

Paramilitarism in a Post-Demobilization Context? Insights from the Department of Antioquia in Colombia

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Abstract

Despite efforts employed by the Colombian state to demobilize paramilitary groups and to tackle organized crime structures since 2003, Colombia today remains characterized by a repressive apparatus of social control by paramilitary successor groups in certain sectors of the population. Drawing on information from Colombia's second-largest city – Medellín – and various rural areas of the Department of Antioquia, this work offers a characterization of the legacies of the paramilitary phenomenon, and its continuities and transformations in relation to one particular paramilitary confederation, the *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC). In many regions, the AUC gained territorial, economic, and social control by managing the illegal drug economy and perpetrating political violence against leftist parties and social organizations. Paramilitaries have thus exerted what we refer to as *status quo-oriented violence*. As we illustrate for the case of Medellín, mechanisms of territorial, economic, and social control, as well as the particular manifestations of violence related to these mechanisms, have been transferred to paramilitary successor groups. The findings are mainly based on the outcomes of qualitative field research carried out in Medellín in mid-2015. *Keywords:* Medellín, Department of Antioquia, social, economic, and territorial control, paramilitary successor groups, organized crime, Colombia.

Resumen: Paramilitarismo en un contexto post-desmovilización? Perspectivas desde el Departamento de Antioquia en Colombia

A pesar de los esfuerzos desplegados desde el año 2003 por el Estado colombiano para desmovilizar a los grupos paramilitares y hacer frente a las estructuras de crimen organizado, la Colombia de hoy sigue estando caracterizada por la existencia de un aparato represivo de control social ejercido por los grupos sucesores del paramilitarismo sobre ciertos sectores de la población. Partiendo de fuentes informativas procedentes de la segunda ciudad más grande de Colombia – Medellín – y de algunas zonas rurales del Departamento de Antioquia, este trabajo ofrece una caracterización de los legados del fenómeno paramilitar, sus continuidades y transformaciones en relación a una confederación paramilitar en particular, las Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia (AUC). En muchas regiones del país, las AUC lograron

establecer un control territorial, económico y social por medio de la gestión de la economía ilegal del narcotráfico y la perpetración de una violencia política contra partidos de izquierda y organizaciones sociales. Así, los paramilitares ejercieron lo que nosotros denominamos una *violencia orientada al mantenimiento del status quo*. Tal como ilustramos para el caso de la ciudad de Medellín, tales mecanismos de control territorial, económico y social, así como sus manifestaciones particulares de violencia inherentes a dichos dispositivos, han sido transferidos a los grupos sucesores del paramilitarismo. Los hallazgos de este estudio se basan principalmente en los resultados de una investigación de campo de carácter cualitativo llevada a cabo en Medellín a mediados del año 2015. *Palabras clave*: Medellín, Departamento de Antioquia, control territorial, económico y social, grupos sucesores del paramilitarismo, crimen organizado, Colombia.

Recent developments in Colombia's peace process – both the announcement of peace negotiations between the national government and ELN¹ guerrillas in March 2016 and the signing of a peace agreement by Colombian government and the left-wing FARC² rebels in September 2016 – promise to finally put an end to the oldest civil war in Latin America.

However, despite these positive steps to end the civil war and reduce violence in Colombia, the country is still challenged by additional armed non-state actors: the paramilitary successor groups. After a demobilization process (2002-2006) managed by the president at the time, Álvaro Uribe (2002-2010), the national paramilitary confederation *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia*³ (AUC) was formally dissolved. However, various mass media sources, research institutes, and non-governmental organizations have reported on the persistence of paramilitary violence since then. What is more, a paramilitary legacy has remained – both militarily and culturally. To this day, it is deeply rooted in Colombian society, as stressed by Iván Velásquez, former assistant judge of the Colombian Supreme Court of Justice (*VerdadAbierta.com*, 2015). Even today, paramilitary successor groups known as *bandas criminales*⁴ – BACRIM, *grupos emergentes*,⁵ or *combos* pursue functions of territorial, social, and economic control exerted by violent means.

Drawing on insights from qualitative fieldwork carried out in mid-2015 in Colombia's second-largest city, Medellín, located in the central north of the country, this paper traces the trajectory of paramilitarism in one of the regions most affected by paramilitary violence during the years of AUC's activities, the Department of Antioquia. We consider the paramilitaries to have exerted a *status quo-oriented violence* to ensure both the established political power structures and the achievement of their private economic interests. With the help of phenomenological contributions by the existing literature on *social orders of violence by armed non-state actors* and suggestions by Colombian think tanks – in particular by the *Observatorio de Seguridad Humana de Medellín*⁶ (OSHM) and the *Instituto Popular de Capacitación*⁷ (IPC), which have developed indicators on human security and on mechanisms of social control by armed non-state actors, we try to operationalize the notion of status quo-

oriented violence in the case of paramilitary successor groups. From a bottom-up perspective, we focus on the daily lives of many Colombian citizens to demonstrate that this paramilitary actor has only undergone a partial transformation since the demobilization process ten years ago. Aside from the obvious organizational transformation of a counterinsurgent force, paramilitary successor groups continue to exert a persistent influence on community life by maintaining a violent social order. Hence, this article tries to operationalize the societal dimension of the enduring 'paramilitary legacy' in the country.

Social orders of violence and the reproduction of armed non-state actors

Throughout the Colombian civil war, paramilitary groups controlled various regions and established certain forms of rule over local communities. By investigating the formation of 'local orders' by armed non-state actors at the micro-level in Colombia, Arjona (2010, p. 199) highlighted the fact that 'armed groups can approach their role as rulers in different ways, from limiting their intervention to the maintenance of public order, to becoming a local government that deals with every aspect of civilians' lives'. Several authors have already referred to the establishment of social orders by armed non-state actors in civil wars (Keen, 2000; Bakonyi et al., 2006; Kalyvas et al., 2008; Akude et al., 2011; Staniland, 2012). Wars do not solely represent chaos and anarchy, but daily life – such as rules and norms – becomes organized in a certain way despite violence, fear, and oppression. Drawing on elaborations by German authors referring to *Gewaltordnungen*, Siegelberg & Hensell (2006) define an order of violence as a social order particularly based on the threat or application of physical violence. Promoters of local social orders under civil war conditions may be armed non-state actors, who become *de facto* rulers in those regions where state institutions are barely present. In order to maintain control effectively, armed groups must relate to the local population to gain ideological supporters or labour, and to get useful information and valuable resources to live on, such as food and shelter (Arjona, 2010). As Davis (2009, p. 226) notes, armed non-state actors develop so-called 'imagined communities', based on loyalty according to ethnicity, race, or religion. By offering new forms of wealth, employment, and belief systems, these imagined communities constitute functional equivalents to the nation-state during civil war times. As Davis (2009, p. 230) further indicates, armed non-state actors therefore occupy a certain locality to exert control over the local population. Many of them choose municipalities or neighbourhoods that are rich in natural resources. Exploiting the latter allows them both to maintain and broaden their violent capacities. In many civil war settings, the presence of armed actors, their antagonistic relationship to state and population – and hence the resulting violence – may persist at the local level for years, even after demobilization processes and peace agreements have been reached.

The changing nature of armed non-state actors has already been examined under the headings of ‘transformation’ and ‘reproduction’. On the one hand, the transformation of armed actors is closely related to their integration into civil life and/or as political actors in post-conflict settings (Dayton & Kriesberg, 2009; Berdal & Ucko, 2009). Peacebuilding literature focuses on instruments such as disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) programmes for ex-combatants and subsequent steps of security sector reform and transitional justice mechanisms (Cutter, 2009). Furthermore, some authors have studied the political transformation of specific types of non-state armed groups – mostly rebel groups – into political parties (Söderberg Kovacs, 2008; De Zeeuw, 2008). On the other hand, the reproduction of armed non-state actors has often been examined from an economic perspective (Keen, 2000; Elwert, 1997), focusing on the perpetuation of (criminal) economic activities within so-called ‘war economies’.

However, a phenomenological perspective, which focuses on social orders of violence, provides for a rather broad array of dimensions beyond considerations on ‘transformation’ and ‘reproduction’. This way, it is possible to analyse the establishment of an entire social order by an armed non-state actor, e.g. by referring to ‘multiple orders’ created by different (armed) actors (Arjona, 2010), by examining the problem of legitimacy and processes of self-legitimization by armed non-state actors (Schlichte, 2009) or by developing a typology of wartime political orders between the state and insurgents (Staniland, 2012). This latter approach presents an elaborate characterization of the mutual relationships among state actors and insurgents, focusing on two dimensions: distribution of territorial control and level of cooperation. Using these elaborations as a starting point, this work tries to qualitatively operationalize how local orders of violence have been shaped by paramilitary successor groups – which we differentiate from pure criminal organizations – in the case of the Department of Antioquia, putting special emphasis on the city of Medellín.

Paramilitary successor groups and social orders of violence

In Colombia, despite the formal demobilization process of the AUC, some sectors of the population still live under illegal coercive violent orders established by paramilitary successor groups. According to the Colombian government’s narrative, these are referred to as BACRIM, pure criminal groups that constitute the remnants of the traditional paramilitarism based on a counterinsurgency logic that was usurped by drug-traffickers (Hristov, 2014, p. 51). Nevertheless, there has been an intensive debate on how to classify these groups, based on their different origins, motivations, and members (Granada et al., 2009). Paramilitary successor groups primarily include demobilized paramilitaries that reorganized themselves, followed secondarily by former paramilitary fighters who did not take part in the demobilization process, and thirdly constitute new criminal groups, linked to illicit drug traffickers and comprising gang members

and former guerrilla combatants, as well as children and adolescents (Massé, 2011; Prieto, 2013). Nussio (2016) notes that the contribution of ex-combatants in BACRIM membership and to Colombia's post-conflict violence is somewhat overestimated, since the ex-paramilitary fighters are growing old and armed groups are characterized by very high personnel turnover.

Subsequently, within the scientific debate on BACRIM the criminal nature of these groups has received more attention, while their political motivations – and therefore a central legacy to the AUC-paramilitaries – have been less discussed (Prieto, 2013; Rozema, 2008; McDermott, 2014; Echandía, 2013; CNRR, 2007). Nevertheless, some authors have emphasized the paramilitary features of some of BACRIM's actions, such as the infiltration of public institutions (including the military and police forces), and the control of local and regional politicians (Espitia, 2012). Other authors have asserted that the effects of BACRIM violence are still political (Kurtenbach, 2015) or even 'paramilitary' (Krakowski, 2015). The primary victims of the activities of these paramilitary successor groups are still civilians who are forcibly displaced or are compelled to live under the authority of one of the BACRIMs. BACRIM violence exhibits a political character, since it is selectively used by different advocacy groups, such as by opponents to the negotiation processes with FARC and ELN rebels (Zelik, 2015, p. 381).

As the 21st semi-annual report by MAPP-OEA⁸ (2016) indicates, the BACRIM have recently become more fragmented in light of the capture of some main BACRIM leaders and the seizure of assets through military operations. However, in many local settings, paramilitary remnants continue to play the same role as their predecessors, as *InSight Crime* (2013) has documented for the Urabá sub-region, the BACRIM known as 'Los Urabeños' do not engage in massacres and open violence as their predecessors but try to control local population through fear, with constant threats and occasional selective killings against land campaigners and the peasant population. The BACRIM therefore share a fundamental characteristic with former AUC paramilitaries: they are the 'mercenary muscle serving the needs of the long-standing counterland reform alliance between business and paramilitarism'. MAPP-OEA also provides examples of other rural areas, like Bajo Cauca Antioqueño and the south of the Department César, where Los Urabeños and the Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia still maintain powerful armed structures, wear uniforms, and engage in smuggling, illegal mining, and extortion, and get occasionally involved in violent clashes with other criminal bands for territorial control (MAPP-OEA, 2016, p. 24).

In the particular urban context of the departmental capital, Medellín, the DDR process has shown highly contradictory results, such as a significant decrease in the number of homicides, while at the same time several criminal groups have consolidated themselves as a complex organized crime network (Rozema, 2008). In the scope of this framework, the OSHM, in its Report on Human Security (2012), provided an analytical framework for systematically

analysing the persistence of social orders of violence in the aftermath of paramilitary demobilization. The OSHM presents a detailed catalogue of indicators for qualitatively measuring *territorial*, *economic*, and *social control* by illegal armed groups within different communities inside the city of Medellín. Following the OSHM model (2012, pp. 51-54), control devices by armed non-state actors can be grouped into three categories: social and political, economic, and territorial control. *Social and political control* includes the imposition of practices, rules, and behaviour patterns on a community's everyday life. By means of generating fear through selective punishment and indiscriminate attacks against the local population, illegal armed groups seek to establish an authoritarian and para-state order as a way to legitimize themselves as a capable and dominant actor in a given region. For its part, *economic control* is aimed at monopolizing legal, illegal, formal, and informal economic activities, both in the public and private realm. By mostly violent means, such as extortion of transportation companies, businesspeople, and simple workmen alike, illegal groups strengthen their capabilities and may offer greater incentives to those who submit to its rule. Finally, *territorial control* is used to establish a physical permanent presence and coercive domination over a given territory. Therefore, armed groups set down illegal borders which delineate spaces of violent confrontation. To keep up this control, they monitor these borders by means of vigilante forces, the systematic displacement of people living within these spaces, and even co-option of members of the public police and military forces to protect their territory, among other means.

Since the label 'BACRIM' is mostly applied by mass media and government officials to describe the *bandas* and *combos* still operating today in different municipalities of the Department of Antioquia, the main trend of discourse on paramilitary legacies puts emphasis on the persistence of the criminal nature of post-demobilization groups. Although we do not underestimate the criminal nature of paramilitary successor groups operating in the Department of Antioquia, and in particular in Medellín, in this paper we want to highlight the paramilitary continuities. Our main argument is that the traces of continuity with the AUC's patterns of action are observable in the deployment of devices for establishing a systematic violent social order by paramilitary successor groups. The creation of such an order is not only a way for tapping into criminal activities and illegal economies, but it allows keeping and exerting a system of domination on the civil population, what we call a *status quo-oriented violence* (Schneckener, 2015).⁹

Taking the Department of Antioquia as an example, we argue that two kinds of paramilitary legacies may be observed in today's Colombia. First, the BACRIM still include a crucial feature of paramilitary structures, which is the application of political violence that we call *status quo-oriented violence*, expressed through the deployment of selective violence against certain social groups. This becomes manifest especially in the rural areas of the Department of Antioquia. Secondly, we argue that this specific form of violence is also

deployed by armed groups in the urban context. Paramilitary successor groups uphold local orders of violence in the city of Medellín, which contribute to a perceived 'paramilitarism' by the local population. However, in contrast to rural areas, in the urban realm this violence is exerted in a systematic way, through permanent devices of territorial, economic, and social control. To test this, the following research is based on ethnographic and qualitative sources obtained from fieldwork, which give in essence an account of the paramilitary legacy from the perspective of common citizens.

The ascendancy, consolidation, and demobilization of Colombian paramilitarism (1982-2006)

Due to its richness in natural resources and its strategic location, the Department of Antioquia became one of the most violent regions during the civil war and has since experienced the presence of guerrilla groups, paramilitaries, and drug dealers alike. In particular, Medellín has undergone three major stages of paramilitary evolution, from the era of narcoterrorism under Pablo Escobar (1988-1993), to the urbanization of violent conflict (1993-2002), to the consolidation of paramilitary dominance over other conflict actors in the city (2002-2003) (Llorente & Palou, 2011). In this sense, compared to other regions in the country's central north, Antioquia stands out as the department in which the early fusion of the initial counterinsurgent project with criminal objectives linked to the drug business becomes most apparent. Therefore, detailed analysis of Medellín and some examples of the countryside are most suited to illustrate paramilitary and post-paramilitary violence in Colombia.

Since the mid-1980s, more than 150 small criminal gangs had operated in Medellín and the neighbouring areas. These gangs – mainly groups of young men – emerged initially as small criminal groups that committed thefts, burglaries, and other minor offenses. Later when they were subsumed under the hegemony of Pablo Escobar's criminal enterprise, the Medellín Cartel, they transformed into a complex criminal network and worked as drug dealers and contract killers (Rozema, 2007, p. 540; Jaramillo & Gil, 2014, p. 132). With the fracturing of this drug cartel after the murder of its leader in December 1993, such gangs were forced to regroup around the subsequent criminal organization, the Office of Envigado, now under the leadership of Diego Fernando Murillo – alias Don Berna – one of the main leaders of *Los Pepes*,¹⁰ a coalition of Escobar's foes that made the collapse of the Medellín Cartel possible.

During the 1990s, preceding the demobilization efforts launched by the Uribe administration, the municipal government of Medellín tried unsuccessfully to implement pacts and peace processes with the armed actors operating in the city. Created in 1995, the *Oficina de Paz y Convivencia*¹¹ of the Medellín Mayor's Office backed the negotiation of informal truces between gangs, by means of training community mediators, providing financial incentives, and promoting agreements among gangs (Cruz & Durán-Martínez, 2016, p. 202).

By July 1999, mediation processes aimed at setting *pactos de convivencia*¹² and supported by the local government involved around 160 *bandas* and *combos*, representing around 1,600 people from 86 neighbourhoods of the city (Vélez, 2001, p. 69). However, these efforts did not work in the long run, because the agreements were not backed up with a political or legal framework, and did not involve efforts for the demobilization of the youth gang members or any incentives for social reintegration, such as education or job creation programmes (Rozema, 2008, p. 436).

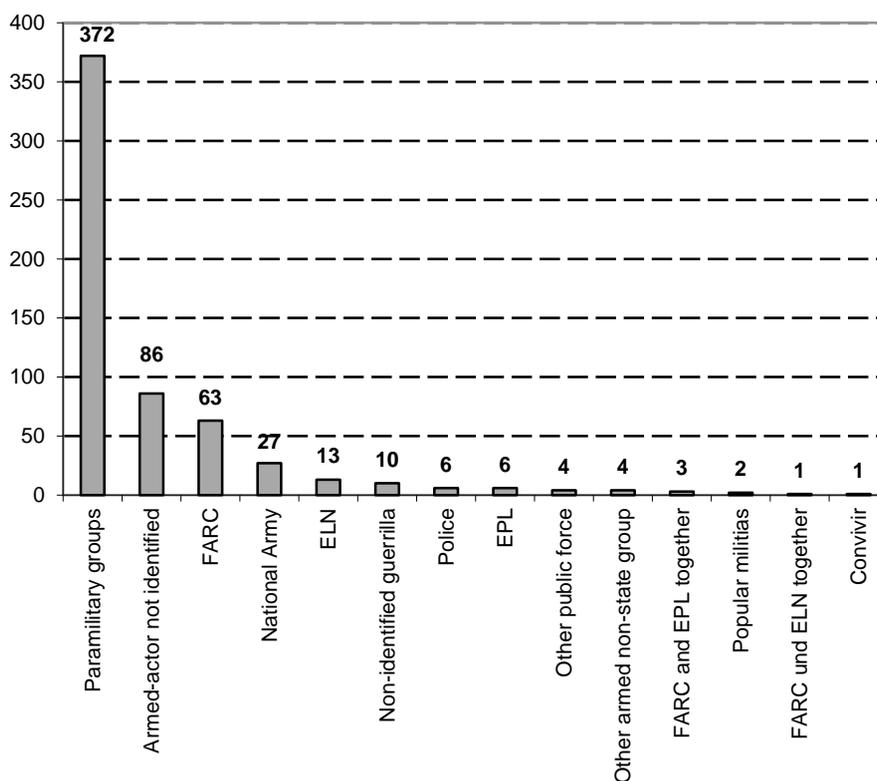
Years later, the fusion between these pre-existing criminal gangs linked to the drug and criminal industry and the counterinsurgency project became clear with the creation of the national paramilitary umbrella organization, the AUC. Paramilitary groups emerged in the 1980s following the logic of counterinsurgency and this later led to the formation of the AUC confederation. Cattle breeders and large landowners from Antioquia's countryside, both disappointed by efforts by the President at the time, Belisario Betancur (1982-1984), to negotiate with guerrilla groups¹³ and, at the same time, affected by the guerrillas' practices of kidnapping, decided to combine their efforts and organize self-defence groups to protect their businesses. However, this locally inspired paramilitarism was already connected from its beginnings to the growing influence of drug dealers. For instance, the death squad *Muerte a Secuestradores* (MAS)¹⁴ was founded by over 200 leading drug traffickers in 1981 (Zelik, 2010, p. 38). Subsequently, more than 250 paramilitary groupings arose both in the context of the drug milieu and as the regional elite's reaction to securing property from increasing guerrilla activity. Under Carlos Castaño's efforts, who came from a wealthy cattle breeder family in the city of Amalfi (north-eastern Antioquia), the dispersed paramilitary groups gradually began to be centralized. Castaño himself had a criminal background and close relationships with the Medellín Cartel, but under his guidance the paramilitary project was presented as the only effective means for tackling the guerrilla activity.

In 1997, the AUC paramilitary confederation was founded by Carlos Castaño, and the consequence of including Don Berna into the AUC secretariat was a transformation from criminal to self-defence groups for the more than 300 *bandas* and *combos* operating in Medellín. In this sense, the emergence of organized paramilitarism in the departmental capital was a result of the conversion of the Office of Envigado into one of the 40 blocs comprising the AUC coalition, called the *Bloque Cacique Nutibara*. This bloc acted as an outsourcing force that took the leading role in the fight against ELN and FARC cells operating in the city, and the collection of illegal rents linked to criminal activity, in particular through the *oficinas de cobro*,¹⁵ to financially strengthen the paramilitary project as well (Rozema, 2008, p. 437; Jaramillo & Gil, 2014, p. 141).

As several authors have pointed out, during the AUC's period of operation Colombian society was heavily affected by paramilitary violence and terror, which encompassed forced displacement, repression of labour organizations,

and the subjugation of social movements and trade unions (Romero, 2003; Hristov, 2014). Reprocessed data by *VerdadAbierta.com* and the Colombian Centre for Historical Memory demonstrates that the Department of Antioquia has been more affected by paramilitary violence in Colombia than any other, both during AUC activity *and* after its formal demobilization. Taking the sample of the violation of personal integrity between the timeframe from 1980 to 2012, 598 massacres were documented in the department, of which 372 – equivalent to 62% – could be attributed to paramilitary groups and their successors (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Numbers of massacres according to the responsible actor in the Department of Antioquia between 1980 and 2010



Source: Own computations, based on retrieved data by *Rutas del Conflicto.com*.

With the amalgamation of formerly loose paramilitary blocs, the AUC established a hegemonic social order based both on the violent regulation of social relations and of steering the drug economy in Antioquia. Structurally, the paramilitary phenomenon in the department was characterized by a strong urban paramilitarism in Medellín, and powerful armies of the so-called *señores de la guerra*¹⁶ in rural areas. Urban paramilitarism operated in relatively autonomous networks, which became unified due to shared objectives such as extracting

rents by criminal means and establishing social control over local population (Llorente & Palou, 2011, p. 429). In particular in rural areas, the penetration of the network into society was achieved during the peak of paramilitary activity at the end of the nineties by the figure of the ‘intermediary’, a person – sometimes linked with active paramilitaries through family bonds – who established relationships with community leaders, local authorities, members of security forces, and social organizations, in order to gain institutional and social support for the paramilitary project (Osorio, 2013). In those regions, paramilitary structures were characterized by the deployment of vertical hierarchies, with clear command and control structures (Llorente & Palou, 2011, p. 430). AUC blocs that fought the insurgents and their supporters easily consolidated power in Antioquia’s sub-regions by means of heavily armed confrontation with FARC and ELN cells (Sierra Montañez, 2011, p. 4). Peripheral sub-regions of the department such as Urabá and Bajo Cauca, whose indigenous and Afro-Colombian population have been historically stigmatized, became ever more stereotyped and targeted by selective violence under paramilitary domination. Violence by paramilitaries was mainly characterized by mass displacement and land expropriation, varied from region to region, but altogether social organizations, indigenous activists, trade union leaders, and students have stood out as the main victims (Sierra Montañez, 2011, p. 61).

With the beginning of Uribe’s presidency in 2002, negotiations between the AUC command and the national government began, resulting in the Santa Fe de Ralito Agreement in July 2003, a document signed by 22 of the 26 paramilitary blocs (Guáqueta, 2009, p. 21). Paramilitary leaders agreed on a ceasefire and promised to demobilize all combatants by the end of 2005. In return, the Colombian government conceded to limiting criminal prosecution and to granting further concessions to combatants (Saab & Taylor, 2009, p. 462). Details of demobilization were then ratified in the framework of the Justice and Peace Law, enacted in July 2005. The main AUC bloc operating in the Department of Antioquia, the *Bloque Cacique Nutibara*, was demobilized between November and December 2003 (Guáqueta, 2009, p. 21). However, even after this formal demobilization took place, it is said that many middle-ranking members remained in operation – now grouped as *Bloque Héroes de Granada* – and were in charge of criminal and drug economy activity, until a demobilization agreement was signed by such a group with the national government in August 2005 (*VerdadAbierta.com*, 2014).

Throughout the country 31,671 paramilitary members were demobilized (Guáqueta, 2009, p. 21). The demobilization process officially ended on 5 August, 2006 and the top AUC leaders were transferred to a high-security prison located in the city of Itagüí, 8 km south of Medellín (Massé, 2011, p. 43). DDR efforts have been criticized by the academic sector and civil society organizations as being incoherent and insufficient, because of the exclusive emphasis on military demobilization, the concession of very soft amnesties, and the absence of long-term social and economic reintegration efforts (Sriram, 2008,

pp. 163-165). Furthermore, the government failed to verify who exactly had been mobilized and omitted to ask the demobilized people for information on further supporters and connected criminal networks. As Human Rights Watch (2010, p. 19) illustrated, one of the consequences of this incomplete demobilization process is that many paramilitaries have remained active, have managed to hide their capital, and have recruited new members after being reorganized into new groups.

To sum up, be it a counterinsurgent force or a criminal actor, the AUC represented a complex organization that managed to set up a territorial, social, and economic order in many regions and replace formal state authority at the local level (Duncan, 2006, p. 304). Where these paramilitary groups predominated, they created and maintained governed local orders in a monopolized way, referred to as 'illegal protection systems' (Nussio & Howe, 2013) that sometimes contained the systematic deployment of violence. After demobilization, these protection systems were disrupted and provoked several armed non-state actors into competing for rents and power by using violence.

The transformation of the paramilitary actor (2006-2015): Continuities and ruptures

The negotiation process launched by the Colombian government with the AUC resulted in the individual or collective demobilization of 10,312 paramilitaries in the Department of Antioquia. Of this number, 26 per cent of them in 2008 were outside of the reintegration process undertaken by the Colombian Agency for Reintegration, either because of death, arrest, voluntary retirement, or recidivism in an armed group (Aguirre, 2010, p. 217). At a departmental level, the rate of remobilizing ex-combatants was higher in urban centres than in rural areas, as well as in the case of collective demobilizations in contrast to individual demobilization. Some of the main causes of remobilization include the limitations of the DDR process to offer a real social reintegration to ex-combatants into society and the attractiveness of criminal activity to many young people as an easy way to get rich quickly and obtain social influence (personal communication with M. Foronda, 2015, June 4; and with N. Tobón, 2015, June 12).

As a result, the dissolution of paramilitarism in Antioquia has been difficult, because its social and economic attractiveness has remained unbowed. Furthermore, the network structures of urban paramilitarism have been barely solvable. Many nodes of networks have stayed in place, giving up any counterinsurgent objectives and strongly turning towards a criminal rationale (Llrente & Palou, 2011, p. 433). In this sense, after the demobilization process of the main paramilitary blocs linked to the AUC, a successive reorganization of criminal activity took place in the Department of Antioquia in disputes over the control of the drug economy and organized crime among different militiamen groups that willingly decided to take up arms again and form new criminal or-

ganizations. As McDermott (2014, p. 5) points out, ‘although more than 30,000 AUC members were demobilized in 2006, the paramilitary structures and the billing offices, both urban and rural, remained intact. Such offices represent the core of the more than 30 BACRIM that emerged after the peace negotiation process with the self-defence groups’ (author’s translation).

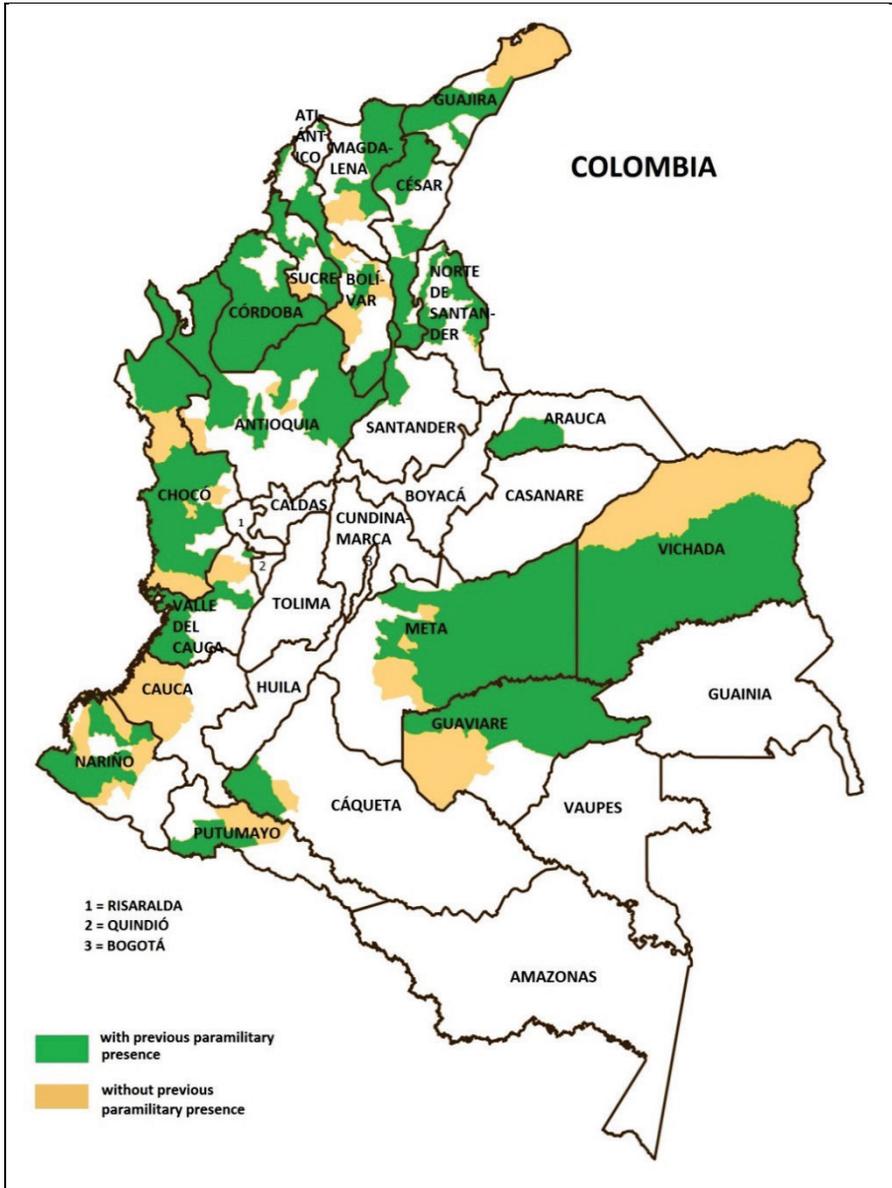
As mentioned above, one stream of thought argues that clear links of continuity between the paramilitary successor groups and the AUC organization are observable after the demobilization efforts. Such a continuity may be seen in the territorial disposition of BACRIM. Echandía Castilla (2013) shows that one signal of continuity is that the BACRIM (from 2007 to 2011) occupied most of the same territories on a national scale that former AUC blocs did between 1997 and 2002 (see figure 2).

In the case of the Department of Antioquia, the development of BACRIM started to some extent with the extradition of the paramilitary leader Diego Fernando Murillo – alias Don Berna – to the United States in 2008, which provoked a break in the cohesion of the criminal leadership and caused a power vacuum (Cruz & Durán-Martínez, 2016, p. 204). This marked a turning point for the flourishing of criminal factions under different leaderships, such as Los Urabeños headed by the Úsuga Brothers in the northern sub-region of Urabá, Los Rastrojos in the Valle del Cauca Department, or Los Águilas Negras in various departments of north-western Colombia. In some cases, the struggle for control of the drug market has provoked bloody clashes between factions, as happened in the northeast of the Department of Antioquia between Los Urabeños and Los Rastrojos in 2012, or in Medellín between Maximiliano Bonilla – alias Valenciano – and Erick Vargas – alias Sebastián – for the head of the Office of Envigado during 2009 and 2012. The biggest BACRIM have been broken up into small cells due to the state military’s response during the last three years, and as a consequence these groups have progressively moved to urban centres, where the epicentre of organized crime is now located (J. Laverde, personal communication, 2015, June 23).

In the Department of Antioquia, the paramilitary legacy exhibits two characteristics: an urban dimension, in which the *combos* or urban gangs stand out as the main kind of actor and are strongly linked to organized crime activities; and a rural dimension, in which more complex and violent organizations in charge of the drug industry and natural resource exploitation operate under patterns more similar to the AUC. Even though both kinds of groups carry out illegal and legal economic activities, qualitative fieldwork and participant observation made clear that all these groups are referred to with the general label as BACRIM, both in the collective imagination and the public discourse.

We hereinafter argue that BACRIM should be differentiated from pure criminal organizations, since these are still characterized by status quo-oriented controlling practices in the urban context, and by securing an entire domination system on the population, as can be observed in rural areas.¹⁷ Therefore, even

Figure 2: Territorial presence in Colombia of the BACRIMs (2007-2011) and AUCs (1997-2002)



Source: Echandía Castilla (2013, p. 23), with permission, based on data from the Human Rights Watch of the Vice-Presidency of Colombia.

in the urban context of Medellín, where criminal networks have the longest tradition, the BACRIM still feature paramilitary characteristics. These become most apparent by analysing the relation between the armed actor and the civil population, what we hereinafter subsume to the analysis of a violent social or-

der. By means of the deployment of territorial, social, and economic control devices, paramilitary successor groups have achieved the establishment of a long-term relationship of cooperation and conflict with Medellín's local population.

Within the scientific debate, the BACRIM phenomenon is considered to be in essence the main outcome of a process of rearrangement of criminal activity in Colombia after paramilitary demobilization took place; this is why it shows considerable differences in relation to its predecessors and why the classification of such groups as a 'third wave of paramilitarism' has been highly disputed within the academic field and the political arena (McDermott, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2010; CNRR, 2007). Clear ruptures between the AUC organization and the BACRIMs are observable, in particular with regard to structure and regionalization, funding sources, and political motivations.

In the first instance, regarding their organizational structure and geographical coverage, the BACRIM constitute small cell groups or nodes that work independently or are linked to other groups with flexible and changing bonds, without a unified command or a confederate frame, as in the case of the AUC. The BACRIM lack a vertical structure beyond the hierarchy proper of the drug business, but they work as a network, in which three kinds of organizations can be identified: 1) *combos* – small criminal gangs comprised of youths – operating at the smallest territorial scale, such as rural districts or shantytowns; 2) *bandas*, which exercise control over boroughs or *comunas*; and 3) organized crime structures and billing offices with control over various municipalities or departments, and with transnational links with other drug trafficking and money laundering groups as well (McDermott, 2014, p. 5; M. Gil, personal communication, 6 June, 2015). In most of the cases, *combos* maintain an outsourcing relationship with the most complex criminal structures, since they are in charge of the petty criminal activities, exercising social control on borough residents, and collecting taxes at the local level (Jaramillo & Gil, 2014, p. 133).

Secondly, the BACRIMs show a broader diversification of funding sources, going beyond the drug business, including a wide range of illegal activities and, more recently, an incursion into legal markets. Similar to the AUC, paramilitary successor groups get their main sources of funding through activities linked to the drug economy, money laundering, human trafficking, illegal arms trade, extortion, illicit gambling, and petty drug peddling. What is remarkable is the finding that these groups are progressively moving in the urban areas into the control of legal activities, such as the trading of daily consumer products, such as milk products, eggs, *arepas*,¹⁸ or soft drinks (personal communication with P. Angarita, 2015, June 1; and with A. Jaramillo, 2015, June 5). In rural areas, the illegal mining exploitation of gold and silver stands out as an important source of funding, in particular in the municipalities of Remedios, Zaragoza, El Bagre, and Segovia, all of which neighbour the Bolívar Department (personal communication with R. Osorio, 2015, June 9).

Since the accumulation of economic rents seems to be the main motivation for the BACRIMs' operations, the absence of a political backdrop and any formal counterinsurgency agenda is observable in such groups (CNRR, 2007, p. 44). With the demobilization of the main leaders and the ideologies of the paramilitary project, the self-defence motivation to tackle the advance of the guerrillas and stop their abuses against the population and landowners has been completely dispelled. Even in rural areas, some interviewees and mass media have mentioned that some links of cooperation and exchange between the BACRIM and guerrilla organizations regarding the drug business have taken place, in particular in the agricultural and livestock areas useful for coca cultivation, as observable in the municipalities of Caucasia and Nechí (neighbouring the Córdoba Department) and Puerto Berrío (neighbouring the Magdalena River and the Santander Department) (*El Tiempo*, 2014, September 20; personal communication with R. Osorio, 2015, June 9).

Continuities of violent social orders: Three devices of control by paramilitary successor groups

The actual proportions of the paramilitary legacy in Colombia today are difficult to estimate. The remnants of almost three decades of paramilitary violence are deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of Colombian society, and have contributed to feelings of mistrust and scepticism among the mutual interactions in daily life. As has become apparent through participant observation, citizens referred to a perceived omnipresence of paramilitary successor groups in everyday life and gave testimony that they 'are everywhere' or 'can be seen all around', but when asked about specific details about how they could be identified, no precise answer was given. This observation coincides with the assertion by Llorente and Palou (2011), who argue that the power of the paramilitary's descendants is perceived to be greater than it really is. This is attributable on some level to daily petty crime incidents, armed confrontations among urban gangs, or the occurrence of violent episodes by illegal armed groups in rural areas, mostly perceived by the population as stemming from demobilized paramilitary members.

Despite this fact, it is undeniable that paramilitary successor groups continue to exert certain forms of social control on some sectors of Colombian society, as this article shows by depicting the situation in the Department of Antioquia. Continuity in practices and repertoires of violence over the civil population have been reported by mass media and human rights advocates. Taking the example of Medellín, this paper argues that the BACRIM, in order to ensure hegemonic control over the criminal activity in a given territory, establish long-term relationships with the local population, making use of *social and political, economic, and territorial* control devices.

Notwithstanding the abovementioned transformations of the paramilitary phenomenon, the clearest continuity after formal demobilization is the

deployment of selective violence by BACRIM members. In the Department of Antioquia, such selective violence has ranged from threats, targeted killings, torture, and forced disappearance, to intra-urban displacement for the appropriation of land (personal communication with A. Franco, 2015, June 24; and with L. Quijano, 2015, June 3). However, the main strategy of violence and intimidation has been threats through leaflets, graffiti, or phone calls, and in extreme cases physical violence is still employed. The main victims of physical violence by paramilitary successor groups are those related to the dynamics of the drug economy (e.g. debtors and intermediaries), in particular in cases of settling scores, but also a large number of victims are those same *combos* members, on the occasion of disputes among crews for domination and hegemony. A second group of victims comprise human rights advocates, community leaders, and land claimants. For this reason, the BACRIM are considered to possess a kind of ‘counter-insurgency gene’, which includes a general mistrust and animosity against any form of social organization considered to be left-wing. Furthermore, today’s violence deployed by paramilitary successor groups against social activists cannot, to any extent, be detached from the ongoing processes for seeking truth and historical clarification, the recognition of victims by paramilitary violence, and subsequent reparations driven by the central government and civil society groups (personal communication with M. Gil, 2015, June 6; and with L. Zuluaga, 2014, June 17).

Moreover, claimants for land restitution constitute one of the core victims of selective violence by BACRIM organizations, due to the fact that the control of coca growing areas, mineral-rich zones, and strategic corridors for drug commercialization constitute one of the main sources of economic power by these illegal groups (personal communication with J. Laverde, 2015, June 23; and with A. Franco, 2015, June 24). One example illustrating this situation can be found in the community of San José de Apartadó, located in the sub-region of Urabá. For years, Colombia’s greatest banana-producing area has attracted guerrilla groups and paramilitaries alike (since the 1960s and the 1980s, respectively). Today, paramilitary successor groups frequently enter the community’s villages to threaten and beat farmers, with the goal of displacing them from the land (Comunidad de Paz San José de Apartadó [CPSJA], 2016, September 30). Most recently, the group Autodefensas Gaitanistas de Colombia has announced its presence in San José de Apartadó with graffiti, which a social leader from this region has called ‘psychological terror’ and resembles the intimidation strategies used by AUC paramilitaries (Hernández, 2016). Lastly, a third group of victims are considered to be those ‘undesirable persons’, against whom lethal violence is exerted by social cleaning squads – known locally as *La Limpieza* – in a very selective way: drug addicts, beggars and homeless people, sex workers, transgendered people, and petty thieves (see personal communication with M. Gil, 2015, June 6; and with L. Quijano, 2015, June 3).

In the slums of Medellín, the *combos* continue to play a key role as providers of social order and punishers of behaviours considered to be disturbing to the community. This social function is in part attributable to citizens' mistrust towards law enforcement agents, in particular to the police. In the urban dimension, these groups also play a role as arbitrators to solve intra-community tensions, as an expeditious mechanism of conflict management. Since their members mainly originate from the same boroughs where they operate, many people prefer to call for their intervention in cases of interpersonal disputes, rather than going to the police or the local authorities. Through this behaviour, certain sectors of the population, particularly in the most impoverished areas, confer legitimacy to these groups to work as mediators of interpersonal quarrels and also by following the 'codes of conduct' imposed by them to regulate everyday life, for example a system of fines in cases of playing music too loudly at night, disorderly conduct in public places, or episodes of domestic violence (personal communication with P. Angarita, 2015, June 1; with N. Tobón, 2015, June 9; and with D. Luz, 2015, June 4). In rural areas, social control is exerted in a more violent way by these groups, since their activities are mainly directed toward land concentration for coca cultivation or mining exploitation, therefore antagonizing the local population's interests. For this reason, Antioquia's countryside is where the highest rates of forced displacement and physical violence against peasants by illegal armed groups are still observable (personal communication with A. Franco, 2015, June 24).

A recent mode of penetration into the fabric of local social organizations and collecting funding consists of infiltrating community-based councils (called Community Action Boards), in order to get a portion of the resources allocated by the local government to neighbourhood assemblies under the scheme of participatory budgeting.¹⁹ The intervention in such boards is composed of both determining in which areas funds will be allocated and deciding who will be responsible for the implementation of social projects (personal communication with P. Angarita, 2015, June 1; and with L. Quijano, 2015, June 3).

A second function exerted by *combos* and *bandas* is their control over certain territories to strengthen their financial capacity. Economic control devices include extortion in terms of offering surveillance and the delivery of public services, and blackmailing small and medium-sized retailers, and the management of drug distribution centres for micro-trafficking as well (OSHM, 2012, pp. 51-52). In Medellín, the collection of a *vacuna*²⁰ on commercial establishments in return for 'the provision of security' – which means in essence a safeguard that the store will not be assaulted by the same groups – is common practice for capitalizing revenues and exerting domination on those areas where they operate. Likewise, the payment of a *vacuna* is also applied to couriers, bus, and taxi drivers crossing through different neighbourhoods of the city (personal communication with P. Angarita, 2015, June 1, and with D. Luz, 2015, June 4).

Territorial control devices constitute the third dimension of the violent social order maintained by paramilitary successor groups. This includes the systematic use of forced displacement, monitoring to control the entry and exit of people within boroughs, and in particular the establishment of illegal territorial boundaries, which means the demarcation of places under which uncontested control is exerted and where freedom of movement is restricted (OSHM, 2012, p. 53). In the particular case of Medellín, the civil population commonly referred to the existence of *fronteras invisibles*²¹ in the city or delimited zones – generally a borough or sectors within a *comuna* – along which a criminal gang exerts sole control over economic activities and is also responsible for providing security. Limiting freedom of movement has been particularly acute in the case of Commune 13 in Medellín, where even the provision of a ‘visa’ is sometimes demanded by *combos* for young men in order to authorize their transit from one borough to another (personal communication with D. Luz, 2015, June 4).

Another indicator of territorial control exerted by paramilitary successor groups is shown on the occasion of so-called ‘armed strikes’. By means of these, people are forbidden to move freely by blocking transit routes, commercial activities are banned, and street closures are set up through control posts. Such strikes have been used by the BACRIM as a strategy to put pressure on the national government, as was observable on occasion of the strike imposed by Clan Úsuga in the sub-regions of Urabá and Bajo Cauca in the face of announced peace negotiations with ELN guerrillas at the end of March 2016 (*El Colombiano*, 2016, April 1).

Last but not least, a final characteristic of maintaining a violent social order through the BACRIM is both the co-optation of the state, or cooperation with the state. In Colombia, the intersection between illegal groups and the institutional framework of the state is one of the consequences of a long-lasting state-society confrontation, in which the adaptation to contexts of illegality by public officials and common citizens had been engendered. During ethnographic work in Medellín, people referred to the existence of close collaboration by state agents in the functioning of paramilitary successor groups by means of a widely dispersed network of corruption at the different levels of the institutional framework of the state, which includes judges, law enforcement agents, and low-ranking public officials. In particular, common citizens made mention of the connivance by the military and police agents for the operation of armed non-state groups. This is shown in practice by providing illegal payments or ‘double salaries’ to members of the local police bodies, in order to collaborate with them, either through action or omission (personal communication with P. Angarita, 2015, June 1; and with L. Zuluaga, 2015, June 17). Reports for the year 2013 from the the Colombian public prosecutor’s Unit against Emerging Groups provide evidence of existing links to 208 members of the state security forces, attorneys, court clerks, mayors, and town councillors with BACRIM groups; 43 of these cases occurred in the Department of Antioquia (*El Universal*, 2013, November 3).

In terms of cooperation, during the last quarter of 2015 some cases of links to some mayors of municipalities of the Department of Antioquia and BACRIM reached the public eye, which were referred to as *BACRIM-politics*²² by the mass media. The recent case of the mayor of Buriticá, located in the sub-region of western Antioquia, stands out. The mayor was accused in December 2015 by the Colombian prosecutor of taking bribes from the Urabeños to grant mining concessions without the appropriate legal requirements (*El Colombiano*, 2015, December 9).

Interviewees sometimes referred to the existence of a *pacto del fusil*,²³ a verbal non-aggression truce since June 2013 among armed groups operating in Medellín – mainly between the Urabeños and the Office of Envigado – aimed at avoiding open confrontations against each other and achieving mutual respect for the zones of operation and influence. This deal also aimed to keep the homicide rates in the city low so that an armed response by the state security forces would not be provoked against the *bandas*, but the use of forced disappearance and other non-lethal forms of violence have not been part of the truce (McDermott, 2013; Cruz & Durán-Martínez, 2016, p. 204). According to an interviewee, this pact was set up to some extent in agreement with state law enforcement forces, in particular with the police; the police delegated the governance of the public security to paramilitary successor groups in the impoverished boroughs where they operate, on the condition that they do not misuse physical violence (personal communication with L. Quijano, 2015, June 3).

To sum up, in stark contrast to the AUC, which was capable of managing violence by being the monopolistic actor over a given territory, violence today is curbed by an informal agreement among several armed groups, and backed indirectly by the state. In other words, what is observable today is a kind of hybridization between the state security function and the paramilitary successor groups' activity, which means a set of agreements and transactions based on a non-antagonistic cohabitation (personal communication with M. Gil, 2015, June 6).

Closing remarks

Analysing the legacies of paramilitarism in today's Colombia requires adopting a broad understanding of the phenomenon which takes into account practices and mechanisms of adaptation by paramilitary successor groups and society. By illustrating the case of the Department of Antioquia, this article provides the first steps to covering the diverse local orders established by paramilitary successor groups in urban and rural contexts. Applying specific devices of control is an attempt to depict the varied and therefore complex relations among the armed actor, society in general, and the state in a post-demobilization context, which, as has been shown, oscillate between conflict, (coercive) cooperation, and co-optation. This approach has revealed the myriad ways of how paramilitary successor groups organize illegal and legal economic activities in the

city of Medellín and in the countryside, and how they deploy violent and non-violent means to control local populations as well. In summary, this article has shown how local social orders of violence are created and maintained over the years, notwithstanding the formal dissolution of paramilitary organizations.

The economic interests around the drug economy and the criminal industry are very powerful and continue to play a decisive role in Colombian society today. On this basis, the understanding of paramilitary successor groups' activities should be framed in a context of *transformation* of the paramilitary phenomenon, under which economic motivations – and not political ones – constitute the main driver for their operation in a post-demobilization context, as rightly stated by the Colombian government. We have emphasized that the BACRIMs' activities include paramilitary features concerning their specific type of violence, what we call *status quo-oriented violence*, which is pursued to secure a domination system achieved over the years by paramilitary action. It is undeniable that paramilitary successor groups strive to ensure their hegemony over the illegal economy and the functioning of their criminal networks. But as shown in more detail in the case of Medellín, paramilitary successor groups also use mechanisms of social and territorial control over the civil population. These include a wide array of devices, such as the deployment of selective violence, the regulation of social life, the hegemonic domination of strategic zones for the development of illegal and legal economic activities, and the limitation of the freedom of movement, among others. Such strategies not only aim at the optimal achievement of their economic goals, but also seek to ensure a hegemonic position vis-à-vis other social actors – not only guerrilla groups, but even the Colombian state – and exert permanent regulation on civilian daily life. In other words, all this indicates how violent social orders have been maintained in a post-demobilization context and contribute to the notion of a persisting 'paramilitarism' in the country.

Empirical evidence from the Department of Antioquia demonstrates that in urban areas, the exercise of mechanisms of social, economic, and territorial control by paramilitary successor groups tend to be higher in zones of limited statehood, such as impoverished boroughs and shantytowns, where some cooperation and mutually beneficial outcomes between *combos* and the local population are observable. However, findings from qualitative research highlight the fact that the presence of the state and paramilitary successor groups' activities are not mutually exclusive at all, but that these sometimes create complementary orders, as the institutional framework of the Colombian state suffers from widespread corrupt practices.

Moreover, although the urban context was prioritized in this article, the applied indicators for analysing the control devices by the paramilitary successor groups might qualitatively enrich the research on post-paramilitary violence in Colombia in general. Other departments neighbouring Antioquia with relevant natural resources, such as Bolívar, Córdoba, Chocó, and Santander, are also affected by the same type of violence linked to the control of illegal mining

and coca cultivation zones and which is often directed against land claimants, human rights advocates, and the peasant population.

Given this scenario, the challenge for the Colombian state is to tackle the legacies of paramilitary violence by using a multi-dimensional approach, moving beyond armed confrontation by the military and the police, but also by eliminating the persisting or newly established forms of social control and their sources of power, and by protecting the vulnerable population from violence caused by paramilitary successor groups. Likewise, the existence and continued violent operation of paramilitary successors could act as a potential spoiler in the scope of a peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC guerrillas, since aggression towards social leaders and human rights advocates as well as forced displacement still take place in some areas of the country. In this sense, the persistence of a broad criminal activity network and the deployment of social control mechanisms over the local population in the hands of paramilitary successor groups negatively contribute to diminishing the efforts of the institutional actors and civil society to building the transition towards a sustainable and lasting peace.

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Notes

1. National Liberation Army, by its Spanish acronym.
2. Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, by its Spanish acronym.
3. English translation: United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia.
4. English translation: Criminal gangs.
5. English translation: Emerging groups.
6. English translation: Human Security Watch of Medellín
7. English translation: Popular Training Institute
8. Colombian Peace Mission of the Organization of American States, by its Spanish acronym.
9. Schneckener introduces this type of violence for characterizing militia groups, under which paramilitary groups are subsumed.
10. Acronym from the Spanish name *Perseguidos por Pablo Escobar* (English translation: People persecuted by Pablo Escobar).
11. English translation: Office for Peace and Coexistence.
12. English translation: Agreements for co-existence.
13. The national government, the guerrilla organizations FARC, *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN) (English translation: National Liberation Army), *Ejército Popular de Liberación* (EPL) (English translation: Popular Liberation Army), *Movimiento 19 de Abril* (M-19) (English translation: April 19th Movement), and *Autodefensa Obrera* (English translation: Workers' Self-Defense Movement) participated in these peace negotiations.
14. English translation: Death to Kidnappers.
15. English translation: billing offices
16. According to Duncan (2006, p. 15), commanders of paramilitary blocs, operating as *señores de la guerra* (English translation: warlords) in rural areas, introduced a social order and exerted state functions, including the regulation of the local economy, administration, and justice provision.
17. Regarding paramilitarism before its demobilization, Hristov (2014, p. 146) offers a similar argument to differentiate paramilitary structures from purely criminal groups.
18. English translation: corn cakes, a typical staple food in Colombia
19. According to this scheme of participatory democracy, organized community groups decide how to allocate and manage 5% of the annual municipal budget.
20. English translation: bribe or levy

21. English translation: invisible borders
22. In allusion to the prominent scandal of cooperation between Congress members and paramilitaries, referred to as *Parapolítica* (Romero, 2007).
23. English translation: rifle deal.

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