* reached informal arrangements, like allowing new *milicianos* to carry on with their parallel projects in exchange of control over neighbourhoods. “The CMDA commander controlled the former *Rastrojos* commander, and through him, the whole *Rastrojos* cell followed whatever orders Daniel Aldana gave” (S114). In practice, this was not always the case (S140). *Milicianos* kept other sources of income through contract killings, body disposals, and coca paste sales (S105; S106). “If someone wanted to kill or disappear someone, they’d call us... to the community, we weren’t FARC — we were *jefes de barrio*” (LH028). Some CMDA mid-level commanders even hired them for targeted killings

unrelated to the CMDA's mission. "A rural cadre paid a former *Rastrojo*, by then a *miliciano*, to kill a local merchant allegedly involved with one of his wives." (S139).

During the Havana peace talks—before the transitional justice tribunals were established—it is unclear whether all CMDA members knew about this instrumental use of the former *Rastrojos* for personal reasons. Nonetheless, ex-combatants before the JEP in 2023 admit that "the situation with the *milicianos* got out of hand," (JEP, 2023, 92). A research respondent recalls, "In 2016, when speaking with ex-combatants from the rural component of the CMDA, they started asking themselves, '*How did we allow people who used to be Rastrojos to live among us within the FARC?*' When asked if they had known, they would say, '*No, I had no idea*'" (S146; LH026; LH028). Yet, locals in Tumaco during the early 2010s noted that, unlike in rural units, the CMDA coordinated military operations and terrorist attacks with former *Rastrojos* — *milicianos* as of 2012 — such as the 2012 motorcycle bombing against the Tumaco police station, which killed 11 people and injured over 70 (BBC Mundo, 2012).

For former *Rastrojos*, joining the CMDA between 2012 and 2016 reflected a short-term, instrumental association shaped by three overlapping motivations: prestige — retaining their *jefes de barrio* status — survival — avoiding death or forced displacement at the hands of the CMDA — and self-interest, or personal agendas — maintaining ties to external actors in illicit economies and pursuing personal agendas.

They stayed on as neighbourhood bosses even after joining the CMDA. Between 2012 and 2013, "neighbourhoods remained impenetrable" (S105) to outsiders, including state authorities. "It was because of *milicianos*, even though everyone knew they had been *Rastrojos*" (S106). These *jefes de barrio* worked for the CMDA while still running micro-trafficking plazas, confining residents, and committing sexual violence (S105; S106; S140; S142; Defensoría 2013, 2014; Rocha, 2014). As one ex-combatant puts it, "The CMDA used us to plant bombs, gather intelligence, and kill people. What we did is also the FARC's responsibility" (LH028).

Rambo, CMDA's leader, ordered the recruitment, killing, or displacement of members of *Los Rastrojos*, especially their neighbourhood leaders (LH028; S104; S105; S106; S108; S114; S140; S146; Álvarez-Vanegas & Restrepo, 2017; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018; JEP, 2023). He did so following orders from the FARC-EP top echelons (JEP, 2023), which shows that it was not an autonomous decision. A local leader recalls: "The *Rastrojos*' *jefes de barrio* who

stayed had to join the FARC—they were told, ‘*If you want to die, we will kill you; if you want to leave Tumaco, leave; or if not, join us,*’ by the leaders of Daniel Aldana” (S105; S114; S142; S143). A former combatant confirmed this was not an individual choice: “We weren’t just individuals; we were Black families. In my house, 12 children lived, 10 becoming *milicianos* after being *Rastrojos*. Decisions weren’t personal — they were collective, family matters” (LH028; S143). Even after the CMDA defeated *Los Rastrojos*, locals anticipated further struggles for Tumaco, leaving those aged 15–30 particularly vulnerable: “For ex-*Rastrojos*, it was survival without ideology” (S140), tells a local leader. Another adds: “The youth were left exposed, and the FARC knew how to exploit that” (S105)¹²⁵.

Besides the CMDA, other armed groups also posed a threat to the soon-to-be *milicianos*. As one ex-combatant recalls, “We had to join *la Daniel Aldana* because at least Rambo promised to respect our lives and those of our families. Other groups, like the *Águilas Negras*, were after us, and the police were cracking down as well” (LH028; LH26; S105; S106; S139; S141; S142; Rocha, 2014; Rodríguez, 2015; Aponte & Benavides, 2016; JEP, 2023). These groups had formed from the fragmentation and remobilisation of actors following the AUC’s demobilisation in 2005 (Defensoría del Pueblo, 2005; Vicepresidencia, 2009; Rocha, 2014; Rodríguez, 2015).

Research participants note that beyond survival, these individuals’ trajectories were shaped by switching sides to whoever offered the best financial deal. “Did the FARC-EP pay you?” I ask to a former *milicianos*, “Yes, we had a salary and some extra money for jobs I can’t talk about,” (LH028; S105; S139; S146). Until 2012, they had been part of *Los Rastrojos*, and some had previously worked for the AUC (Rocha, 2014; JEP, 2023). “The dream of many of these young men was to be *jefes de barrio*, not leaders of an armed group. That was their real motivation!” (S141), showing that prestige also drove their joining of the CMDA. Transitioning from *Los Rastrojos* to the CMDA helped them maintain their status as *jefes de barrio*, along with their ties to drug trafficking and local sales networks. “The difference,” one participant notes, “was that [as of 2013] they had to report to the CMDA liaison and pay quotas from drug sales and extortion” (S106). Yet, they continued to act independently under the FARC-EP banner. “The problem,” another participant explains, “was that if someone reported

¹²⁵ See also *Defensoría del Pueblo*, IR-027 (2012) and NS-007 (2014).

them to the CMDA, the commanders wouldn't discipline or sanction that *jefe* because the FARC depended on him to maintain control in that neighbourhood" (S140).

The recruitment of former *Rastrojos* had multiple, contradictory effects. It provided short-term mutual benefits, as I show above. Likewise, recruiting these individuals without socialising them into the history, political goals, ideas and beliefs of the FARC-EP had implication for their lack of political education and ideological indoctrination. Both became salient during the peace process and upon the signing of the 2016 peace accord, with implications for high-proportion fragmentation, as I show in the following section.

7.1.2 Whose Milicianos? Ill-educated and Ill-indoctrinated

Between 2012 and 2016, former *Rastrojos* were not socialised to internalise the history, broader political goals and normative commitments of the FARC-EP, nor unlike the CMDA's rural troops. The lack of political education and ideological indoctrination, which Rambo acknowledged before the JEP after he demobilised (2023, 91), undermined their bonds with the CMDA from the moment the joined this secondary group (S114), as well as their behaviour toward civilians and commitment and subordination to the peace process.

The priorities of both the CMDA and the former *Rastrojos*, as discussed above, likely contributed to the absence of political education and indoctrination. For these recruits, the shift from *Rastrojos* to CMDA *miliciano* was less a rupture than a continuum. The evidence indicates that CMDA leadership did not send former *Rastrojos* to camps for receiving political education. "They didn't even do basic drills" (S106), or "sent to the camps in Cauca" as the rural cadres (S140), note two local leaders, and another adds: "Rambo didn't impose rules on the urban networks in Tumaco the way he did with the combat units, which had been with him since the early 2000s. *Milicianos* were simply a continuation of what already existed, and they kept recruiting uneducated teenagers and even children" (S108). Without political education, the new *milicianos* acted much as they had under *Los Rastrojos* — pursuing their own projects, without showing commitment to the CMDA or adherence to FARC-EP norms and political goals, either for the war or peace. "Their only knowledge was how to shoot, control neighbourhoods' entry and exit points, and handle coca base paste shipments... When Rambo recruited them, the only 'training' was: 'Take control of that neighbourhood — you'll control it as a FARC *miliciano*'" (S139; S140; S141). They also ignored FARC-EP principles of clandestinity, unlike the other case studies. "They were hitmen working for the FARC-EP.

Everyone knew who they were” (S114). Notably, Rambo acknowledged before the JEP that *milicianos* “acted with considerable autonomy in decisions over the control of neighbourhoods” (JEP, 2023, 91). In sum, their wartime trajectories — exogenous to the peace process and external to the FARC-EP — interacted with the mismanaged recruitment and lack of political education — internal to the FARC-EP and exogenous to the peace process.

Data shows undisciplined behaviour is an observable implication of lack of political education. “A *miliciano* is expected to behave a certain way toward comrades and civilians. Those who had been *Rastrojos* kept using drugs, spending time in brothels, and were addicted” (S106). Rural units serve as a point of comparison: “Local rural units had received military and political education. You’d see them engaging in political work with their social base, holding meetings, organising activities, and resolving community conflicts. That’s 101 FARC’s mass work” (S140; S108). In contrast, former *Rastrojos*, “Spent money and guarded the invisible borders between neighbourhoods. They remained *jefes* pretending to be rebels — all they knew was how to pull the trigger” (S106), to which another local leader adds: “They’d show up with whiskey, throw parties with drugs and prostitutes — I saw it myself, and no one could do anything because they were *jefes de barrio*” (S105). S141; S142; JEP, 2023).

According to Section 7.1.3, the FARC-EP and the CMDA leadership faced the difficult task of how to handle undisciplined *milicianos* in 2015 and 2016 (LH026; LH028; S105; S106; JEP, 2023). The CMDA killed some and later attempted to encamp others in the Tumaco reincorporation cantonment. But later rejected them for having been *Rastrojos*, contributing to high-proportion fragmentation. By the signing of the 2016 peace agreement, they had only four years in the FARC-EP and were never thoroughly socialised. Locals in Tumaco and other towns also note that it was unclear whether they were fully incorporated, like rural units and long-standing urban *milicianos* or in reality were doing side jobs for on-the-ground commanders



The lack of political education persisted into the 2016 peace accord. Ill-socialised *milicianos* not only displayed lack of discipline and restraint toward civilians, which prompted disciplinary measures (Section 7.1.3.1.2). Also, a lack of commitment to the organisation's broader political goals. They were the same who, “Early in 2015, began saying they wouldn’t participate in any peace process” (S146; S106). Locals also note that the former *Rastrojos* had hardly any knowledge of the Havana peace talks. This suggests that they did not receive political education about the peace process through pedagogical tools—unlike rural cadres and

members of the organisation in Case Studies One, Two, and Four. “You’d talk to them, and they didn’t care at all about Havana,” (S105).

In addition to lack of political education, the evidence indicates *milicianos* were not socialized into the FARC-EP’s beliefs and ideas to dampen their prior commitments and individual goals in favour with the organisation’s peace-related goals. “It was hard to understand how well-known sicarios in Tumaco, once hunted by the CMDA, suddenly became *milicianos*. They didn’t believe in the cause — just that the FARC had tried to kill them. In the end, they had to grin and bear it,” tells a local leader (S139). They maintained their prior commitments to external drug trafficking and local criminal networks and prioritized their standing as *jefes de barrio*. “They remained *Rastrojos*, wearing FARC armbands,” another illustrates (S114; S105; S106; S108). Moreover, the CMDA did not ensure former *Rastrojos* to undergo ideological indoctrination to align their preexisting commitments to those the FARC-EP for both war and peace. Even former combatants of the CMDA and the Western Bloc have acknowledged this before the JEP (2023). Likewise, Rambo kept the *milicianos* apart from rural units because he “didn’t want to contaminate them” (S146). A former combatant recalls: “When we went to the cantonment, first there was surprise because no one knew us, and then rejection, because we had been *paracos* [paramilitaries]” (LH028; LH026; S106; S108). This suggests that the incorporation of former *Rastrojos* may have been kept among the CMDA and leadership.

In 2016, Colombian President Santos and Timochenko, the leader of the FARC-EP, signed the peace agreement and shook hands, symbolically ending the war. But in Tumaco, the *milicias* had not been socialized into a “commonality of identification and beliefs” (Verweijen, 2019) that no longer involved continuing the war but instead laying down their arms. “They didn’t even know who Manuel Marulanda was, had no idea about agrarian reform, didn’t know the leaders of the Western Bloc. They had no clue what was happening in Cuba. They had barely even heard of Rambo,” recalls a research participant (S105). In other words, this new commitment—peace—was alien to them. Some (those who formed GO 2.0) eventually went to the reincorporation cantonment, where the new CMDA leadership ultimately rejected them (Sections 7.1.3.2 and 7.2.3).

Mismanaged recruitment, not followed by political education and ideological indoctrination, created a grey area — an ambiguous status — for the former *Rastrojos* in the CMDA. This ambiguity highlights the interactions between their wartime trajectories, before

joining the FARC-EP, and the group's failure or conscious decision not to implement socialisation mechanisms, privileging instrumental reasons. It also highlights the former *Rastrojos*' weak ties and limited integration into the CMDA, making them one of the most detached components of the CMDA. In the final stages of the peace process, the FARC-EP adopted disciplinary measures aimed at the CMDA, which had multiple effects—ultimately contributing to the detachment and the high-proportion fragmentation into two breakaway factions.

7.1.3 Discipline

In 2015 and 2016, the FARC-EP and the Western Bloc implemented two disciplinary measures over the CMDA. In 2015, following the assassination of Genaro García, a prominent Afro-Colombian leader, the Western Bloc removed Rambo and appointed a new leadership under Leonel and Yesid to reassert control over urban networks and secure the subordination of mid-level rural commanders to the peace process. It also involved purging undisciplined *milicianos*, which contributed to their detachment and, ultimately, the emergence of the first breakaway faction in 2016: GO-GUP (Figure 7.1).

The second measure was the replacement of the CMDA's provisional leadership with Romaña, appointed by the FARC-EP top echelon in late 2016. His mission was to ensure the secondary group's subordination to the peace process and oversee the demobilisation and disarmament, including the preparation of the reincorporation lists. This second measure involved further internal purges, the exclusion of *milicianos* from the peace process, and internal competition between the new leadership and rural local cadres. It contributed to the consolidation of the first breakaway faction—GO-GUP—and the formation of a second breakaway group, also within urban networks—GO 2.0. Additionally, it led to the detachment of mid-level rural commanders, resulting in the emergence of the FOS.

Both disciplinary measures were decided in Havana by the FARC-EP and the Western Bloc leaders (S102; S121; S146). A former combatant of the Western Bloc leadership describes the CMDA in the following terms:

“A curse for the organisation — something nobody wants to talk about. On one hand, it fulfilled the goals we had set back in El Caguán when we created it (in 1999), and it became a critical source of funding during our *Plan Renacer*

(2008). But it deteriorated: its commanders turned into drug traffickers, recruited paramilitaries, and later tried to sneak narcos onto the demobilisation lists. The decision in Havana was that we had to take back control of the *Daniel Aldana*, especially after the killing of Genaro García. That was a major screw-up, and at the time, in 2016, we recognised it. Regaining control of that unit became essential.”¹²⁶

“Regaining control” captures the main goal of the two measures: reasserting command over *milicianos* and fostering cohesion and subordination to the peace agreement. In sum, “cleaning [the CMDA] up because it was heavily contaminated” (S146). In practice, however, leadership renewal in 2015 and 2016 had multiple effects at the secondary-group level, similar to Case Studies One and Two. In the CMDA, it ensured that a large portion of its mid-level commanders and rank-and-file laid down their arms and demobilised. At the same time, it contributed to the detachment of different segments of the urban networks or high-proportion fragmentation (measures 1 and 2) and rural mid-level commanders or low-proportion fragmentation (measure 2). In the following two sections, I examine both.

7.1.3.1 First Leadership Renewal

In August 2015, *milicianos* of the CMDA killed Genaro García, leader of the *Alto Mira y Frontera* Community Council¹²⁷. Evidence indicates the motive was his outspoken criticism of the peace agreement’s land restitution provisions (S106; S108; S146). Genaro’s opposition stemmed from tensions the peace agreement deepened land conflicts between coca-grower *campesinos* — who settled in the late 1990s — and Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities. His grievances clashed especially with *campesinos* displaced by Plan Colombia, many of whom cultivated coca and formed part of the CMDA’s social base (S106; S142; S143). In Havana, the FARC-EP negotiating team acknowledged that the CMDA was “involved in carrying out this reprehensible act” (FARC-EP, 2015). Months later, the FARC-EP rendered Genaro's assassination as “a violation of revolutionary discipline and ethics” (FARC-EP, 2015).

¹²⁶ Field note, Bogotá, July 2025. Also, S102; S104; S121; S146.

¹²⁷ Under Law 70 of 1993, a *Consejo Comunitario* is a legal entity representing an Afro-Colombian community with titular collective ownership over rural lands adjudicated to the group. *Consejos* are responsible for administering collective territories, allocating internal areas, protecting land rights, preserving cultural identity, sustainably managing natural resources, and mediating internal conflicts.

In 2023, transitional justice tribunals ruled on CMDA's responsibility for Genaro's killing (JEP, 2023, 122; 216).

Evidence indicates that Rambo ordered Genaro's killing on the allegation that he was "collaborating with the enemy [the Colombian army]" (JEP, 2023, 218; S108; S140). Informal conversations ¹²⁸ suggest campesino *colonos* (settlers) also pushed for his assassination, viewing his opposition to coca crops and land claims as a threat to land they already considered their own, despite it being Afro-Colombian and indigenous ancestral territory. Notably, it was not rank-and-file members of the CMDA's rural units who carried out the murder but *milicianos* who had previously been *Rastrojos*. Regardless, the responsibility fell on Rambo.

7.1.3.1.1 Leadership Renewal

As a result, the FARC-EP relieved Rambo and sent him to the Cauca Department, because "he was not exercising effective control or complying with the rules he had been given regarding the civilian population," says former member of the FARC-EP top echelons (JEP, 2023, 2018). He was sidelined for several days and replaced by Leonel Páez and Yesid Guevara (LH026; S106; S108; JEP, 2023, 217). Both were mid-level commanders. The former, commander of the Gabriel Galvis Mobile Column of the Arturo Ruíz Mobile Bloc, which operated in Cauca, Valle del Cauca, and Nariño, and participated in the Havana peace negotiations. The latter was in the leadership of the 8th Front of the Western Bloc, which operated between Cauca and Valle del Cauca (Génesis, XXIX and XXXIII, 2017).

Why did this control mechanism contribute to the emergence of breakaway factions within urban networks? The evidence suggests it was due to the mission assigned to the new commanders and its unintended consequences (S106; S108; S139; S142; S143). Their mission was to carry out the orders of the Western Bloc, focused on ensuring the cohesion of rural and urban units.

In July 2016, Leonel signed a statement declaring that the Daniel Aldana Front—by then no longer a column — condemned the First Front's breakaway (Case Study One) and reaffirmed its subordination to the peace process and the FARC-EP (2016). "Yesid knew the region; he and Rambo had served together in the 8th Front and had similar seniority" (S142; S106; S108). This continuity preserved Rambo's commandership legitimacy among rural units

¹²⁸ Field notes, Tumaco, October 2022; Bogotá, July 2022, July 2025.

and vertical ties with CMDA-aligned communities, since the new leaders arrived with a “conciliatory attitude” (S139). The challenge, however, lay in the urban networks. The provisional leadership was tasked with preventing crimes like Genaro García’s assassination and reasserting Western Bloc authority. As one commander reflected in Cuba, Genaro’s case revealed that “discipline in the Daniel Aldana had collapsed” (S146; S102).

7.1.3.1.2 Purges and the Birth of Gente del Orden (GO)

However, the urban networks remained beyond control. Former *Rastrojos* who sought to preserve their status as *jefes de barrio* defied orders; one of them, Camacho, raped and murdered three teenage girls and killed two construction workers in mid-2016. “This was unacceptable because it signalled that the control measures ordered by FARC commanders were not being enforced,” explains a local leader in an informal conversation¹²⁹. Yesid and Leonel summoned Camacho and court-martialled him (Johnson, 2018a; S105; JEP, 2023, 319). “They dumped his body in the mangroves near where the girls were found, with a sign that read: ‘*This happens to rapists*’” (S108).

Camacho’s assassination contributed to the detachment of part of the urban networks from the CMDA and to the emergence of the first breakaway group—GO, later known as GUP or GO-GUP (Figure 1). “Most of the *milicianos* from the Nariño coast broke away from the FARC, especially because Camacho was the brother of El Mocho, another CMDA commander. According to local sources, during Camacho’s funeral, the militias carried a banner that read: ‘The Daniel Aldana Front betrayed its militias’” (Johnson, 2018a; JEP, 2023, 319; LH028).

The *milicianos* that broke away from the CMDA aligned themselves with Don Ye, a *miliciano* leader with commandship legitimacy both inside local CMDA units and among the population (S108; S141; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018). Don Ye invited Mocho’s men to join him because he “did not agree with the peace process” (S105; S141). He was already under scrutiny from Leonel, Yesid, and the Western Bloc leadership for being undisciplined — “fractionalist” in FARC-EP jargon (LH028) — killing indiscriminately, using drugs, “deviating from the FARC line” (S143), and isolating himself in mangroves accessible only by river (S106; S108; S141; JEP, 2023, 874). He reportedly stole funds meant for peace pedagogy and community projects (Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018)¹³⁰ and carried on with drug trafficking (*Verdad Abierta*,

¹²⁹ Field notes, Tumaco, October 2022.

¹³⁰ Also, field notes, Tumaco, October 2022.

2016). A former *miliciano* recalls that the order was to kill Don Ye because “he was making too much noise” — meaning he had broken from Yesid and Leonel.

While they secured subordination among rural units, Yesid was also interested in taking over Don Ye’s illicit operations, which he refused to relinquish while protecting Camacho’s former men (LH028; S108). Exogenous to the peace process, these operations involved local and transnational drug trafficking networks that Rambo had established since the early 2000s in Colombia and Ecuador (S104; S114; S139). Leonel and Yesid seemed determined to keep these operations active while formally committing to the peace process (S139, S140, S142), similar to Case Study Four. In practice, however, disciplinary measures played out mediated by the individual goals of mid-level commanders linked to illicit economies. For instance, Rambo, Yesid, and Romaña included traffickers on the reincorporation lists (S146). Similarly, although Leonel demobilised and has appeared before the JEP, Yesid — who also demobilised — was arrested in early 2024 with 65 kilograms of cocaine in his security detail’s vehicle (El Tiempo, 2024).

Renewing the CMDA leadership had multiple implications. For one, it ensured the cohesion and subordination of rural units and militias trained by the FARC-EP. At the same time, this control mechanism also operated through court-martial, which contributed to the detachment of ill-socialised urban networks. Killing Camacho was not just the elimination of one individual. “They went after an entire family — brothers, cousins, friends, *compadres*. Those are the ones who joined Don Ye.” Consequently, Don Ye became the next target of the CMDA leadership, as of late 2016, under the command not of Leonel and Yesid, but of Romaña, who had over 30 years of experience in the FARC-EP.

7.1.3.2 Second Leadership Renewal

In December 2016, the FARC-EP leadership implemented a second discipline measure by appointing Romaña to oversee the cantonment site in Tumaco for the demobilisation of the CMDA, CMMS, and combatants from other secondary groups. His task was to “*farianizar* the Daniel Aldana” (S106), to “clean up the FARC’s image” (S142), and to “bring the CMDA under control” (S143). In the context of the peace process, *farianizar* meant enforcing discipline and cohesion within the CMDA while signalling that “for the FARC-EP Secretariat, the Daniel Aldana had become a serious problem — sending Romaña was a tacit recognition that things were going wrong in Tumaco” (S146; S102). Romaña’s appointment sent a clear

signal. He joined the FARC-EP in the early 1980s, commanded fronts in the Eastern Bloc, and served in its high command. He was “from Mono Jojoy’s school,” “trusted by Manuel Marulanda” (LH001; LH014; LH021; S112), and viewed as “a risk to the peace process due to his influence over the troops and resistance to the agreement” (LH017; LH022). Known as “a natural-born warrior” (LH015), his arrival sent two messages: he would lead the operation to kill Don Ye, who had defied orders, and he would enforce discipline by recalling urban networks to the reincorporation cantonment (S105; S106; S108; S141; S143).

Romaña’s arrival with his trusted circle comprising combatants from the Meta Department was a turning point for the CMDA (LH026; LH2028; S105; S106; S108; S114; S139; S140; S142; S143). His role extended beyond enforcing discipline. He also sought to take control of national and transnational networks, as well as the economic resources and connections that the CMDA had developed before and during the peace process (Section 7.2). “Romaña’s mission was to clean up the FARC’s narcos image in the region, but then he started moving drugs himself... who can make sense of it?” (S106; S105; S108; S146). Unlike Yesid and Leonel, appointed by the Western Bloc, Romaña was sent directly by the FARC-EP Secretariat as part of a broader internal reorganisation. Its members deemed him and other bloc-level commanders as “problematic figures, liabilities to the peace process” (S103; S146), citing their resistance to the disarmament provisions, clashes with [name redacted #3] and [name redacted #2] (LH001; LH014; LH022; Section 5.1.3), and their knowledges of hidden caches of money, gold, and weapons (LH017; S146). His assignment may also have been related to conflicts or debts with drug traffickers (S104; S146). Local rural troops regarded him as an illegitimate leader, further contributing to low-proportion fragmentation at the level of rural CMDA mid-level commanders (Section 7.1.2.2).

As in Case Studies One and Two, leadership renewal had multiple repercussions. In the CMDA, it contributed to mixed fragmentation but also fostered subordination among his troops from the Meta region, as well as some local troops. As I show in the following section, Romaña’s mission was to eliminate undisciplined *milicianos* and enforce discipline at the reincorporation cantonment. As one research participants puts it, “He came to cleanse the region of dissidents and insubordinates,” referring to the killing of Don Ye (S108; S105; S016; S141; LH028).

7.1.3.2.1 Purges and the Consolidation of the First Breakaway: GO-GUP

In November 2016, Romaña summoned Don Ye, ostensibly to discuss alleged thefts and collect his weapons. “But in reality, it was a military operation planned by Romaña and the Western Bloc and the FARC-EP leadership” (S139; S105; S106). Romaña did not attend the meeting, to which Don Ye brought locals and *milicianos*. Some say it was an ambush; others claim Don Ye made a suspicious move that triggered a shootout, resulting in his death (S105; S143). Evidence also suggests Don Ye knew he was going to be killed: “Locals and his family say he told them, 'They pulled the red card on me'—a reference to the FARC-EP’s decision to have him killed (S108; S139; S140; S142).

Don Ye’s death facilitated the consolidation of GO, the first breakaway faction in this case study. His brother David assumed command, and the group was later renamed *Guerrillas Unidas del Pacífico* (GUP) or GO-GUP (S104; S108; S141; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018; Johnson, 2018b). *Milicianos* aligned with Don Ye understood that Romaña’s arrival aimed to “clean up the area” (LH028) by targeting dissidents — reportedly with [REDACTED] to secure disarmament and demobilisation (S105). As with Camacho, the order to kill Don Ye was not only about disciplining an insubordinate fighter but also about confronting an extended family deeply embedded across Tumaco’s neighbourhoods and nearby towns (S105; S108; S142; S143). This case illustrates how disciplinary measures interacted with the social embeddedness of *milicianos* — endogenous and exogenous to the peace process — contributing to the emergence of GO-GUP (Section 7.2.2). Similar dynamics are evident in Case Study Two, where [name redacted #4] attempted to encamp *milicianos* (Section 6.1.2.3). As I show in the following sections, Romaña also adopted disciplinary measures at the reincorporation cantonment, further exacerbating tensions among *milicianos* y rural cadres.

7.1.3.2.2 Discipline in the Cantonment and the Emergence of Two Breakaway Factions: GO 2.0 and FOS

At the reincorporation cantonment, Romaña oversaw the demobilisation and disarmament of the CMDA. He ordered the concentration of rural troops and the recall of urban networks that had not broken away. Regarding rural troops, evidence suggests that Romaña replaced mid-level commanders of the CMDA and attempted to take over their material resources. Combined with his commandship illegitimacy (Section 7.1.4), the management of the reincorporation lists (Section 7.2.3) and the evolution of illicit economies along the

Ecuadorian border (Section 7.2), Romaña's actions led to low-proportion fragmentation of rural cadres (FOS). Concerning *milicianos*, disciplinary measures involved “*vida campamentaria*” [life in camps] as well as discriminatory treatment against them. Combined with their lack of socialisation (Section 7.1.1), social embeddedness and sources of commandship legitimacy (Sections 7.2.2), Romaña further contributed to high-proportion fragmentation of *milicianos* (GO 2.0).

Frente Oliver Sinisterra (FOS)

To ensure the rural CMDA units' compliance with disarmament and demobilisation, Romaña implemented two disciplinary measures: (a) he replaced CMDA mid-level commanders; and (b) he collected CMDA assets to transfer them to the FARC-EP and support economic reincorporation projects ahead of disarmament. These control measures, however, contributed to the emergence of the FOS, comprised by mid-level commanders and rank-and-file under the leadership of Guacho. The FOS began operations in January 2017 (Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018; Defensoría, 2018b; CORE, 2021). Nonetheless, as I noted above and detail in this section, Romaña also had hidden agendas tied to illicit economies. I present evidence on his ambivalent relationship to the peace process in Section 7.2.3 and analyse it in Section 9.2.1.4.

a) Replacement of CMDA Mid-Level Commanders

After assuming leadership of the CMDA, Romaña replaced its mid-level commanders with troops from his inner circle in the Meta Department. “Romaña tried to discipline the rural base, excluded the Tumaco *milicianos*, replaced local commanders with seasoned fighters from Caquetá and Meta, and sidelined Rambo, deeply involved in drug trafficking,” tells a local leader (S106; S108; S139; S146). Similar to Case Studies One and Two, these measures had multiple repercussions. On the one hand, CMDA mid-level and rank-and-file members began to detach after Romaña's arrival. “Those who left said they wouldn't follow a stranger who came with his people to take over what Daniel Aldana had built since 2000,” tells a research participant (S139; S106; S142; S146). An ex-combatant adds that removing Rambo, followed by Yesid and Leonel — “at least familiar faces” — deepened distrust: “Romaña had no reason to be here. He didn't know the region or how we work. Then he started ordering killings. In a month, he tried to wipe out what we'd built over two decades” (LH026; LH028; S139; S140; S143). Like [name redacted #4] in the 10th Front, adopting disciplinary measures can foster

subordination in favour of the peace process (especially among troops bonded over years) and contribute to fragmentation.

In late 2016 and early 2017, official reports warned of the *Guerrillas Campesinas del Norte* (Defensoría, 2017b). While participants did not recall this group specifically, they described the gradual formation of rural factions led by CMDA mid-level commanders who broke away after Romaña's arrival. "They weren't *milicianos*; they were local cadres who had been with Rambo and felt demoted and sidelined by outsiders [Romaña's troops]" (S139; S106; S140; S146). One was Guacho, who became the first leader of the FOS in 2017. Evidence suggests that as other commanders detached, Guacho realised Romaña, and his Meta troops sought CMDA assets and deals with Colombian and Ecuadorian drug lords (LH026; S104; S114).

b) Asset Seizure — Hidden Intentions?

Evidence suggests that Romaña enforced discipline in ways that then-combatants described as "dictatorial," clashing with urban networks and mid-level CMDA commanders such as Guacho (S108; S143). He claimed to be acting under orders from the FARC-EP Secretariat to push the peace process forward in Tumaco, including seizing assets from CMDA combatants and their families: "He came in with a very hostile attitude — saying '*this is mine and that belongs to the FARC.*' He sold off assets, including land and machinery, because they were allegedly FARC property. People objected, but he just said, '*This belongs to the FARC, period.*' And since he was still armed, who was going to challenge him?" recalls one participant (LH140; LH028).

Guacho deemed these actions a "betrayal". He had supported Romaña in the operation that killed Don Ye. But soon broke away to join other mid-level commanders who had already detached months earlier (S105; S108; S139). Romaña's attempt to build a political project with outsiders from Meta, disregarding the CMDA's history in the region (LH028; S139; S143), reinforced Guacho's decision. "If Rambo's replacement was a red flag for local cadres, the asset seizures was the last straw," recalls an ex-combatant (LH028; S139; S140). While enforcing the organisations' orders, Romaña also compiled the reincorporation lists of those formally recognised as FARC-EP members, allegedly excluding Guacho while including drug traffickers. In Section 7.2.3, I present evidence in this regard and its role in fuelling mixed fragmentation.

The following subsection shows how discipline extended to urban networks, contributing to the emergence of GO 2.0.

Gente del Orden (GO 2.0)

Romaña clashed with urban networks that arrived at the reincorporation cantonment between October and November 2016. The dispute stemmed from disciplinary measures the *milicianos* described as “mistreatment” and “racism” (LH026; LH028; S139; S142). Romaña enforced FARC-EP rules and norms at the cantonment. However, unlike rural cadres and his loyal troops, the *milicianos* had never been socialised into *vida campamentaria* and thus reacted against it (see Section 7.1.1). In practice, these disciplinary measures also contributed to these *milicianos* breaking away and forming GO 2.0.

The *milicianos* who had not joined Don Ye “Moved into the cantonment because they were under El Tigre's command, one of the few *milicianos* educated and trained by the FARC since the 2000s” (S108), and who demobilised in 2017. However, these *milicianos* had previously been *Rastrojos*, and it is unclear the extent of control El Tigre had over them. “El Tigre knew who Romaña was — he was almost a legendary figure within the FARC-EP — but the other guys had no idea, why they were there, or that Romaña would enforce FARC-style discipline” (LH028). At the same time, “Romaña had no idea who these *milicianos* were” (S139; S108). Although the data indicate that the *milicianos* were genuinely interested in joining the peace process (S105; S106; S108; S141; S143), disciplinary measures at the cantonment, threats from other armed groups over their neighbourhoods, and the involvement of external actors (Section 7.2.2) ultimately pushed them to break away (ICG, 2017; Defensoría del Pueblo, 2017, 2018; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018).

How did Romaña's mechanisms of discipline and control play out in practice within the urban networks? “For the *milicianos*, meeting Romaña's discipline was a real shock... that's when they realised what the FARC really was, and many deserted,” recalls a local leader (S142; S102; S105; S106). Romaña arrived with just over 100 trusted fighters from Meta, trained in FARC-EP norms. He imposed strict routines — 5:00 a.m. wakeups, physical training, daily tasks (kitchen, cleaning, security), weapons maintenance, and studying the peace agreement (LH026; LH028; S106; S108). These practices sharply contrasted with the former *Rastrojos*, “who had never known any form of discipline” (S106; S140).

By imposing this strict regime on *milicianos* who had never been socialised into such norms, Romaña face a harsh reality: their mismanaged recruitment in 2012-13. “They were undisciplined, didn’t want to follow orders, and wouldn’t get up in the morning. They’re the Afro guys. Just wanted to wear flip-flops and relax all day, and that’s not guerrilla life,” recalls a former combatant (LH026). Another adds: “El Tigre stayed, and maybe a few others... but the rest said they weren’t going to put up with it—no one had ever forced them to wake up early or exercise” (LH028). Moreover, in the cantonment, many wanted to continue using drugs, and some showed withdrawal symptoms — “Rambo recruited the former *Rastrojos* but never controlled their drug and alcohol use” (S106).

Romaña and the mid-level commanders he brought from Meta engaged in racist and discriminatory behaviours. Alongside the FARC’s strict disciplinary regime, *milicianos* at the cantonment sent messages to those not yet present — mostly relatives — warning, “Don’t come, things here are not easy” (S142), referring to racism. Romaña and his troops reportedly said things like “these negroes don’t listen... undisciplined and lazy like all blacks” (S106) or “these blacks just like disorder” (S105), framing *milicianos*’ behaviour as undisciplined and un-FARC-like (S102; S108; S141; S142). “He harassed the Black community [*correteó a la negritud*],” recalls a former combatant (JEP, 2023, 123). Secondary sources confirm these abuses (Álvarez-Vanegas & Restrepo, 2017; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018). By contrast, there is no evidence of racism or mistreatment toward rural cadres or Romaña’s troops.

In addition to racism, Romaña’s leadership also engaged in serious accusations against the *milicianos*. Labelling them as *paracos* (slur for paramilitaries) is an example. Research participants recall that the new leadership excluded and discredited *milicianos* by saying, “You’re not FARC, you’re just ignorant *paracos*” (S105), recalls a local leader who acted as a mediator to prevent the *milicianos* from abandoning the cantonment (S108; S142; S143; Álvarez-Vanegas & Restrepo, 2017). While some had previously been *Rastrojos*, Romaña used these accusations to portray all urban networks as responsible for the region’s deteriorating security (LH028; S102; S105; S108)¹³¹. Nonetheless, for research participants, the FARC-EP leadership could have managed the *milicianos* differently. Instead, as one ex-combatant puts it, “The worst mistake the FARC made was sending Romaña to Tumaco. Dissident groups skyrocketed because of that man’s bad behaviour” (JEP, 2023, 123; S139; H026; LH028; S105).

¹³¹ By late 2016 and throughout 2017, insecurity was of the main obstacles to implementing the peace agreement in the region (ICG, 2017; BBC Mundo, 2017; Defensoría, 2017a; 2017b; 2018a).

Of roughly 1,000 *milicianos* who went to the cantonment or remained outside (LH142), most were either expelled or broke away (S105; S106; S108). Mostly between 15 and 30 years old (Defensoría, 2017b), they returned to their neighbourhoods in late 2016 and joined GO-GUP, now led by David, Don Ye's brother. Romaña officially expelled them from the FARC-EP. But in early 2017, around 350 left GO-GUP due to David's internal abuses and violence against civilians, attempting to rejoin the peace process. Romaña, however, rejected them (Section 7.2.3). A few months later, approximately 120 of these former combatants demobilised individually through state programs, outside the framework of the 2016 peace accord. Some moved to other cities. Those who stayed in Tumaco were targeted by GO-GUP and subsequently formed Gente del Orden 2.0 (GO 2.0), the second breakaway faction at the level of the CMDA's urban networks.

7.1.4 Commandership Legitimacy and Illegitimacy

This existing explanation helps us understand how members of armed organisations represent their superiors. A careful examination of the observable implications of commandership legitimacy shows that it played out differently across the different levels of the CMDA. First, I identify the sources of commandership legitimacy that, in Romaña's case, fostered cohesion among both his troops and local cadres, as well as his sources of commandership illegitimacy that contributed to mixed fragmentation. Second, I examine the sources of commandership legitimacy that facilitated leaders such as Don Ye, David, and Guacho to lead the GO-GUP and FOS, respectively. In this case study, there is no evidence that appointing new top FARC-EP leaders influenced or altered secondary leaders (e.g., Iván Mordisco, 1st Front) perceptions of commandership legitimacy. Thus, in this case study, as in Case Study Two, the sources of commandership legitimacy and illegitimacy operate at the secondary-group level or within the CMDA and evolved before and during the peace process.

7.1.2.1 Romaña: Legitimate and Illegitimate

Romaña's role as a seasoned combatant had implications for both cohesion and fragmentation. Regarding cohesion, the troops he brought from Meta demobilised and disarmed. "Those who came with Romaña respected him and followed everything he said" (S105), notes one research participant. Another adds, "Seeing Romaña and his fighters engaged in the peace process and pedagogical work was one thing, the *milicianos*, another" (S106). Data suggest that his troops admired and respected him, due to his standing in the FARC-EP as one

of the most respected mid-level commanders of the Eastern Bloc (S112; S131; S144; S146). “They all came with the same mindset: to help build the cantonment and push forward the peace process” (S142).

His troops respected Romaña for his trajectory as a military leader and his close ties to Mono Jojoy (LH001; LH014; S106; S112; S146). These sources of commandship legitimacy further reinforced the respect he commanded. However, like other mid-level commanders, he was a contentious figure for the FARC-EP leadership. His relocation — whether for security or to prevent remobilization of his faction — underscored both his influence and the trust his troops placed in him (S146; S112). As one former combatant noted, “His troops knew they were with one of the most important figures in the FARC-EP... In Tumaco, we had Rambo at a regional level, but he was quickly sidelined and demoted” (LH028), highlighting the contrast between Romaña’s authority and that of other leaders.

Romaña, despite a potential threat to the peace process (LH001; LH014; S146; Section 7.1.3.2), fulfilled his role in enforcing discipline among rural units and urban networks. For his troops and other combatants who demobilised from local units, it was clear that Romaña had come to “follow through with the peace process” (S105; S106; S142). Thus, alignment with the FARC-EP’s commitment to peace may have conferred a degree of authority and commandship legitimacy on Romaña in the eyes of those who demobilised — similar to [name redacted #4] in Case Study Two (Section 6.1.3).

Despite this, he also saw in the peace process an opportunity to advance his personal agendas, as noted above and in other sections (Sections 7.1.3.2 and 9.1.3), contributing to the detachment of rural cadres. They deemed Romaña the opposite of Rambo, who led the CMDA between 2000 and 2015. Rambo was deeply familiar with the region, successfully delivering revenue streams, facilitating territorial expansion, and maintaining strong ties with Alfonso Cano, the top leader of the FARC-EP (2008–2011). He achieved key military objectives and built vertical links with local communities (S106; S114; S139; S140; S146). In contrast, they regarded Romaña’s leadership as authoritarian and dismissive. He ignored the CMDA’s leadership and its social ties with local populations (LH026; S105; S139; S140; S142). *Milicianos* went from autonomy under Rambo to fear under Romaña, who they said sought to “kill them or confine them in the cantonment” (S139) and impose “a discipline they did not recognise” (S106).

Romaña's hidden agendas undermined his commandership legitimacy among rural cadres, despite his public support for the peace process (Section 9.1.3). "What legitimacy can Romaña have if he continued trafficking drugs while living in the cantonment?" asks one participant (S105; S146), referring to his ties with narcos, while fulfilling his financial obligations with the organisation and protecting his troops (S139). Romaña's personal agendas in illicit economies created distrust among CMDA troops. A local leader recalls, "Romaña prioritised his own interests, was unapproachable and volatile, ordered *milicianos*' killings, demoted pro-peace mid-level commanders, and his dealings with traffickers in Colombia and Ecuador deepened divisions, prompting many to abandon the cantonment" (S143). For *milicianos*, "Romaña dismissed everything we had done for the Daniel Aldana" (S028), severing the ties built under Rambo. Likewise, rural mid-level commanders distrusted Romaña's leadership, feeling sidelined, as was the case with Guacho, which I discuss in the next section.

In sum, Romaña supported the peace deal while advancing personal interests. Mid-level CMDA commanders, comparing him to Rambo, deeply distrusted him, while *milicianos* rejected his mission to discipline them and his disregard of their urban accomplishments. These perceptions fostered detachment among both groups, undermining cohesion within the CMDA.

7.1.2.2 Rural Mid-level Commanders and *Milicianos*

What are the sources of commandership legitimacy of the rural and urban leaders who led the FOS, GO-GUP, and GO 2.0?

In the case of Guacho (FOS), his commandership legitimacy in mobilising mid-level CMDA commanders who detached in 2015 (S139; S140), as well as rank-and-file members joining between late 2016 and 2017, relied on three sources. First, discrediting Romaña. Guacho capitalised on suspicions that Romaña, during the peace process, pursued personal interests involving drug trafficking and the appropriation of CMDA resources, which date back to the 2000s. By excluding those loyal to Rambo (S106; S108; S139), Romaña turned into the FOS's main adversary, ultimately forcing him to leave the region in November 2017 (El Tiempo, 2017). Second, Guacho emphasised being "local" and "loyal to Rambo" (LH026; LH028; S139), whose commandership legitimacy evolved before and during the peace process. Guacho also invoked the memory of fallen CMDA commanders, such as Oliver, who was killed in 2015 by the Colombian army—hence the name *Frente Oliver Sinisterra* (Álvarez-

Vanegas, 2018). Third, he leveraged disenchantment with the 2016 peace accord, exploiting frustration over the government's failure to fulfil it, a central theme in the FOS's founding communiqué (FOS, 2017).

Breakaway factions led by *milicianos* relied on the legacy of fallen fighters, often relatives or members of extended families, an observable implication of social embeddedness (Section 7.2.1), which evolved before and during the peace process. In the case of David—leader of GO-GUP—his brother's killing during the peace process was pivotal: “Don Ye's death shocked him deeply because he was an esteemed man, criminal, yes, and brutal—but he was local and deemed a hero” (S141; S108). David's commandership legitimacy initially drew on opposition to an external enemy, Romaña, to keep his arms (S105; S106; S108; S139). Second, he invoked Don Ye's memory and local significance to solidify his leadership amidst threats from other armed groups (S105; S108; Defensoría, 2018; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018). GO 2.0 leaders likely adopted similar strategies to those of GO-GUP, taking over neighbourhoods in Tumaco (S105; S108; S142). Moreover, Secondary sources indicate that posters in towns where Don Ye had lived described him as a “soldier of the people.” Songs were written in his honour too. “Some recorded and sang by David himself” (S108), along with messages such as: “Don Ye: How cold and painful it is to remember that you are no longer in this world,” or “You left and left a profound loss in our hearts” (Johnson, 2018b).

7.2 External Dynamics

In this section, I examine the external dynamics that contributed to high- and low-proportion fragmentation at the level of urban networks and rural mid-level commanders. An examination of the observable implications of local population, social embeddedness, material resources and patronage networks show how they evolved before and during the peace process. Likewise, they perform differently for *milicianos* and rural cadres, who formed GO-GUP and GO 2.0, and the FOS (Figure 7.1). Lastly, I briefly examine the peace process, specifically the politics behind the reincorporation lists and the role of Romaña.

7.2.1 Local Support Networks and Material Resources: FOS

The FOS emerged in early 2017 in response to a combination of internal dynamics to the CMDA, exogenous and endogenous to the peace process: disciplinary measures, Romaña's commandership illegitimacy, and his pursuit of personal agendas. To maintain its arms, the

FOS relied on the CMDA's local support networks, whose social embeddedness dates back to the late 1990s colonisation of Tumaco by coca-growing peasants. These evolved through the 2000s and 2010s, also including material resources and external actors in illicit economies in Colombia and Ecuador.

7.2.1.1 Local Support Networks

The CMDA originated from the FARC-EP's military plans for the Nariño region on the Pacific coast. From the onset, it coordinated with the CMMS and the 29th Front. Unlike the 29th Front, which had operated in northern Nariño since the mid-1980s and carried out political and mass work, the CMDA focused on military and financial tasks (Rodríguez, 2015; Génesis, XXXIII, 2017, 115). During the late-1990s armed conflict, FARC-EP relied on such secondary groups, as counterinsurgency operations and *Plan Colombia* disrupted both the FARC-EP and the coca economy, displacing thousands of peasants from Meta, Caquetá, and Putumayo to Tumaco (S106; S139; S140; S142; Vicepresidencia, 2009; Rodríguez, 2015).

This historical background helps us understand the social embeddedness of the CMDA. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the FARC-EP in Nariño prioritised military objectives, replacing political leaders with military-oriented leaders (Rodríguez, 2015). When the CMDA established Tumaco, it engaged in mass political work among displaced coca-growing peasants to deter other armed actors and secure new revenue streams. "People already had their coca plants when we arrived," recalls a former combatant (LH026). "Rambo reached agreements with settlers to organise processing chain," tells a research participant (S139; S140). However, this political work "didn't go beyond that — the CMDA aimed to set up a system to regulate the coca economy" (S114; S139; S140), while coca-growing settler peasants organised into their own associations.

The CMDA relied on long-standing ties with settlers from the Caquetá, Putumayo and Meta Departments to regulate the coca-cocaine chain, determining who harvested, produced, sold, or could buy, thereby creating a security buffer from external actors and cocaine brokers (LH026; S139; S141; JEP, 2023, 34). These interactions unfolded through the 2000s and 2010s. Settlers and the CMDA clashed with existing local organisations, such as Afro-Colombian Community Councils (S106; S114; García, 2011; Rodríguez, 2015; Aponte & Benavidez, 2016). Consequently, the CMDA relied on coca-growing settlers as local support networks while coming into conflict with the Community Councils. Throughout the 2000s and 2010s,

these conflicts were shaped by a contentious relationship, including the assassination of Genero García (Section 7.1.3), among others (JEP, 2023, 209-238).

Settler peasant organisations and their interactions with the CMDA persisted throughout the peace process. FOS leaders relied on these networks, shaped by trust, a shared history of colonisation, resistance to the state — mainly anti-drug policies — and contentious relations with Afro-Colombians. Evidence suggests a mutual benefit: FOS leaders “found shelter in areas near the border... and the peasants looked after them. At the same time, those peasants were asking, ‘*Who’s going to protect our economy now—the coca leaf?*’ The FOS stepped in with an answer” (S106; S108). This support addressed multiple threats, including the rival GO-GUP group, the 2016 peace accord illicit crop substitution programs, and drug lords who did not want the business to stop (S105; S106; S108; S139; S140; S146; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018; CORE, 2021).

Transnational dynamics are also key for the FOS, as Guacho and his troops relied on networks and local populations on both sides of the Colombia–Ecuador border. Similar to Cases Studies One and Two, the CMDA used foreign soil before and during the peace process. For instance, Guacho was born in Ecuador, in the Esmeraldas Province (Insight Crime, 2019), and fostered relations with the Ecuadorian police for arms supply (S104; S105; S114). When he broke away from the CMDA, he relied on these long-standing CMDA connections with military suppliers and drug lords in Ecuador. Rivers along the binational border facilitated cocaine trafficking and weapons smuggling (S104; S105; S114; S139). Ecuador also served as safe haven for rest, medical care, and training (LH026; LH028; S139; S140). “CMDA mid-level commanders who later joined the FOS had Ecuadorian IDs, crossed the border through the Mataje River, and blended into the cities like any other resident,” tells one research participant (S140). They and their families lived in both countries, blending into Ecuadorian cities and sometimes joining the FOS. Even Ecuadorian nationals joined the FOS through their ties to the extended families of mid-level commanders who broke away from the CMDA in 2015–2016 (S104; S106; S108; S114; S139; BBC Mundo, 2018).

Interactions between the CMDA and external actors involved in illegal economies contributed to low-proportion fragmentation at the level of rural mid-level commanders. These interactions primarily involved local drug traffickers, emissaries and buyers from international cartels, and arms and military hardware dealers. They evolved after this secondary group settled and evolved in the region in the 2000s and 2010s, before and during the peace process.

7.2.1.2 Material Resources and External Actors

“The CMDA was just one actor in the drug trafficking supply chain, but not the main one. When the FARC-EP demobilised, dissidents forming the FOS were mid-level commanders most influenced by criminal networks and drug trafficking” (S106; S108; S139; S146). This quote illustrates the social context of some rural mid-level CMDA commanders during the final stages of the peace process, as cocaine buyers and traffickers ensured the supply chain would continue with or without the FARC-EP. “What they cared about was simply that they kept delivering the same amount of cocaine, or more” [to their buyers] (S141). This occurred between 2015 and 2016. But external actors tied to illicit economies evolved alongside the CMDA.

The FARC-EP’s expansion into the region marked the start of systematic coca cultivation (S139; S140; S141; *Verdad Abierta*, 2019; CTC, 2022)¹³². “The CMDA organised the coca production chain — providing security, coordinating settler-farmers, and taxing buyers — a system known as *gramaje* (LH026; S106; S139). As one participant explained, “Rambo knows he has to support the displaced peasants, protecting them from external actors, whether mafias or paramilitaries” (S142; LH026). During the 2000s and 2010s, Rambo “went from a trained combatant, recruited through the communist youth in the 1980s and following all rules and procedures, to gradually becoming a drug trafficker” (S112; S114; S146). Similar to John 40 and Grannoble in Case Studies One and Two, respectively, Rambo and the CMDA became a major source of revenue for the FARC-EP (S139; S104; S112), benefiting from taxing buyers, expanding coca cultivation, and Tumaco’s rise as a key global cocaine cluster¹³³. According to an ex-combatant, “Rambo follows the Strategic Plan¹³⁴: finding money to grow, maintain his troops, provide uniforms, food, weapons—keeping them well. And for that, you need large amounts of money. So, you get it from the mafia. They come in to collect their merchandise (cocaine), and they’re charged” (LH026).

Rambo’s importance with buyers and traffickers became more apparent after the AUC’s demobilisation in 2005 and the CMDA’s victory over *Los Rastrojos* in 2012. “Rambo became

¹³² Drug traffickers had used the region since the 1980s, prompting the AUC to enter in 2000 to challenge the FARC-EP and the emerging CMDA (Rodríguez, 2015).

¹³³ In 2017, the UNODC reported Tumaco as Colombia’s top coca-producing municipality, with 23,148 hectares, and a cocaine production cluster connecting cultivation, labs, armed groups, and trafficking routes to Central and North America” (SIMCI, 2017).

¹³⁴ Adopted in 1982. See Section 5.2.1

‘the friend’—that’s how they referred to him—of the traffickers who were only interested in keeping the business going after the AUC’s leaving” (S146; S104; S112). Simultaneously, he pursued individual and parallel projects with drug and arms traffickers. “People in the region started saying that the CMDA was contaminated by drug trafficking, and because it was unclear to what extent it was still fully under FARC control or serving narcos interests” (LH028). Evidence suggests that these interactions may have turned the CMDA into a client, even as it continued to fulfil its obligations to the FARC-EP Western Bloc. “By 2015, Rambo was already working closely with drug lords, raising questions about their role in blocking crop substitution and silencing supporters” (S112; S114; S146). Members of the FARC-EP top echelons have acknowledged before the JEP that the Western Bloc lost command and control over the CMDA (2023, 91-92).

Rambo’s removal in 2015 and Romaña’s appointment in 2016 was significant because Romaña sought not only to enforce discipline but also to control deals with drug traffickers and cocaine buyers, excluding CMDA’s rural cadres (S105; S106; S108). “I met Romaña at the cantonment. He was a contradictory figure: one of the driving forces behind the peace process, but also drug trafficking,” recalls a research participant (LH105; S106; S108; S143). He sought to take control of the trafficker networks, which had long been managed by Rambo, prompting mid-level commanders like Guacho to suspect that he was targeting the CMDA’s finances. As I detail in Section 7.2.3, Rambo also included drug traffickers in the reincorporation lists to secure deals, while excluding others.

The CMDA’s social embeddedness and relations with external actors, which evolved before and during the peace process, contributed to low-proportion fragmentation at the level of rural cadres.

7.2.2 Local Support Networks and Material Resources: GO-GUP and GO 2.0

In this section, I present evidence on the social embeddedness and relations of *milicianos* with external actors, which contributed to high-proportion fragmentation.

7.2.2.1 Social Embeddedness

Milicianos also relied on their social embeddedness to break away from the CMDA – name, extended families shaped by kinship or *compadrazgo*. As I detail in Section 7.1, the

CMDA did not socialise its new *milicianos* into FARC-EP norms, beliefs, or political goals, nor did it incorporate their extended families. Former *Rastrojos* and their relatives instead “provided security at neighbourhood entry and exit points to maintain their status as street-level bosses or *jefes de barrio*” (S105; S106) or acted as road informants, reporting who entered or passed through (LH026; LH208; S114; S139; S140). This contrasted with the early 2000s *milicianos* — such as El Tigre or El Doctor — who underwent gradual trust-building and political socialisation, much like the urban networks in Case Studies Two and Four.

The GO-GUP and GO 2.0 leaders built on their extended families, whose networks predated their incorporation into the CMDA and continued through the peace process. “These breakaways continued the *Rastrojos* and *milicianos*: kids grew up in the *Rastrojos*, became CMDA teenagers, and later detached or were rejected by *Romaña*,” recalls a local leader (S106). For them, “the FARC was just another stage in their lives” (LH028). Unlike Guacho’s FOS, they did not rely on local support networks, shaped by the political and mass works of the CMDA in the early 2000s. “For Don Ye and David (GO-GUP), family networks were key. Some families had up to 17 children, with everyone contributing in some way” (S108).

Disciplinary measures imposed by the FARC-EP in 2015–2016, combined with threats from the new CMDA’s leaders and fears of rival groups entering their neighbourhoods, *also* extended to their families. The killings of Camacho and Don Ye (Sections 7.1.3.1 and 7.1.3.2) had repercussions on these kinship-based networks, facilitating their mobilisation to break away. “Their strong ties gave leaders security and trust while reducing visibility and risks of infiltration or leaks” (S143), tells a local leader.

7.2.2.2 Material Resources and Patronage Networks

The *milicianos* who led the breakaway factions had established parallel networks with external actors before joining the CMDA and retained them thereafter — that is, these ties are external to the FARC-EP and both exogenous and endogenous to the peace process. They became central nodes in illicit economies as clients of powerful patrons who wielded significant influence over the CMDA throughout the 2000s and 2010s. When they broke away to form GO-GUP and GO 2.0, they drew on these patrons for support, mainly local drug traffickers, international cocaine brokers, and arms dealers (S104; S105; S106; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018).

The evidence suggests that we need to understand the role of the above-mentioned external actors. Specifically, and similar to Rambo in 2012 (Section 7.1.1), their interest in the *milicianos*' urban know-how and their extended families living in the neighbourhoods, whose narrow streets lead to the Pacific coast, particularly around the stilt houses or *palafitos*—key for logistics, hiding spots, movement routes, and awareness of local dynamics. The evidence does not distinguish between the factions' ties to resources or patronage; the following applies to both GO-GUP and GO 2.0 interchangeably.

Milicianos' ties to illicit economies preceded their incorporation into the CMDA. “Being *Rastrojos* and then *milicianos*, they ensured that merchandise moved from the coast to the open sea. Some shipments went by river to Ecuador or directly into the Pacific. Others left through the *palafitos*,” recalls a research participant (S105; S106; S114). *Milicianos* were held accountable to the CMDA and their urban leader — individuals socialised in the organisation's norms. At the same time, former *Rastrojos* “would do whatever they wanted in their neighbourhoods: they took money for themselves, and *narcos* used them for contract killings” (S106). This autonomy — shaped by weak socialisation and bonding, and the CMDA's short-term instrumental choices — persisted before, during, and after their time in the FARC-EP.

The projects consolidated by these individuals — first as *Rastrojos* and later as CMDA *milicianos* — paved the way for their integration into drug trafficking networks. “Before the demobilisation, buyers — many of them based in Ecuador — offered salaries to keep operations running” (S141) or “paid for their services” (S142; LH028)¹³⁵. At the same time, ill-socialised *milicianos* observed that their trained and better-integrated counterparts struck deals with Yesid and later with Romaña to maintain local control over illicit economies (S104; S106; S114; S139; S140). This sense of betrayal by the new leadership (Section 7.1.3.2.2) shaped the social context that *milicianos* navigated in late 2016 and early 2017. Furthermore, the disciplinary measures adopted between 2015 and 2016, such as purges and rejections, made these offers even more appealing.

These external actors understood that “the *milicianos* just wanted to be left alone and continue doing what they knew best: move drugs, work as hitmen, and protect their neighbourhoods and rivers” (S105). International cocaine brokers remained key actors amid shifting illicit economies during the peace process: “They came to make sure the *milicianos*

¹³⁵ For example, drug lord “Contador”, who sponsored GO-GUP (Insight Crime, 2020b).

handled the shipments, checked the submarine packed with cocaine for Central America or Mexico, and left” (S114; S104). At the same time, local narcos excluded from demobilisation lists (Section 7.2.3) armed and financed both high- and low-proportion fragmentation breakaway faction. In this mutually beneficial arrangement, for instance, transnational cartels relied on *Los Contadores* to maintain the flow of supply chains (S104; S108; S114; S141; S143).

7.2.3 Peace Process

The evidence suggests that the peace process in this case study impacted the internal dynamics of the CMDA through two key elements: the new leadership under Romaña and his role in the reincorporation lists.

Regarding the first element, Romaña’s relationship with the peace process was ambiguous, as detailed in Section 7.1.2.1. The FARC-EP top echelons transferred him from Meta to Tumaco to foster cohesion and discipline and to oversee the CMDA’s demobilisation and disarmament (Section 7.1.3.2). He also faced security issues with local narcos, and he had previously challenged the commandership legitimacy of leaders like Timockenko, the FARC’s top commander between 2011 and 2016 (LH001; LH014; S146). In Tumaco, Romaña enforced discipline among rural fighters and milicianos (e.g. the killing of Don Ye). At the same time, for his troops and other combatants who demobilised from local units, Romaña sought to “follow through with the peace process” (S105; S106; S142). He demonstrated a commitment to reincorporation initiatives and had plans to establish a settlement for demobilised fighters (S105; S141). However, these efforts were limited to his trusted troops from Meta or to locals who had aligned with the new leadership after Rambo’s demotion in 2015 (S106; S140; S141). This approach contributed to the exclusion of members of rural units and urban networks, mediated also by mistreatment, racism, and accusations at the reincorporation cantonment. Mistreated milicianos led the formation of GO 2.0 (Section 7.1.3.2.2).

The second point reinforces Romaña’s ambiguous role in the peace process when he assumed command of the CMDA at the end of 2016 (Section 7.1.3.2). One responsibility of mid-level commanders overseeing the reincorporation cantonments was to prepare the demobilisation lists. As in Case Study Two (Section 6.2.3), this process relied on discretion and temporality. Several commanders in the CMDA — Rambo, Yesid, and Romaña — did so (S140; S146). The problem lay in the politics behind inclusion and exclusion from the lists. All three included ten drug traffickers, falsely presenting them as combatants, on the condition that they

could continue their illicit activities. They had longstanding ties with the CMDA and with external actors involved in illicit economies. Don Ti (S106; S146) had ties to Rambo before the peace process and maintained them through the CMDA, with Romaña adding him to the reincorporation lists. He was later captured in the cantonment in 2017, accused of trafficking cocaine to Mexico (Policía Nacional, 2017; El Tiempo, 2017a), despite the FARC-EP claiming he had served as a *miliciano* for over 20 years (El Tiempo, 2017b).

However, Romaña excluded other drug traffickers, suggesting he pursued personal interests in illicit economies alongside advancing the peace process (Section 7.2.1.2). “It’s unclear what happened. By mid-2015, *Los Contadores* and Cachi began contacting mid-level commanders they already knew, particularly those resentful of Rambo’s removal,” recalls a research participant (S143), referring to Guacho. Some of these commanders had served as financial intermediaries between the CMDA and cocaine brokers before and during the peace process (S106; S114; S139; S146). As Romaña negotiated new deals with some narcos, competition arose between those on the reincorporation lists and those excluded, like Cachi. “Intelligence indicated narcos were encouraging [mid-level commander] like Guacho [FOS leader] to remain active, promising weapons, uniforms, and profits” (S146; S141). Cachi, connected to international cartels, became Guacho’s sponsor until state forces captured him in 2018 (El Tiempo, 2018). Romaña’s exclusion of Guacho, combined with leadership renewals in the CMDA, delays in establishing reincorporation cantonments, and growing threats from the GUP, served as sources of commandership legitimacy for Guacho to lead the FOS by early 2017 (Section 7.1.2.2).

Discussion

This chapter contributes to understanding the transformation of secondary groups. Disciplinary measures to control urban networks and foster cohesion disrupted arrangements built before and during the process. For example, removing Rambo and imposing external leaders undermined both horizontal ties within the CMDA and long-standing vertical ties with local support networks. Similarly, purging undisciplined *milicianos* — even through formal mechanisms such as court-martials (*juicios revolucionarios*) — contributed to high-proportion fragmentation. Disciplinary measures provide a vantage point to understand the hidden workings embedded in the operational environment of the CMDA that fall outside the FARC-EP’s statutes or regulatory framework. Disciplining of *milicianos* uncovered the

mismanaged recruitment of former Rastrojos who were never socialised, despite the CMDA's mission to secure Tumaco in the early 2010s. This recruitment violated FARC-EP statutes. But beyond a how-things-ought-to-be approach, these examples reveal the CMDA's shifting realities in practice, which are exogenous and endogenous to the peace process. In contrast, in Case Studies Two and Four, *milicianos* formed the backbone of the 10th Front and CMTF, respectively, shaped by controlled recruitment and trust-based networks grounded in settlement processes and clandestine practices.

Exploring hidden workings uncovers parallel networks within the CMDA, spanning leadership and *milicias*. These networks reflect a two-fold reality: they served as economic endowments — rooted in the CMDA's mission and ties with actors in Colombia and Ecuador — while also advanced the personal projects of on-the-ground commanders and *milicianos*. The agendas of Rambo and *milicianos*, which evolved before and during the peace process, illustrate how such networks shift to enable political engagement, illicit activities, or both in a war-to-peace transition. Romaña exemplifies this duality, simultaneously supporting the peace accord and forging alliances in illicit economies. As Chapter 9 shows, mid-level commanders with the mission of fostering cohesion in favour of peace, also advanced their personal agendas by co-opting the 2016 peace agreement. [Name redacted #4], in Case Study Two, and El Paisa, in Case Study Four, are two other examples.

The findings in this chapter align with the four pillars of my organizationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion, which I outline in Chapter 3 and further elaborate on in Chapters 9 and 10. First, by disaggregating, I demonstrate that fragmentation varies both in proportion and *where* it occurs: was high among members of CMDA's urban networks, and low among rural mid-level commanders and rank-and-file. Second, adopting a longer approach — before and during the peace process — helps us understand how observable implications of existing explanations in the literature can be both endogenous and exogenous to the Havana negotiations. For instance, had I not zeroed in on the evolution of the CMDA *milicias*, I would not have uncovered their earlier pre-FARC-EP trajectories during the 2000s. Nor would I have identified their mismanaged recruitment in the early 2010s, shaped by a lack of socialisation. These dynamics, in turn, had important implications for the fragmentation of the CMDA during the peace process. Similar is the evolution of CMDA's local support networks and their contentious relations with Afro-Colombian communities, dating back to the early 2000s. The assassination of Genaro García exposed these long-standing

tensions and prompted the FARC-EP to adopt disciplinary measures with multiple repercussions on the integrity of the CMDA.

Third, fragmentation and cohesion coexist. In addition to mixed fragmentation, cohesion and subordination also took place in favour of the peace process. Although the evidence I present is limited due to the challenging conditions for conducting fieldwork, Romaña's commandship legitimacy among members from other FARC-EP's secondary groups in the Nariño region and his troops, as well as his support for the peace process, may have contributed to this outcome. [name redacted #4]'s role in Case Study Two is similar. Lastly, like in the previous two chapters, the mechanisms I build in this case demonstrate that there are case-specific paths toward the observable outcomes (high- and low-proportion fragmentation). In Chapter 9, I elaborate on the mechanisms *instrumental incorporation - personal agendas and threat construction* (high), and *betrayal and discontent - bypassing and personal agendas* (low).

The following chapter examines the negative case in this dissertation: *Columna Móvil Teófilo Forero* (CMTF). I present evidence on the internal and external dynamics, both endogenous and exogenous to the peace process, that contributed to its cohesion in favour of the Havana negotiations. Similar to Case Study One, commandship legitimacy contributed to strong intra-secondary group cohesion. As in Case Studies Two and Three, the CMTF's hidden workings facilitated the co-optation of the peace process, serving as a platform for individuals to detach from the organisation after demobilising and pursue political activities not aligned with the participation provisions of the 2016 peace accord.

Chapter 8: Case Study Four. Mobile Column Teófilo Forero. *Los Teófilos*: the Breakaway Faction that Never Came to Be

We always saw El Paisa as the highest authority. If he gave any orientation, it was because it was the right thing to do.

-Former combatant, Caquetá, September 2022

My son wants to join the FARC-EP, but not any front. I prefer him to join la Teófilo.

-Former combatant recalling what his mother said to the CMTF leadership before he joined the FARC-EP, Caquetá, September 2022

In this chapter, I examine the case of the *Columna Móvil Teófilo Forero* (CMTF, *La Teófilo* or *Los Teófilos* hereafter). I select the CMTF as a negative case — an against-all-odds scenario that could plausibly have occurred but did not — since media reports, intelligence officials, peace negotiators, and locals alike¹³⁶ initially regarded it a likely breakaway faction when the Havana peace process began in 2012¹³⁷. The CMTF's organisational robustness, economic endowments, and strong commandership legitimacy were among the reasons for this belief. Surprisingly, when the Colombian state and the FARC-EP signed the peace agreement in 2016, the CMTF had not broken away.

In this chapter, I present evidence on the different combinations of internal and external dynamics to the CMTF, both endogenous and exogenous to the peace process, that contribute to cohesion — the observable outcome in this case study. I demonstrate that El Paisa's commandership leadership, which evolved before and during the peace process, shaped by strong vertical ties with the local population, strong intra-secondary group socialisation mechanisms and military performance, contribute to this outcome. The quote above illustrates his leadership capabilities in mobilising the CMDA to either break away from the FARC-EP or in favour of the 2016 peace accord. Moreover, the prospect of doing politics after the war also facilitated the cohesion of the CMTF in favour the peace process.

This case study puts into perspective the findings in Case Studies One, Two and Three. For one, commandership legitimacy fosters strong intra-secondary group cohesion, as seen in

¹³⁶ Field notes, June – December 2022.

¹³⁷ See, [Insight Crime, 2012](#), among others.

Case Study One. However, unlike Mordisco in the 1st Front, who draws on his capabilities to reorganise the 1st Front and anti-disarmament rhetoric, El Paisa's sources of commandership legitimacy go way back to his early days in the FARC-EP and have evolved over nearly 30 years. These findings support a longer approach to before and during the peace process. While the former generated strong intra-secondary group cohesion to break away in high proportion, El Paisa's did so in favour of the peace accord, mediated by his post-demobilisation political project — which could have gradually come to fruition had he not rearmed in August 2019.

Moreover, the CMDA's prestige among locals and its social embeddedness in a region of historical and social significance to the FARC-EP were key conditions for relying on a local recruitment and support base throughout the 1990s and 2010s. These pre-existing networks contributed to strong vertical ties between its leadership and rank-and-file, shaped by rigorous political education and discipline enforcement throughout decades. The second quote above illustrates this. Case Study Three, on the contrary, shows that the mismanaged recruitment of former *Rastrojos* facilitated weak intra-secondary group vertical ties. Another example is the role of material resources and external networks. They played a fundamental role in the mixed fragmentation of the CMDA and the ambiguous role of Romaña in Case Study Three. Case Study One demonstrates their strategic relevance for Mordisco to stay in arms by drawing on his and other mid-level commanders' long-standing ties to external actors in illicit economies. In Case Study Two, they were a source of dispute between the 10th Front renewed leadership ([name redacted #4]) and local support networks, due to the former's political aspirations, while also serving those who led the breakaway faction. In this chapter, I demonstrate that material resources and external networks are key to understanding CMTF's post-demobilisation or post-war politics plans.

The evidence in this chapter stems from 11 life history interviews with former combatants, nine semi-structured interviews with elite and third sectors, field notes from 11 informal conversations, and additional empirical materials. Per my research design (Chapter 2), I selected participants based on specific criteria: their knowledge the CMTF's history and internal dynamics, its parent group (the South Bloc) and their operational environment. Unlike the other three cases, the CMTF was not part of my original case selection. Its inclusion resulted from “unexpected moments” (Fujii, 2018) during fieldwork in Colombia, as I detail in Chapter 3. I spent nearly weeks in the reincorporation cantonment, where former CMTF members lived

until 2024¹³⁸. This short immersion was invaluable. I conducted life-history interviews with ex-combatants who had extensive knowledge of this secondary group's history and internal dynamics, and who also referred me to others. Observing daily routines facilitated impromptu conversations with both locals and relatives of ex-combatants. Had I not stayed in the cantonment, it would have been far more challenging, if not impossible, to have these conversations. Their occupations left them with limited time, and many were deeply distrustful of outsiders like me. Overcoming this barrier (which not always happen) required time and patience, as I detail in the Research Process Chapter. I also conducted fieldwork in cities across the Caquetá and Huila Departments.

This chapter is divided in three sections. First, I offer brief historical context of the CMTF. Then, I examine the internal and external dynamics that contribute to its cohesion and subordination to the peace process. Finally, I briefly discuss the findings, highlighting the mechanisms that lead to the observable outcome in this case study.

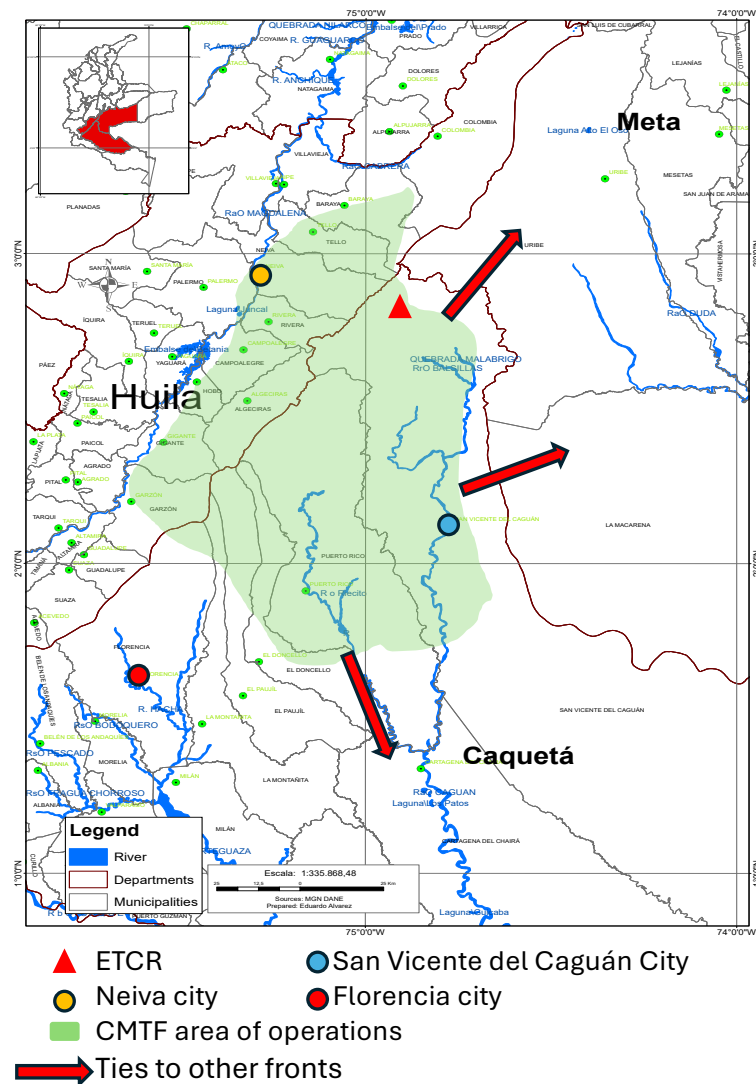
Historical Context

The FARC-EP established the CMTF in 1993. Its leaders and first cadres were seasoned combatants serving as personal guards for the General Secretariat. In the early 1990s, after an air raid against the FARC-EP leadership's stronghold, the organisation's top brass scattered. One commander, Raúl Reyes, and his personal guard settled in the El Pato region, whose historical significance for the FARC-EP I detail throughout this chapter. Following strategic military decisions, Reyes' guard was restructured in 1993 into the CMTF. At the same time, the FARC-EP's 2nd Front¹³⁹, which had been operating in El Pato since the 1960s, was redeployed elsewhere. The 2nd Front's political work, mass work, and economic endowments provided the CMTF with an organisational baseline and support network and strong vertical ties to local settlers, who shared similar political preferences and a history shaped by violence and state repression from the 1950s to the 1980s.

¹³⁸ In that year, they were forcibly displaced by ongoing armed groups, or FARC-EP dissidents.

¹³⁹ A "mother front" whose origins date back to 1965. Officially established as a front in 1978 (Génesis, XVI, 31; Aguilera, 2015, 147).

Los Teófilos, under El Paisa's command from 1993 until laying down of arms in 2017, further strengthened this buildup. The CMTF was a *sui generis* secondary group: formally part of the Southern Bloc, yet it maintained close ties with the FARC-EP's top leadership due to its origins in the general secretariat. This granted El Paisa and the CMTF leadership autonomy to operate across Colombia, including major cities. By the 1990s and 2000s, it had evolved into an elite, highly trained secondary group, bolstered by its economic resources, external networks linked to coca paste and coca base buyers, military successes, and internal discipline. Feared outside the FARC-EP and highly regarded within it, the CMTF survived the counterinsurgency campaign. Due to its wartime trajectory, material resources, and charismatic leadership, the CMTF was deemed a loose cannon and a national security risk both before and during the peace process. Nevertheless, against all odds, El Paisa and his troops laid down their arms in 2017.



Internal and External Dynamics: Cohesion in the CMTF

In this section, I present evidence on the observable implications of existing explanations in the literature that allow us to understand the cohesion and subordination of the CMTF to the 2016 peace accord. In Section 8.1 I demonstrate that recruitment, strict socialisation mechanisms, and commandership legitimacy at the secondary group level, as they evolved before and during the peace process, contributed to this observable outcome. These internal dynamics were also shaped by the FARC-EP and CMTF's long-standing local embeddedness, prestige and military accomplishments. Moreover, in Section 8.2, I demonstrate that material resources and external networks, exogenous to the peace process, also contributed to the CMTF's cohesion. At the same time, the evidence suggests that cohesion and subordination served the strategic purpose of advancing the CMTF leadership's post-demobilisation political objectives — diverging from the official party line that emerged from the FARC-EP's rebel-to-party transformation after 2017.

8.1 Internal Dynamics

8.1.1 Joining *La Teófilo*: Recruitment, Being “Well-known,” Prestige and Commitment

The CMTF built strong horizontal and vertical links throughout the 1990s and 2010s, shaped by its social embeddedness, localized and strict recruitment practices. Being “well-known” or local and having relatives or friends in the FARC-EP or its external political support networks largely facilitated joining the CMTF. Likewise, the CMTF’s original mission and military achievements also contributed to its prestige among locals, thereby facilitating the recruitment of politically and ideologically motivated individuals.

8.1.1.1 Historical Roots and Localized Recruitment Base

The CMTF prioritized localized recruitment and relied on trust-based networks in the El Pato region, where it began operating in 1993, due to its historical significance. Former combatants say that the CMTF, “Most of *los Teófilos* are from El Pato... there they had their relatives in that region” (LH016; LH08; LH009, LH010; LH013; LH015), referring to long-standing social networks in that region, mediated by familial ties, extended families, and kinship or *compadrazgo*. Individuals who were “well-known” or from a “good family” (*de buena familia*) had greater chances of joining the CMTF (LH008; LH009; LH010). Unlike the

history of the CMDA (Chapter 7), this secondary group did not have to mobilize fighters and support networks to a new region. The CMTF relied on a recruitment base among locals as result of historical processes from the 1950s to the 2000s. “My dad was one of the first FARC-EP commanders in the region. Those are my origins. My father and my mother were in Río Chiquito and the Marquetalian process,” (LH015) tells one ex-combatant, referring to the early mobilization of communist guerrillas that preceded the FARC-EP. Similarly, another refers to how the CMTF established and evolved in a region that had “transformed into a refuge for people displaced by violence” during the second half of the 20th century second half alongside the 2nd Front, followed by the CMTF. “Coexisting” was “normal” and “joining” the guerrillas “a life choice” (LH010; S126). As one puts it, “There was more affinity with the guerrillas than with state institutions; they offered a refuge and protection that could not be found elsewhere” (LH012).

Data show that having friends or relatives in the CMTF (either as combatants or *milicianos*), prior membership in the PCC, JUCO, or UP¹⁴⁰, or collaboration with the FARC-EP in rural and urban areas also facilitated recruitment (LH008; L010; LH011; LH012; LH013). Political committees, “organisational commands” (LH008), urban networks, and collaborators also helped in identifying potential recruits. Recruitment of *milicianos*, for example, relied on being “well-known,” an observable implication of recruitment criteria widely used by all ex-combatants in the four case studies, except former *Rastrojos* in the CMDA. Concerning the CMTF, a former *miliciano* recalls: “[the FARC-EP] knew me well, so they called me and said, *look, we know you, we know your family, we want you to be part of the milicias*” (LH010). *Milicianos* operated under strict compartmentalisation and clandestinity (LH008; LH010), as discussed in Section 8.1.2. Only the CMTF company commanders kept contact with them and received intelligence, such as the location of potential attacks or the whereabouts of wealthy families (LH008; LH009; LH012; LH013). Recruiting streetwise individuals (LH012) was key to the CMTF’s military successes, which earned it prestige and respect within the FARC-EP, as I show in the following section.

8.1.1.2 Prestige and Pride: “I want to be a *Teófilo*”

Evidence suggests that people joined the CMTF due to its prestige and status. Initially established as the personal guard of FARC-EP's top leaders, the CMTF soon gained standing

¹⁴⁰ As I show in case studies one and two, the violence against the UP led to an influx of recruits and political cadres to the FARC-EP, who joined or returned to the organization in the late 1980s and early 1990s.

within the organisation due to its military accomplishments, which, in turn, contributed to its organisational robustness, growth, and cohesion. For instance, this secondary group grew from two companies in the 1990s to five in the 2000s and demobilized four between 2016 and 2017.

Recruitment accelerated because of the CMTF's commitment to the FARC-EP's Strategic Plan¹⁴¹ (observable implication of discipline - Section 8.1.2.1). Military strikes and achievements in the 1990s and 2000s were also crucial, for they boosted its prestige and “status” (LH012; LH013; LH016). “[Military] results assured us that people wanted to join. Like in football, you don't root for the loser but for the winner,” illustrates a former combatant (LH009; LH013). Military performance “helps us grow. *Los Teófilos* [CMTF] gained tremendous fame at the national level. People admired us a lot, and youngsters want to join what the *Teófilo* already meant,” tells an ex-combatant (LH012). Data indicate that “prestige” also translated into feeling “proud [of belonging] to the *Teófilos*” (LH011; LH015; LH016) and being “respected” within the FARC-EP. An ex-combatant recalls, “People wanted to belong to *los Teófilos* because we were admired. Even comrades, upon learning you were from *la Teófilo*, treated you as if you were someone special yet you were just another fighter.” (LH015; LH016). Such was the case externally. In informal conversations, former intelligence officers referred to *Los Teófilos* as “dangerous” and “well behaved”, compared to those in other FARC-EP secondary groups¹⁴².

Potential recruits also showed aligned preferences regarding the CMTF's origins. Former combatants explain that the CMTF was “a special unit” (LH015) because “serving as the guard of a Secretariat member drew considerable attention. Locals joined the CMTF in a region where we were no strangers” (LH011; LH008; LH015; LH016). Being a “special guard” meant that when the CMTF began operating in 1993, it relied on pre-existing capabilities: “We had experience, we were not fresh out of training; we already had seniority, knowledge, experience,” tells one ex-combatant (LH0012; LH008; LH015; S126), referring to the first 50 or 60 seasoned combatants of the CMTF. Likewise, in 1993, it transformed into a mobile combat unit “without territorial limitations” (S123; LH008; LH009; LH012). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the CMTF gained greater internal and external recognition. The FARC-EP's top brass granted it *carte blanche* and operational flexibility. “We were privileged; we operated throughout Colombia to the extent that we were known as the FARC's elite force” (LH015;

¹⁴¹ Adopted in 1982. See Section 5.2.1

¹⁴² Field notes, July 2022; August 2022; November 2022; February 2024.

LH008; LH011; LH012). This allowed them to stand out militarily from the beginning, in addition to their leadership and social embeddedness (Sections xx).

8.1.1.3 Ideological Commitment

The evidence suggests that the CMTF prioritised recruiting individuals whose motivations for joining the FARC-EP were relatively homogeneous. Ideological motivation matters. It shapes members' normative commitments and reduces the likelihood of defection or switching sides, in addition to socialisation mechanisms, as I discuss in Section 8.1.2.

Ex-combatants stress identification with and commitment to the FARC-EP political project before formally incorporating receipts into the CMTF. One recalls, "I joined the FARC-EP because it represented social, economic, and political transformation" (LH009), while another says, "the causes that the FARC represented were just" (LH010). These are ex-combatants who joined the CMTF in the 1990s and are from the El Pato region. The operational environment of *Los Teófilos* — El Pato Region, with its long-standing social embeddedness — and its growing prestige within and outside the FARC-EP likely contributed to prior knowledge of and commitment to the organisation's project and beliefs.

In addition, all research participants acknowledge that recruitment accelerated to meet the FARC-EP's Strategic Plan goals, similar to Case Studies One and Two. Due to income quotas, this could have led the CMDA to recruit individuals who were not identified with or aligned with the FARC-EP project. Nevertheless, within the CMTF, mid-level commanders implemented screening mechanisms to assess the genuine motivations of potential recruits, in line with FARC-EP "Recruiting Guidelines" (FARC-EP. 1993). "I recruited many, but always selectively seeking political convictions or specific conditions, never out of boredom or an abusive household," tells a former combatant (LH015; LH008; LH010; LH011). Despite these efforts, recruitment was not flawless, as infiltrations and desertions occurred¹⁴³, either due to loss of ideological commitment or military pressure.

¹⁴³ A frequently cited example by research participants was the 2000 desertion of "Kabir," then the second-in-command of the CMTF. He defected with a large sum of money obtained through ransom kidnappings and extortion (Génesis, XVIII, 38; [El Tiempo, 2004](#)).

8.1.2 Socialisation for War and Peace

This section presents evidence on socialisation through discipline, political education, and military training. Discipline and political education fostered intra-secondary group cohesion before and during the peace process, and in favour of the 2016 peace accord. Military training, which research respondents associate with military performance, also fostered cohesion — namely, a sense of belonging and camaraderie. At the onset of the peace process, the CMTF was cohesive, unlike Case Studies Two and Three. However, cohesion did not lead to “group thinking” or large-proportion fragmentation, as in Case Study One. As Section 8.1.4 shows, El Paisa and the CMTD’s legitimacy further contributed to socialisation and a pro-peace stance.

8.1.2.1 Wartime Discipline and Political Education

During the war, the CMTF demonstrated discipline, for it was “subordinated” and “complied with the strategic plan” (*los documentos*) of the FARC-EP. “We were guided by FARC-EP documents, regulations, and rules, which required being well-versed in and consistent with the Strategic Plan,” tells an ex-combatant (LH013; LH009; LH015). The CMTF instilled the FARC-EP’s political goals through political education. Recruits attended courses on the FARC-EP’s history and political project, internal statutes, regulations, and the conclusions of its Conferences, including the Strategic Plan. “For someone to say that he joined the FARC and did not go through education first, he is a liar,” an ex-combatant recalled (LH009). Political education and military training would go hand in hand: “You prepare your mind first, then you learn how to use weapons” (LH008; LH010; LH012; LH015). Some CMTF members had prior political indoctrination through the JUCO and CCP (LH011; S123; S126).

In addition to being socialised into the Strategic Plan, learning secondary-group values and history also contributed to a sense of belonging to the CMTF. For example, the history of Teófilo Forero, a union member and high-ranking member of the CCP, assassinated in 1989 (LH009; LH010; LH011; Genesis, XVIII, 15). News briefings further educated troops, with members analysing current events through the organisation’s political lens, either daily or weekly. These briefings reinforced the FARC-EP’s objectives — from the Caguán peace process (1999-2001) to the counterinsurgency campaign (2000s-10s) and the Havana peace process (2012-16) — adapting to the evolving challenges faced by the CMTF.

Complying with the organisation's rules and strategic goals contributed to the CMTF's "growth" and "respect" internally and externally (LH008; LH009; LH010; LH015). Implementing the Strategic Plan was also tantamount to military performance. "When an operation was successful, it was because there was discipline," tells one ex-combatant (LH016), and another adds: "We had commissions in the cities, often within family groups. But it wasn't about casually going to your mother's house — no, on a mission, you stayed in safe houses, not partying, strolling, or eating whenever you felt like it" (LH011; LH008).

Secrecy and compartmentalisation are two additional observable implications of discipline (LH008; LH011). Both principles refer to not disclosing sensitive information among comrades unless instructed otherwise. "I was good at solo missions. Sometimes I knew only the details of a specific mission in a big city, unaware that another Teófilo was following me to see if I would betray the cause [*torcerme*]," recalls one former *miliciano* in an informal conversation¹⁴⁴. Compliance with both principles instilled discipline in then-combatants, contributing to military performance and the clandestine role of the *milicianos*. "50% of the success of a military operation is discipline and secrecy," tells an ex-combatant (LH008). Failure to do so could lead to failed missions, being infiltrated by the state, mass captures, and even being bombed.

The role of the CMTF mid-level commanders was essential for fulfilling the strategic plan and missions: "The discipline statutes guided them" (LH016; LH015; LH009). In practice, it meant internalising behaviour rules and meeting the Strategic Plan through missions and tasks. "The strategic plan was for us, for example, a pastor talking about the gospel without knowing, without having read the Bible," (LH013) illustrates an ex-combatant. Evidence suggests that the CMTF generally applied these principles. Military successes and the trust placed by the FARC-EP top echelons in the CMTF are two examples. There were mistakes, nevertheless. Lack of discipline led to failed missions, like the failed assassination attempt of then-President Álvaro Uribe. "We had a safe house beside Neiva airport to strike his plane on landing [with a portable missile], but indiscipline ruined it: one operative leaked information to someone who passed it to an intelligence officer infiltrated in our ranks." (LH011; LH015).

Discipline was also practised daily. Former combatants refer to "Behaving like a fighter" [*comportarse como un guerrillero*] in the camps [*vida campamentaria*] (LH008; LH009;

¹⁴⁴ Field note, September 2022.

LH011; LH016). Adherence to this system of norms and behaviours was vital for the cohesion of the CMTF. “Being structured” (LH010; LH012; LH013), for instance, refers to “subordinating to the rules, knowing how to orient themselves militarily and politically” (LH009), and “respecting one’s commitment to the organisation” (LH010). Examples include complying with assigned roles such as providing security, cooking, carrying firewood, scouting, reading, and following the order of the day. Discipline also applied to special missions, including intelligence gathering, meeting with *milicianos*, guarding farms, and receiving information from human couriers. “Discipline meant keeping everything tidy. Staying silent, avoiding loud talk, shouting, laughing, or playing, and strictly following orders around the clock. In the *cambuche* [foxhole], you stayed put until ordered to move, reading or waiting until given further instructions.” (LH012; LH008; LH011; LH013; LH015; LH016) illustrates a former combatant.

“Behaving like a fighter” extended beyond interactions within secondary groups to interactions. Political education contributed to the representation of civilians. In regions like El Pato, it emphasised respectful treatment of locals, often descendants of settlers since the 1950s-“good families” (S127; S128). In areas where the CMTF engaged in predatory practices, civilians were represented as sources of income through kidnapping, extortion, and taxation. Political education reinforced these perceptions, with then-combatants using terms like “rich” and “bourgeois” (LH008; LH011; LH016; S125). A former combatant recalls, “The political school was indoctrination. You’d turn on the radio, listen to the news, and ask yourself: *What is the bourgeoisie trying to say? Why are there underprivileged masses? That was the message you had to convey.*” (LH016). Military performance also included targeting wealthy individuals in cities like Neiva.

Failure to follow orders led to punishments, from sanctions, like send undisciplined combatant to retraining camps, to court-martial. Mid-level commanders reinforced this system of punishments. According to the research participants, they were “very strict,” “like El Paisa” (LH009; LH011; LH016). Unlike Case Studies Two and Three (e.g. [name redacted #4] and Romaña with their trusted troops), there were no preferences. The CMTF punished even its leaders like any other member: “I was court-martialled and chained to a wooden stake for a week. It was psychologically gruelling, even though I served in El Paisa’s guard. After the trial, they sanctioned me but did not execute me” (LH015; LH008; LH010; LH011; LH013; LH016). Secondary sources indicate that internal purges (*El Tiempo*, 2013), both before and during the

peace process, are another observable implication of disciplinary measures, following internal “balances.” While these purges led to desertions, data do not return evidence of gradual detachment, as seen in urban networks in Case Studies Two and Three.

“Recalling” was another disciplinary measure implemented by the CMTF in cases of indiscipline for both combatants and *milicianos*, similar to Case Studies One, Two, and Three. “Getting drunk,” “not complying with secrecy,” “not holding political meetings talks,” “acting behind the organisation’s back,” “mistreating civilians,” and not adapting to the effects of the counterinsurgent campaign, are some examples (LH008; LH009; LH011; LH013; LH015). However, unlike case studies Two and Three, “recalling” and “encampment” undisciplined troops did not contribute to their detachment. On the contrary, the evidence shows that each CMTF company commander, after conducting “balances,” had the authority to recall his troops, including urban networks, and encamp them. “They complied and remained under the command of a new leader in our camps,” tells an ex-combatant (LH013; LH009; LH010). A former *miliciano* explains: “I got recalled and sent to a camp. I had to comply with the camp rules: stand guard, cook, and go to combat [*echar plomo*] if necessary” (LH010; LH015; LH016). In other cases, the CMTF leadership “recalled” companies not performing militarily (LH013; S127; S128). In these cases, other companies subsumed them, including their commanders.

Discipline in prison and adapting to the counterinsurgency campaign are two more observable implications of discipline as an existing explanation in the literature.

One of the Colombian state’s significant blows to the CMTF was the massive arrests of *milicianos*. “Not to bend,” meaning not ratting on comrades or folding under pressure, remaining subordinate, loyal, and not betraying the CMTF, are ways ex-combatants refer to being disciplined while in prison (LH009; LH010; LH012; LH016). “Reaching a pre-agreement with the prosecutor’s office meant that one had become a rat [*volverse un sapo*]” (LH010; LH011). In some prisons, the FARC-EP had its wards exclusively for their “prisoners of war”, and keeping secrets was almost impossible (LH011). Not “bending” demonstrated the loyalty that El Paisa expected from the CMTF members. “He wanted the *Teófilos* to behave like when he was in jail—show courage and don’t rat on anyone,” explains a local leader (S126). As I detail in Section 8.1.6, El Paisa promised to “help” those in prison but threatened to kill anyone who betrayed the FARC-EP. “El Paisa would say, ‘If they put you in jail, I’ll get you a lawyer, I’ll get you out, I’ll take care of you, as long as you remain loyal’” (LH016). Loyalty

while in prison contributed to El Paisa's inclusion or exclusion of imprisoned CMTF members on reincorporation lists (Section 8.2.x).

Adapting to the counterinsurgency campaign (Section 5.2.1) involved complying with new regulations regarding infiltration, electronic warfare, desertions, bombings, and communications jamming. Counterinsurgency impacted the *Teófilos* but did not contribute to fragmentation, as in Case Studies One and Two. By complying with norms and implementing adaptation strategies, the CMTF fostered a sense of belonging and cohesion amid the counterinsurgency campaign. Former combatants recall that the CMTF “put up a fight” (LH011) and, unlike other regional fronts, its discipline prevented the military from “killing El Paisa” (LH008). As one proudly state, “If Uribe didn’t finish us off, nobody could” (LH009; LH012; S125), underscoring this secondary group’s resilience against the sophisticated counterinsurgency campaign. New habits included quarantining incoming goods to scan for tracking devices, rotating camps every three days, relying on human couriers, enforcing secrecy and compartmentalisation, moving mainly at night, and avoiding urban areas where the CMTF had been predatory against civilians and the state had deployed informants and operatives (LH008; LH013; LH015; LH016; S124; S125; Álvarez-Vanegas, 2026).

8.1.2.2 Discipline and Political Education for the Peace Process

In the previous section, I demonstrate that discipline is an internal dynamic, exogenous to the peace process, that interacts with other dynamics, both internal and external to the CMTF over time. It shaped daily habits in the camps, adaptation to the counterinsurgency campaign, life in prison, and the internalisation of the Strategic Plan and other documents. It also reinforced loyalty to the organisation and the CMTD's leadership, headed by El Paisa, while promoting compartmentalisation. These examples illustrate how discipline contributed to strong intra-secondary cohesion before the peace agreement. They express a sense of belonging, commitment to the cause and fulfilment of the FARC-EP strategic goals. These observable implications of discipline and political education, which evolved throughout the 1990s and 2000s, carried on into the peace process (2012-16). Discipline and political education in the CMTF concerning the peace process continued — that is, subordination to new strategic goals, entailing a transition from war to peace, which required adhering to peace-oriented rules and norms. At the outset of the peace process, the CMTF was cohesive and not undergoing significant internal rearrangements. The organisational conditions of the *Teófilos* were not

those of leadership renewal and group thinking (1st Front), detached *milicianos* (10th Front), or internal purges (CMDA).

How did discipline and political education contribute to cohesion? Evidence shows that adherence and subordination to the FARC-EP peace-oriented political goals are observable implications of discipline in favour of the peace process, contributing to the observable outcome in this case study. El Paisa and the CMTF leadership also had a critical role in fostering subordination and political education in favour of the 2016 peace accord. "El Paisa spoke openly and told me, *look, I am a man of war; this is my thing. But I am also a subordinate man and I follow the orientations of the organization's leadership; if the organization decides to carry out the peace process and that we all get involved, well, we are going to work for that,*" recalls a former combatant (LH015; also LH008; LH009; LH010; LH011; LH013; LH016; S123; S124; S128; S130). His order was to subordinate if a peace deal if an agreement was reached in Havana.

The leadership of El Paisa and that of the CMTF trickled down to this secondary group. A defining trait of CMTF mid-level commanders was their leadership style, which mirrored El Paisa's: strict adherence to orders and implementation of FARC-EP statutes and regulations to conduct war and in favour of peace. A local leader recounts his commitment: "[I suggested] *leave some weapons in caches in case it doesn't go well,*" he replied, *"I am convinced of the peace process.* He even scolded me for suggesting such a thing" (S123). His dedication to the peace process was so significant that negotiators in Havana closely awaited his actions. As one ex-combatant recalls, *"He always told us he was for the peace process, but the big news was when he travelled to Cuba, following orders"* (LH011). El Paisa's presence in Havana demonstrated both his discipline and his commitment, helping to calm tensions, as his commandship legitimacy within the FARC-EP could have otherwise jeopardised the process. As I detail in Sections 8.1.3.1 and 8.2, his commandship legitimacy and post-demobilisation political plans also played a key role in maintaining CMTF cohesion.

Evidence shows that wartime political education was repurposed by CMTF leadership to convey updates on the peace process and emphasise educating members about it. "El Paisa always used to say, we need peace pedagogy. I am for the peace process. He or another [mid-level] commander would explain it to us," recalls an ex-combatant (LH008; LH009). When El Paisa travelled to Cuba, he left a mid-level commander in charge of receiving communications, or "gems" [*gemas*], from the FARC-EP delegation and disseminating them to others (LH008;

LH009; LH015; LH016; S113; S123; S124). This education also reached local populations where CMTF companies operated and extended to *Teófilos* in prison through lawyers and NGOs (LH010).

Moreover, El Paisa did not want to be deemed a “loose cannon.” (LH009; LH011; S123). He strived to be seen as “someone who followed the orders of the FARC-EP leadership,” tells an ex-combatant (LH008). Another adds: “he wanted to get rid of that image; he was always very subordinate” (LH012; LH008; LH013; LH015; S124; S127). Doubts about the disarmament process arose. “There were mid-level commanders who told El Paisa not to lay down his arms,” tells a former combatant (LH013; LH011; LH008). Another research participant recalls, “One day, all the mid-level commanders shared their doubts and fears about the peace process with El Paisa. He responded, *anyone who wants to break away, go ahead; I stand with the process. I will not stay here supporting lazy people. Those are the orders*” (S124; LH009; LH013)¹⁴⁵. However, if the Havana talks failed, the CMTF continued to train normally until shortly before the signing of the peace deal (LH012; LH013). This aligns with informal conversations I had, in which I learned that company commanders would not let their troops “relax.”¹⁴⁶

In addition to his subordination to the peace process and efforts to promote political education in its favour, El Paisa’s commandership legitimacy also contributed to cohesion in the CMTF, as I show in the following section.

8.1.2.3 Military Training and Cohesion

The evidence suggests that military training contributed to military performance. Exogenous to the peace process, performance — being successful at conducting military operations in urban and rural areas — created cohesion through comradeship, a sense of “courage” (LH012) “pride and belonging to *la Teófilo*” (LH015), “recognition” within the FARC-EP (LH016), and motivation or the belief that its members could accomplish missions regardless of their complexity. The FARC-EP leadership and other secondary groups

¹⁴⁵ Camilo El Argentino, a CMTF mid-level commander and Argentinian national, openly opposed the peace process (LH10; LH15; LH16; S128). He wrote to the top echelons of the FARC-EP that the peace process was a mistake and rejected the rhetoric of the FARC-EP’s defeat. In response, the General Secretariat demoted him and reassigned him to the Southern Bloc. In Putumayo, he was tied up in isolation for eight months. He laid down his arms but refused to sign the demobilisation certificate. He then travelled to Bolivia, where local authorities captured him, and later returned to Argentina, where he died of a heart attack in 2023. (Ciro, E; Juarez, L., 2024; [El Espectador, 2023](#)).

¹⁴⁶ Field note, August and September 2022.

acknowledged the CMTF's boldness in undertaking operations with both national and international repercussions. Even retired military personnel deemed the CMTF one of the most "dangerous" secondary groups of the FARC-EP. Military training encompasses the CMTF's capacity to operate in both urban and rural environments, gather intelligence, and infiltrate public offices and private businesses.

From its inception, the CMTF comprised members whom research participants describe as "courageous" (S127), "brave" (LH016), and "highly trained and seasoned" (LH012), authorised by the FARC-EP top echelons to operate throughout the country, especially in cities. In addition, "El Paisa came from the city. As CMTF commander, he fights the state in its backyard through special ops commandos," tells an ex-combatant (LH010; LH008, LH012), to "strike precisely where it would hurt the country the most" (S125). Urban successful operations were a sign of special training, for "people with skills to navigate in a big city" (LH010; LH011). El Paisa prioritised urban missions through highly trained urban networks for gathering intelligence and blending in with the "rich" (LH008; LH011; LH015; LH016). "We would tell the General Secretariat that we had a target in Bogotá, and they would say *go for it* because they trusted us," tells a former combatant (LH012). Attacks like the bombing of El Nogal¹⁴⁷, a social club in Bogotá's affluent area or the Miraflores building assault, in Neiva, are two examples of the CMTF's military performance.

By operating across the country, particularly in urban areas, and supporting other secondary groups with manpower and logistics, the CMTF earned a unique standing both within and outside the FARC-EP. According to the research participants, the military successes resulted from a combination of leadership, discipline, political education, and material resources — internal and external dynamics, exogenous to the peace process. For example, "El Paisa built national and international networks, sending fighters to Cuba and bringing in Vietnamese and Chinese instructors to train them in urban warfare, explosives, and covert city operations" recalls a research participant (S125). The importance of military training and

¹⁴⁷ "On February 7, 2003, at 8:15 p.m., the FARC-EP planted a car bomb at the El Nogal club in the northern part of Bogotá. At that time the club was packed with people who had gone there to practice sports, dine or have a few drinks. The 200 kilos of explosives killed 33 people, all of them civilians, and 198 were injured, including employees and members." ([Colombian Truth Commission, 2022](#)). The CMTF infiltrated El Nogal club staff by placing *milicianos* and collaborators acting as, for example, squash instructors ([El País, 2023](#)). This was a contentious issue during my fieldwork. The ex-combatants I interviewed avoided discussing this attack. The transitional justice tribunals, or Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP), are investigating it, and several ex-combatants have testified as part of their transitional justice obligations. The JEP has ruled the attack a war crime. ([JEP, 2023](#)).

readiness relates to the CMTF's origins and close ties to the FARC-EP's leadership (LH011; LH015; S123; S124; S130). Moreover, in the 1980s, El Paisa led missions for the general secretariat, endowing the CMTF with an elite, militaristic character from the outset (Section 8.1.3.1), one of its defining organisational traits. For example, in 2002, four *Teófilos* hijacked a plane, landed it on a highway, released all passengers and crew, and kidnapped Colombian Senator Jorge Gechem, who remained in captivity for six years (*Diario del Huila*, 2002).

Another way in which military performance created a sense of belonging was the CMTF's capacity to gather intelligence and its uses. One way was by infiltrating public offices to access, steal, or buy confidential information (LH008; LH009; LH011). "Once El Paisa assembled us and said *I bought this information from a friend in the army*. It was a list of all the Colombian army assets in the region. His orders: *kill them*," tells an ex-combatant (LH012). The CMTF could track judges handling cases against its members or plan prison breaks (LH011; LH012; LH016; S126; *El Tiempo*, 2003)¹⁴⁸. Such actions reinforced El Paisa's commandership legitimacy, shaped by his care for his troops (Section 8.1.4).

Joining other secondary groups of the FARC-EP in large-scale operations against state forces throughout the 1990s and 2010s and reinforcing other fronts to fight paramilitary groups or those that had been weakened by the Colombian armed forces (Genesis, XXVIII, 39)¹⁴⁹ are two observable implication of military performance and capabilities that contributed to a sense of belonging and pride for being a Teofilo (LH009; LH015; S123; S124; S126). "There were fronts with ten men left, so we sent them men to help them" (LH009; LH012), recalls an ex-combatant. Moreover, during the peace process, the CMTF sent troops to other fronts to "make them look bigger" for the demobilisation process (S126; LH012; LH013; LH015; S128)¹⁵⁰. Despite suffering significant military setbacks during the 2000s and 2010s counterinsurgency campaign, the CMTF counted on well-trained and disciplined mid-level commanders to replace those killed or arrested by state forces (LH009; LH013; S128). This collective experience at the secondary-group level was likely another source of adherence, motivation, and a sense of belonging within the CMTF, shaped by interactions with external actors, internal discipline and leadership capabilities, which evolved before and during the peace process. In the following section, I present evidence on commandership legitimacy.

¹⁴⁸ List examples based on secondary sources. Rivera jail in 2003.

¹⁴⁹ *Verdad Abierta*, 2018:

¹⁵⁰ On paper, a mobile column had less members than a front, which was not the case of the CMTF.

8.1.3 Commandership Legitimacy

The CMTF's commandership legitimacy created cohesion before and during the peace process and contributed to the observable outcome in this case study. A careful examination of the observable implications of commandership legitimacy shows that El Paisa's leadership and stance in favour of the peace process stem from different sources, endogenous and exogenous to the peace process, shaped by interactions with internal and external dynamics to the CMTF (also Section 9.2.1.3). El Paisa's troops deemed him legitimate because of his origins in the FARC-EP and his loyalty to its founders. The CMTF's military performance before and during the peace process also granted El Paisa respect and commandership legitimacy at the secondary and organisational level. He also embodied the characteristics that his subordinates deemed desirable in a leader. Unlike the other case studies, El Paisa led the CMTF continuously from the 1990s until its disarmament in 2017. This stable leadership — without leadership renewal — may have contributed to the CMTF's "institutionalisation" (Bakke, et al, 2012), despite the killing of some of its mid-level commanders by state forces. In addition, during the peace process, El Paisa's leadership was a double-edged sword — he could have kept arms and led a breakaway faction larger than that of Case Study One, including top leaders, mid-level commanders from the Eastern and South Blocs, and other secondary groups from FARC-EP. However, his commandership legitimacy played out in favour of the peace process, mediated by his post-demobilisation plans (Sections 8.2 and 9.1.4).

8.1.3.1 El Paisa's Commandership Legitimacy: from Jamaica to Manuel Marulanda's remains

El Paisa's early missions in the 1980s earned him recognition and commandership legitimacy within the FARC-EP, particularly among the top echelons. One was Manuel Marulanda, one of the organisation's founders. Research participants agree that Operation Jamaica was a turning point for El Paisa, for he became "reliable" and displayed "loyalty" and his capacities for carrying out sensitive operations (LH016; S130). Operation Jamaica (1989) was the FARC-EP's attempt to smuggle into Colombia, via Jamaica, 1,000 rifles and other weapons from the United Kingdom (El Espectador, 2010; Génesis, XXVIII). The operation failed, and El Paisa and other FARC-EP members and associates were arrested. While in prison, he was loyal — he "did not rat on anyone" [*no se torció*] (LH011; LH016; S123; S126). He escaped three years later and was appointed Raúl Reyes' guard, then a member of the FARC-EP's general secretariat. "In Jamaica, he showed courage [*cojones*] and what he was capable of," tells a research participant (S126; LH011), showcasing the skills he learned as Pablo

Escobar's hitman in the 1980s (LH016; Génesis, XXVIII, 15; Insight Crime, 2021). An ex-combatant adds: "his initial successes granted him the respect and admiration in the FARC-EP; he rose as a figure" (LH016). In 1993, the General Secretariat appointed him CMTF commander based on his "merits" and "character" (LH011; S126), despite not being a cadre nor an envoy of the PCC and was not from the region. However, he was also considered "close" to some of Manuel Marulanda's associates, who vouched for his entry into the organisation (S123).

More than 20 years passed between Operation Jamaica and the peace process. During this time, El Paisa's commandership legitimacy played out in different ways. If the Jamaica Operation earned him respect, Marulanda's death in 2008 and the handling of his remains elevated El Paisa into one of the FARC-EP's most respected mid-level commanders. Marulanda's death was handled with great secrecy. "The main challenge was to reduce the number of those aware and involved, and to ensure that the secret remained among the most loyal so that they would not take it away from us," writes El Paisa in his memoirs (SM, 2020, p. 134). El Paisa and others buried Marulanda's body in a secret place [REDACTED]. However, in 2012, members of the secretariat — "[REDACTED]" (SM, 2020, 136-138) — dug up Marulanda's remains, dismembered him and buried him in the Meta region without telling El Paisa (LH008; LH010; S130). El Paisa found out, travelled with trusted troops and scouts, and searched for the remains. "The *Comandante's* bones were in a plastic basket. We picked them up with love and veneration, putting an end to the desecration ... Today the remains of Manuel Marulanda Vélez rest in a safe and secret place" (SM, 2020, 137-138; LH008¹⁵¹).

These actions position El Paisa as a legitimate and esteemed mid-level commander in the FARC-EP. "What El Paisa did with Manuel Marulanda is a guy who does what needs to be done, who goes and buries him in a secret place; in their internal ritual, it is quite significant," tells a research respondent (S130). These events occurred amid the leadership renewal within the top ranks of the FARC-EP. By 2012, Timochenko had taken command of the FARC-EP, and [name redacted #2] continued to rise through the ranks of the Eastern Bloc. Both faced commandership legitimacy issues, as I show in Case Studies One and Two. In this case study, their commandership illegitimacy stemmed from their handling of Marulanda's remains, doubts about their true identities, and concerns over their roles in the Havana peace talks over

¹⁵¹ Also triangulated through informal conversations. Field notes, August 2022, December 2022; June 2024.

disarmament provisions and handling of assets (LH008; LH009; LH010; LH011; LH012; LH013; LH015). Commandership illegitimacy, however, did not contribute to fragmentation to the same extent as in the 1st Front (Section 5.1.3.2). It enabled El Paisa to envision a post-demobilisation political project outside the organisation's leaders, most of whom he deemed illegitimate.

In the following sections, I show that Operation Jamaica and Marulanda's death illustrate how El Paisa's and the CMTF's sources of commandership legitimacy evolved before and during the peace process.

8.1.3.2 Behaving Like, and Being, a "Good Fighter"

Two characteristics that subordinates and superiors deem necessary to command before and during the peace process are being "an integral leader" and a "good fighter." (LH011; LH008; LH009; LH012; LH015) The former refers to El Paisa's ability to fulfil the requirements to be a commander according to FARC-EP statutes — "he knew how to lead politically and militarily" (LH009). The latter is an expression to refer to El Paisa as "being approachable" and "respectful" to the troops and local population (LH008) — contrary, for instance, to the case of [name redacted #4] in Case Study Two (Section 6.1.2.3). "He would joke [*les mamaba gallo*] to the rank-and-file" (LH013, S124), but "he was also earnest and disciplined" (S125) depending on the situation. An ex-combatant illustrates, "He made himself appreciated. I will never forget the time we went on a military operation, and we almost didn't bring any food because we thought it would be a matter of hours. It lasted days. El Paisa said *Take out all the food you have*. We all did it, and he distributed it evenly. *We are going to eat the same*, he said" (LH008). He did not feel superior and was modest, which made him "a good commander" (LH012; LH013). Research participants stress his "simplicity" (LH008; LH016). "I never saw him as a king sitting on the top of the mountain commanding," (LH008) or "He did the same chores as everyone else: carrying firewood and cooking. That motivates a lot" (LH012; LH015), two ex-combatants recall.

El Paisa also showed care for his troops in everyday tasks. A local leader remembers that El Paisa always carried a corn grinder to make *arepas*. "However, it was a plastic grinder. An iron-made one was too heavy, and it would be inconsiderate for a rank-and-file to carry it. This just shows his respect and consideration for his troops" (S124). He showed the same consideration toward CMTF members in prison. "He would never abandon them," (LH009) as

long as they remain loyal (Section 8.1.2.1). “He would tell us *if any of you ever go to jail, I will move heaven and earth to get you out of jail. I will hire lawyers, buy judges and prosecutors. I will bomb prison walls,*” tells one ex-combatant (LH012; LH011; LH015 LH016). In informal conversations, former *milicianos* tell me that they left prison because El Paisa paid or threatened the correctional officers and their families¹⁵². They returned to the CMTF as combatants. In 2016, when CMTF members left prison, due to the peace accord provisions, they went to the reincorporation cantonment to see El Paisa and their comrades. “How could I go somewhere else after all he did for me? All I thought was *I have to go and help him in any way I can,*” tells a former combatant who spent six years in prison (LH011; LH012; LH015; S124).

“Behaving like a fighter [*como un guerrillero*]” is another quality research participants note when describing El Paisa. That is, as a “person who was not despotic and imposing” (LH009; LH010; LH11; LH015), yet “very demanding and setting an example with his deeds (LH012). Others also recall his “convincing powers” and “charisma” (LH011; LH013; LH015; S124), which even the locals still remember. “He could be coercive and at the same time had a special gift for dealing with people (S126; S128). His troops admired and respected him “[would] deliver, as said and planned” (LH012; LH015; S124), a leadership quality that extended to the reincorporation projects (LH009; LH011; S124). Such “commanding skills” (LH011; LH012; S130) motivated his troops to accomplish missions out of conviction, not just fear of punishment. “Behaving like a *guerrillero*” also reflected in how El Paisa conducted himself, “well-dressed, clean, shaven. He would even criticise chubby [*barrigones*] commanders from other fronts and, later on, those who moved to Bogotá to lead the party” (S124).

Pride and a sense of belonging to the CMTF are other observable implications of commandship legitimacy, in addition to military performance. Being commanded by an “admired” commander (LH015; S124; S123; S126) created confidence, willingness to fight and accomplish missions. “Talking about El Paisa means talking about a pivotal figure in our armed struggle—a military referent, a driving force. He boosted our conviction,” tells an ex-combatant (LH016). “His troops believed him,” (S125) tells a research participant. “If El Paisa said it, it was because it was the right thing to do and it had to be done” (LH010; LH012).

¹⁵² Field notes, August 2022.

El Paisa and the CMTF mid-level commanders' commandship legitimacy also extended to the local population, which had long-standing ties with the FARC-EP. As noted above, it facilitated localised recruitment (Section 8.1.1). "Parents would come and say, *Look, my son wants to join the FARC-EP; I prefer that he join la Teófilo*. And that depended a lot on the reputation of El Paisa and *la Teófilo*," tells a former combatant (LH013). "El Paisa took care of the mass work, essential for our growth and local support," tells another (LH009). Similar to his troops, in informal conversations, locals [REDACTED] use expressions "admired," "respected," and "loved" to refer to El Paisa¹⁵³. "They loved El Paisa because he was fair. He didn't charge peasants arbitrarily, and when they resisted the movement, *la Teófilo* pushed them either to leave or to commit. He organised peasants, Local Action Boards, roads, and schools," says a local leader (S123; LH009)¹⁵⁴. Even in the 2000s and 2010s, during the counterinsurgency campaign, [REDACTED] helped the CMDA with food, shelter, hiding weapons, and informing on the army's whereabouts (S124). "We saw an old man crying, and he said, *Oscar, I'm sick; I don't have enough money for medicines. I have to take some tests. Can you help me?* And El Paisa told him, *take this money, go to Neiva tomorrow, get yourself checked*," an ex-combatant illustrates (LH015; LH008; LH009; LH11). Providing security and protecting the local population from criminals or unauthorised cocaine brokers also contributed to the CMTF's legitimacy. "He'd kill them following [REDACTED] requests or FARC-EP statutes," says a local leader, which also applied to undisciplined combatants (S123; S126).

8.1.3.3 Courage: Being a Frontline Fighter or "*Ser tropero*"

El Paisa's military capabilities also contributed to his commandship legitimacy. Being "determined [*tropero*]" (LH008; LH015) and "courageous [*frentero o bien parado*]" (S124; S126) was tantamount to fearlessness and boldness to carry out military operations "of national impact" (LH011; LH12; LH015, S125), granting him and the CMTF "respect" and "admiration" inside and outside the CMTF (LH009; LH010; LH011; LH015; S124; S125; S126; S128; S130). Being respected and admired also contributed to make of him a FARC-EP "military referent" (S128, S130; S147). For instance, "During [the peace process] exploratory phase [2010-12], we learned that El Paisa had built a business-like version of the FARC: the CMTF moved operatives nationwide, supported other fronts, and secured key corridors that generated revenue

¹⁵³ Field note, August 2022.

¹⁵⁴ This was not consistent across the regions where the CMTF operated. In urban areas of Caquetá and Huila, their behaviour was more predatory, including terrorist attacks, kidnappings, and extortion (Vásquez, 2015).

for both the CMTF and the Secretariat. This is why he was held in such high regard,” recalls a former negotiator (S130; LH012; LH016; S123; S112; S121; S147).

Other FARC-EP mid-level commanders and top echelons also acknowledge El Paisa’s commandership legitimacy before and during the peace process. “A commander like Iván Márquez¹⁵⁵ was interested in knowing what operations El Paisa had been in, granting him a lot of respect in the top echelon of the FARC-EP,” illustrates one research respondent (S121; S130). El Paisa’s commandership legitimacy was also tied to how he responded to the Colombian state’s counterinsurgency efforts, as noted in Section 8.1.2.3. “*La Teófilo* seemed to play cat and mouse [with the state], bombs everywhere, and they did not catch El Paisa,” says a former combatant from another FARC-EP front, despite the setbacks the CMTF endured (LH020). “The CMTF was not destroyed; it came to the peace process well-organised,” notes a research respondent (S125). As a result, El Paisa and the CMTF’s choices during the peace process — whether to keep their arms or not — became a source of uncertainty, shaped by his commandership legitimacy, and socialised and trained troops, shaped over 20 to 30 years.

8.1.3.4 Commandership Legitimacy During the Peace Process

The evidence indicates that commandership legitimacy evolved and transformed in support of the peace process during the Havana talks, in combination with discipline and political education (Section 8.1.2.2). Nonetheless, the likelihood that El Paisa would keep his arms caused fear and uncertainty among government negotiators, the military, and the local population. “El Paisa and the CMTF’s standing within the FARC-EP raised questions. He was a leader who controlled everything — information, finances, internal strategy — and the troops followed him. Along with other leaders, he was on our list of those likely to break away,” recalls an intelligence officer (S112; S121; S125; S115; S130; S147; [El Tiempo, 2013](#)). El Paisa’s absence during most of the peace talks generated uncertainty. A research participant recalls: “Such was the concern about El Paisa that Iván Márquez had to reassure the government negotiators, telling them, “*I know El Paisa, don’t worry; he has doubts, but when the time is right, we will bring him in. He doesn’t like [the peace process], but he listens*”” (S130). Similarly, a retired army officer recounted in an informal conversation¹⁵⁶, insisting to the lead

¹⁵⁵ Member of the General Secretariat of the FARC-EP from 1990 to 2016. In 2019 he rearmed and helped to create *Segunda Marquetalia*, at that time the second largest FARC-EP dissident group. See, CORE, 2021; FIP, 2022.

¹⁵⁶ Field note, April 2024.

Colombian negotiators: ‘*Watch out with this guy [El Paisa]; there is a reason they [the FARC-EP negotiators] haven’t brought him to Cuba*’” (S112)¹⁵⁷.

Excluding one of the “most militaristic” mid-level commanders from the start of the peace talks may have been a negotiating strategy (S102; S112; S130; S131), signalling the consequences if El Paisa and the CMTF failed to align with the peace process. “The FARC exploited that fear — if one of their top military leaders was not in Cuba, the peace process would fail” (S128; S102; S130; S131). A retired Colombian general illustrates this dilemma: “It was difficult to see him for all the damage he had done. At the same time, we said, *if he is not here [in Havana], there is nothing to do, the process would not continue*” (S131). Among locals, “There was widespread fear that he would not get involved. Undoubtedly, *Paisas’s* approval was required. To ease this fear, he had to go to Havana” (S126; S130, S147).

In the previous three sections, I demonstrate that El Paisa and CMTF’s legitimacy is exogenous to the peace process and was shaped by internal and external dynamics — discipline, commandship traits, social embeddedness and military performance — contributing to strong intra-secondary group cohesion. These favourable organisational conditions at the onset and during the peace process enabled the CMTF to either align with and defer to the organisation’s peace-oriented political goals or fragment in high proportion. The observable outcome in this case study was, however, the opposite: the CMTF remained cohesive.

However, such fears proved well-founded during the peace talks (2012-16). A former negotiator tells, “El Paisa had a remarkable ability to influence other structures across the country, which concerned us” (S130; S121). Another adds: “The CMTF was, if not the most important, one of the most important mobile columns in the country” (S115). Locals with whom I spoke informally¹⁵⁸ consistently noted that El Paisa harboured doubts about the peace process and his security (S125; S128). Eventually, El Paisa travelled to Havana in April 2016¹⁵⁹, which curtailed fears and reaffirmed the FARC-EP’s commitment to the peace process (S102; LH010) — “there was no turning back” (S131). Ex-combatants from other secondary groups recall similarly: “We had many doubts about the peace process, but El Paisa’s presence in Cuba

¹⁵⁷ Media reports from 2013 read as follows, “The FARC Secretariat is aware that El Paisa is a staunch opponent of the peace talks in Havana, leaving the FARC negotiating team leaders uneasy. They fear he could become a loose cannon.” ([El Tiempo, 2013](#))

¹⁵⁸ Field note, September 2022.

¹⁵⁹ Other mid-level commanders travelled to Cuba between 2014 and 2016. [Add secondary sources]. One was Gentil Duarte (Case Study One, Section 5.1).

reassured us” (LH006; LH009; LH011), illustrating that his course of action could set off a snowball effect among other FARC-EP secondary groups.

Concerns about *Los Teófilos* also spread throughout the FARC-EP, fuelled by their animosity toward some top leaders [name redacted #2] and [name redacted #3], which contributed to organisational-level commandship illegitimacy and had developed before the peace process. In addition to the handling of Manuel Marulanda’s remnants by some leaders of the FARC-EP (Section 8.3.1.1), El Paisa criticised them for lacking merit, experience and leadership capabilities. He also distrusted them and believed they had handed Alfonso Cano to the Colombian military (LH008, LH011, LH013, LH016, S130). For instance, similar to the 1st and 10th Fronts, within the CMTF there was a widespread belief that [name redacted #2] was an asset, likely a [redacted] (LH008; LH016). Similarly, the CMTF leadership held [name redacted #2] responsible for the 2012 airstrike by the Colombian military, which resulted in the killing of 36 combatants, including several mid-level commanders¹⁶⁰ who were attending a command training course (S130; Génesis, XIX, 143; [El Pais, 2012](#)). Moreover, during the peace process, El Paisa cut all communications with [redacted] limiting contact to Iván Márquez, whom he had known since the 1980s (S124; S130).

Hence, the FARC-EP leaders faced a dilemma. Relocating El Paisa to another region (e.g., Romaña; Section 7.1.3.2) was not feasible, as it could have contributed to the detachment of the CMTF and other mid-level commanders (S104; S112; S130). Carrying an internal purge was out of the question, even if the CMTF leadership was aware of an alleged plan to assassinate El Paisa, [redacted] (LH001; LH016; S128)¹⁶¹. Moreover, top FARC-EP leaders knew he could break away with other members of the top echelons and mid-level commanders from other fronts and blocs — that is, on a larger proportion and at a higher organisational level than in the other case studies. “If he breaks away, he takes 50% of the FARC-EP,” says one research participant (S130; LH008; S112; LH001; LH012; LH013; LH014; LH011; LH015), who continues: “managing El Paisa was very different, almost like a negotiation within the larger negotiation. It became clearer when he had just settled in the reincorporation cantonment, and there was no infrastructure for him or his troops. It was a national security issue” (S130).

¹⁶⁰ Including Arcesio Niño, mentioned in Chapter 6.

¹⁶¹ I corroborated this assertion in informal conversations. Field notes, August-November 2022; July 2024.

Former CMTF combatants acknowledge they would have followed him if he had decided to keep arms (LH008; LH009; LH11; LH012; LH013; LH015; LH016). “We laid down weapons to comply with El Paisa, and he did it to comply with the Secretariat (LH008),” tells an ex-combatant. However, the evidence suggests that the CMTF mid-level commanders advised him not to lay down his arms or to hide a cache. But El Paisa gave them options: those who wished to keep their arms could do so — “I will respect your decision” (LH012) — on the condition that they conduct themselves as “good fighters” and treat people accordingly (LH009; LH013). Alternatively, they could follow orders and participate in political education to support the peace process (LH008; LH009; LH012).

El Paisa’s commandership legitimacy also extended beyond the CMTF. Mid-level commanders from other fronts also urged him not to demobilise. According to them, some members of the FARC-EP negotiating team, deemed illegitimate before the peace process, had betrayed the “legacy of Marulanda” by approving the disarmament provisions (██████████; also, Section 5.1.3.2). “We thought of militarily assaulting the Yari Conference¹⁶². We hoped El Paisa would do it, but he didn’t,” says a former combatant (LH001; LH014). El Paisa and the CMTF demobilised and laid down their weapons between 2016 and 2017 to advance his plans for doing politics after demobilising (S123; S125; S128; S130), which I elaborate on in Section 9.1.4.2. To do so, according to the evidence, he relied not only on his commandership legitimacy — shaped by discipline, military performance, and his standing in the organization — but also on material resources and connections to external actors, which evolved before and during the peace process and contributed to the CMTF’s cohesion. In the following section, I present evidence on the external dynamics that contributed to this observable outcome.

8.2 External Dynamics

8.2.1 Material Resources and External Networks During War and For Post-Demobilisation Politics

The CMTF’s material resources contributed to strong intra-secondary group cohesion, and for the post-demobilisation projects of some of its leaders. Material resources evolved before and during the peace process, shaped by the FARC-EP’s policies and how in practice

¹⁶² Refers to the FARC-EP’s 10th Conference. It took place in September 2016 in the Yari region, located in the Eastern Plateau. During this conference, the FARC-EP endorsed the peace deal. ([CTC, 2022](#); [BBC, 2016](#))

these interacted with external actors as result of the CMTF's operational environment and its leadership interests. Following the FARC-EP's 1993 financial policy¹⁶³, the CMTF diversified its revenue sources.

As in the other case studies, taxing coca crops and their byproducts, coca paste and base, was one of its primary sources of income (LH008; LH009; LH010; LH012; LH015; S121; S123; S125; S130). Known as *gramaje*, this system set purchase prices per kilogram and required buyers — cocaine brokers — to pay taxes through CMTF intermediaries. Adopted in the 1980s after debates on banning or regulating coca crops, *gramaje* both financed the group and expanded its territorial and social control (Reyes, 2009; Aguilera, 2014; CTC, 2022). “The FARC cannot take the coca economy away from the peasant if there are no other means to get by. *La Teófilo* controls and authorises who can buy it, only if buyers pay us a tax through our intermediaries,” tells a former combatant (LH010; LH008; LH011). By controlling transactions, the CMTF vetted brokers, paid directly to peasants, and strengthened its “policing” (Vásquez, 2012, p. 79). Those who sold independently faced punishment, expulsion, or death (S123; Reyes, 2009). Those who tried to sell on their own volition were punished, expelled, or killed (S123; LH015; LH012; Reyes, 2009, p. 284).

Kidnapping was another key source. It primarily aimed at wealthy individuals for ransom (LH008; LH010; LH012; LH015), resulting from the deployment of *milicianos* and collaborators in cities. Additionally, all individuals, including traders and businesses in the oil, liquor, and dairy sectors — “every economy in our region” (LH009; LH012; S123; S124; S125) — were forced to pay extortion or taxes based on their financial capacity. “Acting on our intel, I would call on the phone and say, *let's negotiate, you pay tax to the State of, why can't you pay a tax to us?*” (LH015; LH009; LH010; LH011; LH012). In other cases, ramson was requested through invoices. “If you received an extortion bill from *la Teófilo*, you had to pay it, or else leave” (S127).

The CMTF invested its material resources not only for military purposes but also in other assets such as livestock and land (LH008; LH013; LH015; S123; S130; Reyes, 2009). Like other secondary groups that operated in Caquetá, Meta, and Guaviare, the CMTF implemented the FARC-EP's 2007 Yará Plan. Its goal was to “legalise” and “acquire farms, livestock, real estate” (Génesis, XV, 131, 154; [Verdad Abierta, 2015](#)). For example, *gramaje*

¹⁶³ See Section 5.2.3

was invested in livestock and land [REDACTED] ¹⁶⁴. “We assigned a farm, 200 calves, and gave them to someone we trusted in our support networks. Then we would share the profits and reinvest them in more land and livestock. But everything was ours.” (LH008; LH013; LH015; S123). [REDACTED]

However, during the peace process, some of these assets would provide the CMTF leadership with a baseline for transitioning after laying down their arms and detaching from *Comunes*, the FARC-EP's new political party, founded in 2017. Unlike Case Studies One, Two, and Three, the [REDACTED] the CMTF leadership and its local support networks relied on material resources acquired during the war for a post-demobilisation political project, rather than using them for breaking away. Nonetheless, as I elaborate on in Section 9.2.1.4, the evidence suggest that leaders from the 10th Front, CMDA, and CMTF saw in the peace process an opportunity to engage in politics — [name redacted #4] in Case Study Two and [name redacted # 5] in Case Study Four — or to continue illicit activities alongside supporting the implementation of the peace process — Romaña in Case Study Three. In all three cases, these leaders advanced their personal agendas.

Interactions with [REDACTED], two key external actors, contributed to the CMTF's wartime organisational robustness and cohesion. At the same time, these actors were instrumental in facilitating the CMTF's staying cohesive in favour of the peace process without severing ties with them. These interactions evolved before and during the peace process, with implications for the observable outcome in this case study.

For instance, cocaine brokers “did not want the business to fall apart” (S123; S125) and sought assurances from [name redacted # 5] for its continuation, facilitating the CMTF's demobilisation. “*Narcos* opposed the FARC leaving the territory or getting out of business... *narcos* faced high costs. The question was how everything that the CMTF had built during the war would continue to benefit those same *narcos*,” tells one research participant (S130; S121; S125). Moreover, in informal conversations¹⁶⁵, there is consensus that [name redacted # 5] and some of the Southern Bloc commanders reached agreements with cocaine brokers and their

¹⁶⁴ Secondary sources suggest [REDACTED] were part of a broader CMTF plan to displace those not affiliated with or supportive of the FARC-EP—a “repopulation strategy” executed by the CMTF's *milicianos* and collaborators (Reyes, 2009, 285).

¹⁶⁵ Field notes, August-November 2022; July 2024; February 2025.

some of its new leaders ([REDACTED] - Sections 5.1.3.2 and 8.1.3.1). Also, because of how the election of the *Comunes'* board was handled in late 2017, Timochenko was ratified as head of party, despite reaching fifth place behind top commanders such as Iván Márquez and Santrich, two hardliners who opposed various provisions of the 2016 peace accord, including disarmament (LH001; LH008; LH009; LH013; LH014; S102; S114; S130). However, this vision never materialised. In August 2019, El Paisa and other combatants from the CMTF rearmed, along with Márquez, Santrich and other top and mid-level commanders to establish *Segunda Marquetalia* (CORE, 2021).

In sum, the CMTF's material resources were shaped by organisational-level decisions and strong intra-secondary discipline in combination with ties with external actors. These interactions evolved before and during the peace process, contributing to the CMTF's cohesion in favour of the peace process. The social embeddedness of the CMTF also created cohesion, as I show in the following section.

8.2.2 Social Embeddedness and Local Population

From its origins in the early 1990s, this secondary group established itself in the El Pato region and subsequently expanded its operations throughout the Caquetá and Huila Departments. The El Pato region was critical for the CMTF's early operations, as noted in the historical context section. Evidence shows the CMTF's pre-war and wartime social embeddedness in this region — which relied on the 2nd Front's political and mass work among settlers — unfolded from the 1990s to the 2010s and contributed to its cohesion before and during the peace process. Pre-war and wartime social bases facilitated local recruitment and support networks shaped by shared identities, trust and kinship, as I show in Sections 8.1.1-8.1.3. In contrast to the previous section, the data do not return evidence on whether the social embeddedness of the CMTF contributed to cohesion in favour of the peace process — namely, [name redacted # 5] and the CMTF's political post-demobilisation project. In what follows, I show that social embeddedness contributed to wartime cohesion, including the period of the peace process.

The CMTF established in El Pato, a region of historical significance for the FARC-EP for being one of its strongholds (Vásquez, 2015, 71) or its “Mecca” (S126). In the 1950s, displaced people fleeing bipartisan violence settled in El Pato. By the 1960s, it became one of the so-called “independent republics,” where agrarian movements evolved alongside

communist guerrillas who had refused to disarm, eventually forming the FARC-EP in 1964. During the 1960s and 1970s, state-led violence against early commanders further stigmatised its inhabitants or *patunos* (LH010; LH011; LH015; S125; S126; S127; Molano and Reyes, 1980; González, 2011). This region was also a rearguard for the FARC-EP during the 1960s and 1970s. During this period, peasants organised outside state rule, while the FARC-EP gradually integrated peasant and agrarian struggles into its military and political strategy in the following decades (Aguilera, 2014; Vásquez, 2015, p. 72; CTC, 2022).

Being a *Teófilo* meant sharing a legacy of resistance and political identities built on a common history of stigmatization noted above. An ex-combatant says, “There was so much trust and confidence in El Pato that when the state bombed the general secretariat in 1990, comrade Raúl [Reyes] settled here. El Paisa was in his trusted circle” (LH011; S126; LH008; LH009; LH012). “Being a *patuno* was like being *guerrillero* for state authorities,” explains a former combatant and continues: “Some of my uncles were tied up by the army and tortured. Those are my roots. El Pato is a region forged by left-wing ideals, combative, and organized. I arrived in El Pato, to my grandfather's, who had fought with Marulanda. That shaped my revolutionary spirit.” (LH010; LH009; LH015; LH016). From its inception, the CMTF is grounded in this history, essential to understanding its social embeddedness from 1993 on.

In 1993, the CMTF began operating in El Pato. It relied on the 2nd Front's pre-war, and wartime social bases established with peasant organisations from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, contributing to a localized recruitment base and trust-based networks with the local population. These interactions contributed to strong ties — “bond” and “embeddedness” [*arraigo*] — between the local population, rank-and-file and the CMTF's leadership. “Most of the members of *la Teófilo* are from El Pato. That's where they had their families. That bond helps,” tells an ex-combatant (LH015; LH010; S124; S126; S130). The evidence suggests that this “bond,” or *arraigo*, facilitated mass work as of the 1990s.

During the 1990s and 2000s, the CMTF implemented the FARC-EP's strategies for mass work and social control¹⁶⁷. “The history of El Pato facilitated mass work. The Juntas already existed and liaised with our [mass] commissions,” recalls a former combatant (LH010; LH008), referring to local organisations that had regulated social life since the 1960s and had built close ties with the 2nd Front (Molano and Reyes, 1980). A local leader says,

¹⁶⁷ Cite FARC-EP documents.

“Communities could implement the FARC’s directives, but leaders had to accept them. Many had relatives in the FARC, creating deeply embedded-extended family networks.” (S127; LH010; LH011; S130). Political meetings or assemblies sought to align local needs with political cadres and the FARC-EP. “The Juntas are the root of organisation. They liaised with authorities for infrastructure and goods,” tells a former combatant (LH012; LH009). When the government failed to deliver, the Juntas were the mechanism for community development. “We would tell the president of the Junta we would build or repair a bridge and organise a workday with the people. We delivered,” recalls another (LH011). The ties between the Juntas and the CMTF varied by region. In [region redacted], cooperation was common, with Juntas even seeking out leaders like El Paisa to mediate conflicts. In other areas, Junta’s members were coerced into supporting the FARC-EP (S123; S126).

The CMTF’s vertical ties with the [redacted] locals were vital for the flow of information and controlling the entry of outsiders. “Juntas for us was like having a database. We had to know who lived in each village, who leaves or enters,” recalls an ex-combatant (LH012; S126). Deep local embeddedness mattered to the extent that “The same communities in the region protected the *Teófilos*; they were their own relatives and families” (S124; LH011), tells a social leader, also referring to El Paisa’s commandership legitimacy that extended to the local population from the 1990s to the 2010s (Section 8.1.3). Another adds: “El Pato was a tight-knit region. You could only enter with permission from the local organisations, [redacted] [redacted]” (S127; LH008; LH009). *Milicianos* also constantly shared information with the CMTF and conducted intelligence in urban areas in preparation for a military operation. The *milicias* “provided security in the zone” (LH012) through a squad of five to ten persons (LH012; S126) in each CMTF zone. “They would alert us of any enemy incursion. They had a radio and would inform us if the army was on its way to our stronghold,” (LH015; LH009; LH011; LH016).

Social embeddedness also contributed to the CMTF’s governance, which reinforced its vertical ties with the local population and legitimacy. A former combatant recalls, “There was a regular conduit — a buffer between conflicts and us: the Juntas. They assessed each conflict and decided on a solution. Recurring problems, however, were resolved directly by the FARC-EP.” (LH011; LH008). The CMTF regulated activities such as deforestation and the entry of outsiders, including coca leaf scrappers (*raspachines*). A social leader recalls: “One would enter the *Teófilos* region, and there were signs: *Welcome to the territory of Manuel Marulanda*

– *Zone of the Teófilo Forero*,’ and notes that coexistence manuals were agreed upon with the population” (S126). The CMTF also regulated land conflicts and domestic violence. Punishments included fines, forced labour, being tied to a pole, expulsion from the region, or, in extreme cases, execution of rapists, murderers, armed forces operatives, and unauthorised cocaine traders (LH008; LH009; LH011; LH012; LH015; S125, S126). Organisational commands and Juntas decided these measures. By regulating social order, the CMTF reinforced both its legitimacy and that of El Paisa, while also maintaining discipline within its own ranks.

8.2.3 Peace Process

Despite “uncertainty” (LH008; LH009; LH010) among the CMTF during the peace process, this secondary group did not break away. Uncertainty, as in the other case studies, stemmed from the legacy of past peace processes. The failed Caguán talks (1999-2002) lingered in the memories of former combatants I interviewed, while the violence against the UP in the 1980s and 1990s raised fears that a peace accord would end the same way (LH009; LH013; LH015). However, El Paisa's presence in Havana, his stance, and the adoption of discipline and political education in favour of the agreement eased these concerns. Moreover, the 2016 peace accord's disarmament provisions were a contentious issue within the CMTF, but they did not contribute to its fragmentation. Some of its members, however, deemed disarmament a "betrayal" and "surrender" by some of the FARC-EP negotiators (e.g. [name redacted #2]) for going against the principles of the founders of the FARC-EP and other top commanders, such as Marulanda and Mono Jojoy (LH008; LH009; LH010; LH011; LH012; LH013; LH015).

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED] The evidence also suggests that how reincorporation lists were put together by the CMTF’s leadership also contributed to the cohesion of this secondary group. Members of the CMTF included *milicianos* operating in the cities and those released from prison during the peace process. Unlike Case Studies Two and Three, there is no evidence of *milicianos* who broke away during the peace process. However, a significant number of *milicianos*, for security

reasons, preferred not to be included on the reincorporation lists and remained clandestine — they stayed in their households and villages (S008; S015; S016; S124).¹⁶⁸

Discussion

I asked all the research participants and my interlocutors in informal conversations, “Why do you think *los Teófilos* did not break away like the 1st Front?” Responses consistently pointed to El Paisa’s commandership legitimacy and the CMTF’s discipline. These two existing explanations in the literature suggested what I should initially look for in the data. Zeroing in on the sources of El Paisa’s command legitimacy led me to explore the significance of his personal trajectory within the organisation — from his entry into the FARC-EP to his demobilisation — and his traits as a commander, shaped by his strict adherence to the FARC-EP’s political and military goals, as well as his courage and merit. In turn, examining internal discipline shows how political education, military training, and ideological commitment among CMTF members contributed to military performance, strong ties with the local population, and a sense of belonging that earned this secondary group respect both within and outside the organisation.

Exploring these dynamics, as they evolved before the peace process and contributed to cohesion, allowed me to identify the organisational conditions under which this secondary group entered the peace process. A central finding, therefore, is that during the peace process, these same dynamics were vital to mobilising the CMTF in favour of the peace process. One example is political education through pedagogy, mediated by a leadership that demonstrated adherence to and subordination of the organisation’s political and peace-oriented goals. Discipline translated into subordination and adherence to the leadership of the CMTF and the FARC-EP, despite distrust toward specific figures in the top leadership. Similar to Case Study One, commandership legitimacy could have also facilitated the emergence of a breakaway faction, but in a higher proportion than that led by Mordisco; the CMTF could have mobilised mid-level commanders and rank-and-file from other secondary groups.

Another insight from this chapter is that, unlike the other case studies, the CMTF did not experience significant leadership reshuffling, which helped to maintain strong horizontal

¹⁶⁸ Some rearmed, but recidivism this falls outside the scope of my dissertation. Informal conversations with former milicianos from the CMTF. Field notes, August 2022.

and vertical ties among its leaders and between them and the other members. When the peace process began, the CMTF's leadership had not been significantly disrupted either by discipline measures or counterinsurgency, nor was it facing internal competition. Unlike Case Studies Two and Three, within the *Teófilo*, to my knowledge there were no detachment processes *milicianos*, nor was it under the command of an “alien” new leader. Likewise, the CMTF suppressed dissident voices concerning the peace process. Additionally, its leadership did not have to contend with undisciplined or poorly socialised troops, which further minimised the risks of fragmentation — unlike in Case Study Three.

Notably, research respondents rephrased the question above. “You should think about why *los Teófilos* did not *need* to break away.” This observation led me to reflect on one of this chapter's central insights. Material resources and external networks with ties to illicit economies did not render the CMTF a loose cannon before and during the peace process. On the contrary, they contributed to its organisational robustness during war. However, after the peace process they would facilitate and lay the groundwork for [name redacted #5] to further a political project. External actors tied to illicit economies reached mutually beneficial informal agreements with some mid-level commanders from the then-FARC-EP for the continuation of their trade, providing the CMTF with assurances that they could carry on with the peace process. As an interlocutor put it, “those external actors trusted El Paisa's word because he delivered, that is, [by] making such arrangements: the CMTF wished to stick to the peace process without disrupting their business (S124; S126; S128; S131). Hence, subordination to the peace process and commandship legitimacy are two crucial elements for understanding the observable outcome in this case study. However, had I not examined external dynamics, such as material resources and external networks, and their potential following the 2016 peace accord, I would not have identified that cohesion extends beyond discipline and ideological commitment to the group- and individual-based preferences of the CMTF and El Paisa himself.

The findings in this chapter are consistent with the four pillars of my organisationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion, which I outline in Chapter 3 and further elaborate on in Chapters 9 and 10. First, by disaggregating the FARC-EP into secondary units, I demonstrate that dynamics that contribute to fragmentation in other case studies also contribute to cohesion in the CMTF. Strong intra-secondary group commandship legitimacy and illegitimacy toward some FARC-EP leaders are two examples that played out otherwise in Case Study One. Second, adopting a longer approach — before and during the peace process

— helps us better understand how observable implications of existing explanations in the literature can be both endogenous and exogenous to the Havana negotiations. For example, material resources and external networks were not factors or conditions. In the CMTF, both dynamics evolved before and during the peace process, and facilitated [name redacted #5]’s post-demobilisation projects, had he not rearmed in 2019. Third, fragmentation and cohesion coexist. Despite the observable outcome in this case study (cohesion), the CMTF’s subordination to the peace process is also its instrumentalization or co-optation: as a platform to break away from the organisation to pursue political goals not aligned with the participation provisions (e.g. *Comunes* Party) of the 2016 accord negotiated by illegitimate leaders. Lastly, the mechanisms I build in this case — *commandership legitimacy*, and *post-demobilisation local politics* — which I elaborate on in the following chapter, demonstrate that there are case-specific paths toward the observable outcome, as I show in the three case studies.

In the last four chapters, I have presented the evidence on the 1st Front, the 10th Front, the CMDA, and the CMTF. In the next chapter, I analyse and compare them through the mechanisms I built for each case study and the common threads across them.

Chapter 9: Comparative Analysis Chapter

In this chapter, I compare how the mechanisms¹⁶⁹ that I build in this dissertation operate across the four case studies. As I highlight in the discussion sections in Chapters 5-8, I derive the mechanisms through an iterative process between the evidence and the existing literature. Identifying the mechanisms for each case study helps me demonstrate there are different paths toward the observable outcomes. In Chapters 5-8, I detail how existing explanations in the literature perform in each case study based on the life histories, semi-structured interviews, and additional empirical materials. I derive the mechanisms through an iterative process between the evidence and the existing literature. Identifying the mechanisms for each case study helps me demonstrate there are different paths toward the observable outcomes: high fragmentation at the level of front or secondary group leadership (1st Front – case one); low fragmentation at the level of urban networks and formerly imprisoned mid-level commanders (10th Front – case two); mixed fragmentation, with high fragmentation in urban networks but low fragmentation among rural mid-level commanders (CMDA – case three); and cohesion (CMTF – case four).

In the Research Design (Chapter 3), I explain that in this dissertation I employ the “explaining-outcome” variant of process tracing (Beach and Pedersen, 2023) to build case-specific mechanisms across the four case studies. I present the mechanism narratives in Section 9.1 with their respective process tracing diagrams. To compare the mechanisms across the four case studies, I draw on comparison with an “ethnographic sensibility” (Simmons and Smith, 2021a; 2021b) and “casing” (Soss, 2021). The former captures how existing explanations in the literature perform within each case study with a close attention the meanings of those who lived through the events. The latter allows me to build mechanisms through a discovery-oriented and cased-based interpretative process. Mechanisms in this dissertation represent analytical constructs derived from an iterative process between empirical evidence — primarily, lived experiences and additional empirical materials — and existing explanations in the literature. In Section 9.2, I present the common threads or recurring elements that appear and operate in a specific way across the mechanisms.

¹⁶⁹ Per the Research Design Chapter, by *mechanism* I understand a chain of interlocking parts (relevant existing explanations as they perform through their case-specific observable implications) that link them to the outcomes of interest—that is, fragmentation and cohesion in different proportion and at different levels of analysis (Table 9.1).

9.1 Case-specific Mechanisms

Process tracing is particularly suitable to the identification of the causal processes that generate observable outcomes (Beach and Pedersen, 2019). Based on the empirical narratives I present in Chapters 5-8, I adopt some elements of this method to trace the observable implications of existing explanations in the literature to build case-specific mechanisms underlying the observable outcomes in the cases selected for the dissertation. The mechanisms I present for each case (Sections 9.1.1-9.1.4) open the “black box” of what happens in the selected secondary groups internally and externally, before and during the peace process, that contributes to the emergence, or not, of breakaway factions.

More specifically, to understand the different observable outcomes across the case studies, I deploy “explaining-outcome process tracing” (Beach and Pedersen, 2019, 1–27; 281–293). This variant of process tracing offers two advantages for my dissertation. First, its analytical focus is case-centred. Second, its purpose is to identify the chains of interlocking parts (mechanisms) that contribute to the observable outcome in each case study, which is captured by the notion of “mechanistic heterogeneity”, or the presence of different mechanisms operating within each case (Beach and Pedersen, 2019, 6). As Table 9.1 summarises and Diagrams A–D showcase, the empirical evidence allows me to build a set of mechanisms for each case study that integrates multiple empirical traces, or observable implications of existing explanations, as I detail in Chapters 5-8. With these mechanisms, I craft a case-based “minimally sufficient explanation” (Beach and Pedersen, 2019, 284). By *sufficiency*, I refer to an explanation that accounts for all the key aspects of an outcome (Beach and Pedersen, 2019, 281), given the available data from life-history and semi-structured interviews, additional empirical materials, and the challenges of this research, as I detail in the Research Process Chapter. As such, different combinations of existing explanations in the literature form the mechanisms underlying the outcomes of interest in each case study.

Case study	Mechanisms	Observable outcomes
One – 1st Front	- <i>Legitimacy</i> - <i>Rejection and distrust</i>	Fragmentation - high proportion - 1st Front or secondary group leadership level
Two – 10th Front	- <i>Detachment and split</i> - <i>Dismissal and exclusion</i>	Fragmentation - low proportion - urban networks and formerly imprisoned mid-level commanders of the organization
Three – CMDA	- <i>Instrumental incorporation</i> - <i>Personal agendas and threat construction</i>	Fragmentation - high proportion - urban networks or milicianos
	- <i>Betrayal and discontent</i> - <i>Bypassing and personal agendas</i>	Fragmentation - low proportion - mid-level rural commanders/rank-and-file
Four – CMTF	- <i>Legitimacy</i> - <i>Post/demobilization local politics</i>	No fragmentation - secondary group level

Table 9.1 Case-specific mechanisms

To identify and build the mechanisms, I proceed in a two-step process:

1. I put the empirical evidence presented in Chapters 5–8 in constant dialogue and juxtaposition with existing explanations in the literature on civil war studies and military sociology (Chapter 2). Then, I trace the observable implications of existing explanations as they perform within each case study highlighting their contradictory effects on fragmentation and cohesion. For example, in Case Study Four (CMTF – Diagram D), I demonstrate how socialisation mechanisms perform before and during the peace process, with implications for the cohesion and subordination of this secondary group to the peace process. Discipline also interacts with the post-demobilisation plans of the CMTF leadership. Similarly, in Case Study Three (Diagram C1), the recruitment of former paramilitaries shows that it was informally carried out by the CMDA leadership. It manifested, among other ways, by the lack of socialisation of these individuals, who in 2016 began breaking away. In this case study, discipline during the peace process, at the reintegration cantonment, also contributed to the detachment of milicianos.

2. Tracing the observable implications of existing explanations in each case allows me to craft mechanism narratives. These are case-specific and illuminate the mechanisms in each case study. In the narratives, I focus on individuals (e.g. mid-level commanders, top echelons, urban networks), organisations (e.g., parent and secondary groups, states) and other actors (e.g., support networks and patronage networks) whose activities contribute to or facilitate

transformation within the secondary groups—1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA, and CMTF—in combination with each and over time.

The narratives link the observable implications of the existing explanations in the literature, endogenous and exogenous to the peace process, with the emergence, or not, of the breakaway factions—that is, the observable outcomes, considering their variation in terms of proportion, levels of analysis and who leads them and who comprises them. In the following sections, I present the narratives for each mechanism.

9.1.1 Case Study One – 1st Front

9.1.1.1 *Legitimacy* mechanism – Diagram A:

This mechanism refers to the sources of commandership legitimacy through which Iván Mordisco mobilised much of the 1st Front to break away. In 2008, Operation *Jaque* decapitated the 1st Front's leadership. This leadership vacuum prompted the Eastern Bloc to adopt disciplinary and control measures to reorganize the unit — replacing the Front's leadership, retraining cadres militarily and politically, restoring discipline, and rebuilding ties with local communities. In this context, Iván Mordisco became part of this new leadership. His appointment positioned him to benefit from the renewed institutional focus on discipline and cohesion. Between 2009 and 2014, before and during the peace process, Mordisco rose through the ranks by meeting the expectations outlined in the reorganization plan: enforcing discipline, maintaining the cohesion of the First Front, providing new military hardware, and fulfilling orders from superiors. These actions reinforced his standing in the 1st Front, which operated in isolation from other FARC-EP units. Mordisco deepened this isolation in response to counterinsurgency, especially after the 2010 killing of his mentor, Mono Jojoy (Eastern Bloc top commander), reinforcing his commitment to self-reliance — though he maintained ties with other mid-level commanders who also broke away in 2016. By the time the peace process reached its final stages, his leadership, resource control, and ability to sustain the 1st Front had solidified his commandership legitimacy, enabling him to lead a breakaway faction.

interlocking parts of the **legitimacy mechanism**

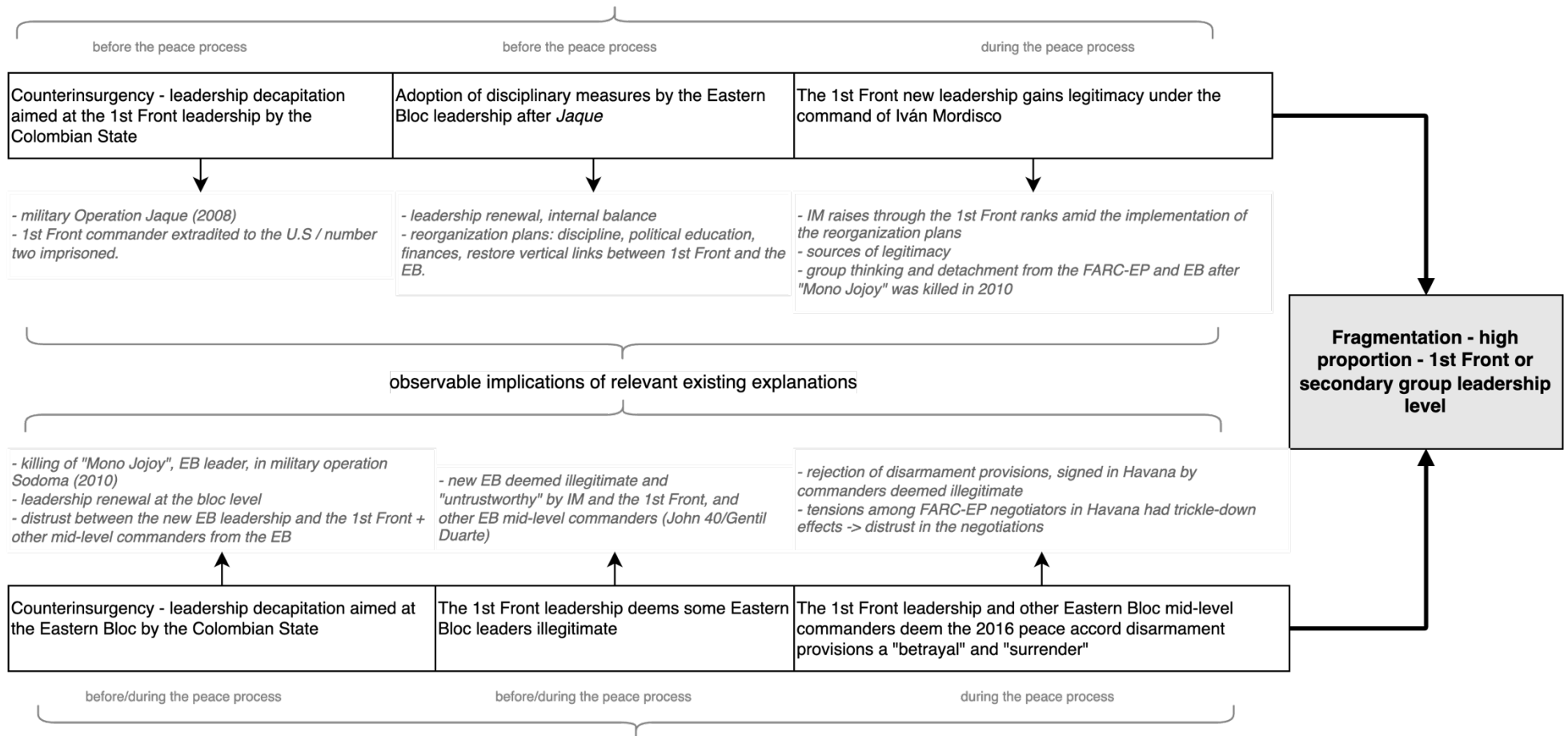


DIAGRAM A

9.1.1.2 *Rejection and distrust mechanism* – Diagram A:

Between 2015 and 2016, as commander of the 1st Front, Iván Mordisco rejected the disarmament provisions negotiated between the FARC-EP and the Colombian government (Diagram A). He distrusted some Havana negotiators, citing internal reports that labelled them as informants and recalled their questionable past conduct. The killing of his mentor, Mono Jojoy, in Operation *Sodoma* (2010) reinforced his detachment from the new Eastern Bloc leadership. Some of its members — who became negotiators in Havana — were regarded by mid-level commanders in the Eastern Bloc, including Mordisco, as illegitimate, lacking both merit and military experience. These top-echelon members were the ones who negotiated and approved the disarmament provisions. For Mordisco and fellow seasoned cadres, the disarmament terms represented a betrayal of fallen comrades and a departure from the FARC-EP founders' principles on the role of arms in negotiations.

9.1.2 Case Study Two – 10th Front

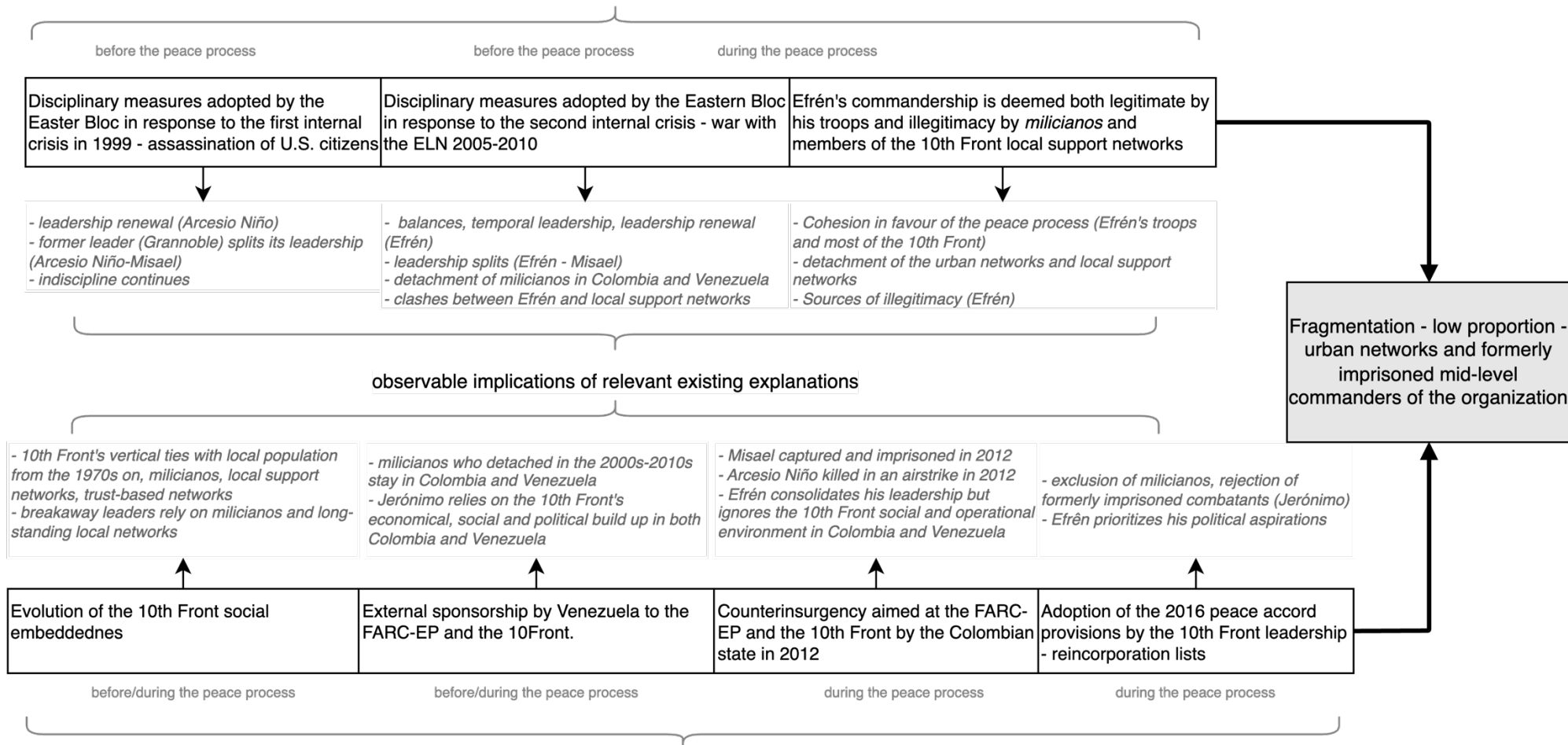
9.1.2.1 *Detachment and split mechanism* – Diagram B:

Before and during the peace process, the 10th Front's urban networks and social bases gradually detached and split due to two internal crises. These crises prompted the Eastern Bloc to adopt disciplinary measures. The first crisis, triggered by the 1999 killing of U.S. citizens, led to the removal of key 10th Front leaders. These ousted commanders (Grannoble and Misael) disrupted the reorganization plans for this secondary group throughout the 2000s. They split the newly appointed leadership (led by Arcesio), created patronage networks, expanded parallel projects in Venezuela tied to illicit economies, and escalated tensions with the ELN. Combined with their anti-ELN stance, gradually alienated the 10th Front's urban networks on both sides of the Colombia–Venezuela border, as inter-armed group violence spread through their support bases. Following the second crisis, the war with the ELN between 2005 and 2010, the Eastern Bloc imposed new measures to discipline and consolidate the 10th Front, demoting cadres and appointing [name redacted #4] as the new commander. However, [name redacted #4] was not local, did not understand the 10th Front's operational environment, and applied disciplinary measures that further alienated the *milicianos*. His attempts to control the Front's finances and local organizations deepened the division among FARC-EP's local support networks. The *milicianos* and some social bases that detached during this period later became the support networks in Colombia and Venezuela for those who led the breakaway faction.

9.1.2.2 *Dismissal and exclusion mechanism – Diagram B:*

Between 2010 and 2011, the Eastern Bloc appointed a new leadership to the 10th Front, aiming to foster discipline and cohesion following the war with the ELN and in preparation for the peace process. Headed by [name redacted #4] and his trusted circle of fighters from other Eastern Bloc units, this leadership failed to understand the Front's long-standing social embeddedness in Arauca and Venezuela since the late 1970s; they overlooked *milicianos* who had detached during two earlier crises and remained in hiding in both countries. Their detachment deepened after mid-level commanders Misael and Arcesio were imprisoned and killed by state forces, respectively, enabling [name redacted #4] to consolidate his authority, promote a pro-peace stance, and prepare for demobilization. However, [name redacted #4] further alienated urban networks. He failed to understand the 10th Front transnational social embeddedness, shaped by decades of FARC-EP–Venezuela relations, nor the fact that many militias had been in both countries due to the unit's missions and the earlier crises. In 2016, he excluded them and some former imprisoned FARC-EP members from reintegration lists, citing their past conduct. *Milicianos* and former prisoners—both with longstanding connections to Venezuelan subnational authorities and illicit economies dating back to the 1980s—went on to lead the breakaway faction

interlocking parts of the **detachment and split mechanism**



interlocking parts of the **dismissal and exclusion mechanism**

DIAGRAM B

9.1.3 Case Study Three - CMDA

9.1.3.1 *Instrumental recruitment mechanism - High proportion – GO-GUP and GO 2.0 – Diagram C1:*

The CMDA, at the start of the peace process in 2012, recruited former members of paramilitary squads (*Los Rastrojos*) as members of their urban networks without formal socialization processes. The CMDA leadership prioritized instrumental choices over ideological alignment and political education — securing control of neighbourhoods and urban centres through new *milicianos* and their extended families. These individuals could conduct intelligence, ensure income through taxation, extortion, and kidnapping, and facilitate connections between rural and urban areas. From the start, new *milicianos* never fully adhered to the CMDA, despite the FARC-EP having defeated them after an urban war between 2010 and 2012. They maintained prior commitments to illicit economies in Colombia and Ecuador and showed little discipline internally or toward local communities. Amid the peace process, *Rambo*, the CMDA's long-time leader, ordered the assassination of an Afro-Colombian leader, deepening tensions with a population the group had clashed with since 2000. Consequently, the Western Bloc and the FARC-EP top echelons adopted control measures. *Rambo* was removed and replaced with new leadership tasked with disciplining the CMDA. Concerning urban networks made up of ill-socialized former *Rastrojos*, these control measures comprised purges (killings) of undisciplined or soon-to-break-away *milicianos*, mistreatment against them in reintegration cantonments, and their exclusion from reintegration lists. Hundreds of *milicianos* split into two breakaway factions between mid-2016 and early 2017.

9.1.3.2 *Personal agendas and threat construction mechanism - High proportion – GO-GUP and GO 2.0 – Diagram C1:*

Members of the CMDA's urban networks were not socialized into the FARC-EP's rules and norms continue to pursue parallel projects. Former *Rastrojos* kept working with and for drug cartels and their liaisons — relations that dated back to the 2000s-2010s, exogenous to the peace process and external to the FARC-EP. The control and disciplinary measures adopted by the CMDA's new leadership between 2015 and 2016 had both individual impacts on these former *Rastrojos* and collective repercussions for their extended families. Threats, purges, rejection, and exclusion by those who had “used them for four years” (the FARC-EP), combined with the personal projects of the CMDA's new leadership, pushed them to strike

deals with external actors. These actors supplied weapons and military hardware in exchange for securing cocaine shipments. The former *Rastrojos* also worked to protect their projects as neighbourhood bosses and extended families. These *milicianos* also relied on their know-how of urban neighbourhoods and rural areas, as well as their access to material resources they had drawn upon before, during, and after their time in the CMDA.

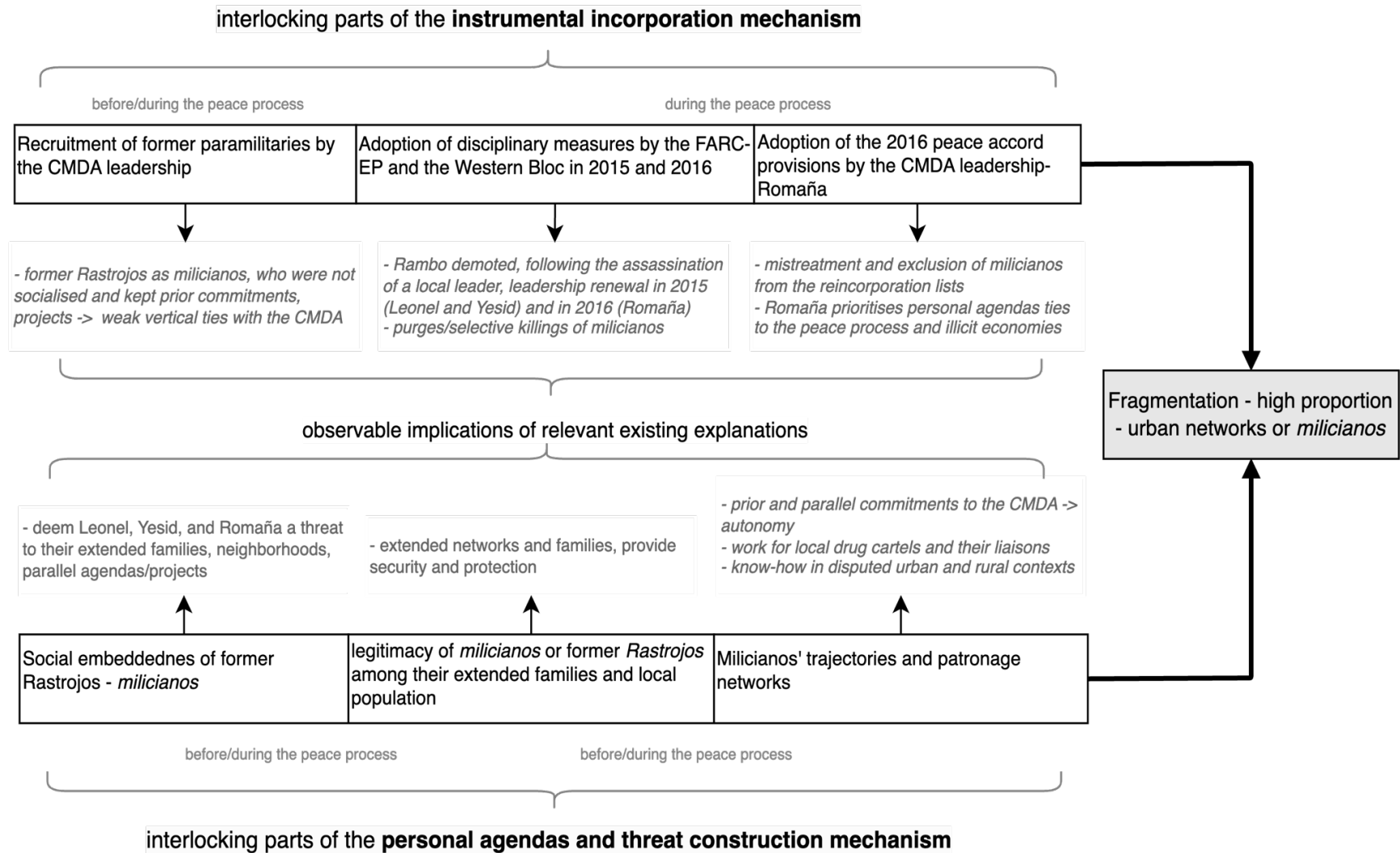


DIAGRAM C1

9.1.3.3 *Betrayal and discontent mechanism* – Low Proportion – FOS – Diagram C2:

Between 2015 and 2016, the leadership of the Western Bloc and the FARC-EP adopted control and disciplinary measures. They removed *Rambo* from the leadership of the CMDA following the assassination of Afro-Colombian leader Genaro García. In its mission to create discipline and cohesion in support of the peace process, the CMDA's new leadership also replaced mid-level commanders who had served alongside *Rambo*. They deemed *Rambo*'s demotion a betrayal. Having commanded the CMDA for 15 years, *Rambo* had fulfilled the mission assigned to him by the FARC-EP: securing border zones, obtaining material resources, and gaining access to the Pacific Ocean. Alienated and sidelined by cadres who were not local, they began to detach from the CMDA. In addition, other armed groups — including breakaway factions within urban networks (GO-GUP) — became their enemies, targeting their economic and financial resources and relatives. By late 2016, these detached mid-level commanders broke away, relying on support bases mediated by strong vertical ties with coca-growing settlers before and during the peace process, as well as extended families and trusted networks in Colombia and Ecuador.

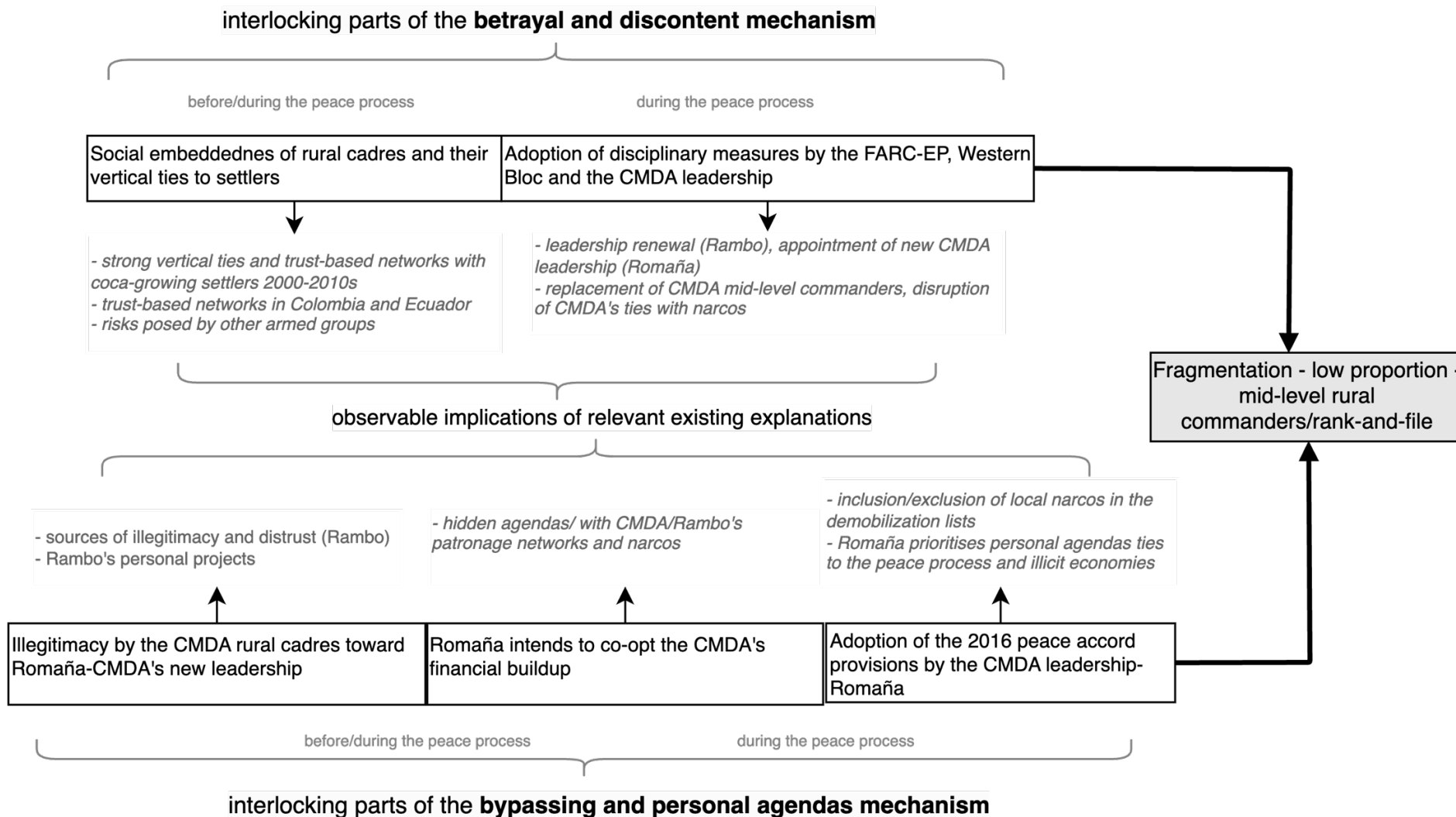


DIAGRAM C2

9.1.3.4 *Bypassing and personal agendas* mechanism – Low Proportion – FOS – Diagram C2:

In 2015 and 2016, the new leadership of the CMDA took over the material resources and patronage networks that the former leadership of this secondary group had built during the 2000s and 2010s. New leaders such as Yesid and Rambo struck deals with Colombian and Ecuadorian drug traffickers who had previously worked with Rambo, while at the same time supporting the implementation of the peace process. These deals involved including them in reintegration lists while also agreeing on arrangements to ensure that illicit economies would not be disrupted. Rural mid-level commanders of the CMDA—who had been detaching themselves since 2015 and felt sidelined by Yesid and Romaña—viewed these actions as illegitimate; a bypassing of what they had built in the region, driven by Romaña and his troops' hidden agendas. At the same time, traffickers who were not included in the lists, or who did not seek their inclusion, saw Romaña and his new alliances as competition. These conditions contributed to rural mid-level commanders forming the FOS. They denounced the lack of commandship legitimacy of the new CMDA leadership and relied on disenfranchised external actors and illicit economies in both Colombia and Ecuador.

9.1.4 Case Study Four – CMTF

9.1.4.1 *Legitimacy* mechanism – Diagram D:

This mechanism refers to the sources of commandship legitimacy of El Paisa and the leadership of the CMTF in mobilizing and subordinating a secondary unit in support of the peace process. It tells the story of how El Paisa built leadership and commandship legitimacy both inside and outside the CMTF. From the early 1990s until disarmament and demobilization in 2017, El Paisa commanded the CMTF in a region where FARC-EP and settler communities had evolved together since the 1960s in response to state violence. His close ties to the inner circle of the FARC-EP's founding members, combined with commanding a secondary unit that inspired respect and prestige within the organization for its military achievements both in its area of operations and in Colombia's main cities. Such a trajectory gave El Paisa and the CMTF the legitimacy and backing to either break away from or commit to the peace process. It also created uncertainty for the FARC-EP's top echelons and the Colombian state, given the possibility that they might defect. A CMTF breakaway might have drawn in other secondary units and top and mid-level commanders. Yet, the CMTF's rigorous socialization processes

reinforced wartime discipline, while also encouraging adherence to the norms, rules, and beliefs — such as support for and subordination to the peace process — that the top echelons transmitted to this secondary unit through their leadership.

9.1.4.2 *Post-war local politics mechanism* – Diagram D:

The CMTF relied on material resources and relationships with external actors, which strengthened its organizational robustness before and during the peace process to advance its plans for doing politics after demobilization. Its leadership deemed some members of the FARC-EP's top echelons illegitimate, particularly those who moved up the hierarchy after the deaths of funding members Manuel Marulanda (natural causes) or top commanders Raúl Reyes, Mono Jojoy, and Alfonso Cano (military operations). The CMTF's leadership also expressed doubts about the peace accord's provisions on disarmament and asset handover. Nevertheless, its plan of doing politics in the CMTF's former area of operations outweighed these concerns. External actors tied to illicit economies reached mutually beneficial informal agreements with some mid-level commanders from the then-FARC-EP for the continuation of their trade, providing the CMTF with assurances that they could carry on with the peace process. This partly helps us understand why El Paisa and the CMTF subordinated themselves to the peace process. Finally, it maintained wartime discipline into the peace process to ensure the loyalty of mid-level commanders and rank-and-file members in support of his regional political ambitions and, more generally, his post-war projects without arms.

interlocking parts of the **legitimacy mechanism**

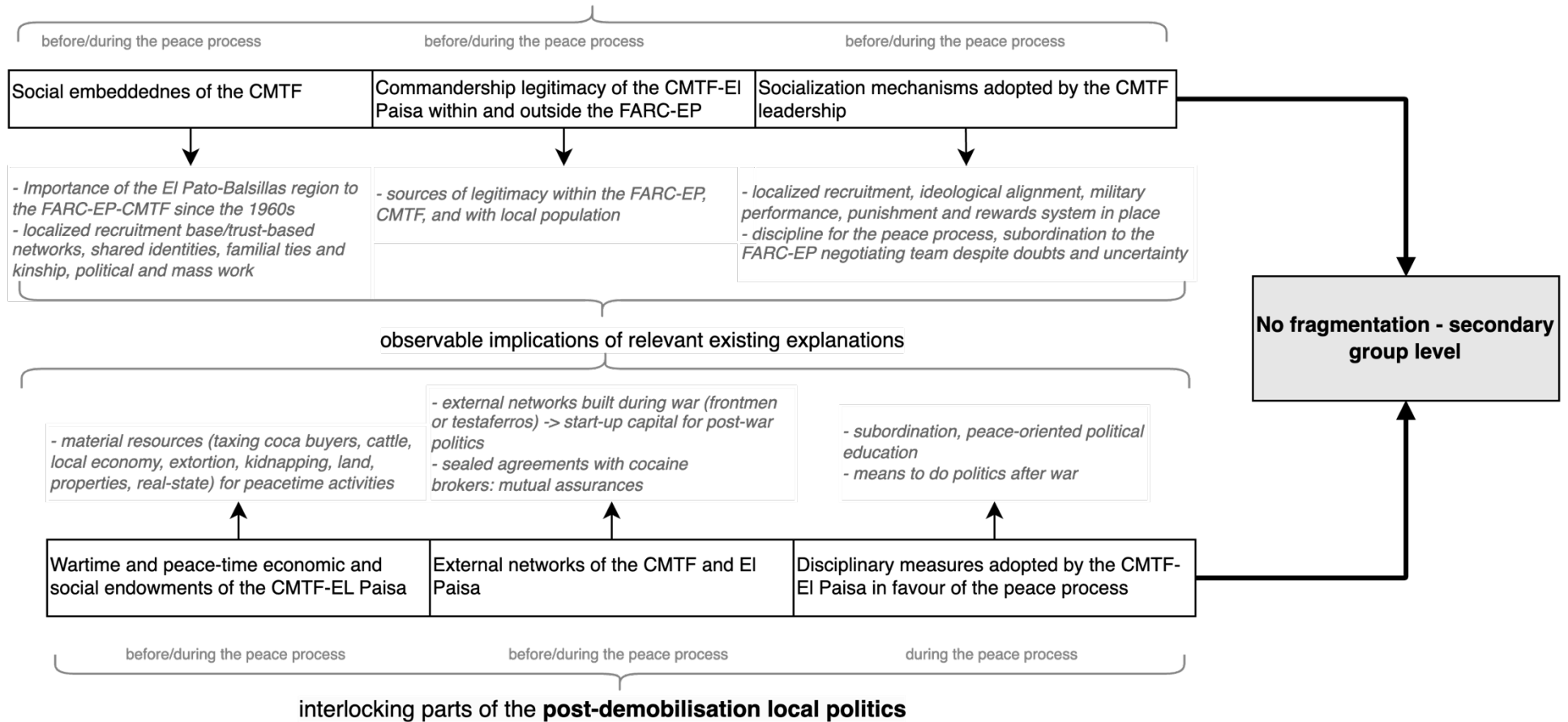


DIAGRAM D

To compare the mechanisms across the four case studies, in the following section I identify and present common threads—recurring elements that appear and operate in a specific way across different mechanisms.

9.2 Comparing with Ethnographic Sensibility: Common Threads

How does the combination of the *commandership legitimacy* and local *post-demobilisation politics* mechanisms help us understand cohesion in Case Study Four, while the combination of *commandership legitimacy* with *rejection and distrust* leads to high fragmentation in Case Study One? Similarly, how do the mechanisms of *instrumental incorporation* and *personal agendas and threat construction* produce high fragmentation within urban networks in Case Study Three, whereas *betrayal and discontent*, together with *bypassing and personal agendas*, contribute to low fragmentation among rural mid-level commanders? To what extent are the *personal agendas* mechanisms in Case Study Three (high and low proportion fragmentation) different to the *post-demobilisation politics* mechanism in Case Study Four?

These questions illustrate mechanism heterogeneity and how this very heterogeneity helps explain the variation in observable outcomes across the case studies. As I detail in Chapter 3 and earlier in this chapter, a careful examination of observable implications of the existing explanations in the literature shows that they perform differently in each case. On the one hand, the existing explanations have multiple, contradictory effects on fragmentation and cohesion both within and across cases. In Case Study One, for instance, leadership decapitation (an observable implication of counterinsurgency) prompted the leadership of the Eastern Bloc to adopt disciplinary measures. This decision opened the way for Iván Mordisco to rise through the ranks before and during the peace process. In doing so, he implemented the reorganisation strategy of the 1st Front, which allowed him to gain commandership legitimacy and foster cohesion and group thinking, which were ultimately critical for breaking away from the organization during the peace process. In Case Study Two, by contrast, leadership decapitation facilitated the new leadership of the 10th Front to consolidate its pro-peace stance and

strengthen cohesion. At the same time, the killing of local cadres contributed to the gradual detachment of urban networks.

On the other hand, I show that the existing explanations in the literature can be both internal and external to secondary groups, namely, the 1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA, or CMTF. They may also be endogenous or exogenous to the peace process, per the narratives of each mechanism and Diagrams A–D. For example, in Case Study Two, I demonstrate that the *detachment and split* mechanism, as well as the *dismissal and exclusion* mechanism, are traceable to internal decisions made by the top echelons of the FARC-EP in response to indiscipline within the 10th Front at different points during the armed conflict, with implications with its external relations with local population and other armed actors. Adopting this temporally extended approach (before and during peace agreement) allows us to develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion, as the mechanisms in each case study capture.

As I mention in the introduction to this chapter, my comparison relies on an ethnographically oriented approach. First, this approach allows me to capture how existing explanations in the literature perform within each case study with a sensitivity to the meanings of those who lived through the events. In other words, by *perform*, I refer to the meanings that research participants attribute to these explanations and how they contributed, or not, to fragmentation, with their respective variations (Table 9.1 and Section 9.1). Second, “casing” (Soss, 2021) enables me to build mechanisms, for they are not predetermined but represent analytical constructs derived from an iterative process between empirical evidence and existing explanations in the literature. In doing so, I zero in on “highly localized perceptions” (Simmons and Smith, 2021b) of existing explanations to unsettle them, thereby uncovering their multiple meanings — and thereby different consequences — within and across cases. For example, in Case Study Two, discipline performs in favour of peace, yet it also contributes to the progressive alienation of urban and support networks. Leadership decapitation targeting the 1st Front and the Eastern Bloc is critical for the *legitimacy mechanism* in Case Study One. In contrast, leadership removal — an observable implication of disciplinary measures ordered by the top echelons of the FARC-EP — is central for deepening the *exclusion* of detached urban networks and the *betrayal and discontent* mechanism in Case Studies Two and Three, respectively.

To compare the mechanisms across the four case studies, I identify four common threads, namely, recurring elements that appear and operate in a specific way across different mechanisms. These are: 1) leadership renewal in response to counterinsurgency and leadership decapitation; 2) leadership renewal in response to ill-disciplined mid-level commanders and urban networks; 3) commandership legitimacy and illegitimacy; and 4) co-optation of and distrust in the peace process.

9.2.1 Secondary-group Leadership Renewal in Response to Counterinsurgency and Leadership Decapitation

Counterinsurgency is one of the interlocking parts in three mechanisms: *Commandership legitimacy, Rejection and Distrust* (Case Study One – Diagram A) and *Dismissal and Exclusion* (Case Study Two – Diagram B). In all three, counterinsurgency operates through leadership decapitation. In response, the leadership of the 1st Front and the 10th Front, as well as the Eastern Bloc, implemented disciplinary measures, including conducting internal investigations (“*balances*”) and drawing conclusions from the Colombian state’s military results. These procedures were followed the appointment of new leaders or leadership renewal of the 1st Front and 10th Front. In Chapters 5 and 6, and in Section 9.1 of this chapter, I show that leadership renewal (an observable implication of discipline in response to counterinsurgency) had multiple effects and contributed to the mechanisms that generated the outcomes of high fragmentation in Case Study One, and low fragmentation in Case Study Two.

In the 10th Front, the killing of Arcesio Niño and the capture of Misael in 2012 — who had assumed leadership of this secondary group after the first crisis — created an opportunity for the new leadership, under [name redacted #4], to consolidate its pro-peace stance and post-demobilisation political project. In this case, leadership decapitation (removing Arcesio and Misael from [name redacted #4]’s path) contributed to cohesion in support of the peace process among the majority of the 10th Front. However, the way [name redacted #4] carried out his mission, while aligned with the peace agreement, in practice contributed to the further detachment of urban networks in Colombia and Venezuela, which later aligned with the breakaway faction’s leaders. This was not the case for mid-level commanders and rank-and-file combatants, who lacked commandership legitimacy among the local population due to the effects of the war with the ELN between 2005 and 2010. As a result, fragmentation was low, essentially comprising *milicianos* and a small number of formerly imprisoned mid-level

commanders. In this case study, leadership decapitation ultimately reinforced pro-peace cohesion at the level of the secondary group, mediated by mid-level commanders subordinated to the organisation's rules and directives, even if it simultaneously contributed to the detachment of militias and the splitting of local support networks.

In contrast, in the 1st Front, leadership decapitation is key for understanding the outcome of high-level fragmentation. On the one hand, leadership decapitation targeted different levels of the FARC-EP. It directly impacted the leadership of the 1st Front through Operation *Jaque* in 2008. Following this operation, the Eastern Bloc appointed a new leadership. Within it, Iván Mordisco stood out, rising through the ranks between 2009 and 2015 to become the leader of the 1st Front. He distinguished himself through his adherence to and implementation of the reorganisation plan, demonstrating discipline and commitment, and fostering cohesion. It was precisely as a result of internal decisions, mediated by interactions with the Colombian military, that Iván Mordisco emerged as the top leader, gaining recognition for his leadership both from his subordinates and from the local population. As I show later, he also benefited from organisational adjustments made by the FARC-EP's top echelons. One of these was the creation of inter-front coordinations across different parts of the country. The leader of the 1st Front assumed one of these roles, which opened the way for Iván Mordisco to rise further in this secondary group. Hence, the *legitimacy* mechanism in Case Study One (Diagram A) is composed of the interlocking parts of counterinsurgency effects—leadership decapitation—and the renewal of secondary group leadership.

Leadership decapitation is also one of the interlocking parts of the *rejection and distrust* mechanism. State-led military action also targeted the Eastern Bloc, the parent secondary group of the 1st Front. In 2010, an airstrike killed its leader, Mono Jojoy. What followed was a reorganisation of the Bloc's leadership and the creation of inter-front coordinations. The significance of leadership decapitation at the bloc level — as opposed to the front level, as discussed above — lies in who replaced Jojoy. As I show in Chapter 5, his death paved the way for new leaders to take command of the Eastern Bloc. The problem was that Iván Mordisco and other mid-level commanders who later broke away in 2016 considered these new leaders illegitimate, both because of their past deeds within the FARC-EP and their role as negotiators. Hence, the *rejection* mechanism is not limited to the rejection of disarmament provisions, as I demonstrate below. Beyond that, it involves the rejection of some top-echelon members of the FARC-EP, deemed untrustworthy by Iván Mordisco and other experienced mid-level

commanders of the Eastern Bloc who rose to the top positions of the organisation largely as a result of state-led violence.

Leadership decapitation creates opportunities for new leaders to emerge. Iván Mordisco, for instance, fulfilled organisational expectations by fostering cohesion, enforcing internal discipline, and earning the legitimacy of his men. This, in turn, helped him become a recognised and legitimate leader. The problem arises when leadership decapitation disrupts the vertical ties between the Eastern Bloc and the 1st Front. With Mono Jojoy gone, even if replaced by experienced cadres within the organisation, this did not necessarily translate into commandship legitimacy or trust for mid-level commanders like Mordisco. Their conduct in both the war and the peace process was questioned by those who doubted them, such as Iván Mordisco, among others who joined him (e.g. Gentil Duarte) or from other secondary groups that demobilised (e.g., El Paisa in Chapter 8). For this reason, for those who eventually led the breakaway faction, the *rejection and distrust* mechanism can only be understood by examining how the effects of counterinsurgency and leadership renewal unfold over time and at different levels of the organisation — namely, how they interact with preexisting distrust of top cadres among mid-level commanders like Iván Mordisco.

In this sense, disaggregating the organisation and analysing the implications of leadership decapitation at different levels of analysis allows me to identify two key aspects of how discipline and control measures operate in practice as they trickle-down different levels of the organisation. First, the organisation demonstrates the capacity to replace leaders and implement internal reorganisation plans after suffering military blows. Second, however, leadership decapitation extends beyond the immediate actions taken by the organisation at its various levels. In the case of the 10th Front (Case Study Two), leadership decapitation strengthened the pro-peace stance of the new leadership, as it curbed within-group competition (e.g., between Arcesio and Misael). Nevertheless, it also interacted with pre-existing internal dynamics at the secondary group level, such as the progressive detachment of *milicianos* throughout the 2000s. Moreover, the new leadership under [name redacted #4], in its attempt to exercise control over them, while dismissing their social embeddedness in the Arauca region and the evolution of the 10th Front, which relied more on *milicianos* than on armed combatants, contributes to their further detachment.

Why, in Cases Studies Three and Four, is leadership decapitation not an interlocking part of the mechanisms that contribute to their respective observable outcomes? As I

demonstrate in Chapters 7 and 8, neither the CMDA nor the CMTF was immune to counterinsurgency — whether through leadership decapitation, local disembedding, desertions, or infiltrations. On the contrary, the evidence suggests that leadership decapitation often resulted in the killing or capture of mid-level commanders of primary groups such as companies and *milicianos*. In Case Study Three, however, there is no evidence of internal effects of leadership decapitation, such as the disruption of vertical ties between these leaders and their subordinates or infighting within this secondary group. For this reason, I did not include counterinsurgency as an interlocking part of any of the mechanisms leading to either high- or low-proportion fragmentation (Chapter 7 and Diagrams C1 and C2). In Case Study Four, leadership decapitation at the level of the primary group, along with local disembedding (including the mass capture of *milicianos* and collaboration of the local population with state forces), was counteracted by disciplinary measures such as the appointment of replacements, balances, drafting reorganisation plans, selective killings and adaptation to counterinsurgency. As I show in Chapter 8 (see also Diagram D), El Paisa's ability to adapt to counterinsurgency — and to avoid capture or death at the hands of state forces — was one of his sources of commandship legitimacy. Combined with his leadership traits, military performance, strong vertical ties with local population and strong intra-secondary group discipline, form the *legitimacy* mechanism.

As I show below, leadership renewal is not only a response to state-led action or interactions with other armed groups. It also originates within armed groups, in response to internal indiscipline or tensions with the local population that developed years before the adoption of leadership renewal itself. Chapters 6 and 8 demonstrate that indiscipline in the late 1990s and 2000s and contentious relations between the CMDA and Afro-Colombian communities, respectively, prompted parent secondary groups (blocs) to adopt such disciplinary measures. Moreover, leadership renewal can also result from the organisation's broader strategic objectives of fostering cohesion for the peace process.

9.2.2 Secondary-group Leadership Renewal in Response to Ill-disciplined Mid-level Commanders and Urban Networks

Leadership renewal is one of the interlocking parts of the *Detachment and Split* mechanism in Case Study Two (Diagram B), and of the *Instrumental Incorporation*, and *Betrayal and Discontent* mechanisms in Case Study Three (Diagram C2). In both cases, leadership renewal was a means by which the top echelons of the FARC-EP enforced

compliance with organisational rules and norms. As mentioned above, it resulted from an internal deliberative process—or “*balances*”—conducted at the bloc or parent secondary group level. But in this case, leadership renewal was a response to ill-disciplined troops in the 10th Front and the CMDA. Notably, in the 1st Front, although leadership renewal was initially prompted by leadership decapitation, in practice it also resulted from *balances*, the appointment of provisional leadership, and, ultimately, the formal appointment of new leadership beginning in 2009.

Regarding leadership renewal in the 10th Front, the top echelons of the Eastern Bloc, its parent secondary group, conducted a *balance* of the consequences of the war with the ELN between 2005 and 2010. As I detail in Chapter 6, this assessment concluded that, to a large extent, the causes of the war with the ELN were the result of indiscipline among the leaders of the 10th Front and other mid-level commanders, who were deemed “loose cannons” (e.g., Grannoble). In this case study, indiscipline refers to commanders who failed to comply with the reorganisation plan following the first internal crisis, prioritised personal agendas, and engaged in regionalist and anti-ELN behaviours. They began to detach from the organisation, believing that in Arauca—the 10th Front’s region—they could impose their own vision of what the FARC-EP should be, rather than adhering to the norms and rules dictated by the organisation.

Similarly, in the case of the CMDA, leadership renewal resulted from the decisions of the Western Bloc and the top echelons of the FARC-EP to exert control over secondary groups that engaged in predatory behaviour toward local populations and internal indiscipline. For example, the assassination of the Afro-Colombian leader Genaro García in 2015 led to the replacement of Rambo and the appointment of provisional leadership—Yesid and Leonel in 2015, followed by Romaña in 2016. This occurred alongside acts of violence against the local population, including the rape and murder of women and other crimes in 2016, as well as internal indiscipline, such as the detachment of leaders from urban networks. In both cases, the new CMDA leadership court-martialled those responsible.

However, leadership renewal in both case studies had contradictory effects. Although it aimed at correcting indiscipline (with implications for the external relations of both secondary groups) and fostering cohesion in support of the peace process, in the 10th Front it contributed to the further detachment of urban networks and the splitting of local support networks; in the CMDA, it contributed to the definitive detachment of *milicianos*—former

Rastrojos or paramilitaries who had been instrumentally incorporated in 2012 without being socialised into the norms and rules of the FARC-EP. As I elaborate on in the concluding chapter, a longer approach allows us to explore and understand how leadership renewal interacts with the internal and pre-existing dynamics of secondary groups and their operational environment. Moreover, in demonstrating the multiple, contradictory effects of leadership renewal, I am addressing broader theoretical debates—namely, how existing explanations (e.g., discipline) help us better understand the coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion as coevolving processes within the different levels of analysis of armed groups.

9.2.3 The Multifaceted Nature of Commandership Legitimacy and Illegitimacy

As with the two threads discussed above, an ethnographic sensibility allowed me to examine and identify the various meanings of commandership legitimacy from the perspective of research participants. Reflections of local leaders, informal conversations, and, more specifically, former combatants of the CMTF and the 1st Front show that *legitimacy* mechanisms can both work and contribute both in favour of the peace process and the emergence of breakaway factions, respectively. Moreover, commandership legitimacy and illegitimacy are not mechanisms in themselves but parts of them, as in the 10th Front and the CMDA. This helps us explain the sources of commandership legitimacy across cases and how fragmentation varies in proportion and in the levels of analysis at which it occurs within secondary groups.

9.2.3.1 Commandership Legitimacy for Breaking Away and for the Peace Process

The *legitimacy* mechanism in Case Studies One and Four help us understand high-proportion fragmentation and cohesion, respectively. In both cases, the mechanism is composed of different interlocking parts, one of which is legitimacy. In the 1st Front, Iván Mordisco's legitimacy stems from the leadership renewal that began in 2009, following counterinsurgent successful operations. In the CMTF, by contrast, El Paisa's legitimacy evolved over a more extended period, dating back to the early 1990s. It stemmed from his origins in the organisation, his ability to instil discipline and recognition within the FARC-EP and the local population, and military achievements over time. I discuss the sources of *commandership* legitimacy and illegitimacy in more detail below. What is important to highlight is that commandership legitimacy, on its own, does not necessarily lead to either fragmentation or cohesion across an armed group. Disaggregating an armed organisation into

secondary groups shows that legitimacy can operate in both ways: high-proportion fragmentation (1st Front) and for the peace process (CMTF) in interaction with other explanations.

Moreover, a close examination of the life histories of former combatants and elite research participants shows that, in the case of El Paisa, the *legitimacy* mechanism could have worked out otherwise. Because of his standing and legitimacy (unlike Mordisco's, both extended beyond the CMTF to other secondary and parent secondary groups of the FARC-EP), he could have mobilised a larger breakaway faction. However, according to the *post-demobilisation local politics* mechanism, El Paisa pursued different objectives. In the fourth thread, I detail how mid-level commanders like El Paisa co-opted or saw in the peace process an opportunity to pursue politics without arms, though not necessarily in ways aligned with the formal rebel-to-party process that signalled the transformation of the FARC-EP into a political party (*Comunes*).

Despite these differences, in both cases the sources of commandship legitimacy are similar. Evidence in Chapters 5 and 8 indicates that both mid-level commanders were regarded by their peers, subordinates, and local populations as disciplined, approachable and concerned with the military readiness and morale of their troops. Both had been promoted based on merit and were close to key commanders within the organisation. In other words, they embodied the principles and representations of a “good fighter” — *buen guerrillero* — and those of the organisation. In the case of Iván Mordisco, a key element is that the *legitimacy* mechanism also stems from how he led the reorganisation of the 1st Front following Operation *Jaque* in 2008. For El Paisa, it is important to note his origins in the organisation — close to its founders, his military achievements, and the trust placed in him by the top echelons of other parent and secondary groups.

In sum, I show that commandship legitimacy at the secondary group level is one of the interlocking parts of the *legitimacy* mechanisms I build in Case Studies One and Four (Sections 9.1.1 and 9.1.4; Diagrams A and D). In the former, it contributes to creating cohesion to breaking away (high-proportion fragmentation), whereas in the latter, it fosters cohesion in support of the peace process.

In addition, my careful examination of how existing explanations in the literature operated in Case Study Three allows me to identify that rural mid-level commanders of the

CMDA relied on multiple sources of commandership legitimacy. In Chapter 8, I demonstrate that Guacho, leader of the FOS, drew on the discrediting of Romaña's commandership illegitimacy (see the following section), invoked loyalty to Rambo and to fallen CMDA commanders, and exploited disillusionment with the early stages of the implementation of the 2016 peace accord. In this case, commandership legitimacy is an interlocking part of the *betrayal and discontent* mechanism (Diagram C2). Regarding members of urban networks of the CMDA who broke away in high proportion, Chapter 8 also shows that the leaders of the GO-GUP relied on invoking security threats and mobilising the legacy of Don Y, whose local significance and symbolic status as a fallen fighter carried weight among the population. Here, commandership legitimacy is an interlocking part of the *personal agendas and threat construction* mechanism (Diagram C1).

In addition to legitimacy, commandership illegitimacy also plays a role in the mechanisms in other case studies and contributes to the observable outcomes, as I detail in the next section.

9.2.3.2 The Sources of Commandership Illegitimacy

What role does commandership illegitimacy play in Case Studies One, Two, and Three, given that it is not a mechanism underlying observable outcomes, but rather an interlocking part that, in combination with others, helps form mechanisms? A common thread across these three cases is that commandership illegitimacy arises as a reaction or response to certain qualities of a commander that conflict with what it means to be a “good fighter.” Case Study One, for example, focuses on commandership illegitimacy as an interlocking part of the *rejection and distrust* mechanism (Section 9.1.1.2 – Diagram A). For Iván Mordisco, as well as for other mid-level commanders who joined him in 2016, the new leadership of the Eastern Bloc — appointed to replace Mono Jojoy (killed in 2010 during Operation *Sodoma*) — lacked military experience and had not risen through the ranks on merit. Moreover, there is distrust toward some of them because of their past actions within the organisation. These leaders also negotiated the disarmament provisions. Hence, their commandership legitimacy also stems from a perceived betrayal of the organisation's founding principles and of its founders, particularly regarding the role of arms in the peace process.

In Case Study One, commandership illegitimacy is a response to the new leadership of the parent secondary group. In this case, leadership renewal is a disciplinary measure

exogenous to the secondary group (1st Front) imposed by the Eastern Bloc, even though within the broader organisation. In the other cases, however, commandership illegitimacy is endogenous to the 10th Front and the CMDA (Sections 9.1.1.2 and 9.1.2.2). The sources of commandership illegitimacy in these two secondary cases arise as a reaction to the qualities of the newly appointed leaders. In the case of [name redacted #4] in the 10th Front, his commandership illegitimacy stems from being an outsider to the region, having never fought in the war against the ELN, and spending most of his time in Venezuela since his appointment in 2011. (Notably, for the troops who arrived in Arauca with him, [name redacted #4] was a legitimate leader, as was the case with those who came with Romaña to Tumaco.) His mistreatment of members of the urban and local support networks of the 10th Front—many of whom had decades of involvement with or sympathy for the FARC-EP—also contributed to their detachment and split, respectively (Diagram B). Although the fragmentation in the case study was of a low proportion, I show that commandership illegitimacy occurs at the level of specific segments within the secondary groups—namely, the urban networks and local support networks. In contrast, in case study one, commandership illegitimacy operates exogenously, emerging in response to leaders of the parent secondary groups and top echelons.

In the case of the CMDA-low fragmentation (Diagram C2), commandership illegitimacy is one of the interlocking parts of the *bypassing and personal agendas* mechanism (Section 9.1.3.3). Similar to the 10th Front, commandership illegitimacy is also endogenous. However, it operates at the level of rural mid-level commanders and rank-and-file members in response to Romaña, who was appointed in 2016 by the Western Bloc and the FARC-EP top echelon to lead the CMDA toward the peace process. Nonetheless, like [name redacted #4], Romaña is considered by on-the-ground commanders to be “untrustworthy,” “alien,” “a stranger,” and “not local.” Moreover, the perceptions that local cadres formed based on Romaña’s actions further undermined his legitimacy. These actions included bypassing the CMDA’s achievements since the early 2000s to advance his personal agendas, both for the peace process and to rekindle illicit economies for his own benefit and that of his troops from the Meta Department. In other words, commandership illegitimacy, combined with these hidden agendas and mediated through deals with drug lords in Colombia and Ecuador, forms the bypassing and personal agendas mechanism that leads to low-proportion fragmentation.

In the following section, I examine the role of the peace process—specific provisions of the 2016 peace accord—that is part of the mechanisms across the four case studies.

9.2.4 Peace: Between Co-optation and Distrust

A fourth common thread across the case studies is the role of the peace process in shaping the mechanisms in all four cases. An ethnographic sensibility allows me to move beyond the question of whether peace processes create fragmentation within armed groups. Instead, by incorporating meaning into the analysis of life histories, semi-structured interviews, and additional empirical materials, I examine which specific aspects of the peace process contribute to fragmentation and cohesion in each case study. The evidence in Chapters 5–8 and the corresponding mechanism narratives indicate that, in Case Study One, rejection of the disarmament provisions was critical and contributed to high-proportion fragmentation. In contrast, the politics surrounding the reintegration lists contributed to fragmentation in Case Studies Two and Three. Subordination to the peace agreement—even amid doubts regarding the disarmament provisions and the handling of assets—contributed to fostering cohesion.

Looking closely at each case study, however, reveals that beyond the provisions of the peace agreement, there are underlying logics of co-optation and distrust in the peace process. By examining how research participants understood the agreement and the meanings they attributed to it, and through an ongoing iterative and discovery-oriented process between empirics and the literature (Simmons and Smith, 2021a, b; Soss, 2021), I identify these two logics. I do not approach the peace agreement merely as an external force or shock to the secondary groups that should do something to them. Instead, I examine how secondary group leaders interact with it—in colloquial terms: “what’s in it for them,” as research respondents expressed in our conversations at the five field sites where I conducted fieldwork in Colombia. Hence, incorporating meaning allows me to build the logics of co-optation and distrust as analytic constructs, rather than given concepts.

By *co-optation*, I refer to mid-level commanders in the 10th Front, CMDA, and CMTF who instrumentalised the peace agreement, or saw in it an opportunity to advance their personal agendas, with implications for the emergence of breakaway factions, or lack thereof. *Distrust*, on the other hand, captures the scepticism behind the rejection of the disarmament provisions and the members of the FARC-EP who negotiated them in Havana, as in the case of the 1st Front. These logics are not mutually exclusive, for *co-optation* contains elements of *distrust*, and vice versa. Similarly, I show that other existing explanations in the literature—such as material resources, networks, and external actors in illicit economies—are also important and interact with co-optation and distrust. Focusing on these interactions, which vary across the

case studies, allows me to form case-specific mechanisms. In the next two sections, I elaborate on these two logics.

9.2.4.1 Co-optation

A common thread across the 10th Front, CMDA, and CMTF is that their leaders, whether newly appointed or not, saw the peace process as an opportunity to engage in politics — [name redacted #4] in Case Study Two and El Paisa in Case Study Four — or to continue illicit activities alongside supporting the implementation of the peace process — Romaña in Case Study Three. In all three cases, nevertheless, these mid-level commanders advanced their personal agendas.

[Name redacted #4], appointed to command the 10th Front in 2010, used the reintegration lists to exclude members of urban networks who had gradually detached during two internal crises (Sections 6.1.1.2 and 6.2.3). Beyond the politics of the reintegration lists, he also envisioned himself as a political leader in the Arauca region. Chapter 6 shows that, by relying on the political participation provisions in the peace agreement and aligning with the nascent political party into which the FARC-EP transformed, [name redacted #4] aimed to take control of the finances and internal politics of the 10th Front's local support networks, whose history dates back to the 1960s. His attempt to co-opt the social, political, and economic fabric of these networks, likely hoping to convert it into electoral support, backfired: more *milicianos* detached, and the local support networks split between those who supported [name redacted #4] and those aligned with the breakaway factions (Diagram B).

[Name redacted #4]'s attempt to co-opt the peace process to advance his political ambitions interacts closely with the role of local networks and the population; this is why both constitute interlocking parts of the *dismissal and exclusion* mechanism in Case Study Two (Diagram B). His intentions disrupted long-standing vertical ties between the 10th Front and its support networks that had developed before the peace process. A longer approach to pre- and post-peace process thus helps us identify the importance of how co-opting the peace process interacts with the wartime external ties of this secondary group. In the concluding chapter, I expand on this long-term approach, which is one of the four pillars of my organisationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion.

Similarly, El Paisa saw in the peace process a way to advance his political project without arms. Supporting the peace agreement did not translate, in his case, into relying on the

political participation provisions of the peace accord as [name redacted #4] sought to do. Instead, the leader of the CMTF subordinated to the FARC-EP negotiators' decisions in Havana, most likely to further his political ambitions upon the signing of the 2016 peace deal. The evidence in Chapter 8 suggests that, for him and the leadership of this secondary group, any political aspirations drew on economic buildup and local support networks of the CMDA — which had evolved both before and during the peace process — as well as on agreements sealed with external actors. Diagram D illustrates how material resources and networks are interlocking parts that in combination with the peace process form the *post-demobilisation local politics* mechanism. As in Case Study Two, a longer approach to before and during the peace agreement allows us to better understand El Paisa's instrumental use of the peace process, contributing to the cohesion of the CMTF.

In both Case Studies Two and Four, the peace process serves to advance mid-level commanders' political projects amid their transition from rebel to politics. However, while in Case Study Two it disrupts long-standing vertical ties between the 10th Front and its local support networks, in Case Study Four the same kind of ties work in favour of El Paisa. A fragmented CMTF would have undermined these goals, despite the lack of trust of its members in some FARC-EP negotiators in Cuba (see Section 8.2.3). As discussed above, commandership legitimacy and illegitimacy also contribute to the feasibility of such post-demobilisation plans.

Co-optation of the peace process can also occur when a mid-level commander of a secondary group publicly endorses it while simultaneously pursuing parallel agendas. This was the case of Romaña when he assumed leadership of the CMDA. As I detail in Chapter 7, he co-opted the peace process to advance his personal agenda, relying on the CMDA's long-standing relations with external actors in illicit economies (Diagram C1). Similar to Case Study Two, Romaña also engaged in politics through the reintegration lists, including local *narcos*, while excluding members of urban networks (or former *Rastrojos*). Yet, unlike in Case Study Two, in Case Study Three, *milicianos* did not merely detach but led a breakaway faction (high-proportion fragmentation). At the same time, rural mid-level commanders deemed Romaña's hidden intentions untrustworthy. Romaña also drew on the material resources, networks, and ties to external actors that had evolved before and during the peace process as part of the CMDA's operational environment — including those that the *milicianos* or former *Rastrojos* continued working with while in the FARC-EP. However, unlike El Paisa, any post-demobilisation project tied to legal or illegal activities required commandership legitimacy,

which Romaña lacked due to being an outsider, his heavy-handed implementation of discipline, and ultimately his bypassing of the CMDA's social, economic, and political endowments in the region, including its mid-level commanders and rank-and-file. In sum, through co-optation, the peace process, combined with Romaña's commandership illegitimacy, contributed to the *bypassing and personal agendas* mechanism (Diagram C2).

In the three examples above, the co-optation of the peace process pursued political objectives (Case Studies Two and Four), financial objectives linked to illicit economies, or a combination of both (Case Study Three). The three cases also relied on material resources, networks, and ties to external actors that, without exception, had developed before the peace agreement. Hence, we need a longer approach to before and during peace agreement. Moreover, in the three case studies, co-optation of the peace process was mediated by a degree of distrust: [name redacted #4] toward the local support networks of the 10th Front, El Paisa toward certain members of the FARC-EP's top echelons, and Romaña toward the top commanders who had sent him to a region unfamiliar to him. Nonetheless, the evidence I present in the respective chapters points consistently to the instrumentalization of the peace process.

9.2.4.2 Distrust

The *rejection and distrust* mechanisms in case Study One captures the role of the disarmament provisions, in combination with the illegitimacy from the 1st Front on some of the leaders of the FARC-EP who negotiated them in Havana.

Similar to the other threads, I incorporate the meaning of the disarmament provisions by paying attention to how people make sense of their worlds. In doing so, the analysis is not limited to the provisions themselves. Instead, it explores and understands why disarmament carried the meaning it did for the leadership of the 1st Front, contributing to high-proportion fragmentation. As I detail in Chapter 5, for Iván Mordisco, as well as for other members of the FARC-EP's top echelons, the issue was not whether to hand over weapons, but how to do so. Evidence from life histories and additional empirical material suggests that, in Havana, differences over the disarmament process divided the negotiating team between those who favoured a gradual handover tied to the implementation of the Peace Accord and those who preferred an expedited process, regardless of its implementation.

The issue at stake with these two visions is that the second one—the one ultimately adopted — was led by [name redacted #2], a member of the Eastern Bloc leadership who gained

prominence after the killing of Mono Jojoy. As I detail in Chapters 5 and 8, and Section 9.1.1, and in the earlier thread on sources of commandership illegitimacy, [name redacted #2] was deemed illegitimate within the FARC-EP due to his actions and for lacking both merit and military experience. For Iván Mordisco, he was, in short, the very opposite of Mono Jojoy. Notably, those who insisted on a gradual handover of weapons tied to the implementation of the Peace Accord were precisely the commanders closest to Mono Jojoy. Among them were other mid-level commanders of the Eastern Bloc who joined Iván Mordisco from mid-2016 onwards when he broke away. These individuals not only had decades of experience within the FARC-EP but also possessed material resources and ties to external actors, both inside and outside Colombia. These economic endowments had evolved well before the peace process (Diagram A).

This account shows that distrust is not only the result of the negotiations over disarmament during the peace process. On the contrary, the disarmament provisions agreed upon in Havana exposed sources of commandership illegitimacy toward top leaders like [name redacted #2] that had arisen before it and deepened through tensions among the negotiators in Cuba. Moreover, the evidence I present in Chapter 5 suggests that Iván Mordisco's stance on disarmament would have been the same as that of Mono Jojoy and Alfonso Cano — the FARC-EP's top commander killed in 2011 in a military operation, which paved the way for Timochenko's rise. [Name redacted #3], like [name redacted #2], in turn, favoured the rapid handover of weapons. Section 9.1.1 shows and Diagram A thus illustrates that the disarmament provisions — deemed illegitimate by Mordisco, among others — is one of the interlocking parts of the *rejection and distrust* mechanism, alongside other interlocking parts that evolved before it. Similar to the logic of co-optation, adopting a longer approach to both before and during peace processes allows us to have a deeper understanding of distrust in relation to the disarmament provisions.

The logic of *distrust* does not exclude that of *co-optation*. In the case of Iván Mordisco, the evidence suggests that he may have instrumentalised the peace agreement to expand his armed project, as an attempt to emulate his mentor, Mono Jojoy. Unlike [name redacted #4] or El Paisa, however, he did not pursue a political project tied directly or indirectly to the political participation provisions of the peace accord. Instead, his trajectory and commandership legitimacy within the 1st Front facilitated him to lead a high-proportion breakaway faction, as discussed above.

Discussion

One of the main insights of this chapter is that comparing the ten case-specific mechanisms across the four cases allows us to better understand the different path toward the observable outcomes in the 1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA, and CMTF. I show that identifying case-specific mechanisms—through detailed mechanism narratives and Diagrams A–D—provides a solid empirical and analytical foundation for explaining variation in fragmentation and cohesion, both in terms of proportion and level of analysis. These case-specific mechanisms comprise different interlocking parts—existing explanations as they perform through their case-specific or relevant observable implications—that help us identify the different actors at the secondary-, bloc- and organisational-level, as well as external actors, whose actions or activities contribute to the transformation of the selected case studies. Moreover, I show how they interact with each other and vary over time before and during the peace process. These case-specific mechanisms comprise interlocking components—existing explanations as they perform through their case-specific or relevant observable implications—that help identify the various actors at the secondary, bloc, and organizational levels, as well as external actors whose actions or activities contribute to the transformation of the selected case studies. Moreover, I show how these actors and their actions interact with one another and evolve over time, both before and during the peace process.

Another insight from this chapter is that the common threads reveal that the existing explanations in the literature—internal and external to the case studies, and endogenous and exogenous to the peace process—can have multiple, contradictory effects on fragmentation and cohesion within and across secondary groups of the FARC-EP, thus contributing to case-specific observable outcomes. This analysis highlights the benefits of adopting both an ethnographically oriented approach and "casing" to compare the selected case studies. Operationalising both helped me discover the multiple meanings that research respondents ascribe to existing explanations. In doing so, I offer an analysis and interpretation of the broader dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion within the FARC-EP that results from an iterative process between the evidence and the literature. Finally, this chapter, along with the evidence presented in Chapters 5-8, highlights the importance of disaggregation, time, the coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion within armed organisations, and mechanistic heterogeneity. These four pillars constitute my organisationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and

cohesion, which I elaborate on in the concluding chapter as part of the contributions I make in this dissertation.

Chapter 10: Conclusions

How and why did fragmentation and cohesion emerge in the FARC-EP in different proportions and levels of analysis within secondary groups during the peace process? My dissertation provides a novel approach to the broader dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion in non-state armed organisations at the secondary group level — namely, the 1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA and CMTF of the FARC-EP. The organisationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion that I introduce in this dissertation in response to the puzzle (Section 1.2) comprises four pillars: disaggregation, time, coexistence of cohesion and fragmentation and mechanistic heterogeneity. Based on extensive primary and secondary material that I collected at five field sites in Colombia in 2022 and 2024-2025, this dissertation demonstrates that disaggregating armed organisations into secondary groups advances our understanding of how fragmentation and cohesion unfold. Moreover, it shows that we need to explore and understand the different combinations of internal and external dynamics in the selected case studies, endogenous and exogenous to the peace process. Similarly, a careful systematisation, analysis and interpretation of the data reveal that the four case studies transformed over time, following different paths before and during the peace process. Case-specific mechanisms exhibit different paths toward observable outcomes, which vary in terms of the proportion of fragmentation, and level of analysis. This dissertation, therefore, highlights the organisational diversity at the secondary group level of the FARC-EP, as Chapters 5-8 demonstrate, and I analyse comparatively in Chapter 9.

This concluding chapter proceeds in three sections. First, I summarise my research and findings. Second, I discuss my contributions to the existing scholarship on fragmentation and cohesion in the field of civil war studies and military sociology. Then, I present my organizationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion, followed by the methodological and empirical contributions. The third section turns to future research and policy implications. Here, I suggest how my framework, although not generalisable in the sense of exact combinations of mechanisms, can be translated to other contexts and inform relevant policy issues. The chapter closes with a discussion of the dissertation's limitations.

10.1 Summary of Research and Findings

To answer the research questions I pose at the onset of the dissertation, in Chapter 2, I begin with an examination of the sources of fragmentation and cohesion by putting into dialogue civil war studies (CWS) and military sociology (MS) literatures. CWS and MS offer important insights on the role of socialization mechanisms, recruitment, commandership legitimacy, counterinsurgency, local population, material resources, transnational actors and peace processes in producing fragmentation and cohesion in armed organisations. Likewise, both focus on organisations and the meso-level as the main locus of analysis. However, while I build on these strands in the literature, I also identify some pitfalls based on a constant and iterative dialogue between existing explanations in CWS and MS and the life histories, semi-structured interviews and additional empirical materials I collected and analysed in this dissertation. I detail my contributions to existing scholarship in Section 10.2.1.

Drawing on CWS and MS, in Chapter 2, I propose an approach to the puzzle that includes four pillars to advance our understanding of fragmentation and cohesion. The first element is disaggregation. CWS and MS tells us not to treat organisations as unitary and, instead, focus on their different levels of analysis, internal diversity and variations among their constitutive dimensions. Considering FARC-EP's hierarchy and organisational structure that comprised different levels of analysis (e.g., bloc and fronts), I build on the “organisational turn” (Parkinson & Zaks, 2018) in CWS and the standard model of military group cohesion (Siebold, 2007) and other studies in MS to disaggregate the FARC-EP into the levels of analysis — fronts (1st and 10th Front) and mobile columns (CMDA and CMTF) — in which breakaway factions emerged, or not. The second element is time. Building on the different internal and external sources of cohesion and fragmentation or existing explanations in the CWS and MS (see summary in Table 2.1), my interest is to understand and explore how these existing explanations — not static factors — interact and evolve over time at the secondary group level. That is, how they perform by identifying case-specific observable implications, which are internal and external to the selected case studies and exogenous and endogenous to the peace process. Thus, we need a longer approach to before and during the peace process to better understand the broader dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion within different secondary groups.

In addition to time, the puzzle I present in Chapter 2 includes a third pillar: cohesion and fragmentation coexist at the secondary group level. This third element, for instance, shows

that to break away in high-proportion, strong-secondary group cohesion is needed, as in Case Study One. Low-proportion fragmentation coexists with cohesion in favour of the peace process, as in Case Study Two. Likewise, fragmentation can vary in proportion (high and low) and still coexist with cohesion, as in Case Study Three. Case Study Four shows that cohesion can serve to pursue other goals after demobilization, such as engaging in politics outside the political party into which the FARC-EP transformed. Therefore, as I argue in Chapter 2, variation in the observable outcome calls for a fourth element: a more nuanced approach that unsettles existing explanations by showing how they operate and interact — within and across the four case studies — with multiple, contradictory effects.

My research design, in Chapter 3, is constructed to get at this variation by incorporating both within-case and cross-case comparisons. In the first part, I present the scope conditions, emphasising that this dissertation focuses on breakaway factions that emerged within four selected secondary groups or case studies during the peace process. In the first part, I also describe the data collection protocols, including the selection of research participants, the methods used to collect data (life histories and semi-structured interviews, along with their respective interview plans), and the triangulation strategy. Chapter 3 stresses the non-predetermined nature of this dissertation's research design, as I elaborate on in Chapter 4.

In the second part, I present how I operationalise the elements of the “explaining-outcome” variant of process tracing I adopt in this dissertation, allowing me to build case-specific mechanisms. One, they comprise different interlocking parts or relevant existing explanations as they perform through their case-specific observable implications (traced in Chapters 5-8); and two, they demonstrate that there are different paths toward the observable outcomes. These observable outcomes show variation in fragmentation in terms of their proportion, level of analysis and who leads the breakaway faction (Diagram 3.1). Chapter 3 also details the comparison with the ethnographic sensibility approach I adopt to compare the case-specific mechanisms across the case studies. This approach uncovers the multiple meanings that research participants attach to existing explanations in the CWS and MS literature. I present these findings in Chapters 5-8.

Chapter 4 outlines the research process and the data collection strategy. It presents an overview of the five field sites, including life-history and semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, and the general information of research participants (Table 4.1). The chapter then details how the research unfolded, addressing the challenges of identifying participants,

the adaptive nature of my research design, and the role of accidental moments and informal interactions in reshaping it—for instance, the inclusion of the CMTF as a negative case that was expected to breakaway during the peace process but did not. It also discusses the relation between limited field immersion, not only shaped by the research question but also by challenging local circumstances and security conditions for both the participants and me. The chapter concludes with reflections on positionality and being labelled, for example, as an informant or spy.

The next part of my dissertation, Chapters 5-8, presents the evidence from the 1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA, and CMTF, respectively. Based on my coding strategy, I identify and trace the observable implications of existing explanations in the CWS and MS literature on fragmentation and cohesion (Chapter 2) within and across these secondary groups. Each of these four chapters served four purposes.

First, I demonstrate that there are different combinations of existing explanations — internal and external to each secondary group, and exogenous and endogenous to the peace process — that contribute to case-specific observable outcomes. Second, the analysis of individual cases lays the foundation for building case-specific mechanisms, demonstrating different paths toward variation in fragmentation and cohesion, or the observable outcomes, which I compare in Chapter 9. Three, the findings in each chapter are consistent with the four pillars of my organizationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion, which I elaborate on below as part of my contributions. Although these four pillars apply differently in each case study, incorporating disaggregation, time, the coexistence of cohesion and fragmentation and mechanistic heterogeneity in each case study allows me to understand better how the broader dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion at the secondary group level unfold over time. Not only can we see variation in the observable outcome (proportion of fragmentation, the level of analysis at which it occurs, and who leads each breakaway faction). It also allows us to identify the relevant case-specific dynamics that are exogenous to the peace process — specifically, the extent to which it is necessary to look back in time differs across the case studies. This approach also shows how specific provisions of the 2016 peace accord contribute to the observable outcomes, and how mid-level commanders of the selected secondary groups or the broader organisation instrumentalized it to advance personal agendas. Lastly, I demonstrate that an ethnographically driven approach to how participants make sense of the emergence, or not, of breakaway factions helps reveal the case-specific meanings of

existing explanations and, in turn, how these build the case-specific mechanisms toward the observable outcomes.

Finally, Chapter 9 compares ten case-specific mechanisms across the four case studies (Table 9.1). In the first part, I present the narratives for each mechanism and their respective diagrams, which identify the chain of interlocking parts, that is, relevant existing explanations as they perform through their case-specific observable implications. In the second part, I identify four common threads or recurring elements that appear and operate in a specific way across different mechanisms. With each common thread, I demonstrate that existing explanations in the CWS and MS literature have multiple, contradictory effects at the secondary group level, contributing to case-specific outcomes in different ways. Building case-specific mechanisms demonstrates that there are different paths toward the observable outcomes. This finding has broader implications for how we understand fragmentation and cohesion of non-state armed organisations. Specifically, it shows that by disaggregating an armed group like the FARC-EP into its secondary units, the dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion cannot be reduced to or explained through mechanisms that apply uniformly across the organisation.

10.2 Contributions

10.2.1 Contributions to Existing Scholarship

The theoretical insights and empirical findings of this dissertation make three contributions to how we understand fragmentation and cohesion in non-state armed organisations.

The first contribution is putting civil war studies (CWS) and military sociology (MS) into dialogue to better understand the dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion within armed groups at their different levels of analysis. Previous work by scholars of civil wars and political violence builds on concepts from military sociology—disaggregating armed groups into smaller units—to explain, for example, rape as a socialisation mechanism or variations in organisational control between training and deployment phases. Others use concepts like social and task cohesion to explain trust and desertion. However, in this dissertation, I argue that the significance of this dialogue between CWS and MS is that it allows me to approach fragmentation and cohesion in a particular way as co-existing, sometimes with the same secondary groups, and as generated by different mechanisms across contexts and over time.

The point is that fragmentation and cohesion are not opposite poles of a single continuum, but co-occurring phenomena.

First, my dissertation argues that MS enriches CWS by providing analytical tools to disaggregate armed organisations into their different levels. I show that analysing an armed group such as the FARC-EP through their fronts or mobile columns makes it possible to better understand and study variation in fragmentation and cohesion. Put simply, the emergence of breakaway factions occurs at specific levels of analysis within the organisation, at different proportions, and is led and comprised by different types of leaders or cadres, as well as individuals who have different roles inside, outside, and along the organisational boundaries. Disaggregation, in this sense, allows us to gain deeper insight into organisational diversity and to refine our understanding of what we mean by “organisation” when studying fragmentation. This dissertation shows that our focus should be on the secondary groups, their different components and operational environment, where fragmentation takes place, instead of the armed group as a whole. The case studies demonstrate this.

This suggests a shift in how we approach the phenomenon — it is *where* the armed group fragments that matters, not simply whether it fragments. Military sociology tells us that the ideal level of analysis for measuring and studying cohesion, or its absence, is the platoon. The equivalent unit within the FARC-EP would be a company within a front. However, it is difficult to match these analytical scales with an organisation that, during the 2000s and 2010s, experienced a military retreat marked by high rates of desertion and secondary groups wiped out by state forces. Even more challenging is accessing that level of analysis, given the challenging conditions for data collection. For this reason, I scaled up the analysis to secondary units—the fronts and mobile columns examined here—within their parent structures or blocs. This approach allowed me to operationalize the selection strategy detailed in Chapter 4.

Through the dialogue between CWS and MS, this dissertation contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the multiple existing explanations that facilitated the observable outcomes in the selected case studies. Disaggregation indicates that we should combine different existing explanations rather than focusing on specific mechanisms or polarising events applicable to the entire organisation. Hence, this study shows that, by disaggregating the organisation, we find that each case study reflects a distinct combination of existing explanations in the CWS and MS literatures that perform differently and generate case-specific mechanisms, contributing to the observable outcomes discussed in Chapters 5–8.

Across and within the case studies, for example, I show that commandership legitimacy creates both fragmentation and cohesion. Likewise, although the peace process and the 2016 peace accord are often treated as polarising events or external shocks in the literature, they should instead be understood as one existing explanation among other sets of existing explanations.

The second contribution of this dissertation is to the “organisational turn” (Parkinson & Zaks, 2018) in civil war studies. In the last two decades, scholars of civil war and political violence have turned their attention to the group- and meso-level analysis. They have advanced our understanding of armed groups, including their dimensions (roles, relations, behaviours, and goals), internal structures (centralized, decentralized, or embedded), degrees of hierarchy and centralization, and outcomes such as fragmentation and cohesion (see Chapter 2). This dissertation contributes to this breadth of knowledge in two specific ways.

First, by disaggregating the FARC-EP into secondary groups, this research expands on previous calls to move beyond the “organisation-as-hierarchy” (Zaks, 2018) approach to one that captures the internal diversity at this level of analysis, with implications for understanding fragmentation and cohesion. My analysis does not refute the degree of institutionalisation of the FARC-EP¹⁷⁰ and whether this armed group exhibited army characteristics on the army-network spectrum (Gutiérrez & Giustozzi, 2010). The four cases showed differences in the extent to which the FARC-EP operated as an army at the secondary unit level concerning. Life-history interviews with former combatants of the selected secondary groups enable us to demonstrate variation in the different organisational realities of these units, including socialisation mechanisms, recruitment, social embeddedness, commandership legitimacy, repercussions of counterinsurgency and relations with external actors. These findings on the four secondary groups invite us to rethink and reframe the FARC-EP in terms of its organisational diversity, where its army-like qualities are one (although one of the most important) among others. The CMDA is an example of how certain characteristics of centralised and decentralised organisations (Terry & McQuinn, 2018) can coexist at the secondary group level, as seen, for instance, in military discipline (Chapter 7).

Second, by zeroing in on the inner workings of these secondary groups and their transformations over time, this dissertation problematises and unsettles the concept of organisation. How should it be treated at the secondary group level? The findings highlight the

¹⁷⁰ See Ferro & Uribe, 2002; Cubides, 2006; Gutiérrez-Sanin, 2008 and 2018.

importance of considering various organisational features and constitutive actors that contributed to variation in fragmentation and cohesion in the four case studies. I demonstrate that understanding the observable outcomes is not possible without considering the role of mid-level commanders and their interactions with rank-and-file within secondary groups, as well as with other mid-level commanders outside these groups and higher-ranking leaders. Additionally, I examine the role of actors within the organisational boundaries of these secondary groups, including *milicianos* and local support networks. Likewise, actors and external networks (e.g., ████████ in the CMTF, patronage networks in the CMDA, *milicianos* in the 10th Front, mid-level commanders external to the 1st Front) proved vital for the economic and social endowments (Weinstein, 2007) of the selected case studies before and during the peace process. Considering this multiplicity of actors and their roles before and during the peace process provides a more comprehensive understanding of what an organisation *really is* when we disaggregate a larger organisation at the secondary group level and move beyond non-combat activities (Zaks, 2018).

The third contribution of this study concerns the “processual turn” in civil war studies. Recent scholarship has elaborated on civil war as a social process (Shesterinina, 2022) incorporating dynamics of conflict from pre- to post-war periods. This approach to civil war is actor-centered and focuses on how actors transform over time through evolving internal and external relations. The findings and analysis presented in this dissertation contribute to the “processual turn” by examining the transformation of secondary groups. These groups transform over time, shaped by different interactions within them, with other levels of the FARC-EP, and with their operational environment, as illustrated through the cases of the 1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA, and CMTF. Disaggregating the FARC-EP into these secondary groups allowed me to examine existing explanations as they perform through case-specific observable implications. In turn, this evidence provided the foundation for identifying the interlocking elements that form case-specific mechanisms and their respective narratives (Chapter 9). For instance, Case Study One exemplifies the interactions between counterinsurgency and disciplinary measures, and how the latter had multiple, contradictory effects before and during the peace process, which contributed to high-proportion fragmentation. Although these narratives do not focus on the pre- to post-war periods of the selected fronts and mobile columns, they highlight how a processual approach to civil war can be integrated into the analysis of the transformation of secondary groups. It is by examining the interactions within and outside the selected case studies, and how they change over time,

that I demonstrate different paths toward the observable outcomes, thereby adding new evidence to the “processual turn.”

10.2.2 Organisationally Disaggregated Approach to Cohesion and Fragmentation

The contributions to existing scholarship presented above have implications on how we understand fragmentation and cohesion in non-state armed organisations. To draw out these implications, my dissertation advances the organisationally disaggregated approach to cohesion and fragmentation, which rests on four pillars: disaggregation, time, coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion, and mechanistic heterogeneity. In the following four subsections I present each pillar.

10.2.2.1 Disaggregation: Locating Fragmentation

Disaggregating the FARC-EP into secondary groups, such as fronts and mobile columns, per the selected case studies, demonstrates that fragmentation varies depending on where it occurs within the organisation (Table 3.1). Approaches focusing on the organisation as a whole do not enable us to identify where fragmentation and cohesion really occur within the organisation. By disaggregating and selecting cases of secondary groups, however, I demonstrate that breakaway factions emerge at different levels: mid-level commanders or leaders of fronts (Case Study One), mid-level commanders of smaller secondary groups or companies (Case Study Three, low fragmentation), and urban networks or *milicianos* (Case Study Two and Case Study Three, high fragmentation). Disaggregation, therefore, let us identify that in a single armed organisation—the FARC-EP—different dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion take place at the secondary group level, each including multiple mechanisms and leading to case-specific observable outcomes. This also shows the advantages of exploring the FARC-EP’s organisational diversity. As I demonstrate below, the coexistence of fragmentation and cohesion within and across the case studies also draws on disaggregation.

Had I limited the analysis to the organisational level or that of parent secondary groups (*blocs*), it would have been impossible to explore and understand how fragmentation looks like in each case study, with implications for variation in fragmentation and cohesion within the FARC-EP as a whole. For instance, in Case Study One, fragmentation is high-proportion, comprising the leader of the secondary unit, mid-level commanders, and rank-and-file. But in Case Study Two, the proportion is low, primarily led by formerly imprisoned mid-level commanders along with an unspecified number of *milicianos* in Colombia and Venezuela, and

with the support of disenfranchised sectors of local support networks. Locating fragmentation in Case Study Three further shows that it can be mixed, occurring at two distinct levels of analysis within the same secondary group: high proportion, primarily among urban networks, and low proportion, mainly among rural mid-level commanders and rank-and-file.

Variation in the observable outcomes highlights the multifaceted nature of the FARC-EP as an organisation. Chapters 5-8 and the case-specific mechanisms I build in Chapter 9 demonstrate not only the different paths toward fragmentation and cohesion secondary groups can follow but also offer an opportunity to explore the different organisational realities of the selected secondary groups. These realities or the diversity of this organisation helps us identify, for instance, why and how specific segments and actors (varying across the 1st Front, 10th Front, and the CMDA) joined the leaders of the breakaway factions. Seasoned mid-level commanders often described by research participants as “loose cannons” or as distrustful of the peace process joined Iván Mordisco. John 40 and Gentil Duarte leveraged their ties with external actors to provide the 1st Front breakaway faction with both economic resources and manpower, including their own troops (Case Study One). *Milicianos* and members of the local support networks joined Jerónimo in Arauca (Case Study Two). Extended families and long-standing relations with patronage networks facilitated the *milicianos* to keep their arms, while vertical ties to local populations contributed to rural cadres breaking away (high- and low-fragmentation in Case Study Three, respectively). Arrangements with external actors 
 contributed to its post-demobilisation plans.

Disaggregation also helps us identify other actors who are not necessarily internal to the selected case studies — yet they are part of the organisation — and how they contribute to the case-specific observable outcomes. This underscores the need to consider the secondary group’s broader operational environment, including other fronts. An example is the formerly imprisoned mid-level commanders who were no longer recognised as members of the organisation in Case Study Two. Upon his release from prison as part of the peace process, Jerónimo, the former leader of the 56th Front, assumed leadership of the breakaway faction. He and detached *milicianos* leveraged their influence over other external actors in Colombia and Venezuela (Chapter 6).

Moreover, disaggregation highlights the importance of examining the internal workings of selected secondary groups, which extend beyond the broader organisation itself and life in

camps, to their organisational borders. Such is the case of actors who were not formally enlisted members of the 1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA, or CMTF — such as support networks and extended families — yet fulfilled specific roles by providing crucial social, political, and financial support before and during the peace process. Their role varies across the case studies and contribute to the observable outcomes.

Support networks are critical in Case Studies One, Two, and Three. In Case Study One (high-proportion fragmentation), evidence suggests that some local peasant guards (*guardias campesinas*) supported Iván Mordisco’s decision to break away due to fear of incursions by other armed groups, distrust in the peace process (e.g., provisions for the substitution of illicit crops), and, above all, because they deemed the 1st Front a source of protection and legitimacy (Chapter 5). In Case Study Two (low-proportion fragmentation), following the split caused by [name redacted #4]’s actions, local organisations of the 10th Fronts facilitated the breakaway faction in both Colombia and Venezuela. They considered [name redacted #4] a disruptive “stranger” and a “non-local” mid-level commander who sought to exert control over them politically and financially. Maintaining local influence in the face of leadership renewal and the peace process likely motivated them to back the breakaway faction (Chapter 6). Similarly, in Case Study Three (low-proportion fragmentation) local support networks, comprising both local and non-local coca leaf-growing settlers (mostly in Colombia), were essential for mid-level commanders and rank-and-file members for breaking away. These support networks had long-standing ties with the CMDA and its on-the-ground commanders. Following leadership renewal within the CMDA and uncertainty regarding their future in the lands they had settled since the early 2000s—due to the ethnic provisions¹⁷¹ in the peace agreement and threats from other armed groups—they supported the breakaway faction (Chapter 7). Regarding the negative case or Case Study Four, disaggregation also shows that some support networks were crucial for the cohesion of this secondary group (Chapter 8). Some local boards or *juntas* provided a local recruitment base, intelligence, and shelter and protection, mediated by a shared history of resistance against state-led violence. The shared history between the FARC-EP—first the 2nd Front, then the CMTF—and the local population since the 1960s is crucial for understanding the strong vertical ties that evolved both before and during the peace process.

¹⁷¹ Recognises the collective rights and autonomy of Colombia’s Indigenous Peoples, Afro-descendant communities, *Palenqueros*, and *Raizales*. The 2016 Peace Accord created a High-Level Ethnic Instance (*Instancia Especial de Alto Nivel con Pueblos Étnicos*) to monitor the implementation of ethnic provisions. OACP, Peace Agreement, 2016: 206.

In line with t ———, ——— extended families—or ties mediated by kinship and friendship—play? Are these ties external to the case studies, or do they lie within the organisational borders?

Disaggregating secondary groups also allows us to identify segments that otherwise go under the radar and are rarely make it into the analysis of fragmentation and cohesion but are crucial for understanding these outcomes, such as urban networks or *milicianos*. Although formally enlisted in the FARC-EP (when referring to Bolivarian *milicianos*) or less so (when referring to popular *milicianos*), disaggregation reveals that being or becoming a *miliciano* — whether *bolivariano* or *populares* — is mediated by kinship, friendship, and trust, or even by doing favours or running errands for on-the-ground commanders. It also highlights adherence to discipline, including norms and rules of clandestinity, in neighbourhoods or rural areas where the FARC-EP conducted intelligence, carried out political work, or sent operatives for medical care or rest. For instance, in Case Study Three, high-proportion fragmentation, unlike in Case Study One, occurs at the level of *milicianos*. For them, breaking away, despite not being fully socialised into the organisation's norms, often involved doing so together with their extended families—a tight-knit network that extends beyond the immediate family to include second-degree relatives, friends, and kinship or *compadrazgo*. In Case Study Two, disaggregation allows us to examine the role of *milicianos* in low-proportion fragmentation. Unlike in Case Study Three—high fragmentation—the 10th Front's urban networks did not lead the breakaway faction. Instead, they gradually detached from the 10th Front during the 2000s and 2010s, joining formerly imprisoned members of the organisation between 2016 and 2017. Nonetheless, their networks in Colombia and Venezuela, comprised of relatives, friends, and trained *milicianos* (both *bolivarianos* and *populares*), contributed to the emergence of the 10th Front breakaway faction.

Chapters 5-8 and the mechanism narratives (Section 9.1) demonstrate that external actors present in the operational environment of the case studies play a critical role in building the mechanisms and shaping observable outcomes. Examples include frontmen (*testaferros*), drug lords, liaisons of national and transnational drug cartels, and other actors involved in illicit economies in neighbouring countries, such as Venezuela or Ecuador. Disaggregation allows us to identify and locate their role in the case-specific observable outcome and to examine their ties with the selected secondary groups before and during the peace process.

For instance, [REDACTED] contributed to the economic endowments and cohesion of the CMTF during wartime (Case Study Four). El Paisa, envisioning himself as a regional political leader after demobilising, sealed pacts with drug lords that consisted of mutual assurances that business would continue as usual—though not in coordination with the CMTF upon their demobilisation. Unlike Romaña in Case Study Three, El Paisa did not face threats for buying himself out. Drug lords and cartel emissaries would not interfere with his post-demobilisation projects. In Case Study Four, [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

Disaggregation shows that the role of external actors differs in Case Study Three, both in high- and low-proportion breakaways. In the case of the CMDA, drug lords and intermediaries of national and transnational drug cartels exerted pressure on members of urban networks with whom they had collaborated before those milicianos joined the FARC-EP. Since the former *Rastrojos* kept their pre-FARC-EP commitments while serving as milicianos in this armed organisation, their personal agendas after the signing of the peace agreement diverged sharply from those of El Paisa, for example, in Case Study Four. Unlike El Paisa, the former *Rastrojos* lacked leverage over the flow of illicit economies, which led them to formalise agreements with drug lords; neither did they envision a political project beyond these networks in a post-demobilisation context. For the CMDA milicianos, their “plan b” was to continue as neighbourhood bosses or *jefes de barrio*. To pursue these goals, external actors provided financing and weapons as other armed groups posed a threat to them and their extended families. In the low-proportion breakaway faction, external actors — such as drug lords in Colombia and Ecuador — sealed agreements with sidelined mid-level commanders from the CMDA. While these mid-level commanders continued to provide security for cocaine production — from coca leaf to coca paste transformation and transportation to collection points — external actors supplied the military hardware and finances to sustain these operations.

10.2.2.2 Time

By comparing the mechanisms across four case studies, I demonstrate that adopting a longer approach to fragmentation and cohesion that includes both the periods before and during peace agreements helps us better understand the dynamics of processes of fragmentation and cohesion within the FARC-EP—namely, at the secondary group level. This contrasts with approaches that emphasize the take peace processes in isolation to explain the emergence of breakaway factions within armed organizations. For one, the observable outcomes and their variation—high fragmentation in Case Study One, low fragmentation in Case Study Two, mixed fragmentation in Case Study Three, and cohesion in Case Study Four—are the result of examining how existing explanations in the literature perform *over time* within each case study. Moreover, extending my analysis beyond the period of the peace process itself (2012-16) helps me identify the interlocking parts that form the case-specific mechanisms, and which are temporarily situated, for instance, in the 2000s or even in the 1990s. As I demonstrate in Chapters 5-8 and Chapter 9, including time as one of the pillars to this approach allows me to identify all possible elements to offer minimally sufficient explanations of case-specific processes of fragmentation and cohesions—given the data collected and analysed (life histories, semi-structured interviews, and other empirical materials), its limitations and challenges during fieldwork.

What does a longer approach look like, how does it apply to each case study and what does it achieve? Examining both the pre- and during-peace process periods helps identify key aspects of the social embeddedness and operational environment, and the internal workings of the 1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA, and CMTF. In all cases, social embeddedness and internal workings, which are crucial to understanding the different observable outcomes in the cases, predated the peace process and persisted into it. Thus, exploring and understanding how they evolved leads us to adopt a longer approach that necessarily contributes to the case-specific mechanisms I propose in this dissertation.

10.2.2.1.1 Operational Environment and Long-term Approach

In relation to the CMTF (Case Study Four), had I not zeroed in on its social embeddedness in the El Pato region—tracing its evolution from the 1960s to the 2010s—in combination with the sources of El Paisa's commandship legitimacy and the importance of the formal socialization mechanisms between the 1990s and 2010s, I would not have been able

to build the *legitimacy* mechanism in Case Study Four (Chapter 8 and Section 9.1). When the peace process began, El Paisa had already established himself as a legitimate leader in the FARC-EP. Fears of him breaking away were based on his trajectory, loyalty, and military achievements over the past three decades. Furthermore, by examining the social and economic endowments of the CMTF as they evolved throughout the 1990s and 2010s, it is possible to build the *post-demobilisation local politics* mechanism. El Paisa did not envision himself as a regional political leader, drawing on the provisions of the peace accord for political participation or the transformation of the FARC-EP into a political party. Although these provisions facilitated political activity, El Paisa's political project, in practice, relied on external relations with both legal and illegal actors, [REDACTED] [REDACTED] [REDACTED] It is by adopting a longer-term approach that I demonstrate this.

A similar case is that of [name redacted #4] in Case Study Two. Although he supported the peace process and fostered cohesion—contributing to low fragmentation—his short-term political goals, unlike those of El Paisa, drew on the provisions for political participation, leading him to dismiss the social embeddedness and operational environment of the 10th Front. In doing so, he contributed to the splitting of the 10th Front local support networks, which had coevolved with the FARC-EP in the Arauca region since the 1980s. Ultimately, [name redacted #4] neglected the political and mass work of the 10th Front and failed to assume control over it. One could argue that the lack of support is evident in the low number of votes for [name redacted #4] in the 2018 regional elections after demobilisation. However, the *dismissal and split* mechanisms also derive from his illegitimacy and failure to engage with the 10th Front's long-standing local networks, in addition to excluding members of the urban networks who had detached throughout the 2000s and 2010s. Hence, this case study also demonstrates that taking a longer approach helps in understanding why, despite the low fragmentation, urban networks and some local support networks joined the breakaway faction.

Similarly, the low fragmentation among rural mid-level commanders in Case Study Three highlights the importance of a long-term approach, focusing on the CMDA's social embeddedness. In Chapters 7 and 9.1.3.3–9.1.3.4, I show that the mid-level commanders and rank-and-file who broke away relied on long-standing ties with coca-growing settlers and external actors in illicit economies. These ties had evolved before the peace process and were central to the CMDA's military and political strategy in Nariño's lowlands since the early 2000s.

Although only a few mid-level commanders broke away, the *betrayal and discontent* and *bypassing and personal agendas* mechanisms highlight what the new leadership sought to disrupt—the CMDA's ties with local communities and external actors, which had co-evolved with it. Thus, ignoring the pre-peace process period gives an incomplete account, reducing the analysis to factors such as *narco* job offers or threats from other armed groups.

Case Study Two again illustrates the importance of a longer approach to pre- and during peace processes. By analysing the history, transformation, and strategic role of the 10th Front's urban networks, I demonstrate how their gradual detachment, both before and during the early stages of the peace process, contributed to the emergence of the breakaway faction. The *dismissal and exclusion* mechanism, therefore, consists of interlocking parts that trace the formation and transformation of the 10th Front, particularly its vertical ties with the local population. When [name redacted #4] excluded members of the urban networks from reintegration lists, he also disregarded the transnational social embeddedness of the 10th Front, which had evolved from the 1980s to the 2010s before his appointment. Treating the rejection of urban networks as solely a consequence of the politics surrounding the reintegration lists would have overlooked critical elements—namely, the two internal crises in the 10th Front and their repercussions on the gradual detachment of *milicianos* and their families before the peace process.

Thus far, I have shown that a longer approach entails exploring and understanding the social embeddedness of secondary groups that predates peace agreements. How far back in time we should go is context-dependent and for this reason it will be different for each case study. I demonstrate this through a rigorous analysis of the available data. Moreover, the significance of a longer approach is that it allows us to identify the interlocking parts of different mechanisms underlying varied fragmentation and cohesion outcomes within the operational environment as they evolve before and during the peace agreement. For this reason, the mechanisms and observable outcomes for each case study in this dissertation result from examining the processes of fragmentation and cohesion as exogenous and endogenous to the peace process and hence stemming not only from the peace process but also spanning beyond it.

10.2.2.1.2 Inner Workings and Long-term Approach

A longer approach also involves examining the internal workings of secondary groups—and, in some cases, parent secondary groups—both before and during the peace process. By *inner workings* I refer to the organisational characteristics of secondary groups. Following the disaggregation pillar, I analyse how they differ in their origins, geographical deployment, missions, leadership, discipline, and socialization mechanisms, as well as in the repercussions of their interactions with external actors and the peace process. As I demonstrate in Chapters 5-8, an ethnographic sensibility allows me to identify the meanings of these organisational characteristics to the participants, which are case-specific. Moreover, in the mechanism narratives (Section 9.1), I demonstrate that the evolving internal workings of the 1st Front, 10th Front, CMDA, and CMTF shaped the case-specific mechanisms I propose, resulting in their respective observable outcomes (Table 9.1).

For instance, high fragmentation in Case Study One is not *only* the result of a mid-level commander opposing disarmament during the final stages of the Havana negotiations. To understand the rejection mechanism (Diagram A), we must consider internal changes in the top echelons of the FARC-EP during the late 2000s and early 2010s. One key change is the leadership renewal within the organisation and the Eastern Bloc—the parent secondary group of the 1st Front—as a consequence of the counterinsurgency campaign (Chapter 5 and Section 9.1.1). A longer approach helps us explore and understand that leaders who made decisions about disarmament had been deemed illegitimate or untrustworthy by Iván Mordisco and other mid-level commanders before the peace process, due to their past deeds or lack of military and political capabilities to conduct the organisation. Thus, what Iván Mordisco ultimately largely rejects, in addition to the disarmament provisions themselves, is what these leaders represent: a betrayal of the FARC-EP's founding principles regarding the symbolic importance of weapons in a peace process—principles embodied by leaders such as Mono Jojoy, Manuel Marulanda, and Alfonso Cano. At the same time, Mordisco relies on his commandship legitimacy, which derives from how he rose through the ranks, implemented the 1st Front reorganisation plan, and became a trusted and admired leader before and during the peace process—precisely because of decisions made by the Eastern Bloc leadership, first by his mentor and later by those he deemed illegitimate.

Moreover, adopting a longer approach to before and during peace processes reveals that high fragmentation within the urban networks of Case Study Three extends beyond the actions

taken by the top echelons of the Western Bloc and the FARC-EP to control undisciplined and ill-socialised *milicianos* and foster cohesion for the peace process. Therefore, this approach takes me to examine the pre-FARC trajectories, networks, and prior affiliations of *milicianos* with other armed groups (*Rastrojos*). In doing so, in Chapter 7 and Section 9.1.3, I uncover the reality facing the new CMDA leadership from 2015 on: a secondary group that had recruited former paramilitaries whose motivations were not aligned with the FARC-EP's ideology and who had not undergone processes of socialisation or political education. Moreover, due to their pre-FARC trajectories, these individuals continued to pursue personal agendas linked to external actors and illicit economies regardless of the peace process.

Regarding low-proportion fragmentation in Case Study Three, a longer approach helps us understand how the demotion of Rambo and the appointments of Yesid and Romaña during the peace process disrupted long-standing horizontal and vertical ties within the CMDA and with external actors, which had evolved throughout the 2000s (Chapter 7 and Section 9.1.4). For this reason, it is essential to examine the multiple, contradictory effects of new leadership appointments—even when justified (e.g., sexual violence or killing of prominent local leaders)—on the inner workings and operational environment of the CMDA that had been evolving during the 2000s and 2010s before the Havana peace talks. A longer approach regarding low-proportion fragmentation in Case Study Two help us understand that the *detachment and split*, and *dismissal and exclusion* mechanisms are formed by interlocking parts that evolved before and during the peace process (Diagram B). The support that detached members of urban networks in Colombia and Venezuela provided to the leaders of the breakaway faction evolved through trust- and family-based networks over decades alongside the 10th Front in the Arauca region. Moreover, why and how they detached is a process that unfolded before and during the peace agreement, as I detail in Chapter 6 and Section 9.1.2.

My dissertation therefore suggests that we need to ask a number of questions about support networks when studying fragmentation and cohesion. Case Study Four demonstrates that a more comprehensive understanding of secondary groups involves exploring the interaction between their internal dynamics and social embeddedness, the latter of which dates back to the very foundation of the FARC-EP in the El Pato region in the 1960s. In this case study, social embeddedness and external networks are not simply factors that influenced the observable outcome. Both constitute one of the interlocking parts of the *legitimacy* mechanism. They evolved alongside the CMTF's development and interacted in a productive relationship.

The CMTF relied on its pre-war and wartime networks to secure material resources, a local recruitment base and strong vertical ties with local population. At the same time, these trust-based and long-standing networks, which transformed by including new actors tied to illicit economies and asset laundering in line with organisational level policy, provided this secondary group with a social and financial buildup that contributed to cohesion and organisational robustness before and during the peace process, and which facilitated a post-demobilisation political project, as detailed in Chapter 8.

Regarding the *legitimacy* mechanism, a long-term approach shows that El Paisa relied on the FARC-EP's long-standing, trust-based networks with the local population, even before the CMTF was established in the early 1990s in the El Pato region. He led a secondary group that did not disrupt these networks. On the contrary, throughout the 1990s and 2010s, he maintained and nourished preexisting vertical ties and social endowments as key organisational features of the CMTF. He did so by recruiting locals and "well-known" individuals and implementing a system of rewards and punishments for the CMTF's troops, support networks, and the local population at large. Military achievements, material resources, and relations with external actors, detailed in Chapter 8, evolved both before and during the peace process, and are therefore critical to building the *legitimacy* mechanism.

10.2.2.3 Coexistence of Fragmentation and Cohesion

The third pillar of my approach indicates that within the same organisation, some secondary groups may completely break away from the peace process (Case Study One), while others expected to break away nonetheless fully adhere to it (Case Study Four). However, when disaggregating further into the selected case studies or secondary groups, we also find that fragmentation and cohesion coexist within them—that is, the case-specific observable outcomes shows that fragmentation and cohesion are not mutually exclusive. In Case Study Two there was low-proportion fragmentation but also most of the 10th Front members stayed cohesive and demobilised. Case Study Three shows mixed fragmentation—high-proportion at the level of urban networks and low-proportion at the level of rural mid-level commanders.

Case Study One shows that fragmentation also requires within-secondary group cohesion to fragment in high proportion from the broader organisation. Specifically, the 1st Front created internal cohesion to break away from the FARC-EP, as the mechanisms in Section 9.1 and the evidence I present in Chapter 5 demonstrate. Likewise, the subordination and

adherence of the CMTF to the peace process in Case Study Four is also an instrumentalization or co-optation of the process: as a platform to break away from the organisation to pursue political activities not aligned with the participation provisions of the accord negotiated by illegitimate leaders. The *commandership legitimacy* and *post-demobilisation local politics* mechanisms (Section 9.1.1.4, Diagram D), therefore, help us understand that cohesion, as an observable outcome, goes beyond the temporal scope of the peace process. Instead, the cohesion of a secondary group also responds to the post-demobilisation political objectives of its leadership and members.

In the case of the 1st Front, the *legitimacy* mechanism leads to high-proportion fragmentation, whereas in the CMTF, the same mechanism leads to cohesion. This is because the interlocking parts that form these mechanisms are different and lead to different observable outcomes, as I demonstrate in Chapters 5 and 8 and Section 9.1, and Diagrams A and D illustrate.

Case Study Two demonstrates that fragmentation and cohesion can also coexist within the same secondary group. In the 10th Front, fragmentation was of low proportion. Formerly imprisoned members of the organisation led the breakaway faction with support from urban and local networks. As I detail in Chapter 6 and Section 9.1.1.2 (Diagram B), their illegitimacy may have undermined the mobilisation of a larger breakaway faction. In addition, the implications of the war with the ELN—and the resulting lack of social support for any breakaway faction—also contributed to low-proportion fragmentation, even when external actors offered money to experienced local combatants to keep their arms. In this sense, cohesion in Case Study Two—unlike the 1st Front (cohesion to break away) or the CMTF (cohesion for the peace process)—did not stem solely from subordination, as I show in Chapter 6. Cohesion for the peace process can also be understood considering the lack of social support and illegitimacy among the local population after the war with the ELN. The case is different among those who arrived in Arauca with [name redacted #4] in 2010. They firmly believed in the peace process and in the FARC-EP negotiating team, subordinating themselves to [name redacted #4] and the top echelons. These divergent realities within secondary groups exemplify that cohesion in favour of the peace process in the case of local troops can be an outcome of local dynamics of the 10th Front. It also can be an outcome of both local and non-local troops disciplined and subordinated to their immediate leader ([name redacted #4]) and the broader organisation.

Case Study Three shows that fragmentation varied within the CMDA, resulting in a split between urban networks, on the one hand, and rural mid-level commanders and rank-and-file combatants, on the other. Notably, the high proportion of fragmentation among members of the urban networks relied on vertical ties, but not necessarily as a result of having been formally socialised into the norms of the FARC-EP, military training, or group thinking, as in Case Study One. Instead, social embeddedness and ties mediated by extended families may have contributed to strong horizontal ties among *milicianos* or former *Rastrojos*—alongside personal agendas, threats from other armed groups, and their links to patronage networks—to break away from the CMDA (Chapter 7, Diagram C1). In the CMDA, however, some combatants disarmed and demobilised. These combatants, primarily from the CMDA’s rural units, subordinated to the peace process despite the demotion of Rambo and other mid-level commanders by Leonel, Yesid, and Romaña between 2015 and 2016. In these cases, subordination to the FARC-EP’s peace objectives may have contributed to their demobilisation. Likewise, all the combatants who arrived with Romaña from the Meta region also demobilised. Long-standing vertical and horizontal ties with Romaña, combined with his commandership legitimacy among his troops, may have contributed to cohesion, similar to [name redacted #4]’s troops in Case Study Two. Thus, cohesion in favour of the peace process within the same secondary groups can result from subordination to organizational rules and values, or to the authority of an immediate leader. For example, Romaña’s troops followed him back to the Meta region when he left Tumaco for security reasons. In 2019, some of them rearmed with Romaña to join the *Segunda Marquetalia* (see Chapter 8, fn. 93).

10.2.2.4 Mechanistic Heterogeneity

The fourth pillar of my approach concerns case-specific mechanisms. This dissertation demonstrates that we need to carefully examine how existing explanations on their own—both internal and external to armed groups—perform differently, combine, transform, and are conjuncturally triggered by shifting forces and actors at different points in time. In doing so, it is possible to identify the interlocking parts that build the ten case-specific mechanisms that I detailed in Chapter 9. Mechanistic heterogeneity tells us that there are different paths, at the secondary group level, toward case-specific observable outcomes. The mechanistic narratives I presented in Section 9.1 capture the broader dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion at this level of analysis. They also capture the interlocking parts or relevant existing explanations as they perform through their case-specific observable implications. Mechanistic heterogeneity, thus, is a pillar of my approach dependent on disaggregation, time and the coexistence of

fragmentation and cohesion. Identifying the interlocking parts of each mechanism means that we are identifying what is relevant to each selected case study, in that they highlight the broader dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion and how they interact and evolve over time, both before and during the peace process.

For example, the *commandership legitimacy* and *post-demobilisation politics* mechanisms in Case Study Four (Section 9.1.4) show that their interlocking parts (Diagram D) refer to the FARC-EP's long-standing presence in a region critical to the CMTF. This secondary group relied on pre- and wartime vertical ties to build and sustain trust-based networks that enabled local recruitment and ideological commitment. Its leader, *El Paisa*, fostered commandership legitimacy through discipline, military performance, and by embodying continuity between the early 1960s FARC-EP and the CMTF, acting as both governance and security provider. As the conflict evolved and the organisation adopted new financial policies, the region also became central to the CMTF's economic endowments, shaped by material resources and external networks. The observable outcome in this case thus reflects dynamics of cohesion that created favourable organisational conditions to the peace accord—anchored in short-term subordination but strategic for advancing in the long-term post-demobilisation politics.

In the other case studies, the same existing explanations in the literature perform differently and contribute to different observable outcomes. They can also be absent, according to the data, or we should identify others, as implied by the process of constructing case-specific mechanisms. This is possible, as I show in the next section, by adopting an ethnographic-driven approach to examine the evidence.

10.2.3 Methodological Contributions

Through the life histories and semi-structured interviews, I demonstrate that existing explanations in the literature often fail to capture the multiple, contradictory effects within armed groups, more specifically, within secondary groups. The CWS and MS literatures call for desegregating armed groups, and both have elaborated on different sources of fragmentation and cohesion, on which this dissertation builds (Chapter 2). However, in this chapter, I demonstrate the multifaceted nature of, for example, discipline, commandership legitimacy and counterinsurgency. A close examination of the meanings that research participants attribute to these existing explanations and how they interact with each other and operate in practice calls

for careful attention to their coexisting multiple meanings and interpretations at the secondary group and organisational levels, with implications for the observable outcomes in the case studies (Table 9.1).

For example, leadership renewal at the secondary group level occurs under different circumstances—in response to counterinsurgency, indiscipline, or both, as in Case Studies One, Two, and Three. Leadership decapitation prompts the organisational or bloc levels to renew or replace leaders killed by state forces. This shows a degree of institutionalisation and capacity to adopt control mechanisms within the organisation. However, as I detail in Sections 9.2.1 and 9.2.2, what the existing literature fails to capture is *what follows*—namely, the multiple, contradictory repercussions of such control mechanisms, even if they reflect organisational discipline. I demonstrate that leadership renewal can contribute to cohesion in favour of the peace process and fragmentation at the secondary group level. In the 1st Front, leadership renewal in 2008-9 created cohesion and facilitated Mordisco's becoming a legitimate leader. But counterinsurgency aimed at the Eastern Bloc, which resulted in the killing of Mono Jojoy in 2010, brought new bloc leaders, deemed illegitimate by Mordisco and other mid-level commanders. Bloc leadership renewal contributed to distrust of the organisation, which deepened when leaders like [name redacted #2] signed the disarmament provisions.

[Name redacted #4] and Romaña in Cases Studies Two and Three, respectively, capture the multiple meanings and ramifications of leadership renewal in practice. The former included the imposition of norms over specific segments of the 10th Front, while the latter included internal purges. Moreover, I also demonstrate how these control mechanisms or immediate actions do not operate in isolation. On the contrary, they are situated and clash with prior relations within secondary groups or with the local population. [name redacted #4] clashes with the local population and a militarily weakened 10th Front, also subordinated to the FARC-EP. But his pro-peace leadership is favoured by the killing and capture of mid-level commanders who opposed his appointment. Romaña clashes with ill-socialised former *Rastrojos*, who were instrumentally recruited in 2012 as milicianos and resisted disciplinary measures, eventually breaking away.

In line with the above, comparing with ethnographic sensibility also brings into light other common threads across the case-specific mechanisms. One finding of this dissertation is the multifaceted nature of commandership legitimacy and illegitimacy. First, commandership legitimacy fosters strong intra-secondary group cohesion, which can lead to a breakaway in a

high proportion (1st Front) and cohesion in favour of the peace process (CMTF). Commandership legitimacy, though, interacts with other interlocking parts to form the *legitimacy* mechanism in these two case studies, showing that it does not act in isolation. Leadership decapitation aimed at the 1st Front, leadership renewal, and discipline were key for Mordisco to be able to develop intra-secondary groupthink. An experience of over 25 years at the time of the demobilisation in 2016 (unlike Mordisco's), strong vertical ties with the local population, localised recruitment, and military performance and discipline at the secondary group level were critical for El Paisa to maintain the CMTD's legitimacy. Second, commandership legitimacy and illegitimacy coexist at the secondary-group level. In the 10th Front, [name redacted #4] fostered cohesion among his troops and other combatants within this secondary group, while *milicianos* deemed him illegitimate. Nonetheless, the illegitimacy of formerly imprisoned members of the organisation contributed to low-proportion fragmentation due to their past deeds in the organisation. Similarly, Iván Mordisco built his anti-disarmament rhetoric by deeming top leaders (e.g., those who had previously replaced Mono Jojoy) illegitimate due to their wartime trajectories and roles during the peace process. Romaña's commandership legitimacy played out in favour of the peace process among his troops and others in the CMDA but also created distrust among rural cadres.

An ethnographically oriented approach to comparison highlights another important finding regarding the different ways specific provisions of the 2016 peace accord contribute to the observable outcomes in all case studies. In this chapter, I demonstrate that “casing” enables me to build case-specific mechanisms as analytical constructs derived from various interlocking parts. In doing so, I demonstrate, for example, that the *post-demobilisation* mechanism in Case Study Four let us understand that in addition to El Paisa and the CMTF's subordination to the FARC-EP leader's decisions in Havana, we must consider what lies beneath subordination itself — namely, their plans after war. In Section 9.2, I refer to this logic as co-optation of the peace process. It is also present in Case Studies Two and Three. In the latter, however, co-optation is twofold. Romaña supports the peace process while forging alliances with external actors with ties to illicit economies—namely, the economic endowments and external relations of the CMDA, which evolved prior to and during the peace process.

10.2.4 Empirical Contributions

Drawing on life histories I conducted with former combatants, semi-structured interviews with participants from elite and third sectors, informal conversations and additional

empirical materials, this study offers a unique understanding of the internal dynamics and transformations of four FARC-EP secondary groups: the 1st Front, the 10th Front, the CMDA, and the CMTF. Previous research has reconstructed the history of the 22nd Front based on interviews with demobilised or imprisoned ex-combatants (Pérez, 1997) and examined the organisation's internal and external behaviour of the 58th Front (Gutiérrez-Sanín, 2004). Others have relied on interviews conducted by Colombian authorities with demobilised FARC-EP members to analyse desertion and organisational decline (Nussio & Ugarriza, 2021). Recent state-led initiatives have reconstructed the history and evolution of the FARC-EP, its blocs, fronts and mobile columns. One is *Génesis Collection* (2016) — a 50-volume, 18,300-page compilation — which I cite throughout Chapters 5-8 to triangulate my findings. Another is the JEP's rulings, particularly for Case Study Three, which also provide crucial reconstructions of secondary groups used here to triangulate findings on issues such as the incorporation of former *Rastrojos* and ensuing indiscipline.

However, to my knowledge, this is the first attempt to trace the transformation and internal dynamics of four secondary groups of the FARC-EP to study fragmentation and cohesion. Based on life histories with ex-combatants, semi-structured interviews with retired military personnel, former government peace negotiators in Havana and local leaders in the regions of operations of the four case studies, this research offers a rich understanding of the different pathways toward fragmentation and cohesion within the selected case studies, focusing on the interplay between internal and external dynamics, endogenous and exogenous to the peace process. Previous research, based on extensive fieldwork and interviews (Álvarez-Vanegas, 2018) and secondary sources (Aguilera, 2020), provided significant insights into the contexts of the emergence of some of the breakaway factions studied in this dissertation. However, none draws on first-hand accounts like those I analyse here. Moreover, this empirical contribution stems from a particularly challenging population to identify, select and access — specifically, ex-combatants who demobilised from, or at some point in their armed lives belonged to, the secondary groups (or their parent groups) examined in this dissertation. It is largely because of their life histories that I gained access to the inner workings of the 1st Front, the 10th Front, the CMDA, and the CMTF — naturally, respecting their boundaries, as detailed in Chapter 4. This body of empirical material constitutes the backbone of my dissertation. Without their time, generosity, insights and critiques of my research, it would not have been possible to develop my organisationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion. This approach marshals evidence demonstrating the need to move beyond the common

assumption and oversimplified explanations that the emergence of breakaway factions during peace processes is primarily driven by illicit economies and personal profit (Wyer, 2024).

Moreover, the empirical evidence I present in this study relies on semi-structured interviews with local leaders, whose lives evolved alongside (and in some cases predated) the evolution of the four case studies from their establishment to the 2016 peace accord. They not only facilitated contact with former combatants but also provided invaluable insights into the leaders who broke away, the social embeddedness of the FARC-EP, and its urban and support networks. Moreover, focusing on meaning and context enriched the evidence. Local leaders' interpretations, informed by their lives *outside* the secondary groups and "historically and contextually situated" (Weeden, 2010), added a sense of change by introducing anecdotes and personal interactions with FARC-EP members as illustrations of broader transformations that may have contributed to the observable outcomes discussed in previous chapters. The analytical value of these anecdotes lies in their ability to produce meaning—for instance, about the role of *milicianos* and support networks in the 10th Front's low-proportion fragmentation.

Similar was the case with former government peace negotiators in Havana and retired military personnel. I relied on my previous networks to select potential research respondents in these sectors. However, the specificity of my research (the case studies) required highly informed individuals with specific knowledge, for example, of the life trajectories of leaders who broke away from the peace process or the politics behind the negotiation of specific provisions (e.g., disarmament) in Havana. Therefore, the empirical contribution in this dissertation also relies on individuals, whose lived experiences provided access to specific episodes, moments and actors who participated in both war and peace efforts. Taken together, the life histories, semi-structured interviews, and additional empirical materials provide evidence situated both within and beyond the selected secondary groups and the broader FARC-EP—across local, regional, and national contexts, as well as instances of institutional decision-making.

10.3 Future Research and Policy Implications

My research paves the way to new inquiries into central aspects of fragmentation and cohesion of non-state armed organisations in other contexts, beyond the FARC-EP in Colombia. The Latin American context suggests fruitful avenues for expanding my organisationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion, as developed in this dissertation.

Besides Colombia, fragmentation of armed groups—whether former insurgencies, cartels and gangs—is a common feature in Mexico, Ecuador, Haiti, and Brazil. For instance, my research can shed light on cartel fragmentation in Mexico. This country, in the context of the military intervention carried out by President Felipe Calderón's government from 2006 onward, witnessed the fragmentation of drug cartels. Mexico went from having nine well-established organisations to dozens, if not hundreds. Shifts in the national political landscape, electoral competition dynamics, and the establishment of subnational criminal governance systems, as well as leadership decapitation and internal disputes, are among the principal existing explanations for cartel fragmentation.

Despite this breadth of knowledge, my organizationally disaggregated approach to fragmentation and cohesion can shed light on *what drives* fragmentation within Mexican cartels and whether we should consider dynamics that are internal or external to these organisations or a combination of the two. As explained in this study, my analytical framework, particularly the case-specific mechanisms that I develop, cannot be generalised as such. It can, however, be translated to other contexts, such as those involving highly diversified and centralised non-state armed organisations—namely, where the four pillars of my approach can be applied, especially disaggregation. Extending the notion of disaggregation from military sociology to rebel groups and, in future research, to criminal organisations, offers an opportunity for cross-fertilisation with the “organisational turn” (Parkinson & Zaks, 2018) in civil war studies. In the Mexican case, to extend this example, my approach can also be modified and extended from rebel to criminal organisations. Likewise, this dissertation suggests that we can integrate the study of cartel violence with civil war studies, which is a necessary dialogue among scholars and policymakers who have often drawn an arbitrary line between the two.

This study has limitations. First, its case-specific findings are not generalisable, as with most case-based research. As explained in Chapter 3, the ten case-specific mechanisms identified here are not expected to apply directly to other armed groups, in Colombia or elsewhere. However, the strength of this dissertation lies in how my approach can be translated and applied to other non-state armed organisations and contexts, contributing to a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of the dynamics of fragmentation and cohesion. A second limitation is that, even if my approach can be translated, it does not necessarily apply to all types of non-state armed organisations. Those lacking a stable hierarchical structure over time—as opposed to a highly centralised and diversified or well-organised but decentralised

structure—would make it challenging to examine the four elements of my approach. For example, disaggregating the organisation and tracing change over time would not be feasible. It would be possible, however, to examine their processes of fragmentation by combining multiple existing explanations in the literature, both internal and external to them, that help us identify possible mechanisms. Lastly, a third limitation concerns methodological and ethical issues. Even if this approach could be applied to other contexts and armed groups, researchers may still lack access to referral networks, former members, or safe fieldwork conditions. This limitation underscores the need for methodological flexibility that ensures both safety and rigour.

Lastly, beyond its academic, methodological, and empirical contributions, this dissertation can offer important insights into pressing challenges on peace and security policy agendas. Fragmentation is an increasingly widespread phenomenon: 28.3% of 300 armed groups have given rise to splinters (Perkoski, 2022; ACLED, 2024). Its consequences — persistent violence, instability, longer conflicts, attacks on civilians, resilient splinters, and greater challenges for peace talks due to more veto players — remain central concerns for scholars and policymakers alike.

Considering this trend, a first implication for policymakers is that the internal dynamics of armed groups matter. Whether under external pressure from counterinsurgency or the prospects of peace negotiations, not all parts of an organisation will adapt or respond in the same way. Disaggregating armed groups reveals that, regardless of how well-intentioned a peace process may be, it is crucial to understand the organisational conditions of the negotiating party at different levels and identify *where* within the organisation there is a greater propensity toward fragmentation. The presence of material resources is only one factor; an examination of the internal dynamics of local units can be more fruitful, as demonstrated in this research. Divergent views between radical and moderate factions at the top are expected, but attention must also be paid to mid- and lower-level commanders. Some may view the peace process as a threat to their personal or hidden agendas, while others may see it as an opportunity to co-opt it, and some may comply. Managing exits from armed groups thus requires attention to these multiple levels of analysis, which is a manifestation not only of hierarchy and centralisation but also of organisational diversity.

A second implication concerns mid-level commanders. Recent research highlights their importance given their multiple responsibilities and their vertical and horizontal ties within and

beyond armed groups. The evidence in this dissertation reinforces these findings. Policymakers should look beyond the obvious fact of their existence to strategically and systematically address more consequential issues: who they are, how they become mid-level commanders, whether they uphold organisational values, foster groupthink or are loose cannons, and how peace agreements might generate uncertainty or distrust. Even top leaders often lack awareness of secondary groups and their leaders' realities, which former FARC-EP commanders have acknowledged before transitional justice tribunals. Engaging mid-level commanders early can prevent uncertainty and resistance within their ranks.

The role of urban and local support networks in peace processes is the third policy implication of this dissertation. First, *milicianos*, who followed secrecy rules and were locally embedded in the operational environment of secondary groups, had specific roles in terms of mass work, intelligence, assets management, taxing and even recruitment. Negotiating parties must tailor provisions to ensure their war-to-peace transition, shaped by their trajectories and roles, and discourage internal decisions within armed groups from alienating them, with implications for fragmentation and recidivism. Policymakers and practitioners should also consider support networks, which reflect the social embeddedness of armed groups and their organizational boundaries. These networks, along with *milicianos*, change over time and include individuals and groups who may not have formal membership in the armed group but are nonetheless crucial to its functioning. This returns to the issue of the interaction between internal and external dynamics at the secondary group level and how they transform over time—namely the importance of an approach to fragmentation and cohesion that, in addition to the four pillars of my approach introduced in this dissertation, incorporates organisational diversity.

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Appendices

Appendix 1.1. The FARC-EP's military hierarchy

- Tactical Combat Unit (UTC) (six men).
- Squad: basic unit and consists of twelve men, including their commanders.
- Platoon: consists of two squads and platoon commanders (twenty-six men).
- Company: consists of two platoons and company commanders (fifty-four men).
- Guerrilla: consists of two squads and their commanders (twenty-six men).
- Company: consists of two guerrillas and their commanders (fifty-four men).
- Column: consists of two or more companies and their commanders (110 men).
- Front: consists of more than one column.
- Joint Command: created at the Eighth Conference. It operates when the conditions for a block of fronts are not yet in place and coordinates the activities of the fronts in an area. It has no commander, only a coordinator, and reports directly to the Central General Staff or its Secretariat.
- Block: created at the Eighth Conference (April 1993). It consists of five or more fronts and coordinates and unifies the activity of the fronts in a specific area in order to develop a strategic plan. It is under the direction of the Central General Staff or its Secretariat.
- The Central Military Staff: consists of twenty-five members, is the highest governing and command body. It appoints the Secretariat, adjusts the plans of the conference, makes financial decisions, and appoints the commanders of the military staff of Fronts and Blocs.
- The Secretariat consists of seven leaders, and it is the highest authority.

This list is not exhaustive, as it does not include all the political bodies of the FARC-EP, its urban and clandestine networks, decision-making structures, or support networks.

Source: Ferro JG and Uribe G (2002) *El orden de la guerra: las FARC-EP entre la organización y la política*. Centro Editorial Javeriano – Pontificia Universidad Javeriana, Facultad de Estudios Ambientales y Rurales – Colciencias: Bogotá, pp. 40-65.

Appendix 3.1: Life Histories Interview Plan

Box 1
Part 1: Prewar Where were you born? What did your family do? How was [region] as a place to grow up? Were there any armed groups? When did you first hear about the FARC-EP, and what did you hear? Was the FARC-EP where you were born? Was anyone in your family or acquaintance part of the FARC-EP?
Part 2: Wartime experiences: trajectories in the FARC-EP Do you remember how the process of joining the FARC-EP was? When and at what age? Why? How did you join? Was the FARC-EP where you lived? What were you doing when you joined the FARC-EP? Questions on recruitment, discipline, military training, political education, and ideology. Do you remember your commanders? Who were they? What were they like internally? Were they strict? How did they behave with the civilian population? Questions about external sources. Can you tell us about your experiences in the FARC-EP? What was your life like during that time? What military unit did you first join? Factions you were part of before moving to the last one. Questions about the differences between the factions in which you were assigned. Why and how did these changes occur?
Part 3: Changes in cohesion and fragmentation in the last faction you were in. When did you join the faction that demobilized? Can you tell us about your experience in that secondary group? Questions on internal sources emphasizing changes. Can you tell us about recruitment, discipline, military training, political education, and ideological aspects? Were there other ways to achieve bonding? What rank or ranks did you occupy in this secondary group? Can you tell us about your commanders? Questions on external sources emphasizing changes. Time in the group until the beginning of the peace negotiations?

Did you know about the exploratory stage between 2010 and 2012 that preceded the peace negotiations?

How was the onset of the peace negotiations received by the faction?

How was the development of the peace negotiations received by the faction?

How was the imminence of the signing of the peace agreement received by the faction?

State and counterinsurgency

Relationship with the civilian population

Relationship with urban militias.

Relationship with external actors

Non-material resources and relationship with drug traffickers and transnational crime.

State sponsors and relationships with authorities in neighbouring countries

Part 4: Breakaways

Who were they and what were their ranks within the FARC-EP?

Can you tell me about their leaders/commanders and their trajectories in the FARC-EP?

Do you know why they did it? - Questions about internal and external sources.

What did they mobilize? What kind of resources?

Do you remember if there were suspicions about breakaways and their leaders/commanders before or during the peace process?

Do you remember if anything happened during the negotiation phase of the peace process?

How and when did you find out that there would be breakaways?

Appendix 3.2: Semi-structured Interviews Interview Plan

Box 2	
Theme: Biographical and contextual	
Elites	Third sector
When did you first learn about the FARC-EP? What was your relation to FARC-EP or within the FARC-EP and in what capacity? Can you tell me about your impressions and knowledge of FARC-EP before the peace process? Did that prior knowledge of the FARC-EP change during the negotiations? Can you talk about your experience during the peace negotiations? Politically and militarily, how was the FARC-EP before the peace negotiations? Can you recall anything in general or in particular regarding the reception of the negotiations by the FARC-EP in Colombia? Can you recall anything in general or in particular regarding the reception of the signing of the peace agreement by the FARC-EP in Colombia? Was there anything in particular about these regions (case studies) that raised any questions regarding the implementation of the peace agreement?	What can you tell me about the armed conflict in your region? When did you first learn about the FARC-EP? What can you tell me about the FARC-EP in your region? Did the FARC-EP change? How was the peace process received in the region? How was the peace process experienced your region? How was received the signing of the peace agreement? Was there anything in particular about this region (case study) that raised any alarm regarding the implementation of the peace agreement? Can you recall anything in general or something in particular about the FARC-EP in your region during the negotiation phase? Can you recall anything in general or in particular about violence or the armed conflict during the negotiation phase?
Theme: Breakaways	
Elite	Third sector
Can you tell me when did you first learn anything about potential splinters or dissidents? How did you learn that? Did that information change during the negotiations? Was there any similar information before the negotiations started? When do you think the dissidents really broke away from the process? Was	Can you tell me when did you first learn anything about potential splinters or dissidents? How did you learn that? Did that information change during the negotiations? Was there any similar information before the negotiations started? When do you think the dissidents really broke away from the process? Was

something gradual or did it take you by surprise?

Was there anything in general or in particular about the regions when the first splinters or dissident appeared?

Can you remember why this/these groups broke away?

Can you tell me why those commanders?

Who were they?

Why them?

Can you tell me anything about the other individuals that joined them?

Who were they?

Why them?

Can you tell me why in those regions?

Do you have any recollection of what was happening within those units?

Can you elaborate on any internal factors within the organization that might have influenced the splinters or dissidents?

Can you elaborate on any external factors to the organization that might have influenced the splinters or dissidents?

something gradual or did it take you by surprise?

Was there anything in general or in particular about this region when the first splinters or dissident appeared?

Can you remember why this/these groups broke away?

Can you tell me why those commanders?

Who were they?

Why them?

Can you tell me anything about the other individuals that joined them?

Who were they?

Why them?

Can you tell me why in this region?

Do you have any recollection of what was happening within those units?

Can you elaborate on anything that was happening within the organization that might have influenced the splinters or dissidents?

Can you elaborate on any external factors to the organization that might have influenced the splinters or dissidents?

How was this received by the population?

Appendix 3.3: Observable Implications of Existing Explanations in the Civil War Studies and Military Sociology Literature

Source (theory)	Observable implications
Internal	
Socialization Formal mechanisms: • Recruitment • Ideology • Military training • Political education • Discipline Informal mechanisms: • Participation in violence • Participation in sexual violence	• Organizational norms, rules and discourses are followed and not questioned. • Organizational norms, rules and discourses are followed in primary groups. • Moments or periods when norms, rules and discourses were not followed or stopped being followed. • There are episodes in which norms, rules and discourses are not taken for granted. • Military training and political education are carried out at different times in the combatant's life via any medium. • Fighters learn about weaponry, how to kill, the symbols and history of the organization, hymns, songs, statutes, and training manuals. • Fighters get accustomed to military life and learn to act like a "fighter", even in public. • Fighters learn about the organization's goals, the situation in the country, the armed conflict, social problems via instruction, formal or informal conversations and mandatory meetings. • Regular contact with the civilian population is minimal and discouraged. • When there is contact with the civilian population, it is first authorized, and rules of good conduct are followed. • Social activities such as drinking and partying are controlled and allowed only within the organization. • Activities such as drinking and partying outside the organization are punished. • Day to day life is planned, and deviant behaviour from rank and file is not allowed. • The organization has control over the recruitment process, and not just anyone can join. • There are informal spaces in the day-to-day that familiarize recruits with the organization's norms, culture, and expectations. • Ideologically committed individuals are recruited who know that they will not receive a salary. • Recruitment occurs suddenly or over a more extended period. • There are veto processes for joining the organization.

	• Veto processes for joining changed. • Different instances precede recruitment like informal spaces, talks, and local trust networks to identify potential candidates. • New members do not generate tensions in the primary group. • After recruitment, there is a long-term commitment to the organization because recruits do not have the right to leave. • Combatants don't express their willing to leave or side-switching. • There is identification with the goals and beliefs of the group, and the heterogeneity that may exist among recruits vanishes over time. • There are demobilizations or side-switching due to economic incentives. • There are punishments and rewards according to the type of behaviour (internal and external). • There is concern about punishments. • There are initiation rituals to socialize recruits. • There are violent practices against recruits, among peers, and commanders to subalterns to create bonds. • There were violent practices against the civilian population to create bonds in primary units. • The commander of the primary group/secondary group authorizes violent practices against the civilian population. • Acts of violence against the civilian population created stronger ties and loyalty among peers and between peers and their commander. • There is resistance to complying with orders related to committing violence against peers or the civilian population. • There were public displays of violence and punishment against combatants who violated the norms of the organization. • There were public displays of violence and punishment against civilians who violated organizational and coexistence norms.
Commandership Legitimacy • Organization • Commanders • Leaders	• There was someone in charge of coordinating, planning or leading the day-to-day. • There was someone in charge of enforcing the rules. • Someone remembered the organization's mission, objectives, rules, and norms. • How do you remember the person who led your unit (primary group)? • There was someone to go to solve personal problems or problems with other individuals. • Describe the day-to-day communication from your direct commander to you in formal and informal settings. • There was someone to be obeyed and followed daily.

	• You always trusted the commander and his plans for the unit (primary group). • The higher commanders (secondary groups) established informal or formal contact with rank and file, regardless of the primary group commanders. • The new commanders were always respected and obeyed. • What happened when a commander was killed in combat? • There were tensions between peers and commanders. • The perception of the organization's leadership was always the same. • There were times of distrust or disbelief in the decisions of the direct commanders (primary group). • There were times of distrust or disbelief in the decisions of higher commanders (secondary group). • There were moments of being discouraged by the actions or decisions of direct or higher commanders. • Commanders did not follow the norms, rules and speeches of the organization. • Individuals outside the organization were never allowed to make decisions or interfere.
External	Observable implications
State Counterinsurgency: • Leadership decapitation • Local disembedding	• Reactions within the primary group when a commander was killed by state action. • There were reactions in the broader organization when a primary or secondary unit commander was captured or killed in combat. • A commander was swiftly replaced when he was captured or killed in action. • The organization adapted to the strategies of the state. • When senior commanders died, what happened in the primary and secondary groups. • There were attempts of desertions or demobilizations of peers or commanders. • There were desertions or demobilizations of peers or commanders. • Former colleagues (peers or commanders) cooperate with the state. • State action against the organization was not the same; it changed over time. • State action did not affect the organization equally. • The state or military forces would single out the civilian population for collaborating with the organization. • The civilian population helped the organization when the state attacked or killed leaders, commanders or rank and file. • There was sadness and mourning amongst the civilian population when a commander was killed.

	• Reactions to state action in the communities. • Changes in the relationship between the organization and the civilian population due to State action. • The civilian population relied on the organization to solve problems. • The civilian population obeyed the organization's rules of coexistence. • The civilian population did not collaborate with the military forces.
Society • Networks and local • Patronage networks and elites • Material Resources	• Breakaways rely on economic resources and military capabilities acquired during the armed conflict. • Breakaways mobilize links among peers and between peers and primary group commanders. • Breakaways mobilize extended families and kinship. • Breakaways mobilize trust networks among the civilian population built on a quotidian or day-to-day basis. • The civilian population pressures the breakaways not to continue in the peace process. • The commanders of primary units and rank and file always followed the rules and norms of the organization, never internal patronage networks (commanders of secondary groups). • Other non-state armed organizations. • Commanders of primary units and rank and file always followed the rules and norms of the organization, never external patronage networks (drug lords/cartels). • The organization and the primary groups remain closed to external actors or influences. • Big-man networks and elites outside the organization pressure the breakaways to withdraw from the peace process. • The presence of relations between commanders of primary and secondary groups with big-man networks facilitates the breakaways.
Transnational • State sponsors • Foreign fighters	• Shelter in neighbouring countries for different purposes. • The organization's high command first authorizes any form of support from a neighbouring country and government. • There were formal and informal relationships between primary group commanders and sectors of neighbouring states. • Neighbouring governments help resolve internal conflicts within the organization. • Neighbouring governments help resolve the organization's conflicts with other non-state armed organizations. • The organization is used or hired by neighbouring governments to solve internal problems. • The organization has a presence in neighbouring states without contacting the neighbouring government.

	• The organization is opposed by some sectors of neighbouring countries but sponsored by others. • Neighbouring governments financially supported the organization. • Neighbouring governments supported the organization politically. • Neighbouring governments supported the organization militarily. • Neighbouring governments or sectors of neighbouring countries sought out commanders of primary groups to carry out activities unrelated to the organization. • Individuals from the organization travelled to neighbouring countries to receive military training and political education. • The organization always sought sanctuaries in neighbouring countries. • The organization crossed borders with the authorization of some sectors of neighbouring countries. • There were foreign fighters in the organization. • There were foreign fighters as rank and file. • There were foreign fighters in quality of commanders of primary groups. • There were foreign fighters as instructors and military trainers.
Peace processes. • Process • Spoilers • Elites in relation to peace processes	• There were no tensions or divisions before the beginning of the negotiation phase. • Before the peace process, the primary group followed the organization's norms, rules, and discourses. • The organization was willing to negotiate with the Colombian state. • All combatants accepted the beginning of the negotiation phase. • All combatants accepted progress in the negotiation phase. • Progress in the negotiation phase was communicated periodically and discussed internally. • There was an opportunity to discuss and raise issues on the progress of the negotiation process. • All ex-combatants accepted the prospects of laying down arms and demobilizing. • The preliminary agreements were accepted by the primary group and the entire organization. • There were never any tensions between rank and file and commanders about the negotiation process. • There were never any tensions between primary unit commanders, secondary group commanders and top commanders. • Primary group commanders always supported the peace process. • Rank and file always supported the peace process. • Primary group commanders always supported the preliminary agreements of the negotiation phase.

	• Quotidian conversations about the peace process. • Rank and file always supported the preliminary agreements of the negotiation phase. • There was no side switching.
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Appendix 4.1. Research Participants

Code	Elite	Third Sector	Ex-combatants	Semi-structured interview	Life History	Sex	Age	Site
S001	X			X		Female	40-49	Bogotá
S002	X			X		Male	40-49	Bogotá
S003	X			X		Male	50-59	Bogotá
S004	X			X		Male	50-59	Bogotá
S005		X		X		Male	40-49	Bogotá
S006		X		X		Male	50-59	Bogotá
S007		X		X		Female	40-49	Bogotá
S008		X		X		Male	30-39	Bogotá
S009	X			X		Male	40-49	Bogotá
S010	X			X		Male	40-49	Online
S011		X		X		Male	40-49	Bogotá
LH001			X		X	Male	60-69	Bogotá
S013	X			X		Male	40-49	Bogotá
S014	X			X		Male	40-49	Bogotá
LH002			X		X	Male	30-39	Bogotá
S016	X			X		Male	60-69	Online
S017	X			X		Male	40-49	Arauca
S018		X		X		Male	50-59	Arauca
S019		X		X		Male	40-49	Arauca
S020		X		X		Female	30-39	Arauca
E021	X			X		Male	40-44	Arauca
LH003			X		X	Male	30-39	Arauca
LH004			X		X	Male	30-39	Arauca
LH005			X		X	Female	50-59	Arauca
LH006			X		X	Male	50-59	Arauca
S026	X			X		Male	50-59	Bogotá
S027	X			X		Male	40-49	Bogotá
S028	X			X		Female	40-49	Bogotá
LH007			X		X	Male	30-39	Bogotá
S030	X			X		Male	70-79	Caquetá
LH008			X		X	Male	30-39	Caquetá

LH009			X		X	Male	40-49	Caquetá
S033	X			X		Male	30-39	Caquetá
LH010			X		X	Male	40-49	Caquetá
LH011			X		X	Female	50-59	Caquetá
LH012			X		X	Male	50-59	Caquetá
LH013			X		X	Male	50-59	Caquetá
S038		X		X		Male	60-69	Caquetá
S039	X			X		Male	70-79	Caquetá
LH012			X		X	Male	50-59	Bogotá
S041		X		X		Male	40-49	Neiva
LH013	X		X		X	Male	50-59	Neiva
LH014	X		X		X	Male	40-49	Neiva
S044		X		X		Male	40-49	Online
S045	X			X		Male	60-69	Bogotá
S046	X			X		Male	40-49	Bogotá
S047	X			X		Male	40-49	Bogotá
LH015			X		X	Male	60-69	Bogotá
S049		X		X		Male	30-39	Bogotá
S050		X		X		Male	50-59	Guaviare
S051		X		X		Male	50-59	Guaviare
LH016			X		X	Male	50-59	Guaviare
LH017			X		X	Male	30-39	Guaviare
LH018			X		X	Female	30-39	Guaviare
LH019			X		X	Male	30-39	Guaviare
LH019			X		X	Male	50-59	Guaviare
LH020			X		X	Male	50-59	Guaviare
S058	X			X		Male	50-59	Guaviare
S059		X		X		Male	40-49	Guaviare
S060		X				Male	40-49	Guaviare
LH021			X		X	Male	60-69	Bogotá
LH022			X		X	Male	30-39	Bogotá
S063	X			X		Male	50-59	Bogotá
LH023			X		X	Male	50-59	Tumaco
S065	X			X		Male	60-69	Tumaco
S066	X			X		Male	60-69	Tumaco
S067		X		X		Female	40-49	Tumaco

S068		X		X		Male	50-59	Tumaco
S069		X		X		Female	30-39	Tumaco
LH024			X		X	Male	60-69	Bogotá
LH025	X		X			Male	50-59	Bogotá
LH026	X		X			Male	50-59	Bogotá
S070	X					Male	40-49	Bogotá
S071	X					Male	40-49	Bogotá
S072	X					Male	40-49	Bogotá
E073	X					Male	40-49	Bogotá
E074	X					Male	40-49	Bogotá
E075	X					Male	30-39	Bogotá
LH027			X			Male	40-49	Bogotá
LH028			X			Male	40-49	Bogotá

Appendix A. Redacted sections in the dissertation.

This appendix documents the sections of the dissertation that have been redacted in the present version. The redacted material primarily concerns sensitive empirical information removed for ethical and personal safety reasons, as well as of research respondent's and local contacts — specifically, individuals, local populations, organisations, and locations where I conducted fieldwork.

Page(s)	Section	Redacted material
87 – 92	4.1	Locations and individuals.
103	4.2.6	Locations and individuals
193	7.1.2	Individuals
201	7.1.3.2.1	Organisation
251	8.2.2	Local populations
252	8.2.3	Local populations and individuals
247-249	8.2.1	Individuals
271	9.1.4.2	Individuals and organisations
301	10.2.2.1	Individuals and local populations
302-303	10.2.2.1	Individuals
305	10.2.2.1.1	Individuals