The Impact of Covid-19 on the Reintegration of Ex-Combatants in Colombia

Rachel Hsu

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Introduction
On October 24, Colombia surpassed 1 million coronavirus cases, making it the eighth country to reach this tragic milestone. One month later, on November 24, the peace agreement which ended the 52-year conflict between the Marxist FARC guerilla group and the Colombian government celebrated its fourth anniversary. While Covid-19 has devastated nations around the world in unparalleled ways, Colombia’s situation is unique: the pandemic hit the country at a crucial inflection point in its history, a moment in which the success of the peace deal was being determined. While peace was already under considerable strain, Covid-19 has presented new and greater challenges to the process. In particular, the threat the pandemic poses to the social and economic reintegration of ex-combatants—the foundation of the peace deal—may prove the final nail in the agreement’s coffin, flinging the country back into conflict at a time in which peace is so desperately needed. Ex-combatants find themselves on the losing side of an increasingly asymmetrical bargain, and facing uncertainty about their economic futures and fundamental safety, the million-dollar question is this: at what point will the challenges to the peace deal outweigh their commitment to reintegration? The answer, although far from clear, will determine the near future of Colombia.

A Brief History of the Colombian Conflict
Since the inception of the Republic in 1886, Colombia has been embroiled in internal conflict for more than 60 years, experiencing only eleven years of peace since the 1950s. The first group of civil wars—four total between 1885-1957—were fought between the Liberal and Conservative parties. Most notable among these were the Thousand Day War (1899-1902), which claimed over 100,000 lives, and La Violencia (1948-1957), which killed more than 200,000. As in every country, the factors of history affect politics today—and the structural causes and effects of La Violencia prove vital to understanding the more recent conflict. First among these is the weakness of the early Colombian state, which failed to construct a law enforcement presence in much of the country. Harvey Kline frames this as a deliberate tradeoff: tax-averse governing elites feared military or police takeover of government, as had occurred elsewhere in Latin America, and instead substituted private forces for public ones. This in part reflected the concentrated power of the private landowners who made and enforced laws on their property in place of the state, a pattern whose roots lie in the colonial era. Spanish colonizers decided that the agricultural and mineral resources of South America were most efficiently exploited through large plantations or mines, creating an extremely unequal distribution of land and power—inequality which persisted through institutions long after independence. Throughout the formation of the Republic, the interests of regional economic elites trumped political centralization, which was further complicated by Colombia’s geographic barriers. The

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1“Colombia surpasses 1 million COVID-19 cases,” Al Jazeera, October 25, 2020.
2Clemente Garavito, “Colombia,” Encyclopedia Britannica, December 15, 2020. The political entity that would become the modern Colombian state went through numerous iterations: it was initially established as New Granada by Spanish colonists in 1549, changed to the Viceroyalty of New Granada in 1717, re-established as Gran Colombia in 1819 after independence, dissolved and reformed as New Granada in 1830, renamed the United States of Colombia in 1863, and at long last became the Republic of Colombia in 1886. I refer to the most recent name for clarity, but it is important to note that Colombian history starts long before 1886.
4Harvey F. Kline, Between the Sword and the Wall (Tuscaloosa, Alabama: The University of Alabama Press, 2020), 9.
dual results of this tradeoff—state weakness and land inequality—fed the later conflict in Colombia. Former President Alfonso Lopez went so far as to state that “unlike other Latin American countries, violence did not originate from the government but from the lack of government.”

Colombia, a state which “geographically defies unification,” became a nation of regions in which the control of the central government seldom extended far outside Bogota and never even approached Weber’s classification of sovereignty as a monopoly over the use of force within a territory. Another pattern made clear by La Violencia was the norm of war as a continuation of politics by other means. Much of this was at the behest of the landowning elites, who enlisted poor campesinos to fight their political battles—meaning the majority of the population participated in politics through armed conflict before they even gained suffrage.

La Violencia ended in a political settlement known as the National Front, in which the Liberal and Conservative parties agreed to share power at regular intervals.

The conditions in Colombia after 1957 created a perfect storm which led to the 1964-2016 conflict: extreme land inequality left the campesino population deeply aggrieved, and a political system limited to two parties provided no route for peaceful political expression of these grievances, so Marxist guerilla groups formed to address these grievances through other means, espousing pre-existing norms of political violence. The first group to emerge was the Ejército de Liberación Nacional (ELN) in 1964, followed by the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC) in 1966, the Ejército Popular de Liberación (EPL) in 1967, and the 19th of April Movement (M-19) in 1970. Because the historically weak state lacked the capacity to fight the guerillas, it once again encouraged the creation of private forces, this time to defend against the communist rebels—leading to the formation of paramilitary groups which would go on to exacerbate the conflict. These paramilitary groups were given legal status under Decree 3398 in 1965 and Law 48 in 1968 and initially cooperated closely with the army, though the government stopped supporting them in the 1980s when it became clear paramilitaries were killing civilians and taking money from drug traffickers. Paramilitaries eventually coalesced into the Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC) in 1997. A final actor in the conflict was the drug cartels, who funded both sides with profits obtained mainly from cocaine trafficking to the US. Coca became a popular crop for many poor farmers because profitable amounts could be grown on very small plots of land and transported in backpacks, making up for the conditions of land inequality and state absence in rural areas (which equated to a lack of roads and markets).

To say that the Colombian conflict was devastating would be an understatement: it raged for 52 years, cost the country an estimated $151 billion, claimed the lives of over 260,000 people, and displaced more than 7 million others. By the time it ended with the 2016 peace deal, the conflict was the longest in Latin American history, leaving Colombia with the second most internally displaced persons in the world after Syria.

Between 1964-2016, numerous attempts at peace—by five presidents, to be exact—failed to end the conflict between the government and FARC, the largest of the guerilla groups. These

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6Kline, 10.
7Kline, 12.
8Peasants or farmers in rural areas
9Kline, 11.
10Kline, 16.
11Kline, 18.
12“AUC,” Colombia Reports, December 5, 2016.
13Adriaan Alsema, “Total economic cost of 52 years of war in Colombia $151B: Study,” Colombia Reports, September 26, 2016.
cases, particularly the first attempt, are worth discussing briefly because their failure is instructive to the challenges the current peace deal faces. The first attempt at peace, pursued by president Belisario Betancur, resulted in the Agreement of La Uribe in 1984. The agreement contained provisions for guerrilla transition into civilian life and allowed FARC to found a political party called the Unión Patriótica (UP). In the following years, an estimated 3,000 members of the UP were killed—contributing to the failure of the Betancur deal and fueling FARC’s justification of its continued insurgency. Another important peace agreement, separate from the five failed attempts with FARC, was reached in 2003 between the government under president Álvaro Uribe Vélez and the AUC. By 2006, 30,671 members of the AUC had collectively demobilized. This demobilization has been heavily criticized: many dissident paramilitaries refused to enter (or later abandoned) the peace process, leading to the formation of “neo-paramilitaries” which the government calls bandas criminales, or BACRIM. Beyond the AUC, Uribe is an important actor in the 2016 peace deal, and the actions taken by his administration are similarly relevant. During his 2002-2010 presidency, the number of soldiers and police increased from 291,316 to 431,900—an almost 50% jump. Uribe renewed the armed push against FARC, reducing their ranks from 24,000 to 8,000. By the time President Juan Manuel Santos began the negotiations that would ultimately lead to the 2016 peace deal, the military balance of power had shifted, leaving both the Colombian army and FARC pessimistic of their chances of victory. The Santos peace negotiations proceeded between 2012-2016 in Havana, Cuba, and a final agreement was announced on August 24, 2016. But the peace deal was not yet finalized: the Colombian public, defying all expectations, narrowly voted against ratification of the agreement in a plebiscite in October 2016. The opposition to the peace deal was headed by none other than Álvaro Uribe. Following modifications, the Colombian Congress eventually approved the peace deal in November, and the armed conflict with FARC came to a formal end.

**Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration**

Central to the 2016 peace agreement is the process of disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, often abbreviated to DDR. DDR has reached near-orthodoxy status since the 1990s, adopted by the UN as the central dogma of peacebuilding—there have been a whopping total of 60 DDR initiatives in the world since 1989, including the one in Colombia. So what

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14Kline, 19.
15The exact number of UP members killed is disputed. Lower estimates place the number at 1,500, while FARC itself reports as high as 5,000. 2,000-3,000 is a commonly cited ballpark. Regardless of which number is true, a lot of UP members were killed and this led to the collapse of the truce. FARC perceptions of a higher death toll only serve to amplify that conclusion.
16Enzo Nussio, “Learning from Shortcomings: The Demobilization of Paramilitaries in Colombia,” *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development* 6 (2012): 88. Some allege that this number (as published by the Uribe administration) is heavily inflated, so it should be taken with a grain of salt. However, the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization counts a total of 36,381 ex-AUC combatants in its tallies of the reintegration process. Regardless of whether all these ex-paramilitaries demobilized during the Uribe deal, they undeniably form a large percentage of the ex-combatant demographic in Colombia.
17Nussio, 89.
18Kline, 38.
exactly is DDR? The Cartagena Contribution to DDR defines disarmament, the first step of the three-pronged process, as “the collection, documentation, control and disposal of small arms, ammunition, explosives and light and heavy weapons of combatants.” Before peace can begin, there must be a laying down of arms. Crucially, the action of disarmament establishes a social contract between the government and the individual peace signatories, wherein “combatants surrender the security and economic surety their weapons provide, in exchange for opportunities and assistance in finding new livelihoods.” Next comes demobilization: “the formal and controlled discharge of active combatants from armed forces or other armed groups.” Demobilization may be followed by reinsertion, a package of interim assistance offered before the start of reintegration. These first two steps are programmatic, military-focused procedures that occur shortly after the end of conflict. The final stage, and the focus of this paper, is much broader: reintegration, which the CCDDR defines as “the process by which ex-combatants acquire civilian status and gain sustainable employment and income,” clarifying that “reintegration is essentially a social and economic process with an open time-frame, primarily taking place in communities at the local level.”

As simple as it is to reduce DDR to three letters representing three clearly defined processes, the reality is much more complex. In fact, DDR itself had changed over its relatively short history, evolving in three successive waves. While the earliest DDR programs aimed at narrow goals of demobilization and basic reintegration of ex-combatants, DDR eventually widened the scope of its ambitions to include laying the groundwork for long-term peace and development, reflecting a shift from negative to positive conceptions of peace. DDR has become intimately connected to larger peacebuilding processes, including community reconciliation, reconstruction of social institutions, provision of public goods, state-building, and security sector reform. In the last decade DDR has expanded even further, shifting from a one-time undertaking to a dynamic political enterprise and “thus being re-imagined as a complex bargaining process connected fundamentally to local conditions on the ground.” Under this wider conception, the UN establishes that whether DDR succeeds depends on “the political will of the parties to commit themselves to peace.”

Disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration, initially a cut and dry procedure for dismantling armed groups after the end of conflict, has become a nebulous and far-reaching program which has “repeatedly proved to be vital” to the creation of sustainable peace. But not all parts of DDR weigh equally: rather, the change in DDR’s scope has taken place primarily in the reintegration stage, which by definition encompasses broader social and economic goals. The United Nations Integrated DDR Standards maintain that “the sustainable social and economic

22“The Cartagena Contribution to Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration” (Cartagena, Colombia, June 2009), 3.
25“Cartagena Contribution,” 5.
26Muggah and O’Donnell, 3.
27Muggah and O’Donnell, 6.
reintegration of former combatants should be the ultimate objective of [DDR]. If reintegration fails, the achievements of the disarmament and demobilization phase are undermined, instability increases, and sustainable reconstruction and development are put at risk.” Therefore, given that the achievement of long term peace is contingent on the success of DDR, and the success of DDR is contingent on the success of reintegration, it logically follows that reintegration is the process upon which the entire fate of peace hinges.

The Colombian Peace Deal and DDR
The Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace was signed on November 24 and ratified by the Colombian Senate on November 29, 2016. The agreement consists of six parts: comprehensive rural reform; political participation; end of the conflict; solution to the problem of illicit drugs; victims; and implementation and verification. The breadth of the agreement’s content recognizes the structural causes of conflict and attempts to redress them, extending the peace deal far beyond a simple end to fighting. While each of the six parts is vital to peace, this paper focuses on the challenges facing guarantees included in Chapter 3 of the peace deal—the “Agreement on the Bilateral and Definitive Ceasefire and Cessation of Hostilities and Laying Down of Arms”—which includes disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration. Acknowledging the importance of reintegration, the peace agreement states that “laying the bases for building a stable and long-lasting peace requires effective reincorporation” of the FARC into the social, economic, and political life of the country.

The “economic and social reincorporation” process initiated by the 2016 peace deal is remarkably ambitious. Following the ratification of the peace accord, ex-combatants began relocating to nineteen Rural Transition and Normalization Zones (ZVTNs) and seven Transitional Normalization Points (PTNs). Here, they underwent a six month demobilization and disarmament process, turning weapons over to the UN mission. The demobilization process was completed by August 2017. That marked the beginning of Early Reincorporation: a 24-month process that begins once the ex-combatant has joined the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization and been accredited by the Office of the High Commissioner for Peace (OACP), between August 2017-August 2019. A total of 13,202 ex-FARC were accredited by the OACP. The ZVTNs and PTNs were now transformed into Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation (ECTRs). During the early reincorporation stage, ex-combatants were given a Single Normalization Allowance of COP 2,000,000 followed by a Basic Income of 90% of the legal minimum monthly wage. At the end of the 24 months, ex-combatants entered Long-Term Reintegration, during which basic income was replaced by a Monthly Allowance of the same amount. Total disbursements of economic benefits between August 2018-June 2020 amounted to

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32Because Colombia has so many ex-combatants from a multitude of different groups who demobilized at different times, different processes for reintegration exist. In the context of Colombian law, “reintegration” refers to programs for individually demobilized guerillas and ex-paramilitaries; “reincorporation” refers to programs specific to ex-FARC members who demobilized collectively under the 2016 peace agreement. In this paper, I use the terms reincorporation or reintegration interchangeably to refer to the processes of the 2016 peace deal, a decision I made because DDR literature predominantly uses the word “reintegration.”
33“Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict and Build a Stable and Lasting Peace,” November 24, 2016, 8.
34Presidential Council for Stabilization and Consolidation,“La implementación de la política de Paz con Legalidad es seria, verificable y reconocida por las comunidades en los territorios y la cooperación internacional, afirma el Consejero Presidencial para la Estabilización,” February 26, 2020, 2.
$316,278 million. The ETCRs now became Former Territorial Spaces for Reintegration and Normalization (AETCRs) which are managed by the Agency for Reincorporation and Normalization (ARN). The ARN is one of several government bodies responsible for reincorporation, and oversees both reincorporation of FARC and reintegration of ex-combatants from other groups. The peace agreement also established the National Council for Reintegration (CNR), which is composed of two government and two ex-FARC members, plus Territorial Councils of Reincorporation (CTRs) that operate at a more local level. Now that early reintegration has finished, former FARC members have full citizenship and are free to leave the reintegration zones. However, some have elected to stay: as of October 2020, 2,619 people remained in the AECTRs, while 9,582 had left.

The long term reintegration process is laid out in the “reincorporation route,” which contains seven broad components. The first is educational: “individuals in the process of Reincorporation and their families will be able to access primary and secondary basic education, middle, technical, and technological education through public institutions,” and may gain admission to higher education programs. As of March 2020, 5,224 ex-combatants were enrolled in primary to high school-level education programs and an additional 1,768 had participated in vocational training. The second component is economic sustainability, which aims to generate long-term income sources. Ex-combatants are eligible for a one-off grant of COP 8,000,000 to fund individual productive projects, which are approved by the ARN, or collective productive projects, which are approved by the CRN. As of October, the ARN counts 1,718 productive projects which have been approved and disbursed, to the benefit of 4,987 former combatants. Total disbursements account to $50.116 million. The final agreement also established a social and economic solidarity organization, Social Economies of the Common (ECOMÚN), which received a fund for the implementation of economic projects. The third component is habitability and housing, involving ARN support for housing acquisition for ex-FARC—important because one survey found that 77% of ex-combatants lacked a place to live. The fourth component is healthcare: so far, over 13,000 ex-combatants have become part of Colombia’s national health care system. Fifth is comprehensive psychosocial well-being, which seeks “to enable individuals in the process of reincorporation to enhance their capabilities to establish meaningful relationships, strengthen interpersonal ties and contribute to the improvement of the quality of individual and collective life.” The sixth and seventh components are family and community.

Notably, section 3.4 of the peace agreement also contains security guarantees including “the fight against criminal organisations responsible for homicides and massacres or who attack human rights advocates, social movements or political movements” or who challenge the implementation of peace. This guarantee reflects a “modern, qualitatively new concept of

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44“Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict,” 8.
security which, in an end-of-conflict scenario, is based on respect for human dignity, and respect of human rights and the defence of democratic values, in particular the protection of the rights and freedoms of those engaged in politics.”

Given the fate of the Unión Patriótica, the 2016 peace deal’s emphasis on security as related to the practice of political opposition is unsurprising. Recognizing the “extraordinary risk” FARC peace signatories faced, the Final Agreement also includes lengthy guarantees for the security of reincorporating ex-combatants in section 3.4.7.4 and promises the dismantling of the “paramilitary phenomenon” in a “National Political Pact” to ensure arms ceased to be used in politics. One of the guiding principles of Chapter 3 is “to safeguard the legitimate monopoly of force and of the use of arms by the state across the country’s territories”—a statement that broke from Colombian government’s past tendency to delegate policing to private forces. What in other countries might be a recognition of simple Weberian sovereignty was in Colombia a declaration of bold, historically unprecedented intent.

The exceptionally broad scope of the peace deal is also worth discussing. The 300-page Final Agreement reads less like a cessation of conflict and more like a broad mandate for structural economic reform and development, achieving social equity, strengthening democracy, and expanding state presence. This largely reflects the agreement’s explicit recognition of “the historical causes of the conflict, such as the unresolved issue of land ownership and, in particular, the concentration thereof, the exclusion of the rural population, and the underdevelopment of rural communities.”

Upon FARC’s insistence, the peace agreement acknowledged the role of state weakness, land inequality, and norms of political violence—and it promised to resolve all three. It also employs novel territory-based, gender-based, and ethnic-based approaches. Chapter 1, Comprehensive Rural Reform, aims to reverse the conditions that facilitated violence by establishing a structural and in-depth transformation of rural Colombia. The central mechanisms of this reform are the Development Programs with a Territorial Approach (PDETs). The goal: eradication of hunger and poverty, closing the gap between urban and rural areas, the democratization of property and greater land equality, and guaranteed non-recurrence of violence which stemmed from any of the previous grievances. Chapter 5 outlines a solution to the problem of illicit drugs, which fueled each side of the conflict, in an approach aimed at causal factors of “conditions of poverty, marginalisation, [and] weak presence of institutions.”

Under this section of the agreement, the government created the Program for the Substitution of Illegal Crops (PNIS), which nearly 100,000 families enrolled in. Addressing political violence and exclusion, Chapter 2, the section on Political Participation, redefines security in terms of protection of political participation and opposition in order to foster the “emergence of a new culture that outlaws the use of arms in the exercise of politics.”

And finally, the peace agreement hints at the central condition which begat violence: state weakness. “Appreciating and extolling the fact that the central pillar of peace is the promotion of the presence and the effective operation of the state throughout the country, especially throughout the many regions that are today afflicted by neglect, by the lack of an effective civil service and by the effects of the

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45“Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict,” 79.
46“Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict,” 80.
47“Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict,” 3.
49“Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict,” 104.
50Felipe Puerta and Maria Paula Chaparro, “A Death Foretold: Colombia’s Crop Substitution Program,” InSight Crime, April 1, 2019.
51“Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict,” 57.
internal armed conflict itself,” the agreement states, “it is an essential goal of national reconciliation to construct a new territorial-based welfare and development paradigm to the benefit of broad sectors of the population that have hitherto been the victims of exclusion and despair.”

Yet while the Final Agreement’s success at its ultimate goal of dismantling the structural conditions of violence in Colombia will broadly determine the sustainability of peace, it is reintegration which will decide if and when armed conflict between former FARC members and the government recurs. Each of the other aspects of the peace deal—comprehensive rural reform, solution to the problem of illicit drugs, political participation—would only cause a relapse into conflict if ex-FARC believed that these efforts had failed so significantly that they decided to remobilize. For example, a failure of rural reform would only cause the peace deal to collapse if it led to a failure of reintegration. Importantly, lapses in other areas of the peace agreement could contribute to reintegration failure by adding to a sense of government let-down, increasing the inertia of grievances which might eventually out-weigh ex-combatants’ commitment to reincorporation processes. But if reintegration itself fails, this self-evidently means conflict has returned in some form. Thus the social and economic reintegration of ex-combatants is both the foundation of peace and the precise mechanism of its potential failure.

**Challenges to Reintegration**

Recall that the success of DDR is contingent on the maintenance of political will from both sides. Disarmament creates a social contract wherein combatants agree to give up their weapons in return for guarantees of security and economic opportunity, which those weapons had once offered. If either side goes back on its end of the deal—if combatants decide their safety and economic livelihoods are better served by taking up arms again, or if the government ceases to offer security or economic support—then DDR fails. Critically, while the social contract is established by disarmament, its guarantees are carried out during the reintegration phase. Challenges to reintegration should be viewed through this framework: are ex-combatants better off participating in peace than going to war? Do the benefits of reintegration exceed the value of a weapon? Will the government hold up its end of the deal? And at what point will the costs of peace outweigh ex-combatant commitment to reintegration? Right now, most ex-combatants—12,940 as of March 2020—remain committed to reintegration. However, they are increasingly questioning the security guarantees and economic options provided.

The Covid-19 pandemic has not created many entirely novel challenges—rather, it has exacerbated pre-existing issues. The pandemic has had four main effects on Colombia. First, it has lessened state presence in rural areas as the government has withdrawn to focus on battling the virus. Second, the pandemic has ravaged the Colombian economy, leading to skyrocketing unemployment and greater inequality, particularly in the countryside. Third, it has shifted the locus of government attention towards lockdown measures and economic fallout and away from the peace deal. Finally, the pandemic has closed down schools across a country which lacks sufficient Internet infrastructure. These four effects have all worsened existing obstacles to the Final Agreement, raising the costs of peace for ex-combatants and contributing to a sense that the government is not fulfilling its side of the contract.

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52“Final Agreement to End the Armed Conflict,” 3.
53“La implementación de la política de Paz con Legalidad,” 2.
Government Will and Capacity
The government’s political will has weakened under the administration of president Iván Duque, a political protege of Alvaro Uribe and member of his Democratic Center Party. As a senator, Duque helped lead the “vote No” campaign against ratification of the peace agreement in the 2016 plebiscite. Duque’s 2018 presidential election campaign promised to “modify” (though not completely abandon) the peace agreement, feeding on public sentiments that the deal was too lenient on the guerillas. Once in office, his administration slashed funding for transitional justice measures of the peace deal, attempting to cut the Special Jurisdiction for Peace (JEP) budget by 30% and reducing the Truth Commission’s budget to 56% of the required level.54 Breaking from the crop substitution approach in the Final Agreement, Duque has sought to restart aerial spraying of coca crops. A Gallup poll noted 57% of Colombians believed the administration would not fulfill the promises of the Final Agreement.55 Duque’s policies and rhetoric have also increased uncertainty among ex-combatants about the strength of the government’s commitment to the peace process. As one article put it, “The transition from a government that had signed the peace agreement and started implementation, to one that openly questioned the peace process, generated discord among the ranks of the former combatants.”56 Such uncertainty drove a number of ex-FARC fighters to abandon the peace process by mid-2018.

Implementation of the peace deal has been slow. The University of Notre Dame’s Kroc Institute found that only 35% of the 578 commitments in the peace agreement have reached “advanced levels” of implementation, while 34% are in a state of “minimal” implementation and 31% have yet to be started at all.57 DDR processes faced early challenges and delays. By March 2017, none of the ZVTNs had been fully built—leaving demobilized combatants, some with children, living under plastic sheets. By July, seven sites remained less than 75% complete.58 Other areas of the peace deal have suffered slow implementation as well. Though nearly 100,000 families signed up for the crop substitution program, 41,910 have yet to receive any payment, and 89,796 total have received only partial payment.59 One report found that at the current rate of implementation, it will take forty years to finish establishing PDETs—the primary mechanism of rural development and establishment of state presence in the countryside. Thus, both government will and capacity have proven tenuous at best throughout the last few years of the peace process.

The most important effect of the transition in political rhetoric under the Duque administration and the slow pace of implementation has been to undermine ex-combatant’s confidence that the government will hold up its end of the deal. Now, with the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the government’s priorities have shifted even further. The peace deal is a massive undertaking, and its programs are expensive. During a time of intense economic strain, when politics feels much like fighting a fire, implementation of the peace agreement is no longer the first item on the agenda. The Duque administration recently released a five year-long plan for Covid recovery that would cost upwards of $46.8 billion—13% of the country’s GDP.60 If the government was unable to even begin one third of the peace deal’s provisions in four normal years, with less political will and more pressing matters to attend to, implementation will

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55“Gallup Poll #131 Colombia,” Gallup, June, 2019.
57“Peace Accord Implementation in Colombia Continues to Progress Two Years In,” Kroc Institute for International Peace Studies, April 9, 2019, 1.
59Felipe Puerta and Maria Paula Chaparro.
undoubtedly slow even further. Given that the success of DDR depends on the maintenance of political will on both sides, the government’s decided lack of will—and inability to hold up its side of the agreement—present a major challenge to reintegration.

Security
To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction: every peace deal mobilizes forces to oppose it. Stedman (1997) describes these so-called ‘spoilers’ as “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.” Peace negotiations involve compromise since they occur by definition because neither side was able to achieve their war aims, and so they force unpopular concessions on both ends and rarely benefit all parties in a civil conflict. Actors who were excluded, stand to lose from peace, or feel their values have been betrayed by the settlement might mobilize against the peace process, undermining stability and threatening the security of peace signatories. Demobilized ex-combatants thus face a security dilemma. Their lives are threatened by spoiler groups, creating incentives for re-armament. Yet this would violate the terms of any DDR-based peace agreement, so ex-combatants must rely on the state—their former nemesis—for protection. State-ensured security therefore forms a crucial piece of the central pact of DDR.

In Colombia, a handful of different groups act as violent spoilers—one 2018 report counted 7,265 persisting members of illegal armed groups. The peace agreement created a power vacuum in many territories formerly held by FARC under the assumption that government forces would step in. Instead, armed groups often took control, battling each other in bloody turf wars that contributed to continuing violence and terror in the countryside. Following the further withdrawal of government presence during the pandemic, these armed groups have only grown in power. There are three main categories of violent spoilers challenging the reintegration process in Colombia: paramilitary groups, remaining guerilla groups, and FARC dissident groups.

When the Final Agreement was signed in November 2016, an estimated 800 FARC fighters rejected the peace process wholesale and refused to demobilize. These constituted the first of the FARC “dissidents,” members of the guerilla group that either eschewed peace from the start or abandoned it later. Hundreds more would follow, though exact numbers are hard to pin down. A report published in Colombian newspaper El Tiempo in December 2019 counted 1,749 total FARC dissidents spread across 19 departments, while other sources place this number closer to 3,000. Top FARC leadership were among the early dissidents. Néstor Gregorio Vera Fernández (alias “Iván Mordisco”) was the first commander to reject the peace process, bringing with him the 1st Front. Months later, after the signing of the peace agreement, Miguel Botache Santilla (alias “Gentil Duarte”) became a dissident. Iván Mordisco, Gentil Duarte, and another ex-FARC, alias Jhon 40, became leaders of the 1st Front Dissidence (or Eastern Bloc) groups, which issued a public letter in 2017 rejecting the peace accords and inviting other ex-combatants to join. A major tipping point came in August 2019, when FARC’s former second-in-command and architect of the peace agreement, Luciano Marín

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63 “Los ejércitos ilegales que enfrentará la nueva cúpula militar”
64 “Disidencia de las FARC estarían en más de 10 departamentos, según informe de inteligencia militar,” Noticias Caracol, October 12, 2018.
65 “The Evolution of the Ex-FARC Mafia.”
Arango (alias “Iván Márquez”), announced that he was abandoning the peace process. Against the backdrop of the FARC flag, Márquez declared a “new chapter” in the conflict and accused the state of “betraying” the peace accords in a video posted on YouTube. Alongside him appeared two other prominent FARC leaders: Seuxis Pausías Hernández (alias “Jesús Santrich”), one of FARC’s negotiators during the peace talks with the Santos administration, and Hernán Darío Velásquez (alias “El Paisa”). Both Márquez and Santrich had been awarded congressional seats under the peace accord’s political representation guarantees. Today, an estimated 23 different dissident groups operate throughout Colombia.

Another cluster of spoiler groups are the so-called bandes criminales, or BACRIM, that emerged out of the flawed demobilization and reintegration processes of the peace agreement with the AUC in 2006. The largest of these groups is the Gaitanist Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (ACG), also known as the Urabeños or the Clan de Golfo. Emerging after AUC commander Vicente Castaño abandoned the demobilization process in 2006, the ACG has somewhere between 1,500-2,000 members. Los Puntilleros are another sizable paramilitary group which formed out of the rubble of the AUC, though membership is below 1,000.

Third are the remaining other guerilla forces: the ELN, the last original member of the Colombian conflict still standing, and Los Pelusos, a dissident faction of the EPL that rejected the EPL’s 1991 peace agreement with the government. Though the ELN shares its Marxist roots with FARC, the two groups fought each other throughout the conflict. Today, the ELN is one of the largest illegal armed groups still operating in Colombia, with membership likely between 2,000-2,500. FARC’s demobilization presented an opportunity for the ELN to expand into former-FARC territory, allowing the group to take over trafficking roots in new areas. The group has also expanded across the Venezuelan border. The ELN is in conflict with both the ACG and Los Pelusos, and has variant relationships with different FARC dissident factions.

The above groups reveal a pattern in Colombian history. After decades of violence, the government and an armed group strike a peace bargain that ends with formal demobilization and reintegration of ex-combatants. But this DDR process partly fails, and a significant portion of former fighters either refuse to participate in the peace process in the first place or abandon it later, reforming into smaller and more diffuse criminal groups. This happened after the AUC demobilized in 2006 when dissident factions formed the ACG and other BACRIM, and after the EPL demobilized in 1991 and dissidents formed Los Pelusos. In 2014, an estimated 24% of Colombia’s demobilized ex-combatants had reverted to criminal activity. These groups contribute to continued violence and insecurity, becoming spoilers to future peace agreements. The same pattern is repeating with FARC, wherein dissident groups are abandoning the peace process, in turn lessening the security of remaining demobilized ex-combatants, prompting them to re-arm in a vicious cycle which degrades peace.

The greatest challenge to reintegration comes from these violent spoiler groups and the resulting lack of security ex-combatants suffer. Since the signing of the peace deal, a total of 247

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69“ERPAC,” Colombia Reports, April 1, 2017.
72“FARC Dissident Groups.”
ex-FARC combatants—nearly one in every fifty—have been killed. According to the UN, the most vulnerable population is ex-combatants living outside the former reintegration spaces, who make up the majority. But even AECTRs themselves have proven unsafe. In the area around the “Román Ruiz” reincorporation space in Antioquia, twelve peace signatories have been killed, likely at the hands of the ACG and the 18th Front FARC dissident group. Near another, nine ex-FARC have died. One peace signatory, Alexánder Parra, was murdered inside an AECTR in Meta. As a result of these killings, many demobilized fighters have fled the former reintegration zones. Others have been relocated by the ARN. The main culprits: the ACG, FARC dissident groups, and the ELN. And ex-combatants are not the only actors in the peace deal being targeted—the NGO Indepaz estimates that more than 1,000 human rights activists and community leaders have been killed since late 2016. Of these, more than 50% were involved in the peace process in some way.

The pandemic has decreased security in rural reincorporation zones further, as killings of ex-combatants and activists have not stopped. While the state focused on responses to the virus, armed groups “sought to profit from the sudden change in conditions, the refocusing of state priorities and distracted security forces,” consolidating control over their territories and in some cases acting as the sole governing authority. The UN reported in June that “In various regions, illegal armed groups and criminal organizations have taken advantage of the pandemic to strengthen their presence in the territories, including through attacks against public security forces, forced displacement and confinement of communities, and threats and targeted killings of social leaders and former FARC-EP members.” In an extraordinary demonstration of the government’s lack of complete territorial control, a number of illegal armed groups have taken it upon themselves to impose Covid-related social restrictions. In northern Colombia, the ACG sent WhatsApp messages and circulated pamphlets to residents advising them to stay inside—and threatening to kill them if they disobeyed the lockdown—a strategy mirrored by one dissident FARC group. In areas along the coast, the ELN imposed a number of restrictions, including curfews, road closures, and a ban on large events. Human Rights Watch identified similar efforts in 11 departments. Consequently, violence against ex-combatants and social leaders is on the rise. One study found that “in recent months, there has been an alarming increase in the killings of social leaders and members of vulnerable groups, relative to pre-pandemic months (January-March 2020) as well as in comparison to the same period last year (April-August 2019).” As ex-combatants feel less secure, more are leaving reintegration zones, while other reintegration zones are being evacuated and moved because security risks are so great. Yet this is

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73FARC Party (@PartidoFARC), Twitter, December 19, 2020. Since the first drafting of this paper, five FARC ex-combatants have been killed. Here, I use the unofficial number reported by FARC party statements. I chose to use this number because official verification of each attack takes time—the latest UN report verified 224 killings—and because what really matters is ex-combatant perceptions of their own insecurity, which are likely more influenced by FARC’s own numbers than by official counts. See “Report of the Secretary-General,” United Nations Verification Mission in Colombia, September 25, 2020.


75“Los espacios de reincorporación de las Farc con más amenazas,” El Espectador, July 9, 2020.


79“Criminal Governance Under Coronavirus.”

driving ex-combatants into areas of even higher risk: “In 2020, 30 per cent of the killings have been committed near new reintegration areas, which are located mostly in isolated rural regions characterized by limited State presence and where illegal armed groups and criminal organizations fight over illicit economies.” These are the very areas in which the pandemic has enabled armed groups to expand their control. For many, Covid-19 has decreased the security of their health. For ex-combatants, it has done so twofold—they risk both the virus and politically motivated murder.

Could killings of ex-combatants motivate FARC members to abandon the peace process? History yields a clear answer—yes. The violent fate of the Unión Patriótica, and subsequent abandonment of peace processes and resurgence of conflict, prove an ominous precedent for the modern day. Then, deaths of thousands of UP representatives led FARC to abandon the Agreement of La Uribe and continue its insurgency. There is no clear reason why history might not repeat itself today. In fact, Ivan Marquez, one of the FARC dissident leaders, was once a political representative of the UP. The government’s previous failure to provide security is clearly fresh on the minds of many ex-combatants—and has proven sufficient cause to abandon peace in the past.

In the words of the UN Verification Mission in Colombia, “the unrelenting violence against former combatants continues to take a toll on the reintegration process and the consolidation of peace more broadly.” The hundreds of killings of ex-FARC combatants violate both the literal text of the peace agreement and the fundamental compact of DDR. Guarantees of security for both ex-combatants and social activists are emphasized in the peace deal, to which the concept of security (especially related to the practice of political opposition) is central. The Final Agreement even contains provisions stipulating that the state must eliminate the phenomenon of paramilitarism, yet the ACG continues to threaten ex-combatants, and has only grown stronger during the pandemic. When combatants’ lives are less secure at peace than they were at war, this inevitably leads some to question whether remaining committed to peace is worthwhile. Continuing murders have driven a sense of government betrayal on its side of the deal—which is to insure the lives and livelihoods of ex-combatants once they turned in their weapons. Sergio Jaramillo, the former High Commissioner for Peace, highlights the central problem created by the lack of security: “Some people may begin, at risk, to hesitate and prefer to get under the umbrella of some illegal organization to protect themselves from murder.” If this occurs—if ex-combatants feel that taking up arms would protect them better than remaining in reintegration programs—then reincorporation fails and conflict worsens.

Economic Opportunity

Economic opportunity is another core pillar of the contract created by DDR. In exchange for handing over their guns, the source of livelihood and security for ex-combatants, the government ensures access to the above-ground economy and works to support the economic livelihoods of ex-combatants. Even in the most stable country, this is a challenge. For one, ex-combatants bear the mental burden of war. Participation in armed groups also develops what Nussio (2014) describes as “anti-social capital”—strong ingroup bonding and weak outgroup bridging, which leads to sticky effects including lack of trust in political institutions and low community

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83Sergio Jaramillo, former High Commissioner for Peace, quoted in Armando Niera, “¿Cuál es el balance del acuerdo de paz tras cuatro años de su firma?,” El Tiempo, November 24, 2020.
participation. These challenges explain why the reincorporation roadmap includes an emphasis on psychosocial care and family and community building. Two other obstacles prevent ex-combatants from finding employment: stigmatization and lack of education or skills outside of violence. McFee (2016) highlights the challenge of “playing double,” wherein ex-combatants must simultaneously conceal their identity to gain employment and acceptance in their community, where association with a group like FARC is scorned, while maintaining their ex-combatant identity to receive benefits from government reintegration programs. The stigmatization of ex-combatants poses unique challenges to economic reintegration and generates tension between identities. Ex-combatants also tend to lack significant education, since many joined FARC at a young age or came from rural areas where education infrastructure is lacking. Yet they become skilled in one area which is in constant demand by other armed groups and cartels: violence. This comparative advantage in guerilla warfare creates a dual problem. First, ex-combatants lack the skills to find employment in the legal economy, which is exacerbated by negative stigmatization. Second, they have impressive resumes for illegal activities, leaving them particularly vulnerable to recruitment by armed groups. Together, these baseline problems make finding legal employment particularly difficult (and illegal employment particularly easy) for ex-combatants—yet gaining a sustainable source of income is vital to the economic half of “social and economic reintegration.”

Colombia’s economic turmoil has only added to this challenge. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, Colombia’s economy faced numerous challenges—persistent corruption, high inequality, a stark divide between rural and urban areas, and the existence of robust underground economies in illicit substances, to name a few. But progress was being made: between 2002-2018, the portion of the population below the poverty line fell from 49.7% to 27%, while income inequality (as measured by the Gini coefficient) dropped from 0.573 to 0.517. The pandemic threatens to erase these gains. In one scenario mirroring the effect of Covid-19, economists at the University of Los Andes found that poverty could rise 15 percentage points relative to 2019, while inequality might rise to 0.574 on the Gini index—a setback of two decades. Unemployment has skyrocketed, reaching a record high of 21.4% in May and now standing at 15.8%, 5.6% higher than the same month last year. Facing this unfriendly labor market, ex-combatants are even less likely to find work than before. The impact of this may not be felt immediately, since ex-combatants still receive a monthly allowance under the long-term reincorporation stage. Yet this is neither sustainable nor sufficient, as it amounts to a measly 90% of Colombia’s minimum wage—just over USD $200 per month. Additionally, the peace agreement is structured so that ex-combatants can employ themselves in productive projects, funded by the government, which somewhat insulate them from the wider economic collapse. So far over a third of ex-combatants have become involved in productive projects, making them integral to sustainable economic reintegration. But even these productive projects have come under new strain during the pandemic. The UN Verification Mission in Colombia found that

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86 “Macroeconomic Note No.20,” Economics faculty, Universidad de los Andes, May 18, 2020, 1.
87 “Macroeconomic Note No.20,” 3.
“half of the productive initiatives have been affected by the pandemic,” largely due to challenges in accessing technical assistance and commercialization.90

Education programs form another component of economic reintegration, aiming to equip ex-combatants with new skills apart from violence that can be used to gain sustainable employment. But in response to the Covid-19 lockdowns, schools across Colombia have closed. The UN reported in June that a number of educational programs included in the peace agreement have been placed on hold in light of the pandemic.91 Internet infrastructure is also largely absent in many rural regions, a problem which disproportionately affects the educational outcomes of ex-combatants, since the great majority live in the countryside. Delays in job training and education programs threaten the development of new productive skills by ex-combatants, while rising unemployment and delays in productive projects curtail economic opportunity in the short run.

Given the rising challenges to sustainable economic reincorporation, ex-combatants may be tempted to abandon the reincorporation process and capitalize on their most lucrative skill set: conflict. Armed groups can reportedly offer four times more than what combatants make from the monthly stipend, drawing on funds gained from illicit activities like cocaine trafficking and illegal mining. The crop substitution program’s failings and the lack of state presence in rural areas have only enhanced the control and financing of armed groups. In recent months, the Covid-19 pandemic has also created new opportunities for recruitment, as rural families have been left with no source of income and children’s schools have closed down.92 These factors result in the strengthening of armed groups and the lessening of economic benefits of reincorporation. Combined with the lack of security ex-combatants face, taking up a gun is increasingly seeming like a more profitable choice than remaining in reincorporation programs.

A One-Sided Deal
The convergence of the Duque administration’s reticence to support the peace process, delays in implementation of crucial programs, the killings of ex-combatants, and decreased economic opportunity have contributed to a sense that the government is letting down its side of the contract established by DDR. In exchange for giving up their weapons, ex-combatants are supposed to receive from the government a replacement of the security and economic guarantees those weapons once provided. Yet in the minds of ex-combatants, these promises have proven empty. Scores of ex-FARC and peace activists have been murdered despite numerous provisions in the Final Agreement for their protection. Economic support has been weak at best, while armed groups offer better salaries and greater security. The Covid-19 pandemic has exacerbated each of these problems, strengthening the violent spoiler groups that pose the greatest threat to peace while undermining programs for education and sustainable economic reintegration.

So far, the vast majority of ex-combatants remain committed to the reintegration process. But unrest is growing. Discontent over the killings is reaching new heights, perhaps best seen in recent protests. In October, thousands ex-combatants marched from reintegration spaces across Colombia to Bogota in a “Pilgrimage for Life and Peace,” to protest the killings of demobilized FARC fighters since the 2016 peace deal. The pilgrimage movement rejected the “systematic murder of peace signatories” and “demands guarantees for [ex-FARC] lives.”93 Anderson

93“Así fue la llegada de los excombatientes de las Farc a Bogotá,” El Espectador, November 1, 2020.
Carranza, a leader of an AECTR in Antioquia, expressed a sense of state failure: “the State must commit itself to taking care of the lives of the peace signatories and opening spaces to seek dialogue with the other actors armed, because as long as they remain active there will be no peace.”

FARC party senator Victoria Sandino echoed this sentiment, saying “there is a desire for peace, but we need guarantees of protection to calmy continue with these tasks.”

For now, ex-combatants are turning to peaceful protest to air their grievances and seek greater security. Whether the government can follow through on its guarantees remains to be seen.

Recent statements from the FARC political party’s Twitter account underscore this sense of an increasingly asymmetrical bargain:

4 years after #AcuerdoDePaz we can tell you that we remain steadfast with peace, committed and committed to exhaustion with the implementation despite the failures of the Colombian state

Four years after signing the final peace agreement, an agreement marked by non-compliance by the government and the deaths of 242 ex-combatants who signed the peace, we continue to reaffirm our fight for peace with social justice for NEW COLOMBIA

#GraciasAlAcuerdo thousands of us and we have returned to our families, however, today we have 242 free companions, whose lives were taken away by those who oppose peace, this happens when the Government applies a complicit indifference and stigmatizes us

The gov @IvanDuque must comply with and advance the implementation of the agreements made with communities. To pilgrims #PorLaVidaPorLaPaz it must materialize access to land for productive projects and especially protect their lives. For now they keep killing our companions

We regret to report that yesterday two peace signatories and a family member were assassinated… Stop this killing! @IvanDuque

May peace not cost us our lives!

These statements from FARC reveal two clear patterns: growing discontent over the perception of government failures, and a continuing commitment to the peace agreement in spite of this. Ex-combatants are upholding their side of the deal. But they increasingly feel that the government (particularly Iván Duque) is not upholding theirs, shifting the costs of peace onto the shoulders of the vulnerable ex-combatant population. This has only accelerated during the pandemic. For
now, peace is holding—but if insecurity continues to worsen, and economic opportunities dim further, the challenges to reintegration and the sense of government betrayal may trump ex-combatants commitment to the peace process. The critical process of reintegration would fail.

Possible Outcomes
There are three main paths down which Colombia may go: a reconstitution of the FARC and resumption of formal conflict with the government; the amplification of low-level violence by a growing number of smaller armed groups; and in the event the peace deal succeeds, lessening violence. Of these, the second is seeming increasingly likely.

Should ex-combatants become so disenchanted with the government’s failings that they collectively abandon collective reincorporation, all the way to the highest ranks of the party, FARC could reform as a formal group and resume conflict with the government. This would be extraordinarily devastating, considering the first conflict cost the lives of a quarter million people and lasted for half a century. So far, top leaders of the party have shown considerable commitment to the peace process, particularly those who now hold formal political office. Because a collective remobilization of FARC would necessarily involve stimulation by leadership, and leadership has grown seemingly comfortable with peaceful mechanisms of politics, this path seems unlikely. However, FARC party statements do clearly show growing discontent over the government’s implementation of the agreement. As showcased by the growth of dissident groups, a number of top-ranking FARC combatants have proven both willing to abandon the peace process and central to the formation of the dissident groups. FARC’s strength as a legitimate political actor has also been weaker than expected, as the party has attracted underwhelming support in recent elections. Were widespread conflict to resume, any peace agreement would be unlikely in the foreseeable future. For one, the conditions that paved the way for negotiations in 2012—a changed military balance of power that favored the government—no longer exist. Meanwhile, rising unemployment and school closures provide ample recruitment opportunities for armed groups. The peace agreement attempted to address structural problems which had created violence in the first place, but given the slow rate of implementation, these changes have not materialized. Economic inequality, lack of state presence, and norms of violence persist in much of Colombia—and have grown worse during the pandemic—feeding the very grievances that evolved into Marxist groups in the 1960s. The ideological appeal of FARC’s egalitarian message might still strike a chord with the rural population who feel abandoned by the state and have suffered intensely during the pandemic, contributing to recruitment efforts and bolstering renewed conflict. Furthermore, were FARC to formally abandon the peace process and return to conflict, this might catalyze other ex-combatants throughout Colombia to un-integrate and return to violence. In particular, paramilitary groups would likely reform, drawing back many of the 36,000-plus ex-AUC combatants. A resumption of widespread armed conflict between the government, FARC, and paramilitary groups would be profoundly destructive. However, this outcome seems improbable.

More likely, facing increasing insecurity and decreasing economic opportunity, ex-combatants will slowly trickle out of reincorporation processes and join or form illegal armed groups, whether those are traffickers, FARC dissidents, or the ELN. Those who remain within the reincorporation process will be killed at higher rates, feeding a vicious cycle which will hasten the unraveling of reintegration. Eventually, if a majority of ex-combatants abandon reintegration—the core of the peace deal—the agreement will collapse, particularly if Duque’s
administration uses ex-combatant’s return to violence as justification to abandon other peace programs. The structural conditions which caused violence in the past will persist.

Somewhat counterintuitively, the second option might actually be worse than a formal reconstitution of FARC—maybe the one thing worse than organized war is disorganized war. If ex-combatants slowly drain out of reintegration programs, the result will be similar to what happened to the AUC: a once-unified group with strong command and control structures will rupture into fragmented and diffuse factions. These groups are no longer motivated by ideology or moral purpose, because they alone will never be able to defeat the state. Rather, their raison d’être is self enrichment. They exist solely to leech the resources of rural territories, much as dissident factions and BACRIM compete for access to trafficking routes and illegal mining in the spaces FARC left as part of the peace deal. This can already be seen in the diversity of FARC dissident groups, who number in the twenties and barely coordinate with each other. Such an outcome would be uniquely deleterious, since similarly large amounts of death and displacement would occur but with no motive except exploitation, no central or cooperated strategy except destruction, and limited hope for peace. With FARC, the government could reach a negotiated settlement by making concessions to the ideological motives of the guerillas—a settlement that was only reached once both sides concluded they could not win. But with smaller groups, the government can hope to win. Furthermore, these organizations exist to enrich themselves on the spoils of conflict and plunder, meaning they likely bear little desire for disarmament and demobilization. Low level conflict will persist indefinitely, extracting a heavy toll. Trapped in a gray zone between formal war and genuine peace, the people of Colombia will suffer yet more underserved tragedy.

Finally, against all odds, ex-combatants may remain committed to reintegration. Four years after the signing of the peace deal, and in spite of numerous challenges which started early in the implementation process, the majority of ex-combatants today stand in favor of the peace process. Perhaps the government will pick up the pace of implementation, find ways to protect ex-combatants, and better support productive projects for ex-combatants. It goes without saying that this outcome would be the best by far. So what actions could be taken to secure the future of reincorporation?

Possible Solutions
The best solution is simply to follow through on the commitments of the peace agreement. The Final Agreement provides a roadmap for spurring economic development; bringing rural areas and the marginalized populations who inhabit them under state control; dismantling norms of political violence; and peacefully and sustainably reincorporating ex-FARC combatants into the economy and society. Were the government to fully and quickly implement the entirety of the programs stipulated in the agreement, peace would probably be achieved and many Colombian citizens would see their lives improved. But given the progress of implementation so far, and the additional challenges posed by Covid-19, this seems unlikely. In light of this, there are two main approaches the central government could adopt in the short run which would decrease the likelihood of reintegration failing.

The first is to prioritize security guarantees contained in the peace agreement. Uncertainty over the very security of their lives is driving ex-combatants’ feeling that the government is not holding up their side of the deal more than any other issue, fueling a strong sense of abandonment. Consequently, stopping the murders of ex-combatants and peace activists is the absolute most important step. Any approach must involve protection of ex-combatants
themselves, but also concerted efforts to stamp out the spoiler groups responsible for the murders. The government should continue peace negotiations with the ELN—one group responsible for murdering ex-combatants—hopewfully resulting in another DDR-based agreement. As part of a wider campaign to increase state presence in rural areas, it should then seek to reduce the ranks of the various paramilitary and dissident groups.

Second, ex-combatants need increased access to land for productive projects, which the UN has called “an urgent requirement for the sustainability of the reintegration process,” particularly because the majority of ex-combatants seek to become farmers. Right now, most of the AECTRs are on rented land. The government has succeeded in purchasing land for one reincorporation space in Tolima, and it should continue these efforts. Purchasing of land for AECTRs could mesh with increased security for these spaces. Some progress has been made: the Duque administration recently released Decree 1543, which creates avenues for ex-combatants who remain committed to reincorporation to gain access to land.

Unfortunately, Duque’s government has repeatedly made promises to improve security for ex-combatants and finance implementation of the peace deal—and repeatedly, ex-combatants have seen these promises broken as threats to peace multiply. Even if it gained the political will, in the wake of the pandemic, the Colombian government may simply lack the capacity to implement the peace deal. It may (justifiably) prioritize economic recovery over the expensive and laborious process of implementing the Final Agreement, at least in the short run. Should this scenario unfold, the burden of peace will continue to fall increasingly to ex-combatants themselves. The success of reintegration may rest upon the strength of a single, unmeasurable variable: willpower. To save peace, ex-combatants might find the only step they can take is to remain steadfastly committed to the Final Agreement regardless of the personal sacrifice this requires. Finally, given the failings of the central government, departments and communities could play a greater role in reintegration going forward, working to provide protection, land, and funding to ex-combatants as they pursue productive projects. Organizations like CTRs and ECOMUN could adopt a central role, freeing reintegration from the whims of the Duque administration. After all, reintegration is at heart about the small, rural communities who have long endured without the help of the state. Though not ideal, a community-centric approach could provide ex-combatants with just enough support that peace remains preferable to re-armament.

Conclusion
In 2012, Colombia embarked on an ambitious mission to end a half-century long conflict and structurally transform much of the country to address the conditions—land inequality, state weakness, and norms of political violence—that had originally created violence. The resultant 2016 peace agreement contained broad stipulations for rural reform, economic development, state-building, and an expansive DDR program including the social and economic reincorporation of ex-combatants. Four years later, the process faces numerous challenges. Most important among these are obstacles to the reincorporation process, since reincorporation alone determines the fate of peace. If ex-combatants fail to reintegrate, they return to conflict, throwing Colombia into war at a time when peace is desperately needed. Reintegration is best conceived of as a contract between the government and ex-combatants which is initially established by disarmament, wherein ex-combatants turn over their weapons in exchange for government support.

guarantees of economic opportunity and security. The success of this process is determined by the maintenance of political will on both sides; so long as the state remains willing and able to safeguard the livelihoods of ex-combatants, and so long as ex-combatants remain committed to reintegration, DDR succeeds. But if the government lets down its end of the bargain, and ex-combatants begin to believe a gun might provide greater economic or physical security, incentives to abandon the peace process eventually outweigh their commitment to reintegration. This is the central challenge peace in Colombia faces today. Since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, the power of armed spoilers in rural areas has grown, contributing to continued killings of ex-combatants and peace activists. Facing an economic downturn of massive proportions, ex-combatants' prospects in the above-ground economy are dimming while demand for their specific skill set stays high. A renewed government push for peace is needed, yet the administration of president Ivan Duque openly questions the peace process and has found in the pandemic a convenient excuse to put peace on the back-burner. The structural conditions which originally fueled conflict still exist—in fact, the pandemic has only exacerbated inequality and state weakness in rural areas. The most likely outcome is somewhere between war and peace: ex-combatants will slowly abandon the peace process, contributing to the growth of multitudinous criminal armed groups who will continue to fight for control in the countryside.

Covid-19 has unambiguously worsened each of the challenges to reintegration. Unfortunately, in the rural areas where the struggle over reintegration is playing out, the pandemic is unlikely to end soon. President Duque recently announced that Colombia has purchased 40 million Covid-19 vaccines, enough to vaccinate much of the country’s population of around 50 million people. But once again, the persistent problems of state weakness and government inefficacy will come back to haunt Colombia. The countryside areas controlled by the ACG or ELN will prove especially challenging to access—since if the central government cannot even establish territorial control over wide swaths of the country, it seems unlikely they will be able to administer complex vaccination programs in these regions. Meanwhile, armed spoiler groups will continue to take advantage of the government’s focus on the pandemic. Eventually, Colombia will overcome Covid-19 for good and return to a degree of normalcy, re-prioritizing peace—but whether this will come soon enough to save the Final Agreement remains to be seen. Much will hinge on the results of the next presidential election in 2022. If ex-combatants can remain committed to reintegration until then, and if the Colombian public elects a candidate who supports the peace agreement and acts to speed up implementation, perhaps there will be reason for hope. Yet much can happen between now and June 2022.

Because it threatens the lifeblood of the peace agreement more than any other problem—failure of another aspect of the Final Agreement would only prompt a return to conflict if it caused reincorporation to collapse—reintegration of ex-FARC combatants is the most important issue facing Colombia today. Of all the possible timelines Colombia may go down in the near future, one in which widespread conflict resumes is surely the worst. Its immediate impacts will be the death and abuse and terror inflicted on the same long-suffering communities which have been marginalized for much of Colombia’s history—the rural families and small farmers whose lands are pillaged and whose blood is spilled. But ultimately, every Colombian will suffer. Renewed conflict will upset the working of the economy during a crucial period of recovery, both by disrupting the operation of businesses and by diverting government funds towards fighting armed groups. The thousands of people who will be displaced by increased conflict will flood into a strained labor market already beset by high unemployment rates. State presence in rural areas will falter further, as insecurity begets insecurity and armed groups battle each other
for territory and resources. This new conflict—a more fractious, less ideological, greedy war—will be even harder to resolve than its predecessor. Facing dozens of distinct groups with no goal except their own self-enrichment and survival, the government will be hard-set to negotiate another peaceful settlement and too weak to suppress all of these groups militarily. Yet perhaps the importance of reintegration is best demonstrated by the opportunity costs of its failure. If the Final Agreement succeeded, every citizen of Colombia could experience a majority of their life in a condition seldom seen by the Republic: peace. The government could establish a monopoly over force across the entire territory, closing the urban-rural gap by investing in the PDETs and following through on its promise to eliminate the paramilitary phenomenon. By funding crop-substitution programs established by the peace agreement, the state could finally nip the cocaine-trade at its source, making legal farming more profitable than growing coca. Thousands of ex-combatants could be reintegrated as productive members of society, and their ideology could be peacefultly incorporated into the political system. The gender and ethnicity-based approach of the Final Agreement could translate into a more equitable, accepting society. And most importantly, the structural causes which fueled conflict for so many decades—land inequality, political exclusion, state weakness, and norms of political violence—could be resolved. The potential for future violence, the number of grievances which could compel someone to take up a gun, could be greatly reduced.

Maybe the exceptionally broad scope of the Final Agreement doomed it to fail, at least to some extent. Yet peace will never succeed without a recognition of the structural causes of war and a concerted effort to redress them. Fixing reintegration programs alone is a stop-gap measure, a band-aid to prevent an imminent return to widespread conflict. Any sustainable peace will require much wider implementation of the stipulations of the Final Agreement, each of which faces daunting challenges of its own. But should ex-combatants abandon their commitment to reintegration in the face of threats from violent spoiler groups and dimming economic prospects, conflict will resume immediately, and the Final Agreement is forfeited entirely. This makes reintegration the vital fulcrum upon which Colombia’s future rests—if it succeeds, impetus for peace will cascade forth, and if it fails, the inertia towards war will become unstoppable.
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