

Policy Brief

April 5, 2022

Foreign Fighters in the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War (UPDATE 1)

An Assessment of Extremist Volunteers

About CEP

The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) is an international, nonprofit, and non-partisan international policy organization formed to combat the growing threat from extremist ideologies. One area of focus for CEP is the transnational violence-oriented extreme right. We have published several research papers on the matter, including reports on the role of foreign fighters in the first phase (2014-2021) of the Russia-Ukraine war.

Contact info: berlin@counterextremism.com

Alexander Ritzmann is a senior advisor to CEP.

Dr. Hans-Jakob Schindler is the senior director of CEP.

Sofia Koller is a senior research analyst with CEP.

SUMMARY:

- The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, reanimated recruitment activities and individual motivations for foreign volunteers to travel to the war zone.
- Although by far the smallest number of volunteers traveling to Ukraine, foreign violence-oriented extremists traveling to Ukraine represent clear security risks. They will likely obtain combat experience in the conflict zone and potentially have a greater impact on the violence-oriented extremist milieus in their home countries upon their return. Their ability to plan and successfully carry out attacks in accordance with their ideology increases massively. Thus, it should be a priority to disrupt the travel of extremists to the conflict zone.
- Governments should coordinate efforts of collecting and collating information on violence-oriented extremists that are at risk of traveling to the conflict zone or are preparing to travel to the conflict zone.
- Possible violations of international law by foreigners in the conflict zone (e.g., by participating in war crimes) should be documented for future prosecution. Lessons learned from gathering “battlefield or military evidence” in the context of returning Islamist foreign terrorist fighters should be considered.
- Specific risk mitigation measures should be introduced for violence-oriented extremists returning from the war in Ukraine to allow for an appropriate analysis of the risks that they may pose of domestic security upon their return.
- Foreign (extremist) fighters returning from the war zone have likely been exposed to potentially traumatizing events. Those that are not able to process these experiences adequately might develop posttraumatic stress disorders (PTSD) and other war related psychosocial disorders.
- Based on the learnings from dealing with returned western foreign terrorist fighters who had joined ISIS and other terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq, countries should start laying the foundation

to ensure an individualized, comprehensive, and multi-professional case management of returning foreign fighters.

- The ongoing need for national and international knowledge exchange on the complex topic of returning foreign fighters makes the establishment of peer learning networks necessary.

CONTEXT AND RISK ASSESSMENT:

- This policy brief is an assessment of the possible threats posed by extremist foreign fighters in the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war once they return to their prior countries of residence/homeland. Based on data from the first phase of this war (2014-2021) and the currently available data of this developing second phase of the war (2022), the number of extremist foreign fighters represents a small fraction of the overall foreign fighter contingent who fight on both sides of the conflict.¹
- 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.
- Foreign violence-oriented extremists traveling to Ukraine represent clear security risks. They will likely obtain combat experience in the conflict zone and potentially have a greater impact on the violence-oriented extremist milieus in their home countries upon their return. Their ability to plan and successfully carry out attacks in accordance with their ideology increases massively. Gun ownership or practicing at a firing range is one thing, but actual combat experience is something else entirely. Thus, it is ideal to disrupt the travel of these extremists to the conflict zone.
- This is in particularly important for violence-oriented right-wing extremist fighters. Their presence in Ukraine—especially if they publicly display right-wing extremist symbols (e.g., tattoos)—will likely be used in misinformation campaigns that attempt to characterize the Ukrainian government as dominated by right-wing extremist ideologies.
- If the travel of violence-oriented extremists cannot be prevented, then upon their return, specific monitoring mechanisms are advisable. Some returnees will also suffer from PTSD or other war-related psychological trauma and might pose a risk to the public or themselves.
- Attempts by Russia-based right-wing extremist groups to send fighters to the conflict in support of the Russian side should be closely monitored. These groups are connected transnationally, and some have supported violent attacks by right-wing extremists in Western Europe in the past.²

DEVELOPING SITUATION:

- Since the first phase of the war began in 2014, a few hundred western individuals with extreme right wing (XRW) or “nationalist” convictions traveled to fight in the conflict in Ukraine. Most of those extremist volunteers fought on the side of the pro-Russian separatists.³ A minority of them remained in Ukraine and others joined conflicts in other regions as mercenaries. However, the majority of these extremist fighters returned to their home countries at some point.

¹ Russian or Ukrainian passport holders who have resided outside these countries and join this war are considered foreign fighters if they will most likely return to their country of residence.

² <https://2017-2021.state.gov/united-states-designates-russian-imperial-movement-and-leaders-as-global-terrorists/index.html>

³

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

- The Russian invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, reanimated recruitment activities and individual motivations for foreign volunteers to travel to the war zone. At the same time, the Ukrainian government officially asked foreigners to join their newly established International Legion, which is part of the Ministry of the Defense. The political ideology of the new foreign fighter seems to be of little to no relevance now.
- The Azov Regiment—which played a significant role as a militia-hub for extreme right-wing individuals during the first phase of the war—has been integrated into the Ukrainian Defense Forces and is also actively recruiting foreign volunteers. This reversed a policy of the Azov Regiment, which in 2019, made clear that they were no longer accepting foreigners.⁴
- Online activities, particularly on Telegram, also indicate that foreign extreme left-wing individuals are seeking to fight on the Ukrainian side. Groups like “Resistance Committee” and “Black Flag Ukraine” are recruiting online.⁵
- Groups in support of the Russian side, such as “The Defenders of Donbass” where extreme right-wing slogans are shared, are calling for volunteers on Telegram and other platforms. The Russian security contractor Wagner Group, which has a history of displaying Nazi insignia, is also accepting applications via Telegram etc.⁶
- Online reports indicate that Spanish, Japanese, U.S., Canadian, Finnish, Danish, Norwegian, Swedish, British, Lithuanian, Mexican, Indian, and German “foreign fighters” have arrived in Ukraine. Their ideological background is currently somewhat unclear. At the time of this writing, however, there are few verified reports of foreign fighters being involved in combat operations.
- From a legal perspective, groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda are globally designated terrorist groups. Therefore, traveling to join them in conflicts abroad has been criminalized by many governments as is any support provided to these groups directly or indirectly. Traveling to Ukraine, however, is not—at least not for supporters of the Ukrainian side. The recent decision of the International Court of Justice on *Ukraine v. Russia*, which declared the Russian invasion an illegal war,⁷ could make the public approval of, the attempt to join, or the financial/material support of (pro)Russian forces and institutions (e.g., in the separatist areas Luhansk und Donetsk) a crime.⁸
- Few countries, such as Poland,⁹ have criminalized joining foreign armed forces. The German government declared that travel to the conflict zone is generally not illegal, but that it wants to prevent the travel of extremists.¹⁰ The British government discussed publicly whether to support the travel of volunteers to the conflict zone generally.¹¹ Still, the possible legal consequences for foreigners returning home after having joined the Ukrainian or Russian armed forces remain unclear.
- Extremists may be prevented from traveling if legally possible, but there is a new problem. Now that Ukraine has started the International Legion as part of its military, joining that entity could be seen as treason in some countries from which foreign fighters are traveling. How to handle this new issue is being discussed currently.
- Foreign fighters returning from a war zone like Ukraine have likely been exposed to potentially traumatizing events. Those that are not able to process these experiences adequately might develop PTSD and other war related psychosocial disorders. A lack of diagnosis and/or adequate care in combination with a violent extremism ideology means that some returnees can pose a security risk to the public, their social environment, as well as themselves.

⁴ <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/dont-designate-azov>

⁵ <https://truthout.org/articles/war-is-forcing-ukrainian-leftists-to-make-difficult-decisions-about-violence/>,
<https://medium.com/@blackheadquarterinua/the-resistance-committee-eng-49056e2d0e84>

⁶ <https://www.csis.org/blogs/post-soviet-post-band-brothers-wagner-group-and-russian-state>
<https://www.belltower.news/gruppe-wagner-putins-rechtsextreme-schattenarmee-128487/?s=03>

⁷ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729350/EPRS_ATA\(2022\)729350_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729350/EPRS_ATA(2022)729350_EN.pdf)

⁸ <https://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/russland-krieg-propaganda-z-1.5556363?s=09>

⁹ <https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6ab3f23.html>

¹⁰ <https://taz.de/Krieg-in-der-Ukraine/!5835674/>

¹¹ <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/feb/28/ben-wallace-distances-himself-from-truss-comments-on-uk-volunteers-for-ukraine>

Spotlight on German Extreme Right-Wing Milieus:

- 1) According to the German government, so far 28 far-right extremists have left or have announced that they are planning to leave for Ukraine. “A few” were already involved in combat, and 13 are said to have returned to Germany. Two weeks earlier, the number of confirmed travelers was three. The extreme right-group/party “Third Way,” which has close ties¹² with the Ukrainian extreme-right Azov movement,¹³ has supposedly provided non-lethal military equipment and gear to unspecified “nationalist units.”¹⁴
- 2) German violence-oriented right-wing extremists imagine themselves in the permanent ideological and physical fight for the “white race” and against a Jewish-feminist world conspiracy. The first days following the Russian invasion were initially marked by confusion and controversial discussions about how to deal with this “White Brotherhood War.” On Telegram channels of the German right-wing extremist violence-oriented key actors, the majority of the articulated positions has clearly shifted towards supporting Ukraine. In order to justify a turn away from Russian President Vladimir Putin (i.e., the “strong white man”), pictures and videos of the Chechen Muslim troops sent by Putin to fight in Ukraine and photos of Russian-Asian soldiers who were denigrated by the right-wing extremists as “non-white” were shared. Additionally, Putin is sometimes referred to as “Jewtin” and Bolshevik. A minority of violence-oriented German right-wing extremists is also trying to remain neutral in order to avoid a split of the “Right.”
- 3) The fact that Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is of Jewish heritage was considered the “lesser evil.” Some extremists show respect for “this brave Jew who stays and fights,” while others share music videos of him dancing in high heels. The latter seems to be an attempt by pro-Putin extremists to taint the reputation of Zelenskyy.
- 4) The departure of German right-wing extremists, who want to fight alongside Ukrainians against the Russian invasion, also poses moral challenges to German society and politics. The notion of whether “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” does not apply here, especially given the specific historical background of German actions in Ukraine during World War II.
- 5) Members of the Young Nationalists, the youth wing of the extreme-right National Democratic Party (NPD) in Germany, reportedly received paramilitary training from the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) near St. Petersburg in 2019.¹⁵
- 6) Within the German “new/alt” far-right milieus and political parties, there is strong support for Putin, which is likely related to the longstanding support, including financial, of German far-right parties by the Kremlin.¹⁶

¹² <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-split-by-russia-ukraine-war/a-61283065>

¹³ The Azov movement is distinct from the Azov Regiment. The Azov Movement, which grew out of the Azov Regiment when it was included into the Ukrainian National Guard, is a political and social right-wing extremist movement in Ukraine. Prior to the current war, the Azov Movement’s political influence in Ukraine was negligible. For example, in the last general election in Ukraine it gained around 2% of the vote, see: <https://www.haaretz.com/world-news/europe/.premium-the-far-right-just-got-humiliated-in-ukraine-s-election-but-don-t-write-it-off-1.7563138>

¹⁴ <https://taz.de/Rechtsextreme-und-der-Ukrainekrieg/!5845602/?s=03>

¹⁵ <https://www.dw.com/de/wehrsport-deutsche-neonazis-in-russland/a-53698933>

¹⁶ <https://euobserver.com/political/128108>

CEP RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Priority: prevent exit of violence-oriented extremists

- Whenever possible, travel of violence-oriented extremists to Ukraine should be disrupted in their home countries. European mechanisms employed to prevent the travel of football hooligans as well as legal mechanisms employed to prevent the travel of foreign terrorist fighters to conflict zones could serve as blueprints. Their potential applicability should be examined with urgency and the necessary legal and regulatory adjustments undertaken.
- Governments should coordinate efforts of collecting and collating information on violence-oriented extremists that are at risk of traveling to the conflict zone or are preparing to travel to the conflict zone. Preventative instruments such as Germany's *Gefährder-Kompendium, including Gefährder as well as Relevant Persons*, could serve as a blueprint. The list is comprised of individuals and their immediate contacts who are likely to use violence to further their ideological aims, allowing for preventative administrative actions against those individuals to prevent a current threat.¹⁷
- The recent decision of the International Court of Justice on *Ukraine v. Russia*, which declared the Russian invasion an illegal war,¹⁸ could make the public approval of, the attempt to join, or the financial/material support of (pro)Russian forces and institutions (e.g., in the separatist areas Luhansk und Donetsk) a crime. Governments should explore the opportunities to use the implications of this ruling to disrupt potential travel and support of violence-oriented extremists that are attempting to join or support the Russian and/or separatist side of the conflict.

2. Monitor travel of violence-oriented extremists to the war zone

- If exit of violence-oriented extremists cannot be prevented, cooperation with and between security and intelligence authorities in countries bordering Ukraine should be intensified. These countries should be informed if violence-oriented extremists attempt to enter their jurisdiction enroute to Ukraine.
- Where appropriate, the use of Advanced Passenger Information (API) and Passenger Name Record (PNR) data should be considered to track international travel of violence-oriented extremists to the conflict zone as well as their return travel.
- To facilitate information exchange among police forces, a dedicated database of traveling violence-oriented extremists could be established at Europol in the form of a special project.

3. Monitor activities of violence-oriented extremists in the war-zone

- Security and intelligence authorities of the respective home countries of foreign fighters should establish or intensify dedicated communication and information exchange frameworks and set up a comprehensive monitoring and surveillance strategy that monitors the activities of the foreign fighters in Ukraine, in particular targeting violence-oriented foreign extremists operating in the conflict zone.

¹⁷ <https://netzpolitik.org/2021/umstrittener-begriff-bundesinnenministerium-schleicht-gefaehrder-in-die-eu/>

¹⁸ [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729350/EPRS_ATA\(2022\)729350_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/ATAG/2022/729350/EPRS_ATA(2022)729350_EN.pdf)

- Possible violations of international law by foreigners in the conflict zone (e.g., by participating in war crimes) should be documented for future prosecution. Lessons learned from gathering “battlefield or military evidence” in the context of returning Islamist foreign terrorist fighters should be considered. This includes for example the collection of finger prints and digital data with the help of digital forensics as well as ensuring that military actors have the mandate to collect information that can be used in civil criminal proceedings.¹⁹
- To support transnational prosecution of foreign fighters, European countries should consider whether they might participate in a Joint Investigation Team (JIT) with the help of Eurojust. A first JIT for core international crimes in the context of the Russia-Ukraine War has for example been established between Lithuania, Poland, and Ukraine in March 2022. National prosecution authorities should also examine which concrete offenses can be applied to foreign fighters.

4. Establish returnee management mechanisms

- After their return, a full risk assessment of the extremist foreign fighters needs to be undertaken, including measures such as movement restrictions and contact bans, until the risk they pose is fully understood and appropriate mitigation measures are in place. This should also apply to female fighters.
- Based on the learnings from dealing with returned western foreign terrorist fighters who had joined ISIS and other terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq, countries should start laying the foundation to ensure an individualized, comprehensive, and multi-professional case management of returning foreign fighters. This could include the following elements:
 - Establish a network of organizations with expertise in disengagement and deradicalization work (with a focus on violent right-wing extremism) and mental health (especially PTSD experts) to prepare for the likely fallout.
 - The social environment (i.e., family and close friends) of foreign fighters should be integrated into the case management as early as possible. Germany, for example, has established a network of “returnee coordinators,” integrated with governmental actors and security agencies that can serve as a basis for such a returnee management system. The objective must be to prevent loss of information when foreign fighters with and without an arrest warrant return home as well as to coordinate different governmental and civil society actors in the continuum of prosecution, rehabilitation, and reintegration.
 - The ongoing need for national and international knowledge exchange on the complex topic of returning foreign fighters makes the establishment of peer learning networks necessary. Formats like the German International Forum for Expert Exchange on Countering Islamist Extremism (InFoEx) can serve as a blueprint on how to foster the expert exchange between government and civil society practitioners as well as academia.²⁰ Such networks help gather good practices and challenges, identify trends, and develop policy recommendations when dealing with returning violent extremist foreign fighters.

¹⁹ <https://www.eurojust.europa.eu/news/eurojust-supports-joint-investigation-team-alleged-core-international-crimes-ukraine> and https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/ctc/sites/www.un.org.securitycouncil.ctc/files/files/documents/2021/Jan/cted_military_evidence_guidelines.pdf

²⁰ <https://dgap.org/en/research/programs/security-and-defense-program/infoex-research-tertiary-prevention-islamist> and <https://www.bpb.de/themen/infodienst/303924/wie-das-bamf-den-umgang-mit-rueckkehrenden-koordiniert/>

CEP RESOURCES:

Policy brief on foreign fighters traveling to Ukraine (March 2022):

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

Report on the travel of violence-oriented extremists to Ukraine after 2014:

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

Report on the paramilitary training infrastructure in Central and Eastern Europe (including Ukraine):

https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2021-06/CEP%20Report_Looks%20Can%20Be%20Deceiving_Extremism%20Meets%20Paramilitarism%20in%20CEE_June%202021_1.pdf

Webinar on travel of right-wing extremists to Ukraine in 2014:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ok-yTzH-oao>

Presentation on the travel logistic of right-wing extremist foreign fighters to Ukraine after 2014:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HL6hCKDCcQI&list=PLMgGq1NecSpYxO2I7-yGhNkcnFqJMKXrV&index=3>

Two webinars on paramilitary training activities in Central and Eastern Europe:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tmocjdq46Z0&list=PLMgGq1NecSpZT08nubo9VaGalWXGMykkR>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GclMX_1-8Bo&list=PLMgGq1NecSpZJV1PFC6xZ6BuNy6ILlQe

Webinar on the status of the Azov Regiment:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kyRTKoWGE4E&list=PLMgGq1NecSpaRKkOv6-ZObtzXbSLJk75V>

Resource on the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM):

<https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/russian-imperial-movement-rim>

Resource on Russia: Extremism and Terrorism:

<https://www.counterextremism.com/countries/russia>