

A YEAR OF FOREIGN FIGHTING FOR UKRAINE

CATCHING FISH WITH BARE HANDS?

Kacper Rekawek

**COUNTER
EXTREMISM
PROJECT**

March 2023

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



KACPER REKAWEK, PHD

Author

Kacper Rekawek, PhD is a fellow at the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX) at the University of Oslo and a non-resident fellow at the Counter Extremism Project (CEP). He has been involved in researching foreign fighters and foreign volunteers with Ukraine since 2014 and has widely published on the issue, including with CEP.

His latest **book** titled “Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: The Brown-Red Cocktail” was published by Routledge in December 2022.

ABOUT CEP

COUNTER EXTREMISM PROJECT

The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) is a nonprofit and non-partisan international policy organization formed to combat the growing threat from extremist ideologies.

CEP builds a more moderate and secure society by educating the public, policymakers, the private sector, and civil society actors about the threat of extremism. CEP also formulates programs to sever the financial, recruitment, and material support networks of extremist groups and their leaders. For more information about our activities please visit counterextremism.com.

LEGAL NOTICE

© 2023 Counter Extremism Project. All rights reserved. Any form of dissemination or reproduction of this document or parts thereof, unless for internal purposes, requires the prior written consent of the Counter Extremism Project.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Foreign fighting for Ukraine did not start with the founding of the International Legion of Defence of Ukraine (ILDU) in late February 2022. Foreigners went to the country to help it defend against Russian aggression since spring/summer of 2014. Some of these very early arrivals actually returned to Ukraine to fight in its defense in 2022.
2. The year 2022, however, saw a creation of what effectively is a significant and transnational social movement of volunteering for Ukraine, which also includes individuals who chose to physically fight on the frontlines in the country's defense.
3. These foreign fighters are dispersed throughout different Ukrainian units: two and not one ILDUs as well as a string of units within the Armed Forces of Ukraine (Zbroini syly Ukrainy or ZSU), or, in particularm the Territorial Defense Forces (Viiska terytorialnoi oborony or TDF). Moreover, the foreign fighters are in constant flux as they shop for new units, rotate back home, or change roles within the newly formed transnational social movement for volunteering in Ukraine—be it as trainers or humanitarians/logisticians.
4. The fighting component within that movement, the foreign fighters, are significantly less than the often mentioned 20,000 volunteers. Likely, a tenth of that figure have actually fought in Ukraine. Americans and Central-Eastern Europeans constitute the highest numbers of Westerners fighting for Ukraine. Within the foreign fighters, the largest contingent comes from Belarus with its representatives mostly fighting in monoethnic units. Georgians have so far suffered the highest casualties from all the foreign fighters present in Ukraine.
5. These foreign fighters quickly had to learn how improvisational the Ukrainian way of conducting war could be and embrace the pre-Global War on Terror paradigm of mechanized warfare but in conditions of scarcity and while operating as the weaker side. Hence, one of the quips regularly mentioned by fighters is “in this war we are the Taliban.”
6. Ukrainian flexibility and pride in their ability to improvise enables foreign fighters to shop for units while in Ukraine, terminate their contracts with the ZSU, or go back home for rest and recovery, including prolonged periods of absence from Ukraine.
7. Existing problems within the ILDU partly stemmed from its “open” character as Ukraine initially invited anyone who wished to fight in the country's defense. The influx of foreign volunteers led to the creation of two ILDUs which suffered from a string of organizational and structural issues, characteristic for hastily established and improvised military units. Most of these issues were later addressed but some, especially related to administrative and logistical grievances, have persisted.

8. Both the arrivals and the hosts have demonstrated a significant degree of respect, goodwill, and flexibility towards one another—largely accommodating preferences of both parties. At times, however, some of the administrative and logistical grievances and the haphazard nature in which the ILDU was initially rolled out led to situations in which some foreign fighters would complain about not being used to the best of their ability while fighting in Ukraine. Simultaneously, other fighters would stress the need to get the “job done” or “look past the drama” so that the in-fighting or bickering does not consume the efforts of this new transnational social movement of which they are part.
9. Russian claims that foreign volunteers for Ukraine are all “Nazis” or “mercs” (mercenaries) are inaccurate and perceived as insulting by the representatives of the movement. The first and much smaller foreign fighter mobilization of 2014 was more politically radical and involved some fighters originating from the nationalist/far-right milieu of different Western countries. In 2022-2023, however, the situation is markedly different. Only a small group of far-right individuals are amongst the foreign fighters active in Ukraine. These are vastly outnumbered by the much larger body of “concerned citizens of the world.”
10. Units which used to host some of the 2014 more radical foreign fighters in their ranks, such as Azov or the Right Sector, have largely been absent from recruitment of such individuals abroad in 2022-2023. At the same time, smaller far-right Ukrainian groups forming volunteer forces attempted to recruit foreigners but had very limited success in the process. Their transnational connections, however, must be monitored to ascertain the degree to which they constitute any security challenge to Ukraine or its Western partners.
11. A similar approach should be adopted while dealing with the so-called “volunteer corps”—the monoethnic units of, e.g., Russians or Belarusians and potentially others, which have now emerged in Ukraine. The fact that they are led by expat nationalists who have broader war aims than Ukraine, and who, in the case of Russian foreign fighters on the side of Ukraine, adhere to traditions of the pro-German Russian Liberation Army (ROA) from World War II should be of particular concern. The question of how these will be decommissioned after the end of the war will gain in urgency and should not be ignored, especially given the events of March 2, 2023, when one such unit staged a raid inside the Russian territory. Russia quickly branded it a “terrorist act.”
12. Some volunteer fighters have already returned from Ukraine and more will be returning home in 2023. They are not “returnees” in the sense of returning foreigner terrorist fighters (FTFs) from Syria and should be perceived and treated differently. Existing Western or European models geared towards returnees are insufficient since they are mostly geared towards returning FTFs.
13. Thus, a new approach and a policy focused on dealing with foreign volunteers/fighters returning should be devised. Mechanisms for the identification and classification of returnees should be developed. For non-extremist returnees, a de-securitized approach should be taken. This should also entail a recognition of the returnee’s experience in Ukraine—including their immediate needs upon return, in particular Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) issues. Contact between the returnee and government authorities should be established and maintained. For non-extremist returnees, the maintenance of this contact should be organized through trusted third parties. The intelligence value of returnees should be recognized and appropriately exploited and appropriate mechanisms should be developed against potential Russian reprisals, in particular for returnees that had a public role and profile while operating in Ukraine.



INTRODUCTION

This report is part of ongoing work for a larger publication and the result of intensive research in 2022 concerning foreign volunteers for Ukraine as well as based on previous studies on the phenomenon of foreign fighting in Ukraine. Throughout 2022, substantial conversations and interviews with more than 70 individuals who effectively belong to the transnational social movement for volunteering for Ukraine were conducted.² Since these contacts continue to operate in an active warzone and their safety and the security is of paramount importance, no footnotes indicating names, locations, or the timing of these interviews will be included in this report.

As will be shown throughout the report, not all such volunteers are fighting on the frontlines. Others are involved in training Ukrainian troops or provide humanitarian support for Ukraine or non-lethal material assistance to the Ukrainian troops in the field. The majority of this report, however, will focus on the fighting members of this social movement who will be referred to as “foreign fighters for Ukraine.” This is to distinguish them from other types of volunteers.

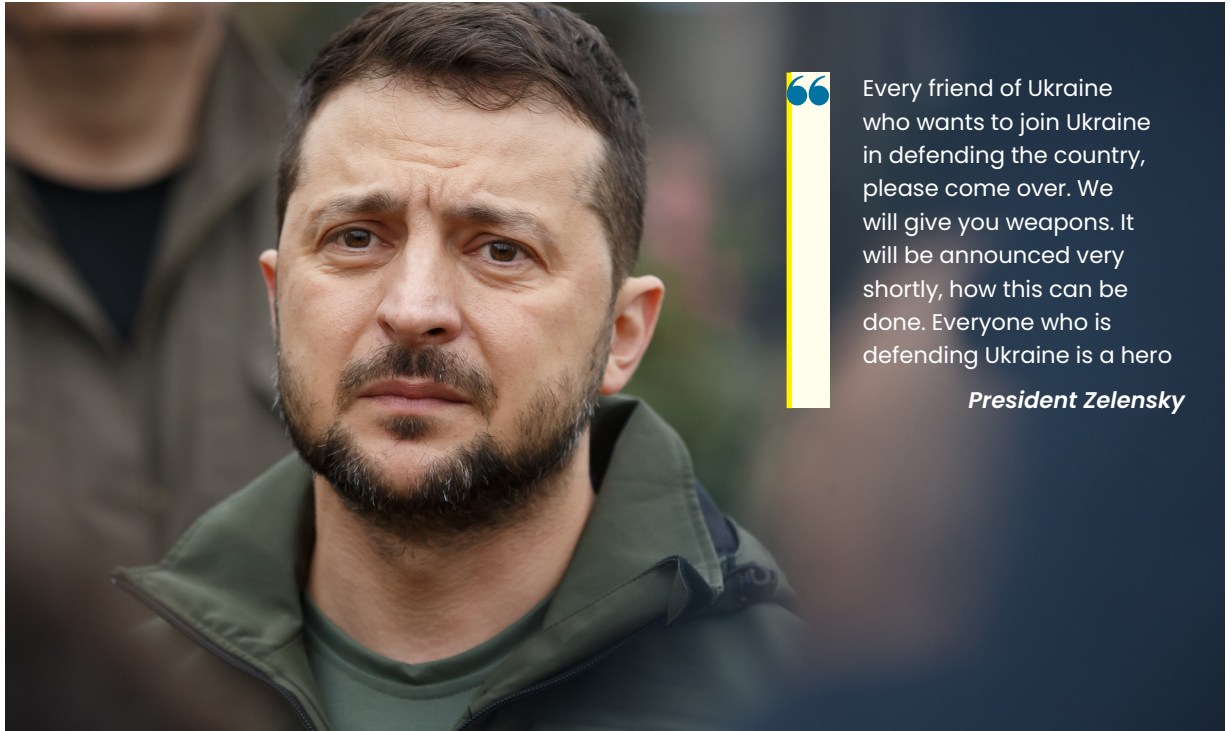
This report, published following the one-year anniversary of the formation of International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine (ILDU), provides only a snapshot as the story of volunteers and fighters for Ukraine is constantly evolving. The fluidity of the situation and the complexity of the research gives this report its subtitle “catching fish with bare hands,” a difficult and at times arduous activity. The newly emerged transnational social movement for volunteering in Ukraine continues to grow, change, and metastasize, and its members espouse a vast array of individual motivations and different experiences of volunteering for Ukraine. This report attempts to provide clarity and delineate key aspects of a year of foreign fighting for Ukraine. It will start by outlining what can be called the “original sin” of foreign fighting, describe the nature of aforementioned transnational social movement of volunteering for Ukraine,

discuss the numbers and the nationalities involved, shed light on the public character of their mobilization, as well as outline the motivations of the fighters and the improvisational nature of many of their experiences throughout their presence in the war zone. Improvisation is a key theme and characterizes the negotiated nature of the relationship between the new arrivals and their hosts as they attempt to establish a sound working relationship which accommodates and benefits both sides. This process is not always successful, and the report will also showcase some of the complaints and discussions related to this issue. Moreover, it will also look into the alleged “Nazi” and “mercenary” (as claimed by Russian propaganda) character of the transnational social movement for volunteering in Ukraine in general and the foreign fighters within this movement in particular. Finally, it will also discuss ways in which Western governments might best manage the return of their citizens from the war zone.

It is crucial to understand that the first wave of foreign fighters who traveled to Ukraine in 2014 was distinctly smaller and therefore did not result in the emergence of a distinct transnational social movement at that time. On the other hand, it is important to stress that indeed some foreign fighter volunteers that traveled to Ukraine in 2014 have remained in the country ever since, including foreigners who at that time fought on the Russian side. Unlike 2022, in 2014, foreign volunteers arrived in Ukraine without being asked by the Ukrainian government for their assistance. However, some of the units that hosted these volunteers in 2014 remain active on the front. Moreover, some of the “original” foreign fighters from 2014 that had returned to their home countries came back in 2022 to defend Kyiv or deployed southwards and eastwards with different Ukrainian units. Their story has partly been told in previous research and is also interwoven throughout this report.

BEGINNINGS

“Every friend of Ukraine...please come over”



Every friend of Ukraine who wants to join Ukraine in defending the country, please come over. We will give you weapons. It will be announced very shortly, how this can be done. Everyone who is defending Ukraine is a hero

President Zelensky

February 27, 2022 is the key date in the history of foreign volunteering and fighting for Ukraine. On that day, [President Zelensky](#) made a public appeal: “Every friend of Ukraine who wants to join Ukraine in defending the country, please come over. We will give you weapons. It will be announced very shortly, how this can be done. Everyone who is defending Ukraine is a hero.”

The result was the creation of the International Legion of Defence of Ukraine (ILDU). It has the role of accommodating and organizing arriving foreign fighters. The announcement was a masterstroke of public relations. It came only three days after the Russian (re-)invasion of the country and while Ukraine was struggling to defend its capital city. Deliveries of sophisticated weapons systems from NATO countries were still months away. With this move, the president also aimed to put pressure on Western allies to assist Ukraine.

The ILDU, however, suffered from an “original sin.” It seemed to be open to all who wanted to join the fight—both experienced and inexperienced individuals. With little or no initial vetting or pre-screening performed, a group of individuals joined the ILDU, who should not have been allowed to join the war effort on the Ukrainian side (more on this issue later). Moreover, it also created a problem of diverging standards among the newly minted “Legionnaires.”

Some had years if not decades of military experience whereas others first needed to be trained as soldiers.

This division of standards explains the creation of two ILDUs. The first is geared towards less experienced volunteers, but it also includes some veterans of, e.g., different NATO armies. This first ILDU operates under the ZSU and so far fielded three infantry battalions for the front.

The second ILDU is geared towards more experienced volunteers and veterans arriving from abroad. It operates under the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine (Holovne upravlinnya rozvidky Ministerstva oborony Ukrainy, HUR MO or GUR). This second ILDU effectively functions as a network of operational teams, each between five and 20 men. These teams are dispersed and attached to different Ukrainian units operating in various parts of the front.

The main focus of the operational work of these teams is reconnaissance and sabotage, and their effectiveness varies not only due to the skillset of their members but also depends on the degree of the Ukrainian commanding officer’s willingness to make use of them while in combat. These groups literally pitch themselves or are pitched around to different area commanders.

A SOCIAL MOVEMENT IN FLUX

“Everything changing”

The existence of several Legions, however, does not fully capture the picture of the foreign fighter presence in Ukrainian ranks. Some foreign arrivals head directly to other ZSU units or enlist with a given TDF battalion that is willing to have them. This is regularly facilitated by existing personal connections previously developed between a given foreigner, usually an informal leader of a group of foreign volunteers, and a local Ukrainian commander.

The former vouches for “his” men. This reduces potential tensions and fissures between the mostly, but not exclusively, English-speaking arrivals and their Ukrainian counterparts, who often only have a rudimentary knowledge of English. Of course, such connections are only possible if a given foreigner had previously encountered the given Ukrainian commander and was able to establish a personal relationship. In this sense, chance or pure luck often matched the two sides, as foreigners “shopped around” for assignments and looked for a unit outside of the ILDU structures.

One fighter remarked that for most of the arriving foreigners “it took two or three changes to find a job or a unit they wanted to stay with.” Furthermore, foreign fighters also regularly rotate back home for rest and recovery and subsequently return back to Ukraine or are hospitalized due to wounds sustained on the battlefields in Ukraine. In effect, this means that foreign fighters in Ukraine have been in an almost constant flux. Moreover, this flux is complemented by Ukrainian flexibility and improvisation which produces, as one fighter put it, a reality of “everything changing round here all the time.”

Currently, most public attention focuses on the foreign fighters. This will also be the main emphasis of this report. However, foreigners also fulfill other roles in supporting Ukrainian efforts in the country. They belong to two communities which in themselves are far from homogenous. Broadly these can be characterized as “trainers” and “humanitarians/logisticians”.

However, individuals rotate between the three communities of fighters, trainers, and humanitarians/logisticians and could at different times play a combination of roles while supporting Ukraine. Such a reality further compounds the flux and the ever changing reality surrounding foreign volunteers in



Foreigners supporting Ukrainian efforts are “trainers” and “humanitarians/logisticians”

- **The trainers** help prepare different Ukrainian units for deployments to the frontlines. They are a multinational community of former servicemen or former fighters (e.g., veterans of the anti-ISIS forces in Northern Syria). This group is dominated by foreigners from Anglo-Saxon countries. Many of these individuals arrived in Ukraine shortly after February 24, 2022 and from the outset chose to focus on training duties. One of these individuals commented on his involvement in the training activities: “this is the way I felt I could make the most difference. If I was able to help one Ukrainian with the training I provided then I would be happy.”
- **The humanitarians/logisticians** might be less visible than the fighters but this is potentially the group that makes the most impact among all the foreigners present in Ukraine. There exists an online community of these volunteers which communicates on social media platforms and coordinates their efforts in either Eastern or Southern Ukraine. They organize evacuations of civilians and wounded servicemen but also transport non-lethal equipment to the frontlines as well.

Ukraine. The existence of two versions of the ILDU and the underlying three communities of foreign volunteers for Ukraine as well as the movement of individuals between them in general and among different units of the ZSU in particular, creates a reality akin to that of a pond full of constantly moving fish. Attempting to categorize these, establish patterns and trends, and analyze them to capture the evolving phenomenon of foreign volunteering in Ukraine is similar to catching fish with bare hands in this pond.

In fact, the foreigners fighting for or assisting the fight in Ukraine are beginning to constitute a transnational social movement. This movement encompasses a multitude of individual intents and motivations on how a certain socio-political goal, the victory for Ukraine in its war against Russia, can be supported or achieved.

One of the foreign fighters who traveled to Ukraine early in March 2022 clearly got a taste of that

reality while landing at the airport in Warsaw, Poland, a popular spot for the fighters' arrival. He stated, "[it was apparent](#) there was more people." He was referring to individuals such as himself arriving there with the intention of continuing onto Ukraine.

After arriving, the foreign fighters, as well as other foreign volunteers, congregate in the same locations in, e.g., Lviv or Kyiv. They usually form connections between themselves already when traveling to Ukraine or while in country waiting to be assigned. This created a reality in which "everyone knows everything immediately around here" as news and or gossip spread quickly and allow for forging of new acquaintances, connections, or links among the volunteers.

At the end of the day, as one foreigner involved in the humanitarian side of assisting Ukraine explained, "people call [me] and I do not know them. I don't know how they got my number."



Photo: Polskie Radio/EPA/Roman Pilipey

NUMBERS

“They would have to deploy us 10 times”

The actual number of foreign fighters for Ukraine in 2022 is a hotly contested subject. Due to the fluidity of the situation, precise statistics are impossible to establish at this point. On the one hand, the number of [20,000 applicants](#) for the ILDU is often brought up in discussions of the issue. This is, however, contested by some of the recruiters. In interviews for this report, they estimated that the number would more likely be in "[low thousands](#)."

This lower number included all individuals that actually crossed the border to Ukraine with the intention to fight, not only individuals that actually managed to be assigned to fighting units. At the same time,

however, other recruiters indicated that "20,000 did actually apply" for the ILDU, by emailing or calling the relevant Ukrainian defense attachés around the globe. However, out of these circa "10 percent of the applications were from individuals with serious military experience who would be of immediate use for Ukraine."

This comment was echoed by one of the early arrivals in the ranks of the Legion who laughed that he and colleagues joked about "having to be deployed 10 times" if they were to reach the number of 20,000 that appeared so widely in media reports.

NATIONALITIES **Belarussians and...**

Citizens of a multitude of countries volunteered for Ukraine in 2022. These can be roughly divided into the following contingents:

1. Belarussian

This is by far the largest group, with 500+ fighters scattered across different, predominantly monoethnic units fighting for Ukraine. This groups regularly includes individuals without previous military experience and with some history of protest against the Belarussian dictatorship after the rigged 2020 presidential election. To a large extent, this contingent is led by individuals who arrived in Ukraine at the beginning of the conflict, i.e., in 2014.

2. Georgians

They are deployed either through the Georgian-led Georgian (National) Legion, which was established in 2014 or serve in the ranks of the ILDU or other Ukrainian units. So far, this contingent seems to have suffered the most casualties amongst all the various foreign communities fighting in Ukraine. So far, more than [30 Georgian fighters](#) have been killed since February 24, 2022.



3. English-speaking Westerners, Americans, British, Australians, New Zealanders, and the majority of Canadians

These are predominantly former military men. In this group, some actually traveled to Ukraine before the re-commencement of serious hostilities on February 24, 2022, as they had anticipated the Russian invasion from media reports and the conversations they had with Ukrainian contacts. These individuals appeared early on the frontlines and sought to make the most of their multitude of military experiences while assisting the Ukrainian defense around Kyiv and in the South, and later also East of the country. This is probably the most visible contingent among foreigners operating in Ukraine, with the Americans constituting the largest subset of these fighters.

4. Central-Eastern Europeans, Poles, Czechs, Lithuanians, Latvians, and Estonians

This is a numerous but to a large degree also media shy contingent. Many of these fighters do not want to speak to either researchers or journalists. In their home countries, foreign volunteering and foreign fighting are technically illegal, and they do not want to risk any legal issues after returning home.

5. Western Europeans, Germans, French, Danes, Swedes, Finns, Spanish, Portuguese, etc.

This is a less numerous but also an impactful group. This was particularly the case with some Scandinavians, in particularly in the early incarnation of the ILDU when they staffed one of the companies of the nascent Legion's 1st battalion.

6. Non-Europeans, Brazilians and other Latin Americans, South Korean, Taiwanese, etc.

This is a seemingly less numerous contingent but one which also suffered casualties, demonstrating its involvement in fighting especially on the Eastern front.

MOTIVATION

“Someone has to do this job”

Photo: International Legion for the Defense of Ukraine



Foreign fighters interviewed for this report generally agreed on their main motivation behind their travel to Ukraine. On a macro level, they frame the ongoing war as a clash between good versus evil. The fighters often stressed that they never expected the war to restart so abruptly and so vividly, e.g., with Russian attack helicopters flying towards Hostomel on the February 24, 2022, while being filmed by Ukrainian civilians.

The initial shock that occurred as “I was just sitting on my couch” or “I was simply working” or “I was driving my car somewhere” while learning of the news came repeatedly up in the interviews. These fighters then recognized that they possessed a skill-set which might be of use for the Ukrainians and made a determination to put these skills to good use in defense of Ukraine, which the fighters perceived as the weaker party, unprovokedly attacked by an autocratic Russia.

Many also stress the connection they felt with the country upon hearing of the founding of the ILDU on February 27, which gave them an opening or an excuse to drop everything and travel Eastwards. Therefore, the official establishment of the ILDU became a pull factor for these individuals, as they now had an organizational framework to which they could attach their motivation to support Ukraine.

Furthermore, while these fighters displayed a simple black and white perception of the situation, they also

mentioned additional triggers, or push factors, which finally convinced them of the need to help Ukraine. This usually involved the consumption of audiovisual material, depicting the suffering of women and children due to the conflict or clips of fathers saying goodbye to their kids before leaving for the front.

According to the fighters, such material regularly triggered a “this could be us” or “I saw myself and my family there” reaction. This strengthened their internal motivation to join the nascent ILDU. Additionally, comments such as “somebody has to do this job” or “if not me then who, as I have the skills, I am a former soldier” were often used during the interviews by fighters.

Interestingly, below these macro push and pull factors, the individual motivations of these fighters vary considerably. While all these individuals may have a desire to support Ukraine, individual circumstances also played a significant role in their final decision to leave for Ukraine. For example, one fighter stated that he already has grown kids and saved enough money so this was a new calling and adventure he could embark upon. Another used this as an opportunity to reset his life while avoiding the consequences of a bad divorce. Others were between jobs or were looking for new challenges just as the conflict re-erupted in Ukraine. Therefore, from their perspective, this was the right moment for such a significant change in lifestyle.

Volunteering for Ukraine meant a life-changing decision for the respective individual, who would abruptly drop everything and worry about the consequences later. In certain cases, this led to a breakup of relationships, lost jobs, and other missed opportunities.

With the passage of time, and in some cases due to a growing sense of uneasiness with difficulties in Ukraine, the fighters were partly shifting their description as to why they continued fighting in Ukraine. The defense of Ukraine against the overwhelming force of the Russian war machine continued to be present in the conversations, demonstrated by comments such as, “[I have to be] here to help the people of this country who have shown remarkable kindness for and are welcoming foreigners” (a sentiment widely shared by the interviewed foreign fighters).

However, at the same time, the overall perception of the war seems to have changed for some. Some fighters began to frame the conflict differently, highlighting that “this was not about Ukraine” but about defending the West, democracy, or the broader transatlantic area. This could indicate a shift in the perception of their engagement, which was initially solely focused on supporting the weaker and

aggrieved party of the conflict, Ukraine, to a more strategic view. This entails a certain element of distancing themselves from the specific war to a more broader stance by some of the fighters. They seemed keen to stress that they would do the same in case another conflict involving Russia. Stronger anti-Russian or anti-Soviet undertones in the comments by some of the fighters were also increasingly becoming clear. This was especially true for the self-confessed [Red Dawn](#) generation of Americans who were more than keen to take on Russia, the perennial pop-cultural foe of the U.S.

All, however, stressed their dedication for their time being to the “job” that was at hand and involved fighting off the invaders.



Photo: International Legion for the Defense of Ukraine

PUBLICITY

“2014 people were different”

One fighter, who had returned to the fight after two previous stints in the war, commented on the experience of volunteering then and now: “Some of the people that joined 2022 were different from the ones joining 2014. In 2014, joining came with a social cost. You were a pariah in your home country. Some joining in 2022 came for the Instagram fame.”

This was a rather candid and subjective summary of the 2022 reality of foreign fighting for Ukraine. It is true that the issue of publicity some fighters were garnering, e.g., through their social media profiles, divided their peers in Ukraine. In numerous conversations, foreign fighters would scold the “PR [public relations] seekers,” “Instagram warriors,” and “video game people” who flocked to Ukraine to broadcast their side of the story and project an image of a fighter in a conflict in which those individuals hardly participated.

According to some fighters, who insisted they had no social media accounts to speak of, the general

“ In 2014, joining came with a social cost. You were a pariah in your home country. Some joining in 2022 came for the Instagram fame

rule of thumb was that if a given individual was present on, e.g., Instagram, Twitter, or Facebook and kept a steady activity there, then that individual was not to be trusted as a source of information for researchers. In short, the “off the camera people were better.” In general, the interview partners stressed that such attention seeking individuals were “questionable” or “some riff-raff” who came to Ukraine for the wrong reasons.

However, it is important to highlight that such networked individuals with a social media presence could and in some instances have played other important roles, in particular as far as fundraising for the Ukrainian war effort and the collection and transport of much needed medical supplies to the country was concerned.

IMPROVISATION

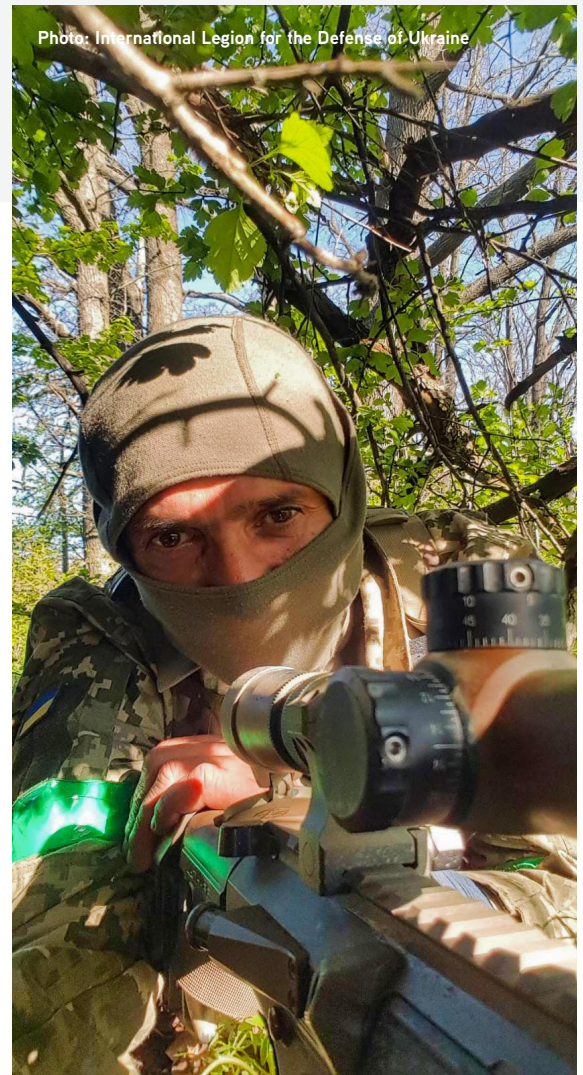
“We are the Taliban”

A recurring theme in conversations with the foreign fighters is the level of improvisation they encountered while in Ukraine. Ukrainians pride themselves on their flexibility and their ability to organize things in a bottom up manner, often bypassing the state and official hierarchies and structures. However, this manner of operation does not always work well with newly arriving foreign volunteers. For these individuals, this method is essentially chaos by another name. As a significant number of arrivals hail from Western societies and served in some of the most developed militaries, the “do it yourself” reality of Ukraine constitutes a culture shock.

Nothing better encapsulates this perception than the “in this war, we are the Taliban” motto regularly used by foreign fighters in interviews. In short, it amounts to an attitude in which one must adapt to the fact that the Ukrainian armed forces have less of everything than the Russians and thus, cannot count on superiority over the enemy or abundance of provisions while on the front. This stands in contrast with the experiences of most of the foreign veterans who deployed to Ukraine in 2022.

These individuals are mostly veterans of the Global War on Terror and fought against the Taliban or Sunni militias and terrorists in Iraq. Now, however, they are defending the weaker party in this war and, at times, are forced to embrace the logic of insurgents. Some, apparently, found this too difficult and left the theater of war frustrated or incensed that some things are not up to the familiar military standards. Potentially, this might also have been excuse for some to simply return home as they found the reality of the war too demanding, too personally dangerous, or too unpleasant to continue.

Military operations akin to an insurgency situation would manifest itself in a myriad of ways. One fighter said that he had to “train myself how to fire a mortar off the internet” as his unit was in a dire need of a specialist. Another, who had some medical training but was not a graduate of medical studies, was told that “half a medic is better than none for our unit,” while he doubted that he could perform



the task of a combat medic. Ukrainians also routinely outsourced parts of the vetting procedure. This was particularly the case in the early days of the ILDU.

Ukrainian officials realized that in some cases an arriving senior volunteer from a given country would be well positioned to assist in the screening process, for example, through pre-screening his compatriots. Moreover, the ILDU itself quickly had to embrace the logic of improvisation. Ukrainian decisionmakers would be keen to swiftly ship off experienced volunteers to the front, rather than focus on molding all foreigners into a single unit along the lines of a nascent “international brigade”. This effectively meant that whenever the Ukrainian hosts realized that they had an experienced veteran on their hands, they would immediately attempt to deploy him, often in disregard of his specialization, to frontline, or worse, to units working as special operations forces.

Not all foreigners accepted such offers and continued to look for other assignments. However, in

“ The “in this war, we are the Taliban” motto used by foreign fighters amounts to an attitude in which one must adapt to the fact that the Ukrainian armed forces have less of everything than the Russians and thus, cannot count on superiority over the enemy or abundance of provisions while on the front

general, Ukrainians were happy to oblige the wishes of the foreign volunteers, demonstrating even more of their improvisational skills. Foreign volunteers were theoretically allowed to join almost any Ukrainian unit, provided its commander would have them. Therefore, the distribution of foreign fighters within Ukraine was often a matter of networking and finding the necessary contacts by the foreigners, rather than an organized, centrally led process.

If the relevant connections were made, a given volunteer could feature in a unit outside of the ILDU but had to complete a rather tiring bureaucratic procedure to be formally induced into the new formation:

“To sign [such an] official contract, you needed to present yourself at the military office in the district from which the unit was hailing. It was a week-

long process, you get an SBU [Security Service of Ukraine] background check, you get a bank account so you can receive your pay, you also visit the immigration office etc.”

Of course, as improvisation was key, such procedures were not always followed to the letter. Contracts would be signed later, and visits postponed or shortened.

This element of improvisation also allowed some Legionnaires to bypass the aforementioned difficulties and challenges and work around the allegedly corrupt or incompetent members of either the ZSU or the ILDU and “focus on [their] job[s].” In effect, they had very little interaction with the administrative side of the two versions of the ILDU and seemed to have preferred it that way.

COMPLAINTS “I provide added value”

The fluidity of the situation, the relative lack of organizational structure, and the resulting high levels of improvisation complicates the relationship between foreign fighters and their Ukrainian hosts. In initial interviews, complaints from foreigners concentrated on the chaos they encountered upon arrival.

Recurring themes were the unresponsiveness of the Ukrainian military attachés in their home countries who were supposed to guide and direct the traffic of the foreign fighters, the illusory vetting upon arrival, the lack of training and discipline in the nascent ILDU, the inability to obtain weapons or ammunition, and abusive or unstable Ukrainian commanders.

“ it was unclear who was in command of the unit and who was the closest Ukrainian commander to each volunteer because it constantly changed and/or was not communicated to the volunteers

Others also focused on the rush to deploy those with experience to battlefields around Kyiv, the improvisational and perceived unprofessional nature of briefings before military operations, and the lack of necessary equipment. This was compounded with an initial chaos and confusion concerning contracts and pay for ILDU members.

As early as April 2022, members of the ILDU were reporting “fundamental and structural” problems which, in their view, had to be addressed by taking “swift action.” The complaints centered on organi-



zational issues such as “lack of a unified command structure,” bad leadership, and “vaguely defined” recruitment criteria.³ This was echoed by one of the platoon commanders in the early incarnation of the Legion who wrote: “It was unclear who was in command of the unit and who was the closest Ukrainian commander to each volunteer because it constantly changed and/or was not communicated to the volunteers.”

The original Legion was made up of “a heterogeneous group of people, ranging from active-duty

SOF [Special Operations Forces] units [...] to civilians unfit for combat both mentally and physically.” Legionnaires were also said to have been a socio-economically diverse group including not only individuals with a military background but also “doctors, airline pilots, lawyers, researchers and engineers.” They spoke different languages. However, up to 90 percent had conversational levels of English or Russian or both. They were 99 percent male and had a median age of “around 30 years old.” 20 percent to 30 percent were not fit for combat. They were mostly motivated by their “desire to be useful for Ukraine”.⁴

As the war progressed, the scale of the problems concerning the ILDU reduced, but some persist up to this day and were mentioned in investigations by both [Ukrainian](#) and [foreign media](#). Continuing challenges for the ILDU center around alleged corruption in the administration of the units. Furthermore, both versions of the ILDU continue to feature individuals widely seen as unfit to perform their duties.

As highlighted in interviews for this report, many legionnaires raised these issues with their commanders but also became increasingly frustrated because, so far, their complaints have been unaddressed. At the same time, some foreign fighters in different branches of the ILDU also highlighted that, while being aware of these issues, they largely managed to avoid the most questionable individuals and “worked around” these issues to the best of their ability.

This is not to say that such an approach nullifies other issues foreigners might be having while serving in the ZSU. This is particularly true for individuals who are outside the ILDU and have had different experiences with various Ukrainian units. Some complained that “I provide added value and they are not interested.” This relates to cases of foreign fighters with prior professional military experience who allegedly are not able to find a unit within the ZSU that adequately matches their military specialization.

On the other hand, some foreign fighters understand that “they [Ukrainians] will put you in a role they want to put you in” and not necessarily the one for which a given fighter is lobbying. Ukrainian contacts also stress that to a certain extent “foreigners have to adapt to the requirements of the Ukrainian command.”

At the same time, some arrivals, without having the full operational or strategic picture, have been pointing out that their unit was led by allegedly “lazy” officers, who gladly “avoid fighting” and spend most of the time “sitting in their base.” Another fighter point-



ed out that their “Maj[or] Gen[eral] would not fix logistical problems they were having.”⁵ At the same time, the same fighter would also stress that “[this isn’t an endemic problem](#) in the military. 99 percent of the Ukrainian military is professional, works to fix things, etc.”

In the most extreme but rare cases, the foreigners went as far as to point out that if their hosts do not fix such issues then “they should really move out of the way” and allow the foreigners to do the fighting “properly.” This is, of course, unfair to the Ukrainian efforts and not representative of the overall mood amongst foreign fighters in Ukraine. However, opinions like this should be taken into account while looking for improvements in how Ukraine utilizes foreign fighters.

Similar issues were raised in the findings of the Kyiv Independent investigation which also highlighted that Ukraine, allegedly unnecessarily, endangered the lives of foreigners fighting on its side. However, it is important to stress that the whole Ukrainian army, and not just its rather numerically insignificant foreign components, suffered heavy losses due to the brutality of the grinding battles in Eastern Ukraine.

Moreover, many of the foreign volunteers filled dangerous roles on the front. Regularly they were deployed as members of a multitude of reconnaissance teams operating under the GUR part of the ILDU. These units operated largely on their own and often behind the enemy lines or in the grey zone between the two armies and were bound to suffer serious [casualties](#) as a result of doing so.

Finally, personal issues such as stress of being in a war and away from home in a foreign country, led to some public spats between different foreign volunteers or fighters for Ukraine. Some termed these public outbursts as “[cockfights](#),” which did not improve the overall image of these foreigners among Ukrainians.

REALITY “Serve on our terms”



Photo: International Legion for the Defense of Ukraine

“The initial Ukrainian approach of “anybody’s welcome” was quickly modified with “as long as you are willing to serve here on our terms”

Both sides - the arriving foreigners and their Ukrainian hosts - made compromises and demonstrated a significant degree of goodwill to accommodate each other in 2022-2023. Ukrainians allowed foreigners to sign up and serve with whichever unit would have them. This effectively enabled these foreigners to transfer between different formations, obtain generous leave time, and acquire the ability to also perform other roles while serving in the armed forces, such as fundraising, marketing and public relations, organizing, and providing medical or tactical equipment.

This situation also allowed some fighters also to become quasi ambassadors of the Ukrainian cause either upon return to their home countries or online while in Ukraine. Simultaneously, the arriving foreign fighters, predominantly veterans from NATO armies, made allowances to understand the Ukrainian command and control models and accepted serving in positions and roles often significantly below their skillset or having very little to do with their experience and track record.

Stories of them being poorly led or deployed in a disorganized fashion abound among the foreigners are contrasted with Ukrainian comments that foreign volunteers should accept the local reality. In effect, the initial Ukrainian approach of “anybody’s welcome” was quickly modified with “as long as you are willing to serve here on our terms.”

Most challenges outlined above are the result of the “original sin” of the Ukrainian side, calling for “everyone we can get” to join in February 2022. This and the subsequent inconsistent approach to

the development of the ILDU and the flexible approach that allowed foreigners to join the ILDU or any other unit of their choosing within the ZSU, as long as the unit agreed, created a complex situation. In some cases, this led to an underuse of skillsets that foreign volunteers had to offer as well as their deployment to unnecessarily dangerous roles on the frontline.

On the other hand, from an Ukrainian perspective, foreign fighters - which constitute in total three battalions within the first version of the ILDU, the second ILDU legion attached to the GUR, and a number of other fighters scattered among different units - are only one (and a fairly small) aspect of the vast overall military efforts of the country. Therefore, the amount of Ukrainian attention and administrative effort devoted to organizing this group and accommodating their criticisms will likely remain limited.

On the other hand, this also likely explains why also some of the staunchest and most publicly criticized individuals serving within the ILDU are allowed to remain in place rather than asked to leave Ukraine. As one fighters explained, these foreigners might be “questionable [individuals] but if they still fight the Russians then it is fine.”

This approach also seems to be permeating Ukraine’s handling of Russian fighters within their ranks, despite the risk that this particular group of foreigners may potentially become a liability for Ukraine in the mid- to long-term, as they might attempt to export the conflict to their home country following the cessation of conflict in Ukraine (more on this group below).

EXTREMISM? “This is a zero extremism party”

One of the official reasons for Russia’s (re-)invasion of Ukraine in 2022 was its desire to “[denazify](#)” Ukraine which was allegedly led by far-right politicians. The “Nazi” slur also extends to foreigners volunteering for Ukraine, who are routinely called “[mercs](#)” or “mercenaries” by Russian propaganda outlets.⁶ These are clearly Russian propaganda allegations. Ukraine never developed transnational “[white supremacist militia\[s\]](#)” but some Western radicals did [feature](#) in a few of its volunteer battalions in 2014. Therefore, an analysis of the issue of extremism among the current cohort of foreign volunteers in Ukraine is warranted.

As demonstrated by [previous research](#), the 2014 mobilization of foreign fighters for either side of the war was to a large degree radical in nature. A significant number of the arriving foreign volunteers hailed from far-right or far-left milieus in their home countries. One reason for this was the novel nature of this war. The hybridity of the conflict, the nefarious Russian involvement in it, and the Russian propaganda narrative that the conflict was waged in defense of a “Russian minority” in the East of Ukraine confused the foreign perception of the conflict. In effect, a “weird” conflict attracted equally eccentric individuals from abroad.

The fact that a few Ukrainian [volunteer battalions](#) attracted far-right foreign individuals largely shaped the foreign view of the situation. This is despite the fact that even at the height of foreign involvement in these structures in 2014, foreign fighters only played a minor role. The recently published memoirs of one of the former foreign members of the Azov Battalion spoke of a rather numerically lackluster entity called “the foreigner group” in its ranks. Nevertheless, in the foreign perception, the country became a proverbial base for a transnational [far-right version of Al-Qaeda](#) with units such as Azov Battalion/Regiment or the Right Sector playing an outsized role in the foreign perception of the situation.

Even Ukrainian efforts to control and hinder the ability of far-right foreign fighters to join their side of the conflict from 2015 onwards through the integration of these formally independent units into the official security forces of the country did not change this image. This integration effectively prohibited the presence of foreigners within these units and required their de-ideologization. Interestingly, although the separatist militias [featured](#) a much higher number for foreign far-right individuals among their ranks,

Putin says he will ‘denazify’ Ukraine. Here’s the history behind that claim.

By Miriam Berger
Updated February 25, 2022 at 1:44 p.m. EST

The Washington Post



Once we fought Jihadists, now we battle White Supremacists

The New York Times



Inside A White Supremacist Militia in Ukraine

they successfully avoided being identified with them.

In the current cohort in Ukraine, extremist foreign fighters play an even smaller role than they did in 2014. [As was shown elsewhere](#), the Azov Movement, the political entity which grew out of the original Azov Battalion/Regiment and spawned the National Corps (Natsionalnyi korpus) political party, attempted to recruit individuals for the ILDU. The Movement used its transnational contacts and its multilingual personnel to this effect. This effort, however, only netted about 20 to 30 people.

The majority of this small group had very little or nothing to do with any far-right activism or politics in their home countries. At the same time, the Azov Regiment, since 2015 an official Ukrainian military formation and distinct from the Azov Movement, featured two Western foreign members in its ranks during the siege of Mariupol between March and May 2022.⁷ Furthermore, in 2022, one of the “Azovian” units on the front, led by a veteran from

the Azov Battalion/Regiment, featured individuals from Muslim countries in the Caucasus or the Balkans as well as an African American man—atypical for a supposedly “white supremacist militia.”

Therefore, while in 2014 some (although less than previously thought) far-right or fascist individuals flocked to Ukraine, in 2022-2023 the involvement of such individuals has been dwarfed by the arrival of large numbers of “[concerned citizens of the world](#).” In the words of one foreign fighter, most of these foreign volunteers from 2022-2023 might be “leaning conservative” but also include “liberals, leftists, do-gooders.” One humanitarian working for Ukraine commented that “this is a zero extremism party.” An ILDU Western European Legionnaire highlighted that he encountered “Azov, former YPG foreign fighters, Resistance Committee [\[anarchist or](#)

[“anti-authoritarian” fighters\]](#) all sitting around the same table and enjoying each other’s company” during time off behind the front lines. Another fighter remarked that it would be unlikely to expect a high number of far-right individuals fighting for Ukraine in 2022-2023. He argued that “fascists are drawn to strength and in this war Russia is equated with this quality. Ukraine is the underdog.”

Nevertheless, some foreign extremists have verifiably been identified in the ranks of the [ILDU](#) and in other [Ukrainian formations](#). Furthermore, local far-right entities are attempting [to utilize the war as an attempt](#) to prepare for political growth in the post-war Ukraine. Finally, certain elements of the foreign fighter community, in particular some Belarussian and Russian fighters are clearly gearing up to [bring the war home](#) after the conflict in Ukraine.

EXTREMISM?

“Challengers” and “Bringing the War Home?”

In 2014, the Azov Battalion was the unit primarily associated with the issue of far-right extremists from Western Europe in its ranks. The situation looks different in 2023. The Azov Regiment, now a brigade in the National Guard of Ukraine is currently preoccupied with reconstituting itself after the siege of Mariupol ([several hundred](#) of its members are still in captivity). At the same time, the Azov Movement’s recent actions resulted in a fairly confusing situation. While the original Azov Regiment was weakened after the siege of Mariupol, the Azov Movement worked to combine several volunteer units serving within the TDF and which were led by Azov veterans under one umbrella. This new formation came into being as the 3rd Assault Brigade, now fighting outside of Bakhmut in Eastern Ukraine. Unlike the remnants of the Azov Regiment, which continue to be part of the National Guard, the [3rd Assault Brigade](#) serves within the structures of the ZSU.

While working to form the new 3rd Assault Brigade, the Azov Movement attempted to hijack the branding of the original Azov Regiment. Early recruiting videos for the 3rd Assault Brigade used the perceived legitimacy of the Azov Regiment and its heroics in Mariupol as well as Azov imagery and symbols. This attempt seemed to have led to the publication of a statement by the original Azov Regiment, which scolded the unauthorized and il-



Kacper Rekawek
@KacperRekawek

The video of the “newly” formed 3rd assault brig is making rounds on this site. a quick explainer: 1. no, this is not #Azov reg. the Reg stays in the Nat Guard, this one is under the army. 2. this is the “azovian” unit which is supposed to bring together all other...!

legal use of its logo and chevrons by [third parties](#). This statement was likely also aimed at other actors in the online far-right community who continue to fetishize the early versions of the Azovian logo (with the Idea of the Nation/Wolfsangel superimposed onto a spinning wheel, kolovrat).

Moreover, confusion over branding increased with the development of informal funding channels supporting the 3rd Assault Brigade as well as the original Azov Regiment. Interviewed Azov Movement members indicated that these efforts would benefit both the original Azov Regiment as well as the

3rd Assault Brigade. However, subsequently, two separate financial support structures emerged. The “Support Azov” campaign channels funds towards the [3rd Assault Brigade](#) and [signal.fund](#) to the original Azov Regiment. The emergence of a distinct informal funding channel for the Azov Regiment might suggest a break or at least a certain parting of ways of the two units and the further depoliticization or de-ideologization of the original Azov Regiment.

The 3rd Assault Brigade is seen by some of the Azov Movement’s leaders as “their” unit as their former comrades and subordinates will staff it and most probably lead it. However, this unit is now part of the ZSU and therefore integrated into the official military command and control structure. Therefore, no political leader will be able to effectively “command” it from the outside or seriously influence its development or deployment. However, this does not mean that the Azov Movement will not attempt to use “their” unit for ideological public relations purposes as was visible during the battle of Bakhmut. As elements of the 3rd Brigade are fighting there, some Azov Movement personnel [appeared amongst the troops](#) with the view of perhaps recasting themselves as defenders of this Eastern Ukrainian city.

All of these maneuvers currently do not present a major risk as far as links between the Western far-right networks and their Ukrainian counterparts including the Azov Movement are concerned. The fact that the original Azov Regiment only had two Westerners in its ranks in the battle of Mariupol and that it is now seemingly moving away from the allegedly more politically involved 3rd Assault Brigade can be seen as a positive development.

At the same time, the fact that the 3rd Assault Brigade includes some foreigners in its ranks definitely

warrants further monitoring. Some of these foreign recruits were interviewed for this report. According to their statements, they were drawn to the 3rd Assault Brigade not because of its alleged ideology or link to the Azov Movement but by the imagined or real fighting prowess of the original Azov Regiment and its legendary stand during the siege of Mariupol. This demonstrates that the highjacking of the branding of the original Azov Regiment by the Azov Movement was at least partially successful. Given that these foreign volunteers seemed to have been confused by the partial highjacking of the brand by the Azov Movement may indicate that these foreign volunteers are not necessarily at risk of becoming a center of a newly established Ukraine based transnational [hub for right-wing extremists](#). Nonetheless,

“ The emergence of a distinct informal funding channel for the Azov Regiment might suggest a break or a parting of ways of the two units and the further depoliticization or de-ideologization of the original Azov Regiment

this current situation is still in flux and may change. Therefore, the developing relationship between the 3rd Assault Brigade and the Azov Regiment as well as the political evolution of the Azov Movement during the rest of the war and its immediate aftermath should be further monitored.

In addition to the developing relationship between the Azov Movement, the 3rd Assault Brigade, and the original Azov Regiment, other units also warrant closer inspection. These lesser known formations may develop into challengers to the more established far-right groups in Ukraine and also include foreign fighters among their ranks. Following the



Photo: The 3rd Assault Brigade

invasion of Russia in February 2022, several units within the TDF have been established by political activists belonging to different groups or groupuscules from the Ukrainian far-right milieu. One of these is fronted by Bratstvo (Brotherhood) an esoteric and religious far-right political outfit with a bizarre pre-2014 history of seemingly doing Russia's [bidding in Ukrainian politics](#). Bratstvo recruited some foreign fighters into its ranks early on in the conflict.

The other such unit is Battalion Revanche (Revenge), effectively fielded by the Tradition and Order, a Ukrainian far-right organization which used to operate as an affiliate of the Azov Movement. Its leader proudly proclaimed that during the war, "his" unit underwent a remarkable transformation as it now includes [hundreds of volunteers](#), including [foreigners](#) such as Russians and citizens of Czech Republic and Poland. The Battalion [proudly celebrated](#) the 100th anniversary of the Italian fascist "march on Rome." Given that the "march of Rome" marked the takeover of power by fascists in Italy and that Battalion Revanche chose to celebrate this occasion can be seen as a clear indication of its ideological orientation and its long-term ambitions.

Other volunteer units formed by political groups or organizations of the far right in Ukraine also featured foreigners in their ranks. A perfect example is the so-called Karpatska Sich, Carpathian Sich. Two organizations with this name exist in Ukraine. These are not identical and often bitterly opposed to one another. The smaller of the two groups, also referred to as C14, is ideologically more radical. However, it fielded no foreigners as fighters but was supported in the field by several Polish paramedics. One of these Polish paramedics hails from the broader nationalist milieu and authored [books on the Azov Movement](#).

The other, larger and more visible (online) group is the TDF battalion of the far-right political party Svoboda (Freedom). This unit featured two platoons consisting of foreigners, one English speaking and the other one Spanish speaking. The Spanish speaking unit includes Ukrainians who had a history of working in Spain where they picked up the language, which enabled the recruitment of Spanish speaking foreigners. Given the relatively wide dispersement of foreigners among Ukrainian units outside the ILDU, this is a remarkably high concentration of foreigners in a single Ukrainian unit. Several of these foreigners were interviewed for this report.

In their statement, they were adamant that the unit was not actively recruiting ideologically likeminded foreigners and that their appearance in the unit was a result of chance encounters and connec-



tions forged between Russian speaking Westerners (e.g., from Central-Eastern Europe) and individual Ukrainian officers of the Sich.

The presence of foreigners in these ideologically based units must be seen against the backdrop of the entire cohort of foreigners serving in other Ukrainian formations, such as, the 59th Motorized Brigade or the 131st Reconnaissance Battalion. As mentioned above, the decision to accept foreigners lies with the given unit's commander. So far, it has not only been the TDF or former TDF units associated with the far right who accepted such fighters into their fold. Additional factors are the location where a given unit is operating and how active it is on the front.

Such was the case with the Carpathian Sich battalion, which successfully fought in the Kharkiv Oblast (administrative region in Ukraine), and after an initial positive experience with individual foreigners did not mind accepting more foreign fighters into its ranks. Simultaneously, the news of the Carpathian Sich reorganizing itself and being ready to recruit foreigners within its ranks spread and acted as a pull factor, drawing foreigners to it. Of course, had this been done along ideological lines, i.e., with the Carpathian Sich ideologically vetting its foreign arrivals or specifically targeting this milieu for recruitment outside Ukraine, this would be of concern.

A similar cautious view should also to be adopted to the 3rd Assault Brigade's ("new Azov") foreigners. However, currently these consist of an African American man and volunteers from Muslim countries, and therefore these current foreigners serving within its ranks can also not be categorized as typical white supremacist volunteers.

In addition to various far-right units in Ukraine and their foreign volunteers, some of the monoethnic or

allegedly monoethnic units of foreigners in Ukrainian ranks may constitute an equally serious long-term risk. Some of these units have been organized and are led by nationalist figures from the Belarussian and Russian expat community. These were discussed in [previous research](#) on the topic, but new developments have shed more light on these two national contingents fighting for Ukraine.

December 2022 saw the creation of the “[Belarusian Volunteer Corps](#)” (BDK). The BDK is a Belarussian unit led by individuals associated with the Belarussian and Ukrainian far right as well as the Belarussian football hooligan scene. The founding of this “corps” was preceded by a split in the ranks of the Belarussian foreign fighters. Some members left the monoethnic Kalinouski Regiment to [form a separate new entity](#). Subsequently these Belarussian fighters appeared in videos announcing the creation of the BDK. It remains to be seen how the BDK evolves. However, the fact that it is led by individuals rivaling the more established Belarussian units and connected to the far-right milieu should be a concern for the Belarussian democratic authorities in exile and for Ukraine, which now hosts a unit unashamedly keen on “bringing the war home.” Moreover, this seems not to be the only such “volunteer corps” as there are rumors of more [monoethnic units](#) allegedly forming in Ukraine.

Apart from the BDK, Russians have also formed separate units, the Russian Volunteer Corps, RDK (Russkiy dobrovol’cheskiy korpus), and the Freedom for Russia Legion. The Freedom for Russia Legion, despite some of the coverage in the Western press, is often seen by fighters on the ground in Ukraine as a “myriad, public relations unit,” which is staffed by former Russian prisoners of war (POWs). Some dispute its actual contribution to the fight.

The RDK is a small unit and not the size of an actual corps. It is staffed by Russian pre-2014 emigres to Ukraine, who by no means are stalwarts of Russian’s democratic opposition. The RDK openly embraces the traditions of the pro-German Russian Liberation Army (ROA) of World War II. The RDK features individuals associated with the Russian far-right milieu, who are appalled by president Putin’s autocratic, oligarchic, “Bolshevik” regime. In their view, the Putin regime is essentially anti-Russian as it allows labor migration from Central Asia and allegedly enables Chechen strongmen to punch above their weight in a multi-ethnic and multi-religious Russia. The aims of the RDK go beyond those of the ZSU and Ukraine, which allegedly is keeping a close eye on “its” Russians. Furthermore, the RDK includes individuals with a track record of connections to the far-right scenes in [Germany](#) and the [U.S.](#) Finally, the RDK

Игорь «Янки», Андрей «Бессмертный» и Родион «Гена» создали «Беларускі Добраахвотніцкі Корпус»

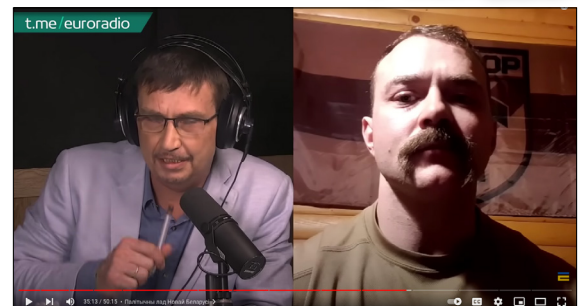
f t o v w p

Reformation



Two Infamous White Nationalists Still Have a Platform for Their Podcast Somehow

ME3



has recruited individuals from abroad into its ranks. Therefore, this unit should also be of concern to both Ukrainian and Western authorities. These authorities should develop plans on how to decommission this unit and how to establish an effective monitoring systems of its members.

This issue becomes even more prescient with the events on March 2, 2023, when the RDK apparently crossed into Russia and staged a raid in Bryansk oblast (region) which borders Ukraine. Russia immediately branded it a “terrorist act” and accused the RDK of [killing civilians](#) in the process. This is unlikely, but Ukrainian denials of this being a “provocation” ring hollow as RDK does exist and social media outlets connected to this organization began publishing photos and videos from this raid on March 2.

Consequently, the Russian reaction might have been a provocation but deeming the event a false flag operation is incorrect. As much as Ukraine’s backers should not have a problem with small scale Ukrainian cross-border raids or drone attacks on Russian military facilities behind the enemy lines, it is debatable whether these should be conducted by such a high profile unit led by Russian far-right expats. This indirectly plays into the hands of critics of Ukraine, who will again have ammunition to accuse the country, unfairly and exaggeratedly, of “Nazi” sympathies.

RESPONSE

Returnees?

The Russo-Ukrainian war tests existing models of how European or Western governments address the issue of their citizens fighting in foreign wars. Currently, most systems are geared towards dealing with individuals who joined proscribed terrorist entities in foreign countries - the foreign terrorist fighter (FTF) phenomenon. As this reports demonstrates, the situation of foreign volunteers and foreign fighters in Ukraine in 2022-2023 is very different.

These individuals are not terrorists and have not joined rebel or non-state groups. They are involved with a standing army of a recognized government, which is defending itself against an external aggression. For this reason as David Malet, an expert on the matter, [rightly pointed out](#), these individuals should be more correctly labeled “foreign volunteers” and not fighters. This report refers to them as fighters to distinguish them from the non-fighting volunteers for Ukraine in 2022-2023.

Foreign fighting or foreign volunteering is not illegal in most of Western countries. As pointed out before, this led “many [states] not to e.g. prosecute veterans of the pro-Russian ‘separatist’ forces from Eastern Ukraine after 2014, not to mention their pro-Ukrainian counterparts. The exception to the rule has been the Czech Republic which only in 2021 began to convict ‘its separatists’ to long jail sentences for participation in ‘terrorist’ (read: conducted on behalf of unrecognized, sub-state actors against a recognized state – Ukraine) activities.”⁸

Regardless of the discussions on the legality of foreign volunteering, it is now obvious that the vast majority of these current foreign volunteers in Ukraine will eventually be returning to their home countries. Moreover, around [150 already died](#) there. Given these significant differences, new policy approaches on how to deal with these individuals **should be developed. A mere copy and pasting of systems developed to manage returning FTFs will likely be ineffective.**

“ These individuals are not terrorists and have not joined rebel or non-state groups. They are involved with a standing army of a recognized government, which is defending itself against an external aggression



So far, four models of how to accomplish this have been in operation since 2014.⁹

1. **Approach of most West European countries:** Returning individuals can expect an interview with either the police or the security services. Such fighters are only prosecuted if they served in the ranks of an unfriendly or non-recognized state/entity such as pro-Russian separatists. However, this approach has not demonstrated a preventative effect thus far. Most of the individuals that had joined the “separatist” side in 2014 remained in the separatist republics and are again fighting for Russia in [2022-2023](#). Others that fought on the separatist side in 2014 and subsequently returned to their home countries [traveled again](#) to the separatist areas.
2. **Czech approach:** Technically it is illegal to fight in a foreign conflict. However, due to a [presidential pardon](#), Ukraine bound volunteers of 2022-2023 can expect no legal issues upon returning home.
3. **Serbian approach:** A stringent anti-FTF and anti-foreign fighting and foreign volunteering legislation bans all such activities but non-jihadi returnees can, so far, expect lenient legal treatment in practice.
4. **Baltic approach:** A “see no evil, hear no evil” approach for its citizens fighting for Ukraine but keen to prosecute anyone who volunteered for Russia.

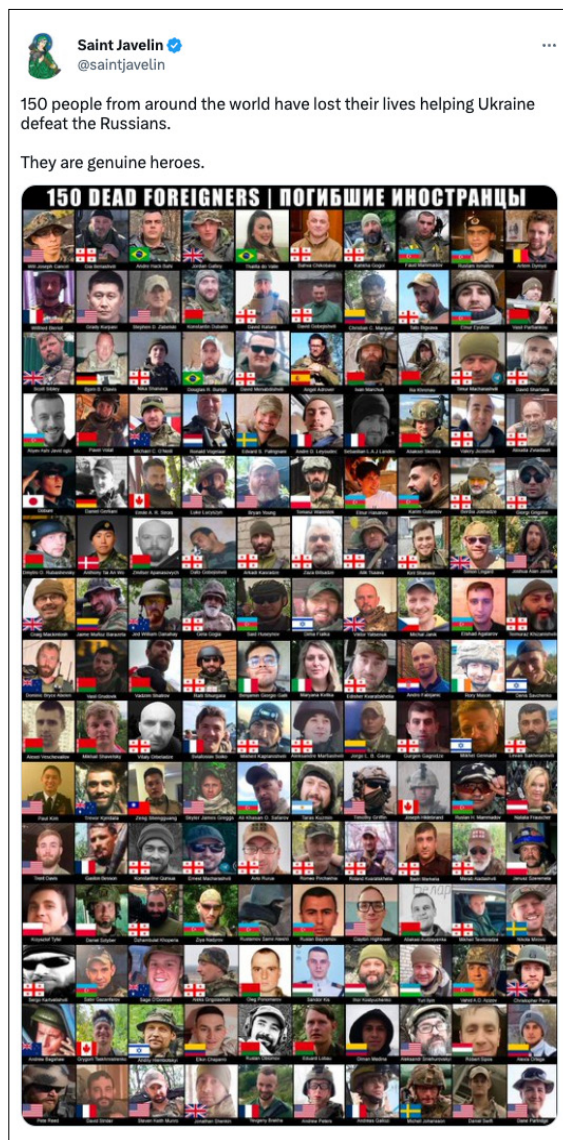
These models have to be developed further to address the issue of foreign volunteers returning from the war in Ukraine more effectively. The first wave of returning foreign fighters from the war in Ukraine following the 2014 mobilization occurred largely under the radar of public perception and more or less unhindered by the security services of the respective home countries.

This situation should not be repeated, given the significantly larger and more diverse cohort of foreign volunteers currently operating in Ukraine.

These have formed a new transnational social movement for volunteering in Ukraine and therefore, require a more developed and multifaceted approach.

Such a new approach could include:

1. With the support of the ZSU and GUR in Ukraine who recruit and deploy foreign fighters, explore the implementation of mechanisms that allow for the identification, classification, and, for returning non extremist-volunteers, recognition of the experience of these foreign volunteers in Ukraine.¹⁰ For example, [Poland offers an interesting example](#) as it promised benefits for the families of fallen Polish volunteers in Ukraine. Although such payments may not be politically feasible or advisable for most governments, options for some support mechanisms for non-extremist volunteers could be explored in other countries.
2. Establish mechanisms that allow contact to all returning volunteers. For non-extremist foreign volunteers, such contact should not be primarily via an interrogation at the airport/ border or a visit by the police or the security services but through their families or their social network, such as former work colleagues. The latter is especially relevant for individuals with military backgrounds. These individuals are likely more receptive to calls from their former comrades, some of whom might be still in active service. Furthermore, foreign fighters are also intelligence assets as far as the situation on the ground and the progress of the war is concerned. This knowledge could be more effectively exploited and therefore, non-extremist volunteers should not be met with an overtly securitized approach.
3. Identify immediate needs of the returning volunteers and offer tailored interventions for them and their families, in particular when it comes to PTSD from which most returning volunteers are likely suffering. The various elements that are part of the Aarhus model, developed to manage



Children of Poles killed in Ukraine will receive pensions

wprost

returning FTFs could be a useful starting point in this regard. This is particularly true while taking into account injuries, trauma, or lack of resources of some of the returning volunteers. As was argued elsewhere, “in order to mitigate any potential negative effects on their local communities such as domestic violence, substance abuse, long term unemployment, homelessness, elements of the [Aarhus] model¹¹,” mentoring, psychological counseling, and trainings could be offered for non-extremist returning volunteers.

4. Finally, returnees may face reprisals from radicalized members of the Russian diaspora or Russian agents within their home countries, in particular if they had a public role while volunteering in Ukraine. Therefore, appropriate mechanisms should be developed to prevent such occurrences.

REFERENCES

1. See: Kacper Rekawek, *Foreign Fighters in Ukraine. The Brown-Red Cocktail*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2022
2. Kacper Rekawek, "Neither "NATO's Foreign Legion" Nor the "Donbass International Brigades:" (Where Are All the) Foreign Fighters in Ukraine?," PISM Policy Paper, no. 6 (108), March 2015, [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/189979/PISM%20Policy%20Paper%20no%206%20\(108\).pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/189979/PISM%20Policy%20Paper%20no%206%20(108).pdf)
3. Kacper Rekawek (ed.), *Not Only Syria? The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters in a Comparative Perspective*, the Hague: IOS Press, 2017
4. Kacper Rekawek, "It Ain't Over 'til It's Over": Extreme Right-Wing Foreign Fighters in Ukraine, Counter Extremism Project, 23 September 2019, <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/%E2%80%99Cit-a-in%E2%80%99t-over-%E2%80%98til-it%E2%80%99s-over%E2%80%9D-extreme-right-wing-foreign-fighters-ukraine>
5. Kacper Rekawek, *Career Break or a New Career? Extremist Foreign Fighters in Ukraine*, Berlin: Counter Extremism Project, 2020, https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Report_Career%20Break%20or%20a%20New%20Career_Extremist%20Foreign%20Fighters%20in%20Ukraine_April%202020.pdf
6. Kacper Rekawek, Alexander Ritzmann, Hans Jakob Schindler, *Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures*, Berlin: Counter Extremism Project, November 2020, https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Study_Violent%20Right-Wing%20Extremism%20and%20Terrorism_Nov%202020.pdf
7. Some of their recollections are quoted throughout the report
8. The author is in possession of this report, which was provided to him by one of the contacts in Ukraine
9. This is a quote from a second, earlier report penned by one of the Legionnaires attempting to take stock of the situation. The author has received it from one of the contacts in Ukraine
10. This quote is from a tweet that has since been taken down. The author has a screenshot of this tweet.
11. The author is following a Russian Telegram channel, which routinely "unmasks" foreigners who it calls "Nazis," from among the volunteers for Ukraine. Neither the name of this channel nor link will be shared to prevent this derogatory channel from gaining a wider audience
12. The author interviewed one of the two fighters
13. See: Kacper Rekawek, "An effective ban on foreign fighting? Wider implications of the Czech policy towards foreign (terrorist) fighters," *RightNow!*, September 20, 2021
14. <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/2021/an-effective-ban-on-foreign-fighting-wider-implica.html>
15. See: Kacper Rekawek, "Foreign Volunteers Returning From Ukraine: What's Next," *Pulaski Policy Papers*, February 1, 2023
16. See https://pulaski.pl/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Pulaski_Policy_Paper_No_02_2023_EN.pdf for more on the issue
17. Ibid
18. Ibid