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Disaffection, (Dis)Engagement and Grassroots Organising: Political Reintegration in the Colombian Peace Process

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Abstract:

This article examines how former combatants interpret and enact "political reintegration" in response to growing disillusionment with the political party that emerged from the 2016 Peace Agreement between the FARC and the Colombian government. Beyond provisions for the social and economic reintegration of ex-combatants, the Agreement mandated the FARC's transformation into a political party with congressional representation and temporary concessions. Yet the party's influence has remained marginal, constrained by low societal acceptance, poor electoral performance, organisational challenges, and internal divisions. Meanwhile, ex-combatants in rural settlements continue to navigate everyday life amid worsening economic hardship and public insecurity. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork in one such settlement, the article shows how disappointment with the implementation of the Peace Agreement, the FARC party's weak performance, and perceived abandonment by former leaders have fuelled widespread political disaffection among ex-combatants. At the same time, it traces how grassroots, female-led initiatives have mobilised to meet urgent socioeconomic needs, generating alternative political subjectivities and organisational forms beyond formal institutional channels. By illuminating these dynamics, the article offers new insights into the often-overlooked political dimensions of reintegration processes.

Keywords: ex-combatant reintegration, political disaffection, post-conflict, peacebuilding, rebel party theory, grassroots organising

Introduction

In 2016, the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia (FARC, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and the centre-right government of Juan Manuel Santos (2010-2018) signed a historic Peace Agreement ending 52 years of armed conflict. After disarming, approximately 12,000 ex-combatants started a reintegration process in multiple rural settlements called *Espacios Territoriales del Capacitación y Reintegración* (ETCRs, Territorial Spaces for Training and Reincorporation) created to facilitate reintegration into civilian life and for the deployment of funds, training, technical assistance and other interventions. The Peace Agreement also established the transition of the armed group into a legal political party, founded in 2017 as the *Fuerza Alternative Revolucionaria del Común* (FARC, Alternative Revolutionary Force of the Commons) and renamed *Comunes* in 2021. Despite being the

cornerstone "political reintegration",[1] the FARC party has suffered from low societal acceptance and legitimacy, poor electoral results, organisational problems and internal divisions (García-Sánchez & Carlin, 2020; Semana, 2019a). Its marginal role in Colombia's democracy has run parallel with the economic hardship and growing public insecurity hindering the reintegration process of ex-combatants in ETCRs and other FARC communities around the country.

This article draws on six-month-ethnographic fieldwork conducted over two periods, in 2019 and 2023, in the ETCR of El Estrecho situated in the Patía municipality in the southwestern department of Cauca. Through conversations with ex-combatants and participant observation of everyday life, I recorded how precarious living conditions, violence, disillusionment with former commanders-turned-politicians and the party's underperformance led to increasing political disaffection among ex-combatants. The centrality of their socioeconomic woes appeared to have overridden interest in the political dimension (electoral or other) of their reintegration. However, since 2023, a group of disenfranchised rank-and-file ex-combatants together with local guerrilla leaders have mobilised around common goals, engaging in collective organisation and action and developing new political subjectivities.

This article illuminates what "political reintegration" means for ordinary ex-combatants by foregrounding their political practices and discourse beyond participation in governments, parties, and elections. It begins by explaining how the FARC leadership envisioned the political dimension of reintegration during the peace process. Next, it provides a theoretical overview of scholarship on political reintegration, examining the multiple perspectives of ex-combatants and how they engage with the national polity in various ways. It then focuses on a female ex-combatant association in El Estrecho, analysing community organising and small-scale initiatives as everyday local forms of political reintegration. The article concludes that, even if not explicitly defined as "political," these initiatives contribute to fostering political awareness among disenfranchised ex-combatants, involving them in decision-making and empowering them to exercise their newly regained citizen rights. This analysis into the often-overlooked political dimensions of reintegration carry important implications for the ongoing implementation of Colombia's Peace Agreement and for other post-conflict contexts.

[1] Although the 2016 Peace Agreement introduced the term "reincorporation" to distinguish the FARC process from that of other armed groups, this article maintains the use of "reintegration", a term commonly used in both scholarship and practice in post-conflict and peacebuilding contexts.

The FARC Reintegration: A Collective Project and Political Imaginary

During the peace process, a bipartite Technical Sub-commission formed by FARC and government delegates established the terms for the ceasefire, laying down of weapons, and ex-combatants' reintegration. It was the first time in the history of peace negotiations that a government's counterpart, namely, an armed group, participated in drafting its own Disarmament, Demobilisation and Reintegration (DDR) (Rettberg & McFee, 2019). The Peace Agreement defined the FARC reintegration as a comprehensive, sustainable process of an exceptional and transitory nature comprising three interrelated dimensions: social, economic and political (Final Agreement, Point 3.2.). It called for the creation of a bilateral entity, the National Reincorporation Council (CNR), to institutionalise the FARC's participation in the design and evaluation of their own programmes (Final Agreement 3.2.2.1.). To promote a socioeconomic reintegration, the Agreement established a national cooperative umbrella organisation called *Economías Sociales del Común* (ECOMUN, Social Economies of the Common), a legal entity responsible for pooling, administering, and executing resources disbursed for the FARC's productive projects and activities (Final Agreement, Point 3.2.2.1.). With regards to political reintegration, the Agreement established the terms for the FARC's transition into a political party and granted it congressional representation for two legislative periods, funding, access to media, security guarantees and other temporary concessions until 2026 (Final Agreement, 3.2.1).

Beyond what was stipulated in the Peace Agreement, the FARC top leaders conceived of reintegration as an integral component of a much wider project of societal transformation and a means to advance political goals previously pursued through arms. During negotiations, they insisted that their troops should undergo their reintegration process collectively in FARC-controlled areas, and envisaged that the new party would parallel the insurgency's ideology and internal structure becoming a cohesive force in a post-conflict scenario. In addition, the FARC sought to pressure the state into expanding its institutional presence in conflict-affected territories and addressing the structural inequalities that perpetuated violence. Reintegration in this sense, more than the transition of demobilised combatants into civilian life, has been conceived of and discursively framed in the FARC's collective narrative as "*la continuación de la lucha por otros medios,"* (the continuation of the struggle through other means), a formulation coined at a FARC national meeting in 2016 (Álvarez Vanegas, 2016).

While the Peace Agreement represents a historical achievement in changing the FARC's approach to gaining power, its feeble political clout has become evident since their demobilisation. The FARC commanders overestimated both their support in rural areas and

their ability to regain it after demobilisation. Former fighters have struggled to maintain ties with civil society organisations and local communities have been distrustful of excombatants or wary of associating with them due to security risks (Murphy & Acosta, 2016). On a national level, the Comunes Party's political ambitions have faltered due to poor voter's support, reflecting public resentment towards the FARC. The Party, plagued by infighting and managed with a dogmatic, centralised approach by former leaders, has faced internal divisions over its handling of reintegration and its relationship with rural areas (Janetsky, 2021; Semana, 2019a). All of these factors have shaped how ordinary ex-combatants in El Estrecho have understood and engaged with the political dimension of their reintegration.

Political Role of Armed Actors in Scholarly Debates

Research within the fields of political science and international relations has primarily examined the political engagement of armed groups through their roles in post-conflict governance, power-sharing arrangements, political parties, and elections (De Zeeuw, 2008; Jarstad & Sisk, 2008; Matanock, 2017). This scholarship has largely focused on formal and institutional processes, overlooking the everyday and informal practices of political participation among ex-combatants. The centrality of rebel parties in the study of post-conflict politics is justified by the fact that political parties can become functional vehicles for ex-combatants to address legitimate grievances, "offering a formalised channel for politics to continue commensurate with democratic practices" (Söderström, 2015, p. 9). However, the so-called rebel-to-party literature (De Zeeuw, 2008; Ishiyama & Sindre, 2023; Kovacs & Hatz, 2018) has diverted attention away from how non-elite ex-combatants view and engage with politics beyond the electoral arena, or how they develop their own modes of political mobilisation outside their former insurgent organisations.

Peacebuilding theory has regarded the promotion of "formal and informal processes of political participation" as a key activity in post-conflict countries (Boutros-Ghali, 1992, p. 212) and has made ex-combatant political participation a declared goal of DDR programmes. In peacebuilding contexts, the political aspect of reintegration has largely been defined by the extent to which ex-combatants *need*, *should*, or *are willing* to embrace political and democratic ideals of inclusion, participation, and nonviolence. However, there are often implicit democratic assumptions embedded in these definitions. For example, examining political reintegration based on how much ex-combatants trust or participate in democratic institutions and processes—such as running for office or voting—presumes these avenues are available, safe, and accessible to them (Gomes-Porto et al., 2007; Humphreys & Weinstein, 2009; Pugel, 2009). This approach overlooks the fact that the quality of a democratic regime—especially in post-conflict contexts with low government legitimacy, weak institutions, and remnants of

authoritarianism—shapes how people in general (both ex-combatants and non-combatants) perceive and engage with “democracy”.

While important to analyse the conditions that facilitate or foreclose political participation, measuring the ex-combatants’ confidence in the democratic system alone does not offer a useful lens from which their everyday political practices and subjectivities can be examined. This is especially true, as their political mobilisation through social movements or peaceful protests may be motivated precisely by their lack of trust in and disenchantment with representative democracy. Finally, while the ex-combatants’ perception that non-violent political channels are viable to solve problems is important, so are their antagonistic views about politics. As Mouffe (2005) reminds us, our acceptance of the impossibility of a political community without antagonisms is essential to create and maintain a pluralistic democratic order. As such, distrust of politics and dissatisfaction with political leaders (a view shared by large segments of society) can be understood as the ex-combatants’ expression of their political subjectivity rather than as a negative assessment of their degree of political reintegration.

A limited conceptual understanding of what political reintegration means derives from the lack of a more systematic identification of the units of analysis involved (Söderström, 2015) That is, *who* reintegrates and into *what*? With regard to the first question, studies on post-conflict transitions and peacebuilding have often approached armed groups as if they had a unitary unproblematic identity, disregarding the great variations that exist in each group with regard to rank, motivations, life projects and personal experiences (McMullin, 2013; Özerdem & Podder, 2011). Scholarship on Colombia’s political reintegration since 2016, has approached the FARC as a unified entity transformed into a political party. It has explored, for example, popular support for Comunes and its electoral performance (García-Sánchez & Carlin, 2020; Nossa & Castilla, 2019) and the Party’s challenges and adaptation to Colombia’s democratic system (Rettberg & Moreno Martínez, 2023). However, these studies lack a systematic engagement with the diverse subgroups that make up the FARC population and have left everyday political practices and subjectivities outside the political party largely unexamined.

As for the second question, Zartman (1995), for example, defines political reintegration as the inclusion of ex-combatants in a political system that previously excluded them. Similarly, (Gomes-Porto et al., 2007) refers to political reintegration as the ex-combatants’ participation in or engagement with politics. In most cases, what constitutes “a political system” or “politics” remains left largely undefined or assumed to be self-evident. Even if understood as ex-combatants’ role and/or participation in formal state institutions and practices, this approach

does not take into account their ideas and everyday practices. Neither does the conceptualisation of political reintegration as participation in politics attend to ordinary ex-combatants' subjective experience of civilian life as political subjects and citizens in a post-conflict society.

On this point, it is pertinent to recall the distinction between "politics" and "the political" drawn by several scholars (Marchart, 2007; Mouffe, 2011; Wiley, 2016). Mouffe (2011) defines politics as the practical realm of governance, decision-making, and the operation of political institutions. The political, on the other hand, refers to the underlying dimension of power relations, conflicts, and antagonisms that define the essence and nature of societal organisation (Mouffe, 2011). What exactly constitutes "the political" has remained a subject of debate, though some political theorists argue that the more familiar term "polity" serves a similar purpose in highlighting the aspects of human interactions that underlie and influence "politics" as a formal practice (Voilrath, 1987). A polity can be understood as a form or process of civil government or constitution, or a state as a political entity, but also a politically organised society (Aydoğdu, 2023). According to Silva and Rossi (2018), three key dimensions define people's inclusion or participation in a national polity: individual rights, particularly the universal right to vote; collective rights, such as the right to form associations; and substantive citizenship rights, which are understood as the capacity to participate in and influence decision-making processes.

The notion of "polity" useful to define the environment into which former armed actors become (re)integrated after being partly excluded (or never having been socialised within) due to their participation in collective violence. FARC ex-combatants across the country have variously enacted everyday forms of political reintegration. They have, for example, participated in peaceful demonstrations, expressed their political voice on social media, made claims from the state, and engaged in alternative economic practices to counteract market forces. In other instances, they have formed various ex-combatants' associations to channel targeted funding and support for vulnerable groups (women, disabled).

In the ETCR of El Estrecho, midlevel cadres were active party members, and engaged with state actors and institutions at national and regional levels and became politically active through various programmes and governing bodies established by the Peace Agreement. With regards to lower-rank ex-combatants, most of them did not participate in party politics, campaigning, running for office, or any form of partisan mobilisation, apart from voting en masse during elections. In 2019, their immediate concerns and future plans were obtaining better homes, sustainable livelihoods and providing for their children rather than the political

ascendancy of the Party. In general, they defined reintegration in terms of the satisfaction of basic needs, physical security, and social acceptance, rather than collective organisation or political mobilisation. However, by 2023, disenfranchised ex-combatants had begun to organise around shared economic and social concerns and to develop small-scale initiatives to improve their living conditions.

Unpacking the ex-combatant category and adopting more nuanced definitions the “polity” (both as political regime and a politically organised society) allow us to see political reintegration beyond representational channels and to acknowledge collective actions, grassroots activism or the exercise of citizen rights as forms of engaging with a political community. These non-formal practices of political reintegration may be either closely tied to the ex-combatant political movements or, on the contrary, express antagonism towards former leaders. Rather than confining political reintegration to the transformation of armed groups into political parties, it must be seen as a process encompassing the diverse and sometimes contradictory ways in which former combatants relate to the polity and develop new political subjectivities during their transition to civilian life.

Rank-and-File Ex-Combatants and Midlevel Cadres: Political Disaffection and Pragmatic Detachment

In the ETCR of El Estrecho but also in other reintegration areas, the first years of implementation have been marked by poor living infrastructure, insufficient support for productive activities, and growing public insecurity. Across the country, the National Liberation Army (ELN)—last remaining guerrilla—various FARC splinter groups, and paramilitary successor groups, all linked to drug cartels, started occupying areas previously controlled by the FARC. This increased the risks of recidivism, forced recruitment, and retaliation against the demobilised combatants. A confluence of these factors led to a massive exodus of ex-combatants away from the ETCRs in search of security and better living conditions. The situation for the ex-combatants in El Estrecho was so dire that the ETCR had to be relocated from the department of Nariño to Cauca in November 2017. Its population dwindled from over 230 to just 80, with only 40 living permanently in makeshift shelters made of wood, plastic and tarpaulin.

The relocation caused further delays in education, training, and the implementation of other reintegration activities. In terms of economic reintegration, only one agricultural project was approved, benefiting 31 members of the ETCR, while the rest waited for guidance and technical support on how to invest their seed capital granted as part of the reintegration package. By mid-2019, public opinion and media had characterised the ETCR of El Estrecho

as “the most underdeveloped in the country” (Verdad Abierta, 2018). In this context of economic precarity and uncertainty, the ex-combatants in El Estrecho grew increasingly disillusioned with the implementation process and felt betrayed by the government, further reinforcing the FARC’s historical antagonism towards the state. Their anger and disappointment were compounded by fears over their legal and economic security after the presidential victory of Iván Duque (2018-2022), from a right-wing party opposed to the Santos government and a key detractor of the peace process with the FARC, who, upon taking office, announced amendments to the Peace Agreement.

For the ex-combatants in El Estrecho, the precarity of the initial transition period shaped their reintegration reality irrevocably. Regarding the political dimension of reintegration, a disaffected cohort of rank-and-file combatants held reductive views of political participation, equating it solely with party politics and struggling to identify a political dimension in their everyday reintegration experiences. Consequently, political reintegration was filtered through pre-existing attitudes toward politics, which were perceived as dishonest politicking, coupled with feelings of abandonment by former leaders seen as out of touch with those in the ETCRs. They accused Party leaders of abandoning them and expressed resentment toward the lucrative salaries earned by Comunes delegates in Congress. However, rank-and-file disaffection was not solely directed at the leaders’ privileges but also stemmed from their lack of physical presence and perceived disconnection from the FARC base.

As Themner (2012, p. 219) notes about African ex-combatants, extended periods away from home, often growing into adulthood within armed groups, leaves rank-and-file members with few acquaintances beyond their wartime comrades. After demobilisations, this isolation makes them more dependent on their former networks and leadership figures. Due to the FARC’s vertical structure, common among insurgent groups, those at the bottom of the hierarchy became accustomed to having their everyday problems solved by their leaders. This fostered an emotional attachment and created an expectation among ordinary ex-combatants that their leaders would stay physically close, maintain direct contact with their bases, and continuously provide guidance and moral support.

That was the case of the majority of lower-rank ex-combatants in El Estrecho who belonged to traditionally marginalised sectors, had joined the FARC at the age of fifteen or younger and had four years of schooling on average. Their reasons for joining the insurgency were generally, physical and economic security, for example, running away from abusive relatives, exploitative work conditions or poverty. Many of them did not necessarily take up arms to fight for the FARC’s political ideals, but because becoming a member of an armed group was the

only viable life choice in their home towns and villages. During the early reintegration process, they received education and training for a few hours a week. The rest of the time, they occupied themselves with domestic and parenting chores or stayed cooped up in their tarpaulin shelters, sleeping or watching TV, waiting for government interventions and instructions from their former commanders.

With regards to midlevel commanders, usually more educated cadres driven by their revolutionary ideals, they also grew increasingly disillusioned with their political reintegration. The role of FARC's midlevel cadres is key to understanding the challenges affecting the group's ability to find its social, economic and political footing (International Crisis Group, 2021). Despite the heterogenous level of responsibility and status among the FARC's midlevel cadres, these were arguably in the strongest position to become cooperative leaders and local political figures after the conflict. However, very few of them have occupied those roles. Some abandoned the process early due to public insecurity or fears over whether the Duque government would uphold the Agreement's amnesty law (Semana, 2019b). A small but significant number have formed FARC dissident factions seeking to maintain personal status, physical security or economic incentives through their involvement in illicit economies. The exodus of midlevel cadres from reintegration areas has created a local leadership deficit, which undermined the organisation and productive capacity of many FARC collectives.

In El Estrecho, midlevel cadres have followed various post-accord paths, with many of them initially facilitating the transition, acting as interlocutors with the central government and international actors, and playing roles at the national level. Others maintained only a nominal presence in the ETCR. Although they were formal members of the ETCR, they lived outside in villages and town and were rarely present at meetings, training courses and other reintegration activities. While rank-and-file ex-combatants showed deference and did not accuse them of abandonment, these "absentee leaders," through their actions or omissions, also contributed to the local leadership deficit and political disaffection in El Estrecho.

In other cases, midlevel commanders, eschewed participation in political activities, leadership roles or grassroots activism due to the risk of violence, the difficulties to organise their former subordinates and disillusionment with Comunes. Many of them maintained party membership while pragmatically detaching from political participation, prioritising family, education and other aspects of civilian life. The lack of interaction with the FARC leadership was not only decried by lower-rank combatants. Midlevel cadres also felt that Comunes was too devoted to national politics and complained that ETCR coordinators and local leaders have been left to confront the reintegration challenges alone.

By 2023, disillusionment was no longer unidirectional or uniformly shared against one single entity: the state. Instead, it flowed in different directions, with the ex-combatants' sense of abandonment and neglect projected onto their former commanders, party leaders, and each other. Many authors have examined the issue of ex-combatant disaffection. In El Salvador, "post-insurgency disillusionment" arose as the revolutionary struggle lost its meaning after the peace accord (Sprenkels, 2018). Despite the promise of peace and prosperity, the country remained poor and violent, disheartening those who fought for democracy (Moodie, 2013). Similarly, (Silber, 2011) offers extensive narratives about waning activism, deception, disillusionment, and economic migration among former combatants. In Northern Ireland, South Africa, and Sri Lanka, ex-combatants have voiced their struggles in relation to the transition to peace, grappling with the moral judgments and societal expectations that hinder their pursuit of a normal life (Brewer & Wahidin, 2021). A central theme in the disillusionment of ex-combatants around the world results from the ever-increasing gap between what is promised by reintegration interventions and what can realistically be achieved (McMullin, 2013; Metsola, 2006). In Colombia, seven years into implementation, many of these feelings have emerged forcefully from the ex-combatants' narratives. However, disaffection and political disengagement have been largely associated with their unfulfilled expectation of responsive leaders who are physically present and connected, able to share ordinary ex-combatants' grievances and offer solutions, solidarity, and moral support.

Ownership, Empowerment and Community Organising

In 2021, ex-combatants in El Estrecho appointed Teresa as the new ETCR coordinator. As a former midlevel commander, Teresa was admired and respected by both her subordinates and civilians. She had joined the FARC in the late 1980s after witnessing the massacre of a dozen fellow UP (Patriotic Union) militants by paramilitaries in the northwest conflict region of Urabá. In her mid-fifties, she seemed toughened by the duress of war but also extremely empathetic towards the suffering of others. Teresa stressed that the Peace Agreement was a political pact and that reintegration required a consensual and participatory approach that included the state, FARC members, their families and civilians from conflict-affected communities. She acknowledged they had been lagging behind in the ETCR but declared they had now decided to stop organising workshops and instead *hacerse cargo de su reincorporación* (take ownership of their reincorporación).

Teresa worked with three women's associations. One of them was Women, Peace and Reconciliation) led by Soledad, another seasoned midlevel cadre, and composed of female FARC ex-combatants, militias, collaborators, and female relatives. The other two groups

comprised local women from El Estrecho and other neighbouring veredas. The recent upsurge of women's collective organising had been prompted by the government's decision to resuscitate an old UN resolution, and put it at the centre of its gender-focused development agenda. The UN Security Council Resolution 1325, introduced in 2000, called for special measures to address the impact of war on women and girls and to promote women's participation in conflict resolution, peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. Despite Colombian women's organisations' insistence on the need to implement Resolution 1325, their calls remained largely ignored until 2022. That year, the election of Gustavo Petro (2022-2026) a pro-peace, left-wing presidential government gave fresh impetus to the women's movement (Cancillería, 2023).

One of the international NGOs committed to promoting the implementation of the Resolution in Colombia is the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (WILPF), an organisation doing peace activism in several countries around the world. As Teresa and Soledad recounted, they had just learned that their first project proposals had been approved and had received a funding package of 70 million Colombian pesos (approximately £13,500) from WILPF and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Other national and international NGOs had also allocated funds and technical support for these and other projects. A different grassroot initiative was a feminist school, which held fortnightly sessions. Through games, role plays, and other ludic activities, women from the ETCR and the local veredas—gradually joined by some curious men—learned about and discussed themes like women's rights, the prevention of gender-based violence, and the importance of girls' education. Another project was the establishment of a *Casa de la Mujer*, a shelter for women and girls experiencing or at risk of domestic or sexual violence.

Taking advantage of improved housing and basic services in the ETCR, and a more favourable national political climate, Women, Peace and Reconciliation and the other two associations were positively transforming people's lives in El Estrecho. These nascent initiatives were a practical way to solve some of their everyday problems, and an initial step towards some form of economic autonomy, community organising, and empowerment. Although in 2019 there were similar processes whereby international organisations disbursed funds for reintegration and development projects—a common practice in post-conflict scenarios worldwide —this time two fundamental differences were noticeable.

First, as a formalised association, participating ex-combatants and other members became direct interlocutors with government agencies and donor organisations. Government agencies were still informed and maintained a consultative role in these donor-funded projects, but it no

longer played the central role in the coordination, execution and evaluation of such initiatives. Since taking on the role as ETCR coordinator, Teresa has been approached by several institutions and organisations asking her to provide lists and details about the ex-FARC population in El Estrecho in order to help them formulate project proposals. “I do not send any lists. Instead, I suggest that they come here, we sit down, talk about our specific needs, and come up with a plan together”. This was what Teresa meant by “taking ownership”.

Second, there was a change in attitudes, especially among a previously disaffected and unmotivated group of lower-rank ex-combatants. While tending to domestic chores and watching TV reality shows had been routine during my first visit, under a new leadership, female rank-and-file ex-combatants were beginning to learn about grassroots organising. This group, together with new arrivals, was attending meetings, deliberating, communicating as well as navigating tensions and resolving disputes. They were also learning about invoicing, filling forms, book-keeping and other laborious bureaucratic procedures with which they were unfamiliar before.

DDR programmes in Colombia and other countries often offer training and support to help ex-combatants with bureaucratic procedures, design of project proposals and other aspects of civilian life (Colletta et al., 1996). Yet, local leaders—in the FARC’s case, former midlevel cadres—are better equipped to mobilise and empower their former subordinates due to their high standing, personal relations, and the constant physical presence required to build trust among a population characterised by their very sense of disenfranchisement. In this sense, Teresa and Soledad exemplify what Lopera-Arbeláez et al. (2023) call local transitional leaders, referring to former unit commanders and other midlevel cadres who have played a crucial role in mobilising rank-and-file ex-combatants, guiding the organisation through its transition from military authority to civilian participation, and establishing links with other sectors of society and the state. Teresa’s and Soledad’s commitment to foster inclusivity and wider civic participation resonate with well documented success stories in other ETCRs, where former midlevel commanders had mobilised ex-combatants and civilian constituencies towards a semi-autonomous and more sustainable collective reintegration model (Cortés-Urquijo & Verschoor, 2021; Forero Rueda, 2019; Tamayo & Hart, 2022). As Lopera-Arbeláez et al. (2023) illustrate, FARC transitional leaders in both urban and rural settings have motivated the creation of cooperatives and solidarity projects based on participatory and consultative approaches, and sensitivity to members’ different capacities.

In many post-conflict countries, mobilisation through interest groups provide channels for both ex-combatants and host communities to take up new claims, and advance individual or

collective projects linked to socioeconomic reintegration and post-conflict reconciliation (Dudouet & Cruz Almeida, 2022). These mechanisms of civic participation in decision-making may constitute alternative forms of political reintegration (outside political parties)—understood as forms of engagement with the polity—even if their objectives are not framed in explicit political terms. This resonates with Baine's (2017) conception of "the political", which encompasses the everyday practices and strategies through which grassroots leaders, particularly women, navigate power relations and assert their agency in post-conflict settings. Local Community leaders and members of the non-combatant women associations mentioned that Teresa had been one of those FARC cadres who had managed to change "the *comandante* chip"; suggesting a conversion from military authority into civil society leadership. The "changing the chip" metaphor echoes what Martin et al. (2021, p. 211) describe as former rebels "reinventing themselves" as agents who, through their association with political parties or non-government organisations, devote their attention primarily to civilian affairs.

By communicating with local bureaucrats, agencies, institutions and ordinary people, both FARC and non-FARC, local transitional leaders act as building bridges between actors—government agencies, local authorities, ordinary ex-combatants— that may have been thus far disconnected. They have translated the essence of reintegration as a comprehensive process taking place among these different actors and making it legible to all concerned. Initiatives like the women's associations, of which there are many in various ETCRs other informal ex-combatant settlements around the country, have reframed the FARC's political struggle from their declared goal of 'seizing power' to addressing people's immediate needs and pursuing economic autonomy. They have also broadened civic participation and fostered inclusivity from the ground up, sometimes from inside, but mostly outside Comunes or other political parties

Conclusions

This article has explored how ordinary ex-combatants have understood their political reintegration and how they have engaged with the national polity, both within the Comunes Party and outside it. As the FARC leadership's vision for political reintegration falters and Comunes struggles to survive in Colombia's political system, ordinary ex-combatants have been filtered through an emotional lens. They have discursively framed political processes and actors as tantamount to dishonest politicking and has been unsure of what "political reintegration" meant in their everyday lives. They have criticised their former top commanders for becoming absorbed by the very system they fought against for decades while simultaneously longing for the physical presence of their former leaders to offer solutions and moral support. Similarly, a more politically experienced cohort of midlevel cadres has been

discouraged from participating in political activities due to rising violence and the challenge of adapting their military leadership style, leading to their pragmatic detachment from local leadership and active political participation. Instead, they have chosen reintegration pathways that prioritise personal ambitions over collective efforts and community organisation.

While the ETCR in El Estrecho still lags behind in its organisation, it has taken important steps towards mobilising people and taking ownership of their own reintegration through community initiatives and associations. Through sectoral interest groups, especially women's associations, lower rank ex-combatants and civil society groups in El Estrecho have developed new practices and subjectivities, which although not explicitly acknowledged as political, exemplify alternative forms of political reintegration. The post-accord political mobilisation of the FARC encapsulated in the common currency of "the continuation of the struggle" can be better understood by teasing out the different struggles that ex-combatants face in their transition to civilians. These might not necessarily be seizing power through formal institutional politics, but taking action to achieve a wide range of goals—improve living conditions, rights protection, civic participation in local decision-making, demanding state action, and channelling resources.

By moving beyond the traditional view of transforming armed rebel movements into political parties, my analysis expands the concept of political reintegration. It frames reintegration as a gradual process where ex-combatants become increasingly involved in the broader political community, develop political awareness, and are empowered to mobilise, engage in decision-making, and address issues through non-violent means, while also exercising their rights as citizens. These practices infuse alternative interpretations of the "continuation of struggle" and imbue ex-combatants' everyday reintegration initiatives with political meaning.

Conflict of Interests Statement

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest related to the publication of this manuscript. No financial, personal, or professional relationships exist that could have influenced the research or its presentation.

Research Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this ethnographic study are contained within the manuscript. Raw field notes and interview transcripts are not publicly available due to ethical considerations and to protect the confidentiality and anonymity of research participants.

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