

Policy Brief

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Managing the Return of EU Extremist Foreign Fighters from the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War

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 as well as a comprehensive assessment of extremist volunteers in the ongoing phase of the conflict.¹

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CEP Policy Recommendations:

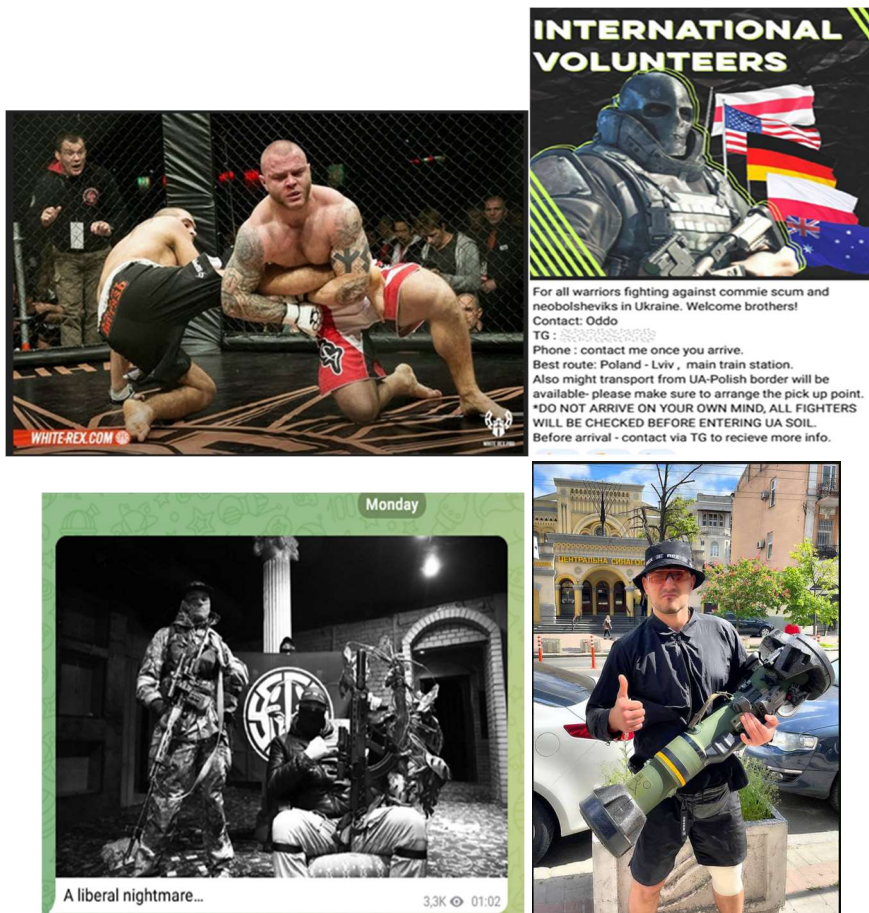
Establish returnee management mechanisms

- Based on the learnings from dealing with returned western foreign terrorist fighters who had joined ISIS and other terrorist organizations in Syria and Iraq, EU member states should start preparations to ensure an individualized, comprehensive, and multi-professional case management of returning foreign fighters when they leave for the conflict zone, not just when they return. 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.

¹ <https://www.counterextremism.com/content/western-extremists-and-russian-invasion-ukraine-2022>

- 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.
- 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.² Such networks help gather good practices and challenges, identify trends, and develop policy recommendations when dealing with returning violent extremist foreign fighters.

**Example: The militarisation of “White Rex”³ –
a key hub and network of the transnational violent extreme-right**



² <https://dgap.org/en/research/programs/security-and-defense-program/infoex-research-tertiary-prevention-islamist>

³ <https://www.bloodyelbow.com/2021/3/17/22335594/white-rex-mma-dangerous-neo-nazi-lifestyle-brand-politics-azov-news> and <https://www.vice.com/en/article/7kbpqx/neo-nazi-fight-clubs-how-the-far-right-uses-mma-to-spread-hate> - picture sources: white rex website and related telegram channels

The transnational violent extreme-right mixed-martial-arts network “White Rex” is actively recruiting foreign extremist fighters with a preference for individuals with military experience. They are claiming to having access to military weapons in Ukraine. In one of the pictures above (lower right), “White Rex” leader Denis Nikitin (Kasputin) is displaying what seem to be an Anti-Tank rocket launcher, next to that “White Rex” members appear to carry sniper and semi-automatic assault rifles.

Other violence-oriented national extreme-right organizations like the German “Der III. Weg” (The Third Way) have provided non-lethal military logistical support to “Ukrainian nationalists” at least three times.⁴

The total number of extremist EU citizens or residents who are fighting on both sides of the war is unclear, the lowest aggregated official estimate is 100.

Context:

- 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.

⁴ <https://der-dritte-weg.info/2022/06/weitere-hilfslieferung-in-der-ostukraine-angekommen/>

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.⁵
- 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.⁶

CEP RESOURCES:

Western Extremists and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (May 2022):

<https://www.counterextremism.com/content/western-extremists-and-russian-invasion-ukraine-2022>

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

⁵ 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.

⁶ <https://2017-2021.state.gov/united-states-designates-russian-imperial-movement-and-leaders-as-global-terrorists/index.html>

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=PLMgGq1NecSpZJV1PFC6xZ6BuNy6ILIQtE

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>