



Western extremists and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022

All talk, but not a lot of walk

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Abstract

This study titled “Western extremists and the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022. All talk, but not a lot of walk” focuses on the travel of violence-oriented extremists to the war in Ukraine and the internal mechanisms inside the country managing the stream of foreign volunteers. The study highlights that only few violence-oriented extremist individuals have currently traveled to Ukraine. However, their ability to obtain training and experience, gain access to arms, ammunition, and explosive materials as well as their ability to network in an active war zone presents a challenge for security authorities in Europe and the United States whenever these individuals chose to return to their home countries. In addition to an analysis of the internal volunteer management structures in Ukraine by Kacper Rekawek, the report includes detailed chapters on the extremist volunteer milieus in United States of America (by Joshua Fisher-Birch), Canada (by Guillaume Corneau-Tremblay), Spain (by Quique Badia Masoni), Italy (by Valerio Alfonso Bruno, PhD), France (by Prof. Jean Yves Camus), Germany (by Alexander Ritzmann), and Poland (by Przemyslaw Witkowski).

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Analysis

Executive Summary

The Russia-Ukraine war has been attracting foreign fighters/volunteers since 2014. Initially, the number of foreign individuals joining the conflict was limited. However, the invasion of Ukraine by Russia on February 24, 2022, provided a seemingly seismic shift in this field with up to 20,000 foreigners expressing an interest in joining the Ukrainian war effort.

Foreign fighters that joined the conflict initially after 2014 hailed from various ideological backgrounds—including from the far right, far left, or red-brown national communists—and fought on both the Ukrainian and Russian/pro-Russian sides of the conflict. The 2022 foreign volunteers, however, seem less radical and politicized in nature. Their mobilization is conducted mainly through official channels of the Ukrainian government and less through informal channels setup by non-state-linked “volunteer battalions” and militias, as was the case in 2014.

Precise numbers of foreign fighters having traveled to Ukraine and involved in combat since the end of February 2022 are currently difficult to establish. However, given the available information, it is reasonable to deduce that only a fraction of those who indicated an interest in traveling to Ukraine after February 2022 actually did so. Their number ranges from merely several hundreds to a few thousands. This is dwarfed by tens of thousands of Ukrainian volunteers who joined units in Ukraine’s Territorial Defense Force (TDF).

Among these foreigners, some individuals with extremist convictions have also traveled to the war zone. Violence-oriented foreign extremists have been in Ukraine since 2014, and at least two of these individuals have been killed in the latest round of hostilities. Both were on the pro-Russia side, including one who was a left-wing extremist.

To correctly assess the current flow of violence-oriented extremists to the war zone, one must study the recruitment input, i.e., local, and right-wing scenes, their attitudes toward the recent Russian invasion, and whether their members have traveled to Ukraine to fight.

An analysis of the far-right and right-wing extremist scenes in seven countries—the United States, Canada, Spain, Italy, France, Germany, and Poland—reveals that the current conflict has not led to a significant flow of extremists to the war zone. There is a lot of discussion and debate among extremists, but very few have traveled to Ukraine. For example, about 30 from Germany and France seem to have traveled. In other cases, such as with Canada, hardly anyone from the local far-right and right-wing extremist milieus appears to have made the trip. Furthermore, it is currently unclear how many of these violence-oriented extremists who have traveled are actually involved in combat.

Regarding the stance of the individual national extremist scenes, most have not changed their ideological position since February. For example, most pro-Russian extremist groups and networks have not switched allegiances.

At the same time, the study of the recruitment output—i.e., the Ukrainian units which have a history of allowing foreigners in their ranks—does not point to a flourishing milieu that is ready to accept and deploy Western extremist foreign volunteers in its ranks. Individual extremists from Western countries are in Ukraine in general and in Kyiv in particular, but their numbers pale in comparison to a) wider international volunteers and b) Ukrainian volunteers for the TDF.



Foreigners in Ukraine have not yet coalesced into recognizable highly ideological fighting units and, as individuals, have been largely unsuccessful in acting as recruiting multipliers for sympathizers in their home countries.

Ukrainian units with a history of featuring foreigners since 2014 either recruited a small number of such individuals in 2022 (i.e., Azov), are nationally focused and do not advertise for foreigners to join (i.e., Belarusian and Russian units on the Ukrainian side), or lack coordinated strategies of recruiting foreigners to join their outfit (i.e., other far-right Ukrainian organizations fielding “their own” TDF units).

In Ukraine, incoming foreigners are distributed across different units, and there is typically little screening overall for ideological extremism. However, units such as the Georgian National/Foreign Legion that has been set up to receive foreigners does not seem to follow discernible targeted recruitment strategies focusing on attracting foreign extremists.

Therefore, the identification of foreigners within far-right ideologically motivated units within Ukraine is a first but not necessarily a sufficient indication of the ideological stance of the foreign recruits themselves, complicating monitoring efforts focused on violence-oriented foreign extremists in the war zone.

The low number of violence-oriented extremists currently involved in the war in Ukraine does not mean that this group of individuals will not present a challenge to domestic security upon their return. The combination of a violence-oriented ideology; potential combat training and experience; access to arms, ammunition, and explosive material in the conflict zone; as well as improved transnational networking opportunities for these extremists is worrying and requires mitigation measures.

Preventing the travel of violence-oriented extremists to the war zone should be a priority for governments. These individuals will not add significantly to Ukraine’s ability to defend itself. Furthermore, at least as right-wing extremist individuals are concerned, their presence in Ukraine can potentially feed into the Russia propaganda narrative that the Ukrainian government is dominated by Nazi ideology. Unfortunately, as the seven country case studies in this report demonstrates, only a few countries—e.g., Italy and Poland—have legal safeguards in place against their nationals joining foreign conflicts. Consequently, preventing the travel of violence-oriented extremists to the war zone will remain a challenge for most governments.

Therefore, monitoring violence-oriented extremists travel to and from the war zone as well as collecting information on their actions and activities in the war zone should also be a priority. This is especially the case if the departure from their home countries cannot be prevented.

Finally, governments should begin exploring opportunities for managing returning violence-oriented extremists from the war zone. Given the currently small number of high-risk individuals, this should be well within already established capacities. This returnee management should include all elements from prosecution to disengagement as well as deradicalization and potential reintegration. As the country case studies in this report demonstrates, so far, few if any governments have begun addressing this issue.

Introduction

Edy (Edi) “Bozambo” Ongaro,¹ a native of Portogruaro in Northeast Italy, died fighting in Ukraine on April 1, 2022. The death of a foreigner in the war zone is not surprising since Ukraine has called on foreign nationals² to

¹ https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/2022/03/31/ucciso-un-miliziano-italiano-in-donbass_e42a5f9f-a14e-4554-ba11-e7e5894127ca.html

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/27/ukraine-appeals-for-foreign-volunteers-to-join-fight-against-russia>



join its fight against Russia and up to 20,000³ of such volunteers expressed an interest in contributing to this fight, with allegedly hundreds⁴ of individuals arriving to Ukraine. However, the case of Ongaro is also indicative of the general situation. He was not among the recent wave of volunteers and had traveled to Ukraine several years ago.⁵ Furthermore, he did not fight on the Ukrainian side but was part of the so-called “separatist militias”⁶ which support Russian efforts against Ukraine. He also had left Italy a wanted man⁷ for participation in bar brawl and attacking a policeman and was associated with “an anti-fascist and militant internationalist organization.”⁸

Ongaro’s fate was shared by Stefan Dimitrijević, as confirmed on April 8, 2022.⁹ Dimitrijević was a Serbian foreign fighter who had fought in Continental Unity (Unité Continentale), a French-Serbian-Spanish-Brazilian far-right/far-left “synthesis” of an “international Brigade” among the Ukrainian “separatist” forces after 2014.¹⁰ He subsequently returned to Serbia and received a 1.5 year suspended sentence¹¹ for his actions in Eastern Ukraine. Following the invasion of Russia in February this year, Dimitrijević returned to the “separatist” areas to again join the war.¹² He was not the only Serbian foreign fighter to return to the “separatist republics,” as others also returned to the frontlines even after they had been sentenced for their actions in Ukraine by the courts in Serbia. Their return to the war zone was possible since most of these Serbian foreign fighters only received suspended sentences in accordance with Serbia’s law prohibiting citizens from participating in foreign conflicts.¹³

Ongaro and Dimitrijević’s stories showcase the complexity of the current foreign fighter phenomenon. According to currently available information, many of the of foreigners that indeed participated in combat were in the war zone before the Russian invasion in February 2022. Furthermore, foreigners have also joined or rejoined the so-called “separatists” side¹⁴ and fight alongside the Russian army and Russian volunteers. Additionally, despite the fact that many publications imply that the war in Ukraine is a magnet primarily for “neo-Nazi” foreign volunteers from around the globe,¹⁵ there are also violence-oriented extremists from other ideologies involved in the fight.

The large scale of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 triggered an explosion of interest in far-right/ right-wing extremist studies vis-à-vis Ukraine and this conflict. Unfortunately, a lot attention has been concentrated on Ukraine’s relatively feeble extremist scene and its alleged capabilities and capacities to recruit, train, and field “legions,” “brigades,” or “militias” full of Western extremist volunteers. This study aims to disaggregate the currently available data and analyze to which extent this truly is the case in order to establish a solid baseline for further research. This is necessary to avoid inadvertently feeding into a false propaganda narrative that attempts to portray the Ukrainian government as being dominated by right-wing extremist ideologies.

³ <https://www.politico.com/news/2022/03/24/ukraine-legion-foreign-soldiers-00020233>

⁴ https://twitter.com/KacperRekawek/status/1501529852758962178?s=20&t=jD1e8ZWH8yk_2WvTKJ4zhQ

⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/login/?next=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2FfondDMEnglish%2Fposts%2Fthe-list-of-italian-mercenaries-and-accomplices-of-lpr-dpr-terrorist-translators%2F1905429726384695%2F>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-d6UupUnLkA>

⁷ https://www.ansa.it/sito/notizie/mondo/2022/03/31/ucciso-un-miliziano-italiano-in-donbass_e42a5f9f-a14e-4554-ba11-e7e5894127ca.html

⁸ https://www.facebook.com/permalink.php?story_fbid=4926738194107539&id=745877035527030

⁹ <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/srbija-borci-rat-ukrajina-pogibija/31792619.html>

¹⁰ https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2015/02/27/inenglish/1425051026_915897.html

¹¹ <https://terorizam.detektor.ba/verdicts/971-stefan-dimitrijevic>

¹² <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/donbas-placenik-ukrajina-milosevic/29551118.html>

¹³ https://www.britishcouncil.rs/sites/default/files/erf_report_serbia_2018.pdf

¹⁴

https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Report_Career%20Break%20or%20a%20New%20Career_Extremist%20Foreign%20Fighters%20in%20Ukraine_April%202020.pdf

¹⁵ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/14/neo-nazi-ukraine-war/>



As CEP research previously argued, “it is important to distinguish between three categories of individuals seeking to join the current conflict in Ukraine. The first and largest category consists of Ukrainian nationals and dual nationals who live abroad and are returning to their country. The second are international volunteers. The third and smallest are violence-oriented extremists.”¹⁶ Given the inflow of foreign fighters and volunteers to Ukraine, it is not surprising that violence-oriented extremists are among them.

In order to take stock of the phenomenon and illustrate the extent to which a) the 2022 foreign volunteer mobilization for Ukraine is extremist in nature and b) how different extreme right-wing scenes and milieus reacted to the Russian (re-)invasion of Ukraine since February 24, 2022, one should study both ends of the recruitment spectrum for this conflict. This means analyzing both sides of the issue. This includes the input, i.e., the discussions and reactions of the extremist milieus in each country and the eventual decisions of some extremist individuals to travel to Ukraine, as well as the output. The output includes an analysis of the Ukrainian units that had been welcoming foreign recruits, especially since 2014, particularly their current position towards foreign recruits and how many foreigners they claim to have among their ranks.

The first part of this report focuses on the output side of the foreign volunteer recruitment process. This is followed by seven country case studies, analyzing the input: the United States, Canada, Spain, Italy, France, Germany, and Poland. This selection includes not only potential recruitment pools in North America but also the largest countries, by population size, of the European Union. Furthermore, in mid-March 2022, four of these seven countries (the United States, Canada, Germany, and Poland) were named by Ukraine as contributing with the highest number of volunteers to its ranks.¹⁷

The country case studies focus on their respective national far-right scene’s position on the Russia-Ukraine war prior to February 24, 2022; the situation after that date; the discussions amongst extremists on potential travel to Ukraine as foreign volunteers; their actual presence on the ground (if any) and their involvement in combat; their numbers in relation to that of non-extremist volunteers from the same country; and, where information was available, the country’s foreign volunteer/fighter returnee management policies.

Conclusion

Since early March 2022, foreign volunteers have been crossing the Western border of Ukraine to join its fight against the Russian (re-)invasion. Some will continue to do so in the foreseeable future, while others have already returned home from their relatively short-lived stay on the frontlines. They will be joining different units of the TDF or even, at times, attach themselves to different units of the Armed Forces of Ukraine. Some will undoubtedly feature in units active since 2014, which have a track record of fielding foreign fighters/ volunteers.

Despite concerns and warnings about the Russo-Ukrainian war becoming a magnet for Western extremist foreign volunteers, relatively few such individuals have traveled eastwards to join the fight. An analysis of local far-right scenes in seven countries revealed only a few actual fighters. Ukrainian units, which could host them, are not reporting their presence on the ground. It must be stated that in some cases such units themselves would gladly advertise such presence in their ranks, as they would see it as a propaganda and recruitment booster aimed at their friends or allies abroad. Other units, which could potentially host foreign volunteers, are either monoethnic in their composition and are thus unlikely to feature Westerners or are screening the arrivals

¹⁶ https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2022-03/CEP%20Policy%20Brief_Foreign%20Fighters%20in%20the%202022%20Russia-Ukraine%20War_March%202022.pdf

¹⁷ <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2022/3/15/how-russias-tactics-are-evolving-in-ukraine>



for potential signs of political radicalism.

It is important to emphasize all foreign volunteers on the Ukraine side, apart from the Belarusians and to some extent Georgians and Russians, do not fight in large national or multi-national formations. They are distributed among different Ukrainian units and therefore, so far, have not had the chance to establish themselves as a standalone “legion” or “legions.” As the idea of the International Legion continues to evolve away from a catch-all entity towards a more streamlined, smaller outfit full of military veterans, then one might expect a smaller type of legion to actually appear on the frontline and meaningfully contribute to the Ukrainian war effort on a tactical level. However, it is not yet clear whether such a unit would develop an ideological agenda, apart from general Ukrainian patriotism.

The current situation in which foreign volunteers that are deemed fit for combat are channeled to various units in Ukraine is a challenge for the detection and monitoring of violence-oriented foreign extremists in Ukraine. It is clear that the presence of foreigners within units that espouse a far-right or right-wing ideology is a first but not necessarily a sufficient indication that these foreigners are violence-oriented extremists themselves.

However, it also remains important to recognize that even a limited number of violence-oriented foreign extremists being active in the war zone are likely to present a challenge for domestic security upon their return to their home country. Their involvement within an active war zone—which allows them to obtain battlefield training and/or experience, enables them access to arms, ammunitions, and explosive materials, as well as increases their ability to networks transnationally with other extremists—is concerning. This means even a relatively small number of violence-oriented extremists returning from Ukraine can change the domestic threat environment.

CEP, which has been monitoring the flow of foreign fighters to and from Ukraine since 2019, has recently developed a set of recommendations for policymakers working to mitigate these risks.¹⁸ These focus on instruments preventing the exit for violence-oriented extremists from their home countries, the monitoring of the travel of those whose exit cannot be prevented, the monitoring of the activities of violence-oriented extremists in the war zone, as well as a range of recommendations concerning the establishment of a returnee management system, focused on violence-oriented extremists that have returned from the war in Ukraine. At the core of all these recommendations lies the appropriate management of information between various stakeholders involved in these different stages of an extremist’s journey to and from Ukraine.

This report was focused on taking stock of the current situation both within the foreign extremist milieus from which individuals may decide to join the war in Ukraine as well as the developing structures within Ukraine to manage arriving foreign volunteers. The aim was to disaggregate the currently available data to allow for an initial substantiated assessment of the current situation. CEP will continue to monitor the situation both in the various foreign extremist milieus, the travel of such extremists to and from Ukraine, as well as the developing situation of the management of foreign volunteers in Ukraine and will publish regular updates on this issue.

¹⁸ https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2022-04/Update%201_CEP%20Policy%20Brief_Foreign%20Fighters%20in%20the%202022%20Russia-Ukraine%20War_April%202022.pdf



Comment: The article reflects the personal views of the author and was first published at Counter Extremism Project (CEP), New York, N.Y., USA, 26 May 2022.

Please find the full study here:

https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2022-05/Western%20Extremists%20and%20the%20Russian%20Invasion%20of%20Ukraine%20in%202022_May%202022.pdf



About the Counter Extremism Project (CEP)

The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) is a non-profit, non-partisan international organization that aims to counter the threat of extremist ideologies and to strengthen pluralistic-democratic forces. CEP deals with extremism in all forms – including Islamist extremism/terrorism as well as right-wing and left-wing extremism/terrorism. To this end, CEP exerts pressure on financial and material support networks of extremist and terrorist organizations through its own research and studies, works against extremist and terrorist narratives and their online recruitment tactics, develops good practices for the reintegration of extremists and terrorists, and promotes effective regulations and laws.

In addition to offices in the United States, CEP has an office and a separate legal entity, Counter Extremism Project Germany gGmbH, in Berlin, and maintains a representation in Brussels. CEP supports policymakers to develop laws and regulations to effectively prevent and combat extremism and terrorism, particularly in the area of combating terrorist financing.

For more information about the activities of the Counter Extremism Project (CEP) Germany, please visit www.counterextremism.com/german.