

# Career Break or a New Career? Extremist Foreign Fighters in Ukraine

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## About CEP

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The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) is a not-for-profit, non-partisan, international policy organization formed to combat the growing threat from extremist ideologies. Led by a renowned group of former world leaders and diplomats it combats extremism by pressuring financial and material support networks; countering the narrative of extremists and their online recruitment; and advocating for smart laws, policies, and regulations.

## About the author

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Cover graphic is inspired by the photo of "Continental Unity," a French-Serbian unit fighting on the "separatist" side in Ukraine, taken in the summer of 2014, probably in Donetsk. See: [facebook.com/unite.continentale/photos/a.681959115180405/792515807458068/?type=3&theater](https://facebook.com/unite.continentale/photos/a.681959115180405/792515807458068/?type=3&theater).

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- **A few hundred Western individuals with extreme right wing (XRW) or “nationalist” convictions travelled to fight in the conflict in Ukraine. Many had known each other from before the war.**
- **They had made an exceptional decision to deploy to a foreign war but otherwise, do not stand out from among their peers in the Western XRW milieu. Many had been members of XRW political parties before the war, some had experience with political militancy.**
- **Neither side of the Ukraine conflict purposefully mobilised foreign fighters along XRW lines. However, it is also true that members of such broader Western milieus must have found elements of the Ukrainian as well as the “separatist” political discourses sufficiently appealing to join. Marrying this discourse with their fatalistic approach to life in the West, where they are allegedly repressed or ostracised and where they think that they cannot get a fair hearing for their ideas, was the key motivation behind their deployment to the war in Ukraine. The conflict provided them with a chance of leaving behind the hated West (“here”) to fight their real or imaginary enemies that is broadly understood as the Western establishment or mainstream (“there”)—in this case, in Ukraine.**
- **The fighters were enchanted with visions of either a nationalist revolution (on the Ukrainian side) or a “Donbass in my country” (on the “separatist” side), a revolt aimed at the overthrow of the hated political order. At the same time, they confess to being too weak to attempt something similar in their countries of origin (too weak for “Donbass in my country”). This admission only strengthened their determination to fight in Ukraine.**
- **Ukrainian units that hosted such fighters did not mind them coming to Ukraine, but the units were not set up with an intention of becoming global XRW hubs. These units would ideologically evolve along the same lines independent from the arrival of Westerners in their ranks. Nowadays, some members of the Ukrainian XRW scene are ready to host and liaise with foreigners as they are keen on making anti-Russian inroads into the Western XRW milieu. They are not, however, hosting them in Kyiv with the view of turning them into XRW terrorists, who could stage attacks upon their return back home.**
- **The situation is more complex on the “separatist” side. They abhorred the idea of hosting Czech XRW fighters who are intent on staging terrorist attacks back at home (e.g. the Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve). However, the Russian Imperial Movement, recently designated as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) by the United States, which previously funnelled the fighters into Donbass, is ready to host and train, e.g. members of violent and anti-democratic**



**organisations** such as the Nordic Resistance Movement. Simultaneously, the groups such as **the Russian National Unity of A. P. Barkashov**, an organisation with a track record of terrorist activity in the Baltic States, also sent members into the ranks of the “separatist” forces.

- **The Russian aspect in connection with the XRW issue in the West has so far been understudied. Russian organisations not only train or recruit people from the former Soviet Union to fight in the East of Ukraine but later also funnel them to other conflict zones like Libya or Syria. Moreover, Russia hosts the pipeline through which the XRW foreign fighters joining the “separatist” side were travelling.** It did not object to their travel to Moscow, and rarely intercepted them on the way to the Rostov Oblast in the South of the country and close to the Ukrainian border where a rudimentary hosting infrastructure was put in place.
- **XRW fighters share a set of common beliefs (traditionalism, anti-consumerism, anti-capitalism, anti-socialism, anti-liberalism, dislike/hatred of the EU/NATO/the U.S./Israel, sympathy for president Putin but not necessarily Russia etc.). Therefore, their choice to join different sides of the conflict in Ukraine was not based on ideology. Quite often their choice was influenced by individual or group connections** (e.g. the Party of Swedes with the Ukrainian Svoboda) with a “gate keeper” (journalist, activist, humanitarian worker, etc.) closer to a given side. This led to a **so-called civil war within the Western XRW milieu** with pre-war peers or colleagues shooting at one another in the East of Ukraine.
- These—sometimes random—choices of a side in the conflict are an indication of **the shallowness of the ideological convictions of the individual XRW fighters. For them the war in Ukraine was post-modern, tribal, memetic in nature as many fought in defence of their preferred symbols, images, and even badges, and not grand ideologies.**
- Three groups of XRW foreign fighters in Ukraine emerge: **the “resetters”** (i.e. those wanting a new career in a new country—Ukraine or the “separatist” republics), **the “ghosts”** (i.e. those coming back and forth to the frontline, after recuperating and fundraising spells back at home), and **the “adventurers”** (i.e. the restless, publicly available and open about their intention to fight in other wars in the future).
- **The XRW alumni of the war in Ukraine, especially the adventurers, redeployed to different conflict areas around the world. They are still looking for their “Donbass” wherever they might find it.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

It is evident that, in 2019, **right wing extremism effectively replaced jihadi terrorism as the number one threat to internal/homeland security of the countries of the broader West.** Rising number of terrorist attacks, or failed attempts of such attacks in Europe, and an ongoing concern about the rise and the international connections of the domestic extremist scene in the United States bear testament to the issue at hand. Investigating such connections and transnational cooperation, and its potential for the future, among the **extreme right-wing (XRW)** forces, has led some of the experts in the field to look at **Ukraine.**

**Since 2014, Ukraine and its so-called “separatist” republics in the East have “hosted” a significant number of foreign fighters<sup>1</sup> coming from the XRW milieu during the country’s war for the reestablishment of control over these Eastern areas.** Consequently, U.S. authorities began to scrutinise the activities of some of such “hosts” in Ukraine<sup>2</sup> as well as their enablers in Russia. The U.S. Department of State’s designation of the Russian Imperial Movement as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) is the most recent U.S. action in this regard.<sup>3</sup>

All in all, **for the first time since the Bosnian war in the 1990s, the West witnessed a non-jihadi foreign fighter mobilisation for a conflict on its doorstep.** As this report highlights, there is a **likely possibility that the next such XRW mobilisation may appear soon again.** **There exists a supply of individuals from the broader nationalist milieus who are keen to fight in wars—ideally at home and, to some extent, akin to the “Donbass revolution.”** However, if this is not an option then these individuals are ready to fight in any foreign conflict.

**The author first heard of such fighters in the summer of 2014** and, at first, was more than perplexed with their mere existence. The question of **“why would anyone want to join this war?”** came back to him many times as he found himself unable to comprehend motivation of the Westerners fighting around Mariupol or Donetsk. As time went by, he made a decision to simply ask such individuals so that the most precise and clear answer could be given by the fighters themselves.

**From 2015 onwards the author first sought and then interviewed these fighters involved in this war with a varying degree of intensity.** The effort was largely successful as many of the fighters—usually cordially, candidly and at length—spoke of their experiences in Ukraine. Throughout 2019, the author re-intensified and obtained new leads as it was becoming clear that the alleged Ukrainian and far-right links of the Christchurch shooter<sup>4</sup> will reignite the interest in foreign fighting in Ukraine. This time, the world more closely scrutinised the ideological backgrounds of the fighters and looked for extremists in their ranks.

The author wrote and had known about some of the **radicals in the ranks of these foreign fighters on both sides of the conflict in Ukraine,** and decided to assemble a report in which **“the who,” “the why,” and “the how” of the extreme right-wing mobilisations for the war would be assessed and explained.** This, in his view, is an essential precondition before making assumptions about this war’s potential to act as a booster for the XRW milieu internationally or as a hub/laboratory/training ground for future generations of XRW

terrorists.<sup>5</sup> As will be shown, the reality is more complex and neither the problem nor its solution lies solely with or in Ukraine.<sup>6</sup>

For this report, the author interviewed **18 foreign fighters of 7 nationalities**: Brazilian, British, French, Georgian, Italian, Spanish, and Swedish individuals, who took part in the war in Ukraine on either side of the conflict. He also interviewed Ukrainian experts, former officials, and journalists who came into contact with such fighters and spoke to academics, experts, and researchers who follow the XRW scenes in the countries which saw significant fighter mobilisation for the war in Ukraine (e.g. Sweden for Ukraine or France for the so-called “separatists”)—in total more than 50 such individuals.

**This report will focus on the Westerners who joined the conflict in Ukraine in general and the XRW—or in their terminology “nationalist”—foreign fighters (estimated to be 50-80% of the Westerners) in particular.** This study aims to demonstrate who these fighters were, where they were coming from, what they are likely intent to do now and to assess to what extent they should be viewed as a security threat.

This report consists of three major sections. The first section examines the background of these fighters, which countries they hail from and what their ideological background is. In this section it will become clear that the shared ideological convictions of these fighters, while often grounded in European XRW belief systems, are often fairly shallow.

The second section of the report analyses their motivations to leave for the conflict in Ukraine. Three archetypes of foreign fighters will be developed: the reseters (i.e. those wanting a new career in a new country—Ukraine or the “separatist” republics), the ghosts (i.e. those coming back and forth to the frontline, after recuperating and fundraising spells back at home) and the adventurers (i.e. the restless, publicly available and open about their intention to fight in other wars in the future).

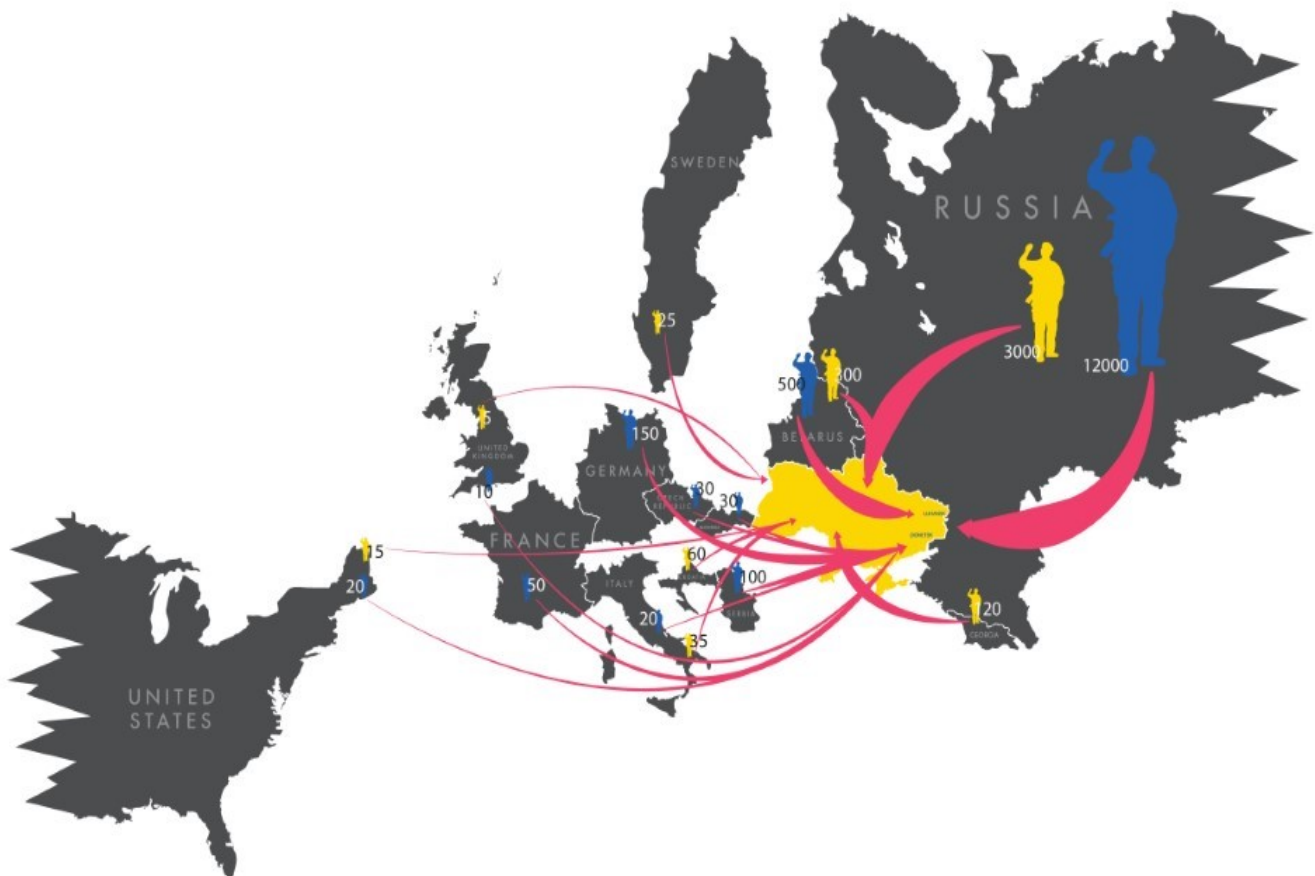
The final section of the report will analyse the potential threat that these individuals may pose and highlight that all three archetypes may pose a threat but that the ghosts and adventurers are of particular concern as they remain ready to re-join other conflicts.

## SECTION I

### INTRODUCING FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN THE WAR IN UKRAINE

At least 17,000 foreign fighters fought in the war in Ukraine up to this day. Of these, 15,000 were Russians who were present on both sides of the conflict—either that of Ukraine (up to 3,000) or that of the Russian supported, if not created, “new republics” of the DNR (Donetsk People’s Republic) and LNR (Luhansk People’s Republic). The remaining circa 2,000 foreign fighters mostly fell into two categories—either citizens of post-Soviet republics like Belarus or Georgia or Westerners—with both groups numbering around 1,000 fighters each.<sup>7</sup>

#### Foreign Fighter Mobilisations for the War in Ukraine

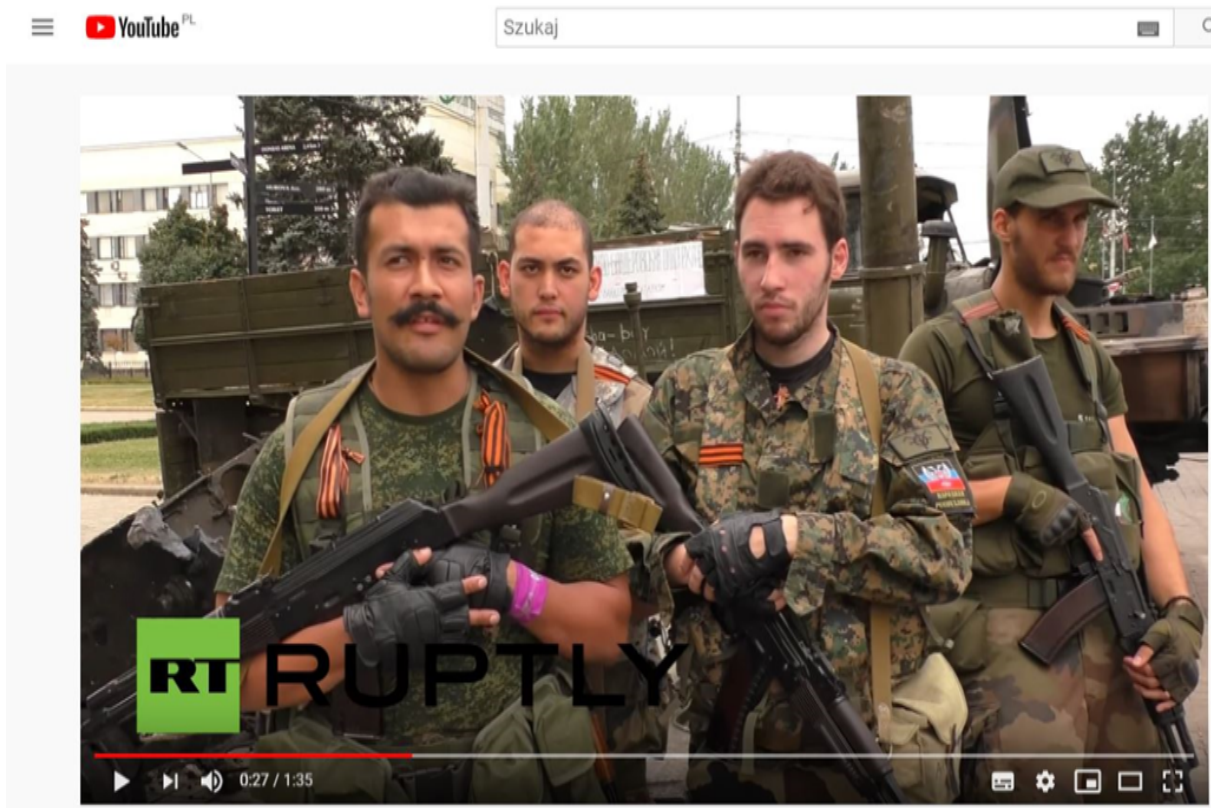


Significant foreign fighter mobilisations for the war in Ukraine (yellow – Ukrainian side; blue – separatist).



Deploying to a foreign war is an exceptional decision and relatively few people do so. It is first and foremost dangerous, a literal leap into the unknown, often without an option of going back home. Nonetheless, in the last decade thousands of Westerners took part in the Syrian civil war—on different sides but mostly in the ranks of the terror group ISIS. These fighters occupied the spotlight as their networks not only conveyed people to Syria but also staged high profile terrorist attacks in the West.

Simultaneously, however, **another Western foreign fighter mobilisation was taking place—this time it concerned the conflict in Ukraine, which saw circa 1,000 Westerners travel to the country to fight in its war either on the side of the Ukrainian government or with the so-called “separatist,” Russia-supported Donetsk People’s Republic (DNR) and Luhansk People’s Republic (LNR).** They fought on both sides and on some occasions literally shot at one another while being “deployed” in the trenches of this Eastern European war.

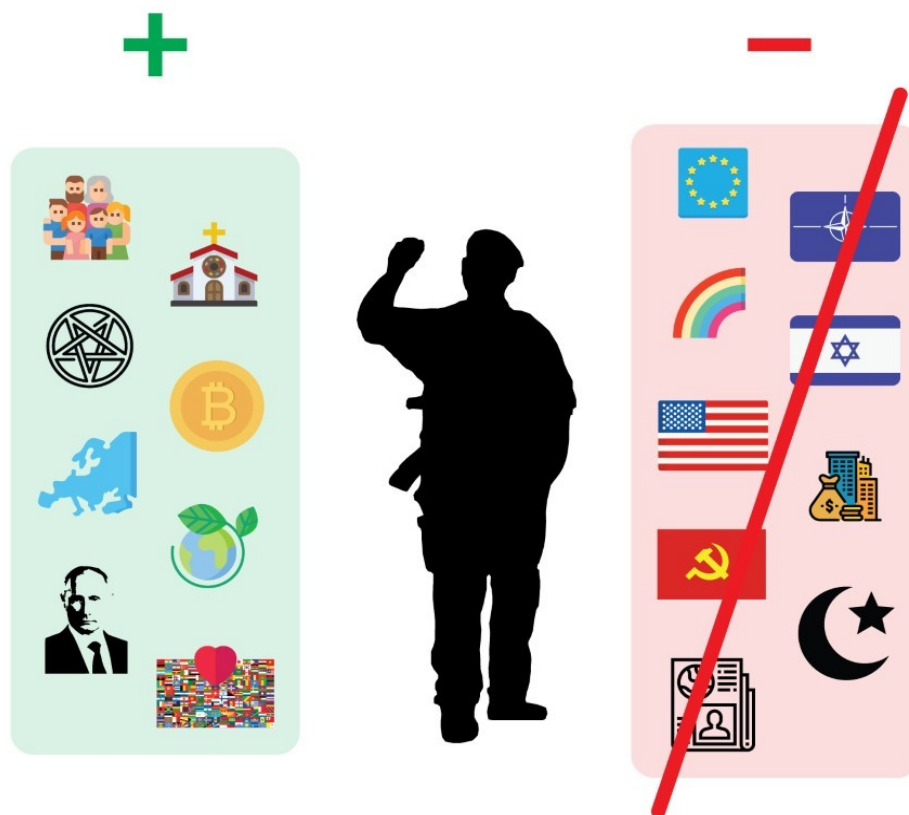


Screenshot from the interview with the “the French Donbass fighters,” Russia Today, 29 August 2014.<sup>8</sup>

## THE XRW FOREIGN FIGHTER: A WORLDVIEW

As will be shown below, the XRW foreign fighters from the conflict in Ukraine have many things in common. They may have fought in different units or different sides of this war, effectively shooting at one another, but the interviews and the open source research on such fighters reveal a core of beliefs that are widely shared among them. It is this common belief system which will be analysed first.

### The World of the XRW Foreign Fighters in Ukraine



These fighters all speak in favour of a **traditional family**, which they see as the bedrock of any given community or nation. At the same time, they **deny Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) rights**. Since, however, many are proponents of **individual liberties**, they insist that they would not criminalise homosexuality, for instance, but are adamant that practising it must be confined to one's home. Some of the fighters are Christians, one even said that he was a "Christian fundamentalist," but **the majority does not seem to have firmly established Christian values either**. For many, it is useful as a **demarcation line vis-a-vis both Islam or Islamism and socialism or liberalism**. Thus, they consider themselves Christian as far as their Europeanness or being Western is concerned and often speak of "**defending the Christian heritage**" or "**Christian values**." Consequently, this, in their eyes, gives them the air of chivalric medieval knights, or crusaders against the heathen, the chosen

few who are ready to make a stand for their beliefs and preferred way of life. Simultaneously, and to some extent bizarrely, many are also adherents of **paganism**—likewise, some do not take it seriously, relegating it to a **backdrop to their favourite music** (e.g. different types of heavy metal), while others are more serious practitioners.

**The fighters see themselves as “nationalists” and “patriots,” and they all profess “love” of their countries of origin and of “Europe” or “Eurasia.”** Frequently, they would call themselves **“European patriots”** who abhor integrationist and “bureaucratic excesses” of the current European Union. **In their view, Europe ranges either from Vladivostok to Lisbon or from Ukraine to Lisbon** and is not identical with the current community of 27 member states. Moreover, in their political belief, Europe should **be “nationalist” but not “chauvinist,”** i.e. **rid of petty territorial disputes among the nations but focusing on the key issues and enemies, such as: all sorts of “fifth columns” that in their view are already within the European borders—oligarchs, media moguls, socialists, liberals, Islamists, jihadists, immigrants, and refugees from outside Europe (especially the broader MENA region), corrupt politicians, as well as multinational corporations destroying the environment.** Some, especially the foreign fighters deployed on the Ukrainian side, would also add Russia to this list of significant “enemies.”

In their political imagination, **Europe would most likely consist of a string of (quasi) authoritarian states** bound together by their common and joint opposition to forces raging both within and outside their borders. Many of these fighters, including those on the Ukrainian side, **profess admiration for Vladimir Putin and the political system he built in Russia.** According to their assessment, the central authority in Russia is respected, the state is “active” on the international scene, the country is socially conservative and appears monoethnic.

The foreign fighters have all an **ambivalent approach to the U.S.** The Eurasianists outright reject any form of transatlantic relationship between Washington and Western Europe, while the pro-Ukraine fighters are unhappy with the United States’ relatively low-level support for Kyiv in its war with “separatists.” Consequently, many pro-Ukraine foreign fighters see **NATO as obsolete.** In their mind, the organisation failed to deploy eastwards to support its partner country in a war with “Russian aggression.”

Foreign fighters on the side of the “separatists” treat NATO as the key manifestation of the aforementioned transatlantic relationship and an American imperial tool that must be opposed by any means possible. These fighters often hold strong **anti-Semitic** views and consequently detest the pro-Israeli views of the notorious Norwegian far-right terrorist Anders Breivik, who is seen as a “hero” in many XRW circles. For example, some of these foreign fighters argue that there is a “nefarious” influence of “Jews” behind world developments. Furthermore, many of them dispute whether or not the Holocaust actually occurred, and if they do acknowledge its existence, they dispute that the incident caused significant casualties. However, they **hardly ever mention race, and many are adamant they want nothing to do with either the American alt-right or white supremacist movements.** Many even reject the label of “ethnonationalism.” At the same time, they speak of immigration quotas for “non-Europeans,” or are strongly opposed to any non-European immigration.

## TALKING TO FOREIGN FIGHTERS: THEIR WORDS AND SYMBOLS

The foreign fighters whom the author interviewed for this research are familiar with international media reports that have pushed their extremist credentials to the forefront. None are happy to accept the labels of “extremist,” “neo-Nazi,” or “XRW,” preferring instead to call themselves **“conservative,” “nationalist,” or less frequently, “national socialist.”** As a response to what they view as unfair categorisations, they most often deploy one of the following two narratives:

1. **“Yes, there were extremists in Ukraine/DNR/LNR/my unit, but very few.”** This kind of statement is often followed by a clarification of their ideological position, such as, “I am a nationalist/European nationalist/internationalist, etc.” Consequently, they imply one should not be concerned by the existence of foreign fighters in Ukraine because they strive to present themselves as followers of what—by Western standards—could be considered legitimate political positions.
2. **“Am I or my friends/comrades/other foreigners in the Ukraine/DNR/LNR/my unit extremists? No, the unit was not political. No, we are not a problem. You should be looking at jihadis/alt-right/Russia/U.S./etc.”** In short, they demand that any observer should refocus their worries on other global threats. Such statements, however, at least implicitly acknowledge the fighters’ appreciation of the fact that their role in Ukraine could be of concern to their compatriots.

**But is there cause for concern?** This is the key point to analyze when assessing the foreign fighters who went to Ukraine. On one hand, their statements of “we are not the problem” are supposed to mitigate any cause for concern. However, this often does not stand up to scrutiny. These “benevolent assurances” from the fighters themselves, is contrasted by:

- a) first and foremost, **their membership in different far-right groups or parties before the war**, such as the Party of the Swedes for the Swedish, the National Vanguard for Italians, Party of France and Black Lily for the French, Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve for the Czechs, the Slovak Conscripts for the Slovaks, etc.;
- b) **“Je suis Charlemagne,”** a “Waffen SS division”-meme on a fighter’s social media profile mocking the “Je suis Charlie” slogan;
- c) **Discussions among these fighters on whether the Holocaust actually happened** or that “more research” is needed to establish that it did;
- d) **A link on a foreign fighter’s social media profile to a YouTube video about a World War II fascist militia in an Axis member state;**
- e) **A recollection that a fighter’s unit had a “shrine” at its base full of swastikas;**
- f) A nickname adopted by a unit hosting foreign fighters of **a convicted neo-Nazi Scandinavian gunman**, etc.

It could be argued that the discrepancy between “you do not need to worry” and the toxic XRW imagery and narratives is a case of **cognitive dissonance**. These foreign fighters stress their benevolence, yet they still cherish—quite openly in many cases—brutal, violent, racist,



exclusionary socio-political positions. At the same time, however, one fighter recalled: “**this is a tribal war, not nation against nation. You’ve got nationalists on both sides because their ideology is less important than the side and symbols they identify with [...]** It is a post-modern war and the divide between the sides is shallow as people are nowadays raised on superficial attachments.”



An example of the fighters’ cognitive dissonance: a group of foreign fighters in the DNR/LNR ranks adopted this logo and a name “Team Vikernes” as their own. Varg Vikernes is a black metal musician and a convicted killer accused of neo-Nazi sympathies.<sup>9</sup>

It is possible that these fighters’ use of such language and symbols may sometimes be an element of their own, private “**shock and awe**” tactics, i.e., an approach through which they attempt to confuse or scare others with extremist imagery. It could also be a reflection of their **limited historical knowledge** and puzzlement when confronted with the “inappropriate” nature of the messaging. The author was also told by foreign fighters from one side that the “others” could in fact be involved in the conflict **to re-enact certain scenes or conflicts from the past. In this case, the foreign fighters referred to the Eastern Front during World War II**, with units playing the roles of 21<sup>st</sup> century “Wehrmacht” or “Waffen SS,” which this time would emerge victorious. A DNR/LNR fighter commented on the pro-Ukraine foreign fighters, saying “**they saw a couple of runes and think it is a re-enactment of the 1941-45 Eastern Front.**”



Moreover, it might be that the fighters are **aping the behaviour of, e.g., football hooligans, whose expressions of extremism are sometimes only pretence, reduced to a 90-minute outburst during the weekend’s soccer match** and deployed “because your mates [i.e. fellow hooligans] do it.”<sup>10</sup> Last but not least, these political views might constitute memetic summaries of their genuine political positions or an attempt, on behalf of the pro-Ukraine fighters, to—in the words of a DNR/LNR foreign fighter, but equally also held by some nationalist adversaries—**“piss off Russia. That is why they use Nazi symbols. Not because they are really national socialists but rather to troll the Russians.”**

## THE “UNHAPPY” FOREIGN FIGHTERS

Regardless of whether the fighters genuinely believe what they are saying, are ignorant of the nature of these things, manipulated into doing so by peer pressure, or reducing it to mere provocation, they certainly speak a different language than authors, journalists, or researchers who attempt to capture a snapshot of their world and communicate it to a wider audience.

**Their terms of reference, starting points, or simply socially acceptable lowest-common denominators are often outside the “appropriate” or “acceptable” norms held by individuals asking them questions.** This is not to suggest that these fighters are beyond the pale, far from it. Some are articulate, have a good education, and on an everyday level aspire to things desired by the majority of their compatriots, e.g., a steady job, house, family, etc. At the same time, **they did not have the happiest of lives before their involvement in the conflict in Ukraine.** They had either been restless, adrenaline junkies, cause-focused, seeking the next adventure, or fatalistic about the future of the West/Europe/their country due to a multitude of factors, such as alleged corruption, what they call the liberal *diktat*, or their perception of American imperialism, cultural Marxism, etc. Most are very pessimistic about their ability to lead a life they would like to lead at home, had they opted to stay there:

**“In the West, EU cultural Marxism is big, with support from liberal forces. I do not like it. I support traditional values of life [...] I don’t care who f---s with who in their bedrooms. But I do not want the cultural Marxism idea to poison society [...] A society needs to be stable, not freaked out where people’s desires are public. This demonstration has gone far over the head for what I can tolerate [...] I could not possibly go back to my country to live there.”**

Another fighter commented that **“we simply can’t [achieve our political goals here]. For people [like us] who have these political ideas, the only options are prison, social death, or madness.”** This viewpoint was also manifested by foreign fighters about their post-conflict impressions:

**“I was personally persecuted [...] And by persecution, I mean the mainstream press had me depicted as something akin to a terrorist. [...] Some leftists wanted us to be officially compared to ISIS after we returned [...] It wasn’t possible really to regain a normal life.”**

The fighters interviewed for this report all conveyed profound unhappiness, even sadness, with how the socio-political situation looked “here” (in the West):

**“[we are] fighting them [the establishment, the “mainstream,” the rulers of “here”] there because we can’t fight them here [...] Think of the communist and anti-communist fighters of the Cold War. They would move wherever they could, where they felt they had the occasion to serve their ideals. That is how you found the Frenchmen in the Karen jungle of Burma and Cubans in Angola.”**

Thus, **the Western world is not “their world” and since they are already functioning in often militant, violent, and almost subversive environments—and given that some of them could have previously been definitely described as impressionable young men—they opted for a radical break in their lives.**

The fighters would also extrapolate their experiences onto a broader social canvass, e.g., **predicting an outbreak of “civil war” amongst “tribes” and “many factions” because they viewed “the system is breaking down” and:**

“not putting a reasonable cap on migration and offering up the best our welfare system has or used to have. It is even at the point of welfare being more readily available for non-citizens now, who pay less or nothing.”

When asked for a country of their dreams they would be speaking of a wholesale but vague reset of their homelands:

“the country has to be the priority and also the restoration of our nation. A system that would fix the huge economic and functional issues our society has, starting by quitting the European Union (EU), reversing the massive immigration process, and putting a collar on the apartheid oligarchs.”

**In this sense, their travel to Ukraine could be seen as an attempt to break off from the downward spiral of fatalism. They left behind their lives and went to war, to a country far away with which they had very little, if anything at all, in common.**

## CIVIL WAR?

The fighters might have had little in common with Ukraine. Only very few—such as some of the Swedish—had some rudimentary connections in the country, but even they **had colleagues/friends/peers fighting for opposing forces**. Originally, this was no less surprising to the author than the 2014 discovery of any foreign fighters in the war in Ukraine. His interviewees, however, seemed far less dumbfounded by this:

**“it is a kind of internal civil war, but people with the same valour and the same objectives united again once the dispute is settled, I guess.”**

Settling of such disputes could take the form of a foreign fighter on the pro-Ukraine side now writing a (para)military reference for his compatriot who fought in the same war, but in the ranks of the DNR/LNR. One astute observer of this situation who spent a lot of time in the company of such fighters, stated to the author that there exists a

**“Western foreign fighter society—they all go to the same wars, all know each other [and since...] most of the fighters are still in their twenties, it is understandable they will want another war.”**

In the world of these foreign fighters, **a civil war between them and shooting at their former comrades was, at worst, met with a shrug and derogatory comments about the intellectual capacities of their colleagues who happened to join the other side**. Sometimes, decisions about which side to join seemed to have been made in a highly—to put it diplomatically—accidental fashion. For example, in some cases this decision was determined by the availability of Russian visas for the respective foreign fighters. When such visas were available, they were able to travel via this route and this determined that they joined the “separatists.” Moreover, there were cases in which much seemed to have been done on the spur of the moment, with fighters citing the minutiae of their everyday problems as the tipping points for abandoning everything and travelling to fight in Ukraine.<sup>11</sup>

It is correct that the mobilisation of foreign fighters on either side of **the conflict in Ukraine resulted in the creation of an international network as people met and new contacts were forged, with some continuing until this day**. However, **this network would not have come into being had it not been preceded by the existence of other, pre-war network(s)**. The author saw this in great detail during his interviews with the fighters, who would use the phrase **“I know the guys on the other side. We were friends/colleagues/etc. before the war.”**

Surprisingly, these words were not meant to depict a fallout between two XRW individuals from the same country or city or region but people of different nationalities who had been in touch before 2014. **They might have met online or participated in the same events—concerts, demonstrations, or protests—around a broader Western XRW network**. In short, **the conflict in Ukraine was not needed for them to come together**. It might have put them on different sides of the front, but the war did not act as the social catalyst for the already internationalised and networked XRW milieu.

Long gone are the days of an XRW milieu neatly broken into national clusters. The individual XRW scenes have means to communicate. It is often very easy for them to establish links and quickly come to a conclusion that their cause is truly international in nature, i.e., a joint fight of European “patriots” opposing the capitalist, globalist, and liberal “enemy.” This, as one French fighter explained to the author, is more difficult for Central-Eastern European (CEE) nationalists as they “still go on about territorial disputes—it is different in the West.”<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the West, seen by the same foreign fighter, has been

“slowly destroyed [by] 60 years of capitalism, globalism, a soft, progressive occupation [...] a cancer which rooted out everything solid in society.” At the same time, “communism froze different cultures in ice. So, when it melted, people were *partly* preserved and they are still harsh, capable of surviving, they have strength.”

### **Pre-War Connections of the Foreign Fighters in Ukraine**



## SECTION II

### WHY THEY FIGHT

Even though the fighters might be indifferent about anyone being surprised about the concept of a “civil war,” **they did not deploy to Ukraine to settle some scores from before the conflict’s outbreak.** In conversations, they profess a **multitude of motivations** for their foreign fighting which are described below:

- 1) **The aforementioned fatalism—an inability to function “here” (West) so we have to go “there” (Ukraine)—potentially with the view of forming what neo-Nazi theoretician Jean Thiriart called the “European Brigades,” i.e., forces of “European patriots” who would return from a conflict in a nearby country to fight a nationalistic war in Europe.**<sup>13</sup> One French foreign fighter alluded to this idea while explaining that he and his nationalist colleagues from the DNR/LNR side **“dream of a ‘French Donbass’ even though it is quite obvious we don’t have the means to achieve it.”** By “French Donbass” he meant a war similar to that happening in the East of Ukraine. Another Frenchman, who in 2019 participated in the “yellow vest” protests, alluded precisely to this concept when he compared the atmosphere of the demonstrations in France to that of **“revolutionary Donbass of the spring of 2014.”**<sup>14</sup>
- 2) **The “exhilarating feeling of being under artillery fire,”** i.e., desire to prove oneself under fire, plus the need for an adrenaline rush. “This is the shit,” one Swedish foreign fighter exclaimed, commenting on the fighting capabilities of a volunteer battalion he and his colleagues were looking at joining. As they shopped around for the most capable unit, they zeroed in on what was at the time the Azov Battalion and opted to join it because it promised the **“real deal.” In short, it was *the action*, i.e., the fighting experience, they were after.**
- 3) **War was used as a resume boost so that the respective foreign fighter can continue or embark upon a career with, e.g., a private military contractor.**
- 4) **Humanitarian motivations**—“I wanted to help people in need” or “let’s see if I can help the weaker/losing side with my military skills.”
- 5) **Geopolitical motivation. The war in Ukraine is seen as an expression of a global and ongoing conflict between the West and the East, the United States vs. Russia, Europe vs. Asia, etc.** In this scenario, a fighter finds it implausible to always remain on the side-lines of this struggle and opts to literally throw his hat into the ring, e.g., **“I was not ‘just’ a nationalist [...] Assuming I want regime change in the West and Russia is actually the designated enemy of these regimes, being on the side of Russia [i.e. pro-DNR/LNR] is quite the obvious choice”**

versus

**“We are concerned about protecting our European heritage and we are proud to be here as representatives of our own countries who are fighting Russia.”**



6) **Ideological motivations—involvement is preconditioned by an ideological “coming out,” i.e.,**

**a) nationalist in nature:** “I am a nationalist and this is a nationalist uprising against corrupt oligarchs”

versus

“I am defending the Russian people and their right to live as they wish to. I am a nationalist.”

**b) Internationalist in nature:** “It is Russian aggression directed at Ukraine, and my country is next. I am doing this because of solidarity”

versus

“It is fascist Ukrainian aggression, supported by the likes of the U.S. and NATO, and directed at the inhabitants of Donetsk/Luhansk/Novorossiia/etc. I am doing this because of solidarity.”

7) Deployment because of my family or colleagues, or my colleagues did it.

## A CAREER BREAK OR NEW CAREER?

Study of the pre-war backgrounds and the motivations of the Ukraine-bound foreign fighters, allows for their categorisation into three main subsets that indicate what we might expect from them in the future:<sup>15</sup>

### Resetter



- a new break
- abandons his old country
- goes public

The first group, “**resetters**,” arguably the smallest numerically but influential in shaping the general perception of the conflict, deployed to the frontline in an attempt to forge a new career. In general, this would amount to **a new start in life in either Ukraine or the “new republics” of the DNR/LNR**. In particular, this new start would lead to a job in private military contracting. In short, they perceived the war in Ukraine as an event through which they could redefine or reset themselves.

## Ghost



- a career break
- returns to the same conflict
- does not go public

The second group, the “ghosts,” are much larger than the previous one. It is constituted of individuals who treated their participation in the conflict as a “career break,” a hiatus after which one would return home. The resettlers were open about their decisions to go “there” and fight, but the ghosts often—though not always—operated in the shadows, hid their faces and avoided contact with academics, experts, journalists, and researchers. **They would and did return home**, usually after a couple of months on the frontline or after repeated short-term stints, so they would not overstay either their Ukrainian (for fighters associated with Ukraine’s volunteer battalions) or Russian (for DNR/LNR associated fighters) visas. Moreover, **many also did redeploy to the frontline after a few months back home during which time they, e.g., saved money for another tour on the front.** As they would be either travelling to Ukraine or Russia legally and adhered to the 90-day visa or temporary residency limits, it is not impossible to track down these “tourists” who made repeated trips.

## Adventurer



- neither career break nor a new career
- wants to go to another war
- goes public

The third group, and arguably the most colourful, though potentially smaller than the second, consists of individuals who fall in between these first two categories. **They were not seeking a new life or a career in either Ukraine or the DNR/LNR but were still happy to publicise their roles on the frontline in the service of some perceived “greater” (usually nationalist or internationalist) cause. This might make them reappear in some conflict in the near future.** One could say these were “adventurers,” the restless, in as much as the second group consisted of potential “war junkies.”

From a security perspective, **it is the ghosts or the adventurers that may potentially pose the main threat. Ghosts went through the conflict largely undetected and returned home unmolested.** Grasping the scale of this second group is key to the understanding of **active war tourism**, i.e., an activity in which individuals transit into and out of a given conflict. Such “war tourists” would involve themselves in actual fighting, unlike their “passive” peers who would, e.g., visit a given frontline for a photo opportunity. Similar occurrences could be observed throughout the 1980s in Afghanistan and to some extent are repeated in, e.g., Kyiv today, hundreds of kilometres away from the frontlines, with non-Ukrainian XRW individuals flaunting their real or imagined radical connections in a country at war. **In short, if the citizens or residents of a given state pursue “war tourism,” it is only logical that the security authorities of their home country would be interested in the details of these individuals’ activism abroad.**

These returning adventurers faced very few legal sanctions upon returning home so far because many European countries do not have specific legal provisions against such foreign fighting unless the respective individual joins a terrorist organisation. Many European countries outlaw joining a foreign military but do not always prosecute individuals enlisting in the ranks of so called “volunteers” or “rebel” groups.

**This does not mean, however, that the third group were not questioned or monitored by the security authorities after they returned home.** Foreign fighters on both sides recounted this. At the same time, these foreign fighters were quite open about the fact that their comrades generally moved on after the war, as none of the “veterans” interviewed is either “homeless or a millionaire,” e.g., the:

**“majority are doing okay. They are not [private military] contractors as some wished to become but they are not homeless, either”**

*or*

**“when we will be back home, most of us will be out of money, without jobs [...] the priority will be to survive. Most guys will just be discreet, maintain a low profile and try to find work and see their families again [...] those who are concerned about us should remind themselves they have infinitely more chances of getting killed by the police of their own state than by one of us.”**

This could suggest that the adventurers have returned to their pre-war fatalism, a reality in which once again they function in a semi-clandestine radical milieu convinced that the socio-political deck is stacked against them. Thus, some of them might be waiting for another chance to deploy to another war in which they, once again, can relive their adventures, away from the perceived oppressive atmosphere back home.

So far, the author was able to “spot” the alumni of the Ukraine war in different trouble spots around the globe, i.e.:

- “Some rebranded as anti-ISIS fighters in the ranks of the Kurdish Peshmerga in northern Iraq;
- Some allegedly participated in an ill-fated coup attempt in Montenegro;
- Others switched into private military contract work; and
- Some former French foreign fighters on the pro-Russia separatist side took part in the yellow-vest protests in Paris as members of the marchers’ ‘security detail’.”<sup>16</sup>
- Alumni of the war also featured in conflicts such as the wars in Libya, Somalia, and Syria (see below).



A post celebrating a Russian foreign fighter, veteran of the war in Ukraine who then died fighting in Libya. Screenshot from one of the Facebook groups founded in support of the “separatists.”

## FOREIGN FIGHTERS WAR LOGISTICS

**The key thing for any Western wannabe foreign fighter that wanted to deploy to a given foreign war was logistics—mostly the issue of how to get “there.”** As discussed above, the fighters might have been well connected amongst themselves but few—apart from the Swedes from the Party of the Swedes with *Svoboda* party in Ukraine—had tangible links to Ukraine. They managed, however, to get there and most often without the knowledge of either Russian or Ukrainian interlocutors, and subsequently enlist in the ranks of either the Ukrainian volunteer battalions or the forces of the so-called “separatists.”

This was possible due to the fact that the **fighters were often just the tip of the iceberg and sometimes the most visible face of a given mobilisation. Their arrival was often preceded by that of supporters or fans of a given side in the conflict, sympathetic journalists, writers, activists, and humanitarian workers.** Some would help with opening doors to the fighter’s Ukrainian or DNR/LNR hosts and helped the internationally networked foreign fighters make the necessary connections on the ground in Ukraine. Sometimes, both groups—the fighters and individuals in the larger support network—would first:

**“chat over social media and then meet in person, and we talked. They couldn’t get us—they couldn’t understand our desire to fight. For them, this was all about sending aid.”**

In the spring of 2014, during the chaotic early stages of the conflict, foreign fighters had the ability to literally **shop around for units that would host them.** Again, chance and the absence of design often played a role in how a given foreigner ended up with one or another unit, e.g., not all Swedes fought for the then Azov Battalion. The same is the case for the French foreign fighters in the DNR/LNR ranks who were also to some extent dispersed.

**Social media** played a key role in the mobilisation and the war logistics. The Russian platform Vkontakte was prime for the DNR/LNR’s Russian foreign fighters whereas the Westerners utilised the more global Facebook to, e.g., **screen recruits** for their nascent foreigners-only units or foreigners-only teams within larger units. They would also use them to **communicate with “compatriots” back home with a view to recruiting them,** as was stated by the Slovak foreign fighters on the DNR/LNR side as well as by the Swedes in the ranks of Azov. The Swedish foreign fighters used a now defunct webpage, run by one its fighters, to propagandise and enlist Swedish volunteers on the Ukrainian side.

Sometimes, Facebook posts **featured detailed instructions on how to get “there”** and what to prepare for so that the transition from civilian life in the West to the ordeal that is the frontline would be smooth:

**“the moment you get to Rostov, you are in good hands, there will be a translator. You should, however, in ideal circumstances, speak Russian, be in good physical shape, have military experience and be 40 years old max.”<sup>17</sup>**

Simultaneously, YouTube would be deployed as a means of conveying video messages, both for recruitment and fundraising purposes and also for taunting the other side, which featured foreign fighter peers from XRW milieus.<sup>18</sup>



The foreign arrivals on the Ukrainian side mostly made it to Kyiv, the most internationally networked place in Ukraine to which they would fly before deploying farther east. Some arrived in Ukraine illegally by crossing its Western border on foot.<sup>19</sup> The other side, albeit with the notable exceptions of some French fighters who arrived in Donetsk after travelling through Ukraine before the frontline was effectively established, transported its foreign fighters down a route following the **Moscow-Rostov-Alchevsk/Kamensk Shakhtinsky pipeline**. This travel route would entail a flight into one of Moscow's airports followed by a train/plane or bus journey to Rostov, close to the Ukrainian border, then by bus into the "new republics" or to a border where one would be assigned to a unit and then illegally moved across the Ukraine border.

### **Moscow-Rostov-DNR/LNR Pipeline of the Foreign Fighters**



Sometimes, foreign fighters heading to the separatist ranks did not have a positive experience on their travel eastwards as some served brief stints in Russian jails before or arriving in the DNR/LNR. This was due to the fact that the local Russian security authorities were unsure if they could be trusted with peaceful passage through the country:

“Russians were totally *unprepared* for foreign volunteers. I was arrested two times in Russia and kicked out [...] Russians never exploited the potential [of the foreign fighters] unlike the Ukrops [Ukrainians] who quickly deployed *their* foreigners [...] We sacrificed a lot to get there, so just *use us!* They saw us as ‘cool little tourists they could use in front of the cameras for propaganda’ [...] We had to change units and disobey orders to get into action. It was very tiring having always to haggle and to build up schemes so we could go into combat [...] We simply came too late—when it was no longer a war of manoeuvring. Some units [like Rusicz, the XRW Russian unit on the DNR/LNR side] came early, there was chaos and they built up their own unit, their own logistics, trademark so to speak. [...] We couldn’t. This was no longer a war of movement. Eventually they and us both left as there was ‘nothing left to do [t]here’.”

This feeling of having nothing left to do was compounded by the shock some foreign fighters experienced throughout their deployments, especially but not only in the ranks of the “new republics”:

“Yes, welcome to former Soviet countries—I, as a medic, had to tell my boss what to do but he, allegedly, had way more experience than I did [...] It was all improvised and ‘davai, davai’ [...] and we [the Westerners] were like, ‘what is this f...ing circus?’”

The aforementioned frustrated XRW fighters on the separatist side also encountered far left extremists or militants, e.g., members of communist parties from Spain, on the frontline. It turned out that the Russian patriotic-communist group **Essence of Time** actively searched for recruits with internationalist-leftist ideological background who would be ready to join the new “*International Brigades*” to fight for the “new republics” of the DNR and LNR. Interestingly, encountering individuals from a very different milieu hardly troubled the fighters which could be another indicator of the shallowness of the alleged ideological mobilisation for the war:

“We fought together, communists and Nazis alike [...]. We all want the same: social justice and the liberation of Russia from the Ukrainian invasion.”<sup>20</sup>

## SECTION III

### XRW FOREIGN FIGHTERS AS A THREAT?

Five years ago, the author was the first to caution about the potential threat of political violence by returnees from the conflict in Ukraine.<sup>21</sup> This was strenuously denied by the foreign fighters themselves, who would profess their **lack of belief in “terrorism or mass shooting or assassinations.”** At the same time, some of the fighters explained their negative view concerning terrorist operations by highlighting that such acts would not be sufficient “to start a war, the war *here*, which we cannot fight” as XRW forces are too weak. One of the fighters stressed that **any aforementioned armed action will not help the perpetrators because**

**“it will achieve the contrary—unite the society behind the police and the state, justify the strengthening of security and authoritarian laws. This is why I can’t fight a war here [in my home country] and why I oppose terrorism.”**

This attitude, as was explained above, pushed the conflict’s adventurers—the third category of fighters—into looking for another fight in different places around the globe. So far, however, little was heard of the Western returnees perpetrating acts of political violence in their home countries. It could be argued that Jean Thiriart’s theory of **going “there” so we could later fight “here”** is only a prospect for the future and those, like the French foreign fighters the author interviewed, **dreaming of a rebellion akin to that in Donetsk happening in their native France—a “French Donbass” as one of them called it. Therefore, many of them are still waiting for their opportunity. However, there are troubling exceptions and complications to this general situation that shine a different light on the issue of potential political violence by returnees.**

The first issue concerns those **organisations that use the space or connections provided by the conflict in Ukraine to train or acquire new, violent skills that could be of use back on the “home front.”** The author is aware of two such organisations, both of which, interestingly, are associated with the pro-DNR/LNR side. The first are the so-called **Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve**, a militant Czech group that sent people to Donbass for exactly that purpose.<sup>22</sup> The fact that it was riven by internal rivalries and failed to disclose the exact purpose of their members’ deployments to the “authorities” in Donetsk, who would find it troubling, might have prevented acts of political violence—if not outright terrorism—in Central and Eastern Europe.

The second organisation that originally started, or at least some of its members did, on the pro-Ukraine side was Scandinavia’s **Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM)**. Since 2015, the NRM has been firmly on the pro-Russian side. It is a violent, neo-Nazi organisation intent on abolishing the constitutional orders of the Scandinavian countries. It is banned in Finland. The NRM is happy with its members deploying for paramilitary training in Russia, organised by the veterans of the war in Ukraine in general and in particular by the **Russian Imperial Movement, recently designated as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) by the U.S. Department of State.** Interestingly, the NRM did not sanction an act of terrorism perpetrated

by its members upon their return from such training.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, the mere existence of a Scandinavia-Russia training conveyor belt should be cause for concern. This is the case, even if the NRM, as was also suggested to the author by Swedish researchers of the XRW, maintains this pipeline in an attempt to allow its members to “**let off steam**” in a “controlled environment.” Whether the organisation adheres to this view or even is able to control the full outflow of this “steam” is debatable. This remains a concern among the Swedish and other Scandinavian authorities.

**The situation is different with foreign fighters who gravitated to the Ukrainian side.** Here, apart from the unproven allegations that the Christchurch attacker trained with or even fought in the ranks of the Ukrainian volunteer battalions, **accusations concerning their intent to at least dabble in political violence concentrated not on the individual foreign fighters or their networks in the broader West but rather on the Ukraine-based units that hosted them.** The main culprit here so far is the **Azov Regiment**. It is the subject of intense discussion amongst experts about whether, due to its alleged XRW connections, it should be designated a “foreign terrorist organisation” (FTO) by the U.S. Department of State.<sup>24</sup>

It is true that this unit, currently within the structures of the National Guard of Ukraine (the country’s gendarmerie), accepted Western individuals from extremist milieu into its ranks. However, for example, the aforementioned Swedish and other foreign fighters often arrived in Ukraine in the early stages of the conflict—before the Azov Regiment was established and subsequently became the alleged epicentre of European neo-Nazi mobilisation.<sup>25</sup>

This suggests that **the foreign fighter mobilisation to Ukraine had initially not been primarily neo-Nazi or XRW in nature. Rather, some members of the XRW scene in general or neo-Nazis in particular had opted to join the war. As explained above, they had varying motivations, especially the “fatalist” push factor combined with the martial discourse deployed by either side as a pull factor.**

**Similarly, the French fighters for the DNR/LNR side, many with XRW convictions, deployed eastwards not because the “new republics” promised the introduction of a socio-political programme favoured by the French far right. Those fighters joined because they saw in the conflict as part of a struggle against U.S. imperialism.**

Unsurprisingly, the interviewed members of the Ukrainian Azov movement (which comprises not only the regiment but also a political party, paramilitary unit, a charity, and intellectual and social wings)<sup>26</sup> distance themselves from the image of global neo-Nazi kingpins with which they are often portrayed in international media. To some extent, they seem baffled by the attention, as they are products of the XRW scene that, as one expert put it, **“was always looking to Western Europe or the United States” for influence or inspiration.**<sup>27</sup>

They have internationalist ideas that would see the CEE region evolving into a separate, i.e., neither Eastern (pro-Russia) nor Western (pro-U.S. and/or pro-EU) geopolitical entity. In their political view this new entity would not, be “consumed by petty nationalistic chauvinism responsible for seemingly endless 20<sup>th</sup> century squabbles amongst the CEE countries” (the *Intermarium* concept—literally *between the seas*: Baltic, Adriatic, and the Black Sea). **The member states of this new entity would pursue nationalist domestic policies that could appeal to members of Western XRW scenes, sometimes enchanted with homogeneous**

(population-wise) CEE countries with very few MENA migrants and often political cultures that, in their eyes, are less prone to being hijacked by “political correctness.”

Moreover, Ukraine, which sits at the epicentre of this project, is a country at war, with a string of nationalist political but also (paramilitary) forces, like the Azov Regiment, and offers Western allies, fans, visitors, etc. a chance to bask in the frontline or activist glory of fellow nationalists. **Such individuals are the “passive” war tourists, individuals keen on photo-ops but not necessarily the “real” foreign fighters in Ukraine’s conflict. Their arrival does not threaten Ukraine’s security but, through the Azov movement, could damage the country’s international standing.**

At the same time, the interviewed **Azov movement members**, while admitting that the organization has difficulties with controlling the extreme political convictions—even by XRW standards—of some of their “guests” or wannabe “allies” **do not hide their keenness to reach new audiences or to host almost anyone who is supportive of Ukraine in its struggle with Russia.** This is, in their words, to “**increase the volume**” of Ukrainian strategic communication in general, and of Ukrainian nationalists in particular, and **counter Russia’s inroads into the XRW scenes of the West.**

In this process, the movement seems to be following a Churchillian logic of “**an alliance with the devil**” [i.e., the USSR in 1941] to reach the desired political conclusion. One interviewee recalled: “**I have a mafia style rule to this. I mean, I will talk to anyone who will not assess, censure me or impose their beliefs upon me. I am open minded.**” This approach is not only supposed to help sell the *Intermarium* but also its promised nationalist *Reconquista* (or the “reconquest” of Europe).

This concept, which is a central part of Western XRW narrative (see the Identitarian Movement), is summed up as the reversal of its alleged current decline, led by nationalists, by a deep and radical reconquest of the mind, history, intellect, and culture of Europe, which is to be launched from the CEE). The movement’s powerful “war story” is also deployed in the process of winning hearts and minds. However, potential allies are not encouraged, as the author was told, to effectively “join” the Azov Regiment. Joining Azov is currently a difficult task without permanent residence in Ukraine.

**Given its “alliance with the devil” strategy, the degree to which Azov is able to keep its friends and allies in check, however, remains debatable. This means that even with the best intentions, the movement will have problems with its international supporters. These are individuals who, while in Ukraine, only pose for photos outside Azov headquarters or attend mixed martial arts fights organised by its members but, upon returning home, could engage in acts of criminality or political violence.**

This will further fuel speculation about whether the Azov Regiment is a foreign terrorist organisation (FTO) and the central hub of neo-Nazi militancy or even terrorism in the West. Therefore, one might deplore its nationalist policies and neo-Nazi members in its ranks. As Azov interviewees stated to the author, they vividly remember these “tough guys” (read: outspoken neo-Nazis) who were pushed to the fore during the war’s early days. Nevertheless, **the movement does not, fully meet the definition of an FTO.** It does not have the intention to conduct acts of terrorism and its training capacities are not the equivalent of those in the Lebanese Bekaa Valley, for example.



One of its former foreign members commented on this very issue rather bluntly: **“30-35 Westerners fought in the regiment with 5-6 Americans in total. What terrorism? What threat?”** Of course, Azov remains a controversial socio-political entity that would have not come into being had it not been for the war in Ukraine. It espouses policies that oppose Euro-Atlantic integration, that is favoured by Ukraine’s Western neighbours. Consequently, however, its party/paramilitary organisation/charity/business/military regiment status should be of concern primarily to the Ukrainian authorities, and not necessarily to the U.S. State Department.

As was shown, **it positions itself as a point of reference or a role model to its global “friends,” including those of the RXW spectrum. However, Azov steers clear of calls to terrorist violence, and—regardless of, as the author was told, “readiness to fight in the streets” in Ukraine—the movement has avoided calls for international militant action in favour of its *Intermarium* or *Reconquista* concepts.**

## TENTATIVE CONCLUSION: NEITHER A UKRAINIAN NOR A WESTERN PROBLEM?

The case of the Azov Regiment demonstrates that the problem with the XRW's mobilisation is not purely an issue connected to the conflict in Ukraine. **Had it not been for the outbreak of war in the country in 2014, foreign fighters from around the world would not have flocked to the country or involved themselves in the conflict. As was demonstrated, these fighters did not emerge inexplicably with the war's opening shots. They had been active and involved in radical scenes before the onset of the conflict.** For them, Ukraine was a stage on which they could act or project their socio-political or geopolitical beliefs, but these had been formed long before their trip to Kyiv or Donetsk and Luhansk.

In short, the problem is not (just) Ukrainian. It is a **problem within Western, primarily European and American societies with scores of young individuals in internal exile, deeply upset about the current socio-political arrangements in their home countries, drawn into and functioning in broader XRW scenes. Furthermore, the spokespeople for such homegrown XRW movements are quite open about their "declaration of war" against the establishment and the mainstream.**<sup>28</sup> These foreign fighters and their peers function in such conditions and one can expect more such fatalistic and restless individuals to gravitate to seemingly forlorn causes abroad and then return home. It is also possible that the **"passive" war tourists, those who did not make it to the frontlines in Ukraine, will constitute a future threat because they could mix with and further radicalize their XRW extremist peers, already radicalised by the refugee crisis.**

In this regard, Ukraine, as a platform, also offers a snapshot of what is brewing underneath the surface in the Western XRW scenes. Until recently, these XRW milieus were often neglected or overlooked by the political violence and terrorism studies community, which for the past two decades mainly focused on jihadists. It would be wrong to characterise these foreign fighters as a minor concern. Although they were exceptional in a practical sense because of their decisions about going *there*, they are not exclusive as far as their socio-political positions are concerned. They have always been part of a larger network that could produce Europe's next generation of restless, more or less active subversives.

At the same time, however, **it would also be an oversimplification to characterise this situation as (just) a Western problem.** In fact, **the huge majority of foreign fighters involved in the conflict had in fact not arrived in Ukraine from the broader West but from neighbouring Russia.** One author referred to them as

"a fun-house mirror of contemporary Russia. Bearded Cossacks in parade dress, tattooed skinhead bodybuilders, bearded philosophers, camouflage-wearing, beer-bellied mercenaries, priests in cassocks, Chechens ..."<sup>29</sup>

**The Russian XRW scene effectively split with some of its leading lights and joined the Ukrainian side in their struggle against the Putin regime, which had no love lost for domestic extremists in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Others were "encouraged" by the Russian security services to enlist with DNR/LNR formations, e.g. via the aforementioned Russian Imperial Movement.**

It is also concerning that the so-called **Barkashovtsy**, named after their leader Alexander Barkashov of the XRW Russian National Unity of A.P. Barkashov, took part in the conflict. This group funnelled members into Donbass so they could join the fight. For this organisation, such activity **constituted a return to the international stage of the political violence seen in the early 1990s, as its members and sympathisers attempted to act as a “stay behind” USSR militant force in countries like Estonia.**<sup>30</sup> Their aim then was to attack such countries with the aim of coercing them to not leave the Soviet Union.

Almost a quarter of a century later, its members went on the offensive to make sure Russia, the legal successor to the USSR, gains new territory again—not just simply defend its existing boundaries. In the trenches of Eastern Ukraine, these Russian XRW individuals encountered fatalistic Europeans, some dreaming of a “Donbass” in their own countries. It is likely that such individuals will meet again, at a battlefield in another country, fighting another postmodern war.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> The term “foreign fighters” will be used for foreign nationals that joined in the conflict in the Ukraine. This group is distinct from “foreign terrorist fighters” that denotes foreign nationals that joined a terrorist group outside their country of origin.

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://thehill.com/policy/national-security/466064-dozens-of-dem-lawmakers-press-state-department-to-designate-white>.

<sup>3</sup> See: <https://www.state.gov/designation-of-the-russian-imperial-movement/>.

<sup>4</sup> See: <https://www.smh.com.au/world/oceania/christchurch-shooter-s-manifesto-reveals-an-obsession-with-white-supremacy-over-muslims-20190315-p514ko.html>.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g.: <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-01/foreign-fighters-return-to-australia-with-military-training/9696784>; <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/09/04/the-hardcore-russian-neo-nazi-group-that-calls-ukraine-home/>; <https://www.voanews.com/usa/white-supremacists-lead-new-wave-foreign-fighters>; <https://www.thedailybeast.com/ukraines-anti-russia-azov-battalion-minutemen-or-neo-nazi-terrorists>.

<sup>6</sup> See: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-cohen-ukraine-commentary/commentary-ukraines-neo-nazi-problem-idUSKBN1GV2TY>.

<sup>7</sup> See the early count by the author from the Winter of 2014/2015: [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). Latest data (September 2019), by Arkadiusz Legiec, see here: <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Report-by-The-Soufan-Center-White-Supremacy-Extremism-The-Transnational-Rise-of-The-Violent-White-Supremacist-Movement.pdf>, p. 29.

<sup>8</sup> See: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahdROtr\\_o8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahdROtr_o8).

<sup>9</sup> See: <https://vk.com/public93628709>.

<sup>10</sup> See: Tobias Jones, *Ultra. The Underworld of Italian Football*, Ch. 12, audible version, Whole Story Audiobooks, 2019.

<sup>11</sup> See: <https://branik.blog.sme.sk/c/375808/rozhovor-s-dostojnikom-armady-doneckej-ludovej-republiky-martinom-kepptom.html>.

<sup>12</sup> The Azov movement, Ukraine’s best internationally known nationalists, disagree with this and its representatives stated to the author that the age of such disputes is over and now the CEE nationalists actually have a chance of moving beyond the “petty chauvinisms” to work together towards the construction of a rival—neither West-, nor East- oriented—geopolitical bloc, the so-called Internarium (more on that concept below).

<sup>13</sup> See: Anton Shekhovtsov, *Russia and the Western Far Right*. Tango Noir, Routledge 2017, for more on Thiriart’s concepts.

<sup>14</sup> See: [https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2019/01/18/un-combattant-du-donbass-dans-le-service-dordre-des-gilets-jaunes\\_a\\_23645055/](https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/2019/01/18/un-combattant-du-donbass-dans-le-service-dordre-des-gilets-jaunes_a_23645055/).

<sup>15</sup> Tomas Forro, who did excellent reporting on the Czech and Slovak fighters in the war in Ukraine, divided them into three groups: mercenaries, idealists, and criminals. See: <https://dennikn.sk/622947/nasi-chlapci-v-donbase-babie-letu-u-ceskoslovenskych-separatistov/> for more.

<sup>16</sup> See: <https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/%E2%80%99Cit-ain%E2%80%99t-over-%E2%80%98til-it%E2%80%99s-over%E2%80%9D-extreme-right-wing-foreign-fighters-ukraine>.

<sup>17</sup> See: <https://www.aktuality.sk/clanok/277366/exkluzivne-v-separatistickej-armade-na-ukrajine-zalozili-cesko-slovensku-jednotku-hovorili-sme-s-nimi/>.

<sup>18</sup> See: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E\\_4O2DOBJs8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_4O2DOBJs8).

<sup>19</sup> See: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/24/chechens-fighting-in-ukraine-on-both-sides>.

<sup>20</sup> See: [https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2015/02/27/inenglish/1425051026\\_915897.html](https://english.elpais.com/elpais/2015/02/27/inenglish/1425051026_915897.html).

<sup>21</sup> See: [https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/193669/Bulletin%20PISM%20no%2075%20\(807\)%2014%20August%202015.pdf](https://www.files.ethz.ch/isn/193669/Bulletin%20PISM%20no%2075%20(807)%2014%20August%202015.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> See: <https://dennikn.sk/1510498/sestdesiatnicka-z-prahy-veli-dobrovolnikom-posiela-ich-bojovat-za-putina-na-donbas/?ref=in>.

<sup>23</sup> See: <https://www.thelocal.se/20170203/swedish-neo-nazis-held-over-gothenburg-refugee-centre-blast>.

<sup>24</sup> See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/11/opinion/politics/white-supremacist-terrorism.html> and <https://atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-azov-should-not-be-designated-a-foreign-terrorist-organization/?fbclid=IwAR0VoR2M3bIFWQAd8b1XWeYFxFaz4FHxKrQzjsmwvBEboYkDwVWIWD-EaMY> and <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/the-azov-regiment-has-not-depoliticized/> for a discussion on the issue.

<sup>25</sup> See: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/11/opinion/politics/white-supremacist-terrorism.html>.

<sup>26</sup> For a view critical of those links, see: <https://twitter.com/kooleksiy/status/1240657599550406656>.

<sup>27</sup> See: <https://newrepublic.com/article/154434/friday-night-fights-ukraines-far-right>.

<sup>28</sup> See e.g.: Markus Willinger, *Generation Identity. A Declaration of War Against the '68ers*, Arktos Publishing, 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Clover, *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism*, Yale University Press, 2017, p. 327.

<sup>30</sup> See: Kacper Rekawek, "Referenced but not linear? Counterterrorism in Central-Eastern Europe in Theory and Practice," *East European Politics and Societies and Cultures*, Vol. 31, Number 1., February 2017, p. 184.



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