

FOREIGN FIGHTERS IN UKRAINE: ASSESSING POTENTIAL RISKS

Egle E. Murauskaite



© 2020 Vilnius institute for policy analysis

www.vilniusinstitute.lt



Egle E. Murauskaite is a senior researcher and simulations designer for the ICONS Project with Maryland University. Presently based in Lithuania, she is responsible for high-level political-military crises simulations in Europe, alongside academic research and government consulting projects. Egle has been working with unconventional security threats for the past 9 years – from gray zone warfare to proliferation of nuclear weapons. Egle is also a senior non-resident fellow with the Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis, where she is currently exploring the issue of foreign fighters in Ukraine. She is a co-author of a monthly podcast “NYLA Update”, where she explores the long-term geopolitical trends and challenges, and also a regular commentator on security issues in national and international media. Egle holds a Master’s degree from Sciences Po Paris (International Security) and a Bachelor’s degree from SSE Riga (Economics and Business Management); her professional experience spans the Netherlands, Australia, Egypt, France, and the U.S.

Abstract

This study analyzes the profiles of foreign fighters, who have joined the conflict in Ukraine on either side, and assesses the risks of radicalization as these fighters are increasingly returning home. With considerable attention given to potential terrorism risks posed by foreign fighters of the Islamic bent returning from Syria and Iraq, foreign fighters in Ukraine receive relatively little coverage - and when they do, this faulty analogy at play risks making the potential radicalizing factors worse. The study systematizes extensive foreign fighter profile case studies, and draws on several interviews with returning fighters from the Caucasus, Eastern Europe and Scandinavia. Far from uncovering a budding network of violent extremists, it suggests that the conflict in Ukraine is becoming the grounds for many strongly right-wing and left-wing bent men to settle the scores of historic injustices. This cluster of fighters disappointed in the global system, Western way of life, and increasingly ideologically hardened (perhaps less by battle and more by the surrounding political realities) is cause for serious socio-political concern, in terms of breathing enthusiasm, resources, and know-how to extremist movements. This is especially problematic, given that Europe is already struggling to pose a credible alternative to these socio-political trends in many of its corners.

Introduction

The 2014 conflict in Ukraine¹ has often been noted as a wake-up call for Europe, in terms of the severity of the looming Russian threat, the source of renewed relevance of tactical nuclear weapons in military planning, as well as the new wind under the wings of NATO - as the alliance had been struggling to find relevance and maintain cohesion in the face of rising non-state actor threats. Following growing Russian pressure on Europe - from cyber-attacks against Estonia in 2007 to the incursions into Georgia in 2008, - the Ukrainian side enjoyed considerable support in Europe (particularly Lithuania) where fears mounted that one of the Baltic countries could be next. While the fighting has been somewhat reduced in intensity, following the signed yet frequently broken Minsk-2 ceasefire agreements in February 2015, the

stagnant conflict has continued well into the 2019, with the influx of foreign fighters² gradually slowing down or changing in profile. In contrast to the early arrivals, the interviews conducted for this study, as well as interviews published in the media, indicate that those fighters continuing to serve after 2018 seem increasingly kept by their lack of alternative prospects at a livelihood at home.

With Europe witnessing the rise of violent extremism - including Islamic fundamentalism fuelled by the ongoing wars in Syria and Iraq - there were concerns that the conflict in Ukraine might spur it on, as Europeans who had joined the fight started to return home. After all, the MENA region had seen consecutive waves of violence unfold in the 1990s, as fighters from all over the region

1 For a more detailed recap of the conflict, see the Background section.

2 For a more detailed discussion of who is generally considered a foreign fighter, and the approach adopted in this study, see p. 4

previously involved in the war in Afghanistan, started to return home and, finding it difficult to reintegrate into civilian life, founded or joined violent movements. Looking at Ukraine, there were particular concerns over the rise of violent neo-Nazis - helped in no small part by Russian information campaigns, and lack of independently verifiable information about the extent of ongoing radicalization. Europe is only starting to deal with fighters returning from this conflict - with considerable controversy concerning the appropriateness of treating them the same way as Islamic militants returning from the wars in Syria and Iraq, regardless of whether they fought for Russian- or Ukrainian-backed forces.

This study seeks to better understand the types of foreign fighters who have joined the conflict in Ukraine on either side, and compare these developed typological profiles with the known risk factors for radicalization and violence. It is important to note that with all the policy and academic attention to the fighters of the Islamic bent as a potential terrorism risk in Europe, to date, the matter of foreign fighters in Ukraine has primarily been traced through investigative journalists reporting in-depth fighter profiles, or law enforcement agencies keeping tabs on recent returnees. The edited volume by Rekawek (2017) has been the only academic study thus far to consider the issue of foreign fighters in Ukraine - but even there the attention is equally split between, and parallels are drawn to, the conflict in Syria. This study, focused exclusively on Ukraine, systematizes 49 publicly available detailed case studies on fighters from various European countries, looking at their backgrounds and motivation, outcomes upon their return. These insights are further complimented by trend analysis of available battle deaths and injuries data (compiled by

Legiec 2017), and additionally enhanced by in-depth interviews with returning fighters from the Caucasus (one of the largest sources of arriving fighters), Eastern Europe (a region where state-level political support for Ukraine is among the strongest), and Scandinavia (a region particularly concerned with the conflict in Ukraine as one of the sources fuelling the domestic rise of neo-Nazism). Due to the dearth of reliable information, and primarily a European focus, the nature and particular challenges of the numerous fighters "native" to the conflict, i.e. hailing from Ukraine or Russia, are discussed only in passing, and mostly as a comparative contextual background.³

Far from uncovering budding network of violent extremists, this work suggests that the conflict in Ukraine is becoming the grounds for many strongly right-wing bent men to settle the scores of historic injustices - committed by or against Russia. Some do seek to gain combat experience, or engage in conflict cruising, having recently gone to battle elsewhere. But this pooling of anti-systemically inclined European youths, disappointed in the West, and increasingly ideologically hardened - perhaps less by battle and more by the surrounding political realities - is cause for serious socio-political concern, in terms of breathing enthusiasm, resources, and know-how to right-wing movements. This is especially problematic, given that Europe is already struggling to pose a credible alternative to such movements in countries like Hungary or Poland. Moreover, as the Balkans are experiencing increasing political tensions and teeter on the verge of violence, the influx of fighters from that region risks having a particularly destabilizing influence.

This paper is organized as follows. The background section briefly recaps the origins

3 Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the fault lines and risks of the returnees identified here are only felt worse in those countries due to significantly more limited state capabilities to monitor, absorb, and assist.

and the current status of the conflict in Ukraine. The first part outlines the overall background of foreign fighters in Ukraine, and discusses their four generalizable archetypes. The second part discusses some of the common concerns regarding the returnees, based on research on radicalization, and relates a few common historical analogies and logic chains that have developed, in no small part, due to the lack of reliable information. The third part discusses some of the emerging practices in states' legal approaches to dealing with

returning foreign fighters. The fourth part of the study recaps some of the types of destiny that the returning foreign fighters have met across the globe – although the data on this subject is particularly limited in terms of scope and reliability. The paper closes with a brief discussion of the likely security and socio-political implications of the foreign fighters returning from Ukraine, potentially in ever larger numbers if the conflict starts drawing closer to resolution over the next few years.

Background

Before delving deeper into the analysis, it might be helpful to briefly recap a few of the key developments of the highly complex and nuanced conflict in Ukraine. However, as there is no shortage of high quality analysis of multiple aspects of the conflict – from fighting techniques to accompanying information campaigns – the purpose of this study is only to plug one of the remaining gaps: understanding the roles of individual foreign fighters (i.e. persons not native to Ukraine or Russia, who have not come as part of one of the mercenary regiments).

Ukraine had gone into the initial internal crisis in November 2013, when the pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich retreated from the EU trade partnership negotiation and swung an agreement with Russia instead. With the Ukrainian population being divided between pro- and anti- Russian sentiments, this political turn brought about a wave of protests. However, the government security forces have brutally dealt with them, sparking even more massive protests and starting the Maidan phase of this still domestic, albeit foreign influenced, crisis. Amidst the internal turmoil, in February 2014 the crisis turned into an international conflict – one fought through thinly veiled proxies, mercenaries, and state-sponsored or state-sanctioned troops rather than official state armies facing one another

in that capacity. Namely, the Russian armed forces have invaded and seized the Ukrainian Black Sea port of Crimea (without too much resistance), and following a show referendum held in March, the territory was annexed by Russia. Subsequently, local pro-Russian and foreign Russia-backed protesters, militants, and other violent and/or political elements have started taking over government buildings in eastern Ukraine (Donetsk, Luhansk, Kharkiv, Mariupol, and other cities) demanding that similar types of referenda be held to decide their status. In July 2014, a commercial airplane carrying a large number of Dutch passengers was shot over Ukraine by a Russian-supplied surface-to-air missile, and soon thereafter the EU and the U.S. have instituted economic sanctions against Russia. In summer 2014, several units of Russian armed forces have entered the Donbas region – in addition to the previously mentioned smaller units, privateers, and individuals. As the fighting continued with no swift outcome in sight for either side, in September, the first truce agreement was signed in Minsk, and Putin had started to withdraw some of the Russian troops from Eastern Ukraine.

During this most violent conflict phase, the absolute majority of the fighters involved were Russian and Ukrainian. While there was some international presence in the crisis early

on (e.g., protesters, medics, NGO workers, journalists, expert advisers etc.), the foreign *fighters* that are the focus of this analysis had mostly started to arrive later, as the conflict wore on and stagnated.

International powers have struggled to broker a peace agreement between Ukraine and Russia since February 2015 through several iterations of the Minsk accords, but the sporadic fighting continued. The U.S. and EU have maintained subsequent new annual

rounds of sanctions against Russia. In 2018, NATO has held a large military exercise in Western Ukraine, and the country has been receiving military assistance in the form of fighting equipment and fighter trainers. In September 2019, the newly elected Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelensky has agreed to exchange prisoners with Russia, and the European powers had once again attempted to broker a peace agreement, but as of January 2020, the conflict remains politically stagnant, if not particularly militarily active.

I. Fighter profiles

By various estimates **between 1,500 and 2,000 foreign fighters from 54 different countries** have come to take part in the conflict in Ukraine on either side of the battle between 2014 and 2019 (Metodieva 2019, Rekawek 2017)⁴. Most of the fighters interviewed or featured in the media seem to have come during or after 2015, with the brokering of the first – ineffective – ceasefires. But because of their typically regular rotation in and out of Ukraine every few months, and porous borders facilitating unchecked access, it is somewhat difficult to tell whether that constitutes the majority, or whether the bulk of those who had come prior to 2015 had been killed, or were unwilling to raise publicity about their activities. Mares (2017) also suggests that the largest influx of foreigner fighters had started in the 2015, with the main wave arriving as the conflict increasingly stagnated – although there was considerable presence of foreign extreme right-wing protesters during the Maidan phase.

Compared to the estimate that over 20,000 foreign fighters are engaged in Iraq and Syria (Barber 2015), the number of fighters

in Ukraine is very modest. Nevertheless, it is important to understand that no small number of these foreign fighters were **ethnic Russians** and/or Russian-speaking citizens of the foreign countries – this may imply that the numbers provided here are underestimated, if the arriving foreigners are able to sufficiently blend in with the locals. While all of these conflicts seem numerically dominated by amateurs using old or makeshift weaponry, military experts suggest that in Ukraine the individuals fighting for both conflicting parties are somewhat better trained and equipped – despite the fact that Ukraine is not receiving nearly as much financial support or publicity (Mil.Today 2015).

Still, active social media campaigns seem to have been the number one **recruitment technique** that helped most foreign fighters on both sides find their way to the conflict zone – from fighter Youtube videos and Instagram or Facebook posts to media profiles featuring either prominent hero fighters or appealing to the nobility of the cause at stake. It has been suggested that the pro-Russian side has been recruiting softball players, trained in

⁴ For fighter affiliations by country see Figure 1; for units that include foreign fighters, see Table 1.

often constitute samples of convenience, so extrapolation about other members of such a group should be approached with caution. It is interesting to note that financial rewards did not play a significant, if any, role in attracting foreign fighters to the pro-Ukraine side (the standard monthly pay seemed to be around \$300), even though on the pro-Russia side, some of the poorer fighters were lured by the rewards that were said to be in excess of \$1,000. Among most foreigners, this marks a clear **distinction from mercenaries** and private contractors, where financial reward is the prime motivation pulling fighters into a conflict they are otherwise unrelated to.

A final note of caution applies to the **definition of a foreign fighter**: this paper is squarely concerned with combatants, i.e. persons actively wielding weapons – whether in battle, in guarding the supplies or providing armed protection to convoys moving through the disputed territories. This focus has been chosen despite the recognition that a large number of support personnel (e.g., doctors, psychologists, NGO and aid workers), as well as journalists have also been exposed to, and some have been profoundly affected by the conflict in Ukraine – so much so as to possibly share some of the risk factors attributable to the returning fighters. Trying to address concerns stemming from the foreign fighters travelling to, and returning from Syria and Iraq,

the UN Security Council voted to include non-combatant and support functions into the definition of foreign terrorist fighters; many governments have subsequently chosen to treat everyone who travelled to the fight (including the fighters' wives and children) as foreign terrorist fighters and prosecute them accordingly. However, with returnees from Ukraine the legal practices are currently in formation, and while they are informed by the Syria precedents, so far Belarus has been the only state to prosecute returning non-combatants, with most states choosing to focus on combatants only (so far, mostly on the pro-Russian ones).

This study identifies four major categories of foreign fighters, based on the key sentiment bringing them to the battlefields in Ukraine, listed in the order of prevalence: (1) veterans with historical grievances, (2) disillusioned ideologues, (3) armed opposition, and (4) battle chasers. The next four sections discuss each category in detail, noting the specific backgrounds characteristic to different nationals in that type. Each category – except for the armed opposition – contains both, pro-Russian and pro-Ukraine fighters, and more generally, people with left-wing and right-wing political convictions of varying levels of extreme.⁵

⁵ As the next four sections explain, political ideology greatly varies in importance from one category to another – from being central to hardly relevant. In the categories where it is considered significant, the pro-Russian fighters would generally identify with left-wing beliefs, and pro-Ukraine – with right-wing beliefs. However, it is important to understand that the political left and right each involve a much broader spectrum of ideas (e.g. role of a nation in general or in particular, relation of a state apparatus to the citizens, attitudes towards market regulation and property ownership etc.) that the clash of ideas specific to the Russia-Ukraine conflict.

TABLE 1. Military Units in Ukraine That Include Foreign Fighters

Pro-Russia	Pro-Ukraine
Vostok Battalion	Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion
Wagner Brigade* (it is not clear if this is a private contractor company, or a unit reporting to Russian MoD)	Sheikh Mansur Battalion
Bryanka SSR Battalion	Georgian Legion
International Brigade	Azov Battalion^ (under the National Guard of Ukraine)
7th Brigade	Aidar Battalion' (under Ukrainian Ministry of Defense)
Ural Unit	Pravyi Sektor (includes Tactical Group Belarus)
Serbian Hussar Regiment	
1st Slavic Unit	
Ryazan Unit	
Batman Unit	
Rusich Unit	

1. Veterans with Historical Grievances

It seems that the largest number of fighters have been drawn into Ukraine by historic experiences of conflict involving their homeland and one of the warring parties. Significantly, these men came not only with general military or paramilitary skills, but were familiar with the particular enemy they were facing.

Among the pro-Ukraine fighters, many have lived through, or held strong family and/or ethnic narrative memories about, conflicts with Russia, and were keen to fight to prevent another country from falling victim to the regime. For some the desire to continue the fight was mainly colored by anti-Russian sentiment, while for others it was more broadly about defending the principles of state sovereignty.

Many Georgians and Chechens, who comprise by far the largest number of fighters present (an estimate of about 100 in each ethnic group), fall into this category. Consider, for instance, the two Chechen fighter units discussed by Racz (2017). The Dzhokhar Dudayev battalion is led by a

prominent veteran of both Chechen wars, and mostly consists of men who have also fought in one or both of those wars. They had been scattered in the West in exile, and have come to Ukraine explicitly to continue this fight against Russia. Many men in the other, Sheikh Mansur battalion, are Chechen Muslims who claim to have come to avenge Imperial Russia’s 18th century conquests of their lands. In addition, prominent Chechen war veterans can be found in other units, e.g., the ferocious Aidar battalion defending Eastern Ukraine – they come driven by an oft-repeated sentiment of refusing to “bend over for Putin” (Jackson 2014). Similarly, the Georgian Legion (as well as other units accepting Georgians) has attracted many war veterans hardened by the country’s lasting confrontations with Russia. Some were drawn in by strong anti-Russian sentiments (Legiec 2017), while others claim that “love for Ukraine is what brought us here, not our supposed hate for Russia” (Euromaidan Press 2017). In addition, as a more pro-Russian government took over in Georgia, many of the veterans of the Georgian war found themselves out of work and under pressure – feeling cornered, to them it seemed natural

to bring the fight back to Russia in another theater.

Moldova's Transnistrian territory is another prominent source of this type of foreign fighters – though far less numerous (an estimate of 40 fighters), they mostly come to fight for the pro-Russia side, driven by anti-Ukrainian sentiment that dates back to the Transnistrian war in 1990. Ukrainian volunteers and Cossacks had come to fight against the Moldovan government forces – and alongside Russian forces – in support of independence claims of the Transnistrian enclave (which had a large ethnic Ukrainian population). These sentiments and narratives were deliberately further stoked by Russian information campaigns in the Transnistrian territory and among Moldovans living in Russia (Secrieru 2017). These volunteers saw the conflict in Ukraine as payback time, and those who came seem to have joined the battalions known for their particular brutality – such as Bryanka SSSR. Nevertheless, there were some individual stories of Moldovan veterans coming to fight on the pro-Ukraine side – seemingly driven by the increasing Russian pressure in the country. Moldovans fighting on this side seem to also have chosen some of the most brutal battalions, like Shakhtersk (Secrieru 2017). It is worth noting that the particularly brutal pro-Ukraine battalions, including Shakhtersk, were subsequently officially disbanded.

The Balkan, or more precisely Serbo-Croat, conflicts are also getting an increasingly intense replay of historical hostilities in the Ukrainian theater. Up to 300 Serbs – many with combat experience from the nineties – have flocked to support the Russian cause, with some joining the Wagner mercenary group, and others spread among the following eight units: the International Brigade, the Seventh Brigade, the Serbian-Hussar Regiment, the Ural Unit, the Batman Unit, the First Slavic Unit, and the Ryazan Unit (Zivanovic 2018). Serbian nationalists, known as “Chetniks”,

constituted a sizeable portion of foreign fighters supporting Russia's efforts in Crimea (Mares 2017). In terms of the driving factors, some cite this as a favor they have to return for Russia's support to Serbia against Kosovo's bid for independence (in confrontation with NATO). Others seem motivated to support the pan-Slavic and/or pan-Orthodox unity (DFR Lab 2016, Metodieva 2019). Indeed, on national policy level Serbia has refused to join the EU's anti-Russian sanctions, and Ukraine's pleas for Serbia to stem the flow of its fighters have largely fallen on deaf ears (Coynash 2019). Unsurprisingly, Croats have been coming to the pro-Ukraine, and anti-Serbian, side of the fight. Interestingly, a French veteran of the Balkan war who had fought on the Croat side and subsequently stayed in Croatia, Gaston Besson, has formed a strong network and became a prominent recruiter for the pro-Ukraine Azov battalion (Jackson 2014, Scimia 2015). Although he may be more appropriately categorized in the battle-chaser category below, his example helps highlight the extent of the presence of Balkan wars' grievances in the Ukrainian conflict.

In a similar vein, dual-nationals from the West have been attracted to the conflict out of historic sentiment. It is worth mentioning the American-Ukrainian Mark Paslawsky, who became the first foreigner to die in this conflict – a West Point graduate – he enlisted soon after the conflict broke out driven by Ukrainian patriotic sentiment (DFR Lab 2016). Another example are two Italian-Russians: Vladimir Verbitsky of Moldovan descent and Oli Krutany of Albanian descent – both had previous experience with the Russian military, and Krutany had reportedly fought in Chechnya, and both were drawn to fight on the pro-Russia side (Wesolowsky and Kreshko 2018). The desire to right historical wrongs has also brought several members of the “Essence of Time” international communist movement from Spain to fight on the pro-Russian side –

they claimed to see it as a way to repay for the USSR’s support to the left-wing forces fighting against Gen. Franco in between the World Wars (DFRLab 2016, Jackson 2014, Mares 2017).

conflict in Ukraine for an opportunity to resettle old battle scores with either Ukraine or Russia. It is important to fully appreciate the geographic, temporal, and ideological breadth of the scope of appeal of these historic injustices.

Overall, a significant portion of experienced individual foreign fighters have come to the

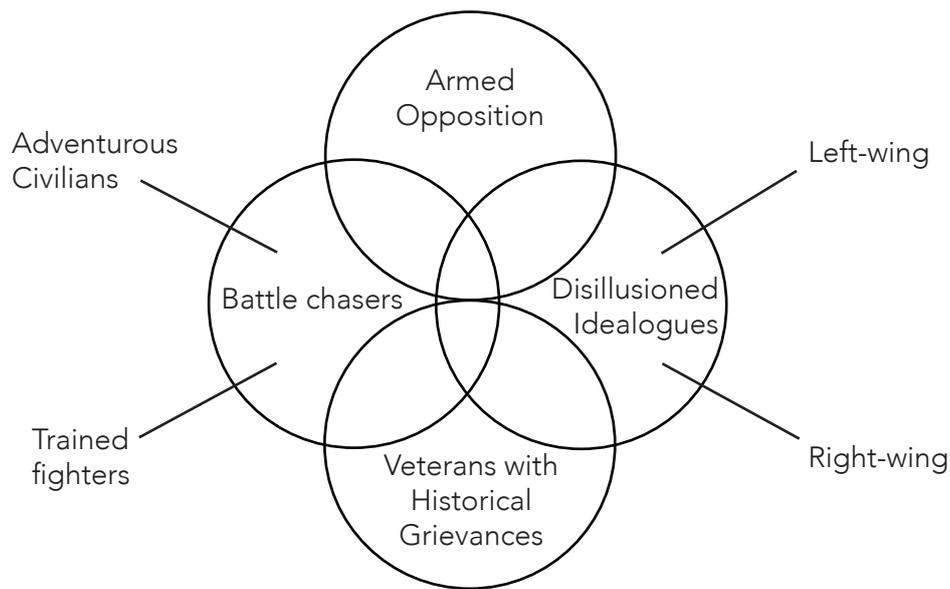


FIGURE 2. Fighter Types Scheme

2. The Disillusioned Ideologues

The second-most-prevalent type of foreign fighters in Ukraine are men generally disappointed with the state of the Western world in reaction to emerging global challenges – particularly those posed by confrontation with alternative world views, such as that of Russia or China. This is the broadest and perhaps the most complex category to analyse. The pro-Ukraine fighters in this segment describe watching with growing frustration as governments of their country, and other Western institutions, helplessly admonished tyrannical regimes – of Syria or Russia – while doing little

to stop the freedom-seeking people from being slaughtered en-masse. The pro-Russia fighters described their mounting anxiety as NATO and the West increasingly encroached on Russia’s traditional sphere of interest with increasingly bold war-mongering. Both types subsequently took it upon themselves to address the situation, often reluctantly, as somebody had to finally do something. Present in this segment was also a number of armchair preachers of the great clash – e.g., of capitalists and the simple people, of the U.S. and Russia, of the dictatorship and freedom. Seeing the conflict in Ukraine unfold, they were moved to join it as a symbolic partaking

in the advancement of their cause. Many disillusioned ideologues had at least some military, police, or paramilitary training (though most have not seen an actual battle), and some had pondered joining the war in Syria as a symbolic cause but were deterred by its perceived brutality and/or the fact that it was primarily dominated by Arab political narratives.

This category seems to fit the few Baltic fighters present. Those fighting on the Ukrainian side seem to see this as the final frontier to be defended from Russian expansion – or their country might be next – while those supporting Russia see Ukraine as the final pro-Russian frontier to be defended from NATO’s encroachment. Historically, Lithuania has been actively advocating the EU to pay more attention to Ukraine and to offer assistance to Ukraine once the conflict started. It is thus hardly surprising that of all the Baltic states Lithuania had the highest number of fighters involved (up to 20), and most of them were on the side of Ukraine. With Latvia’s large ethnic-Russian population and a quieter political stance on the issue, the balance seemed to favor the pro-Russian side. But it seems somewhat surprising to that the 2014-2016 statistics captured no Estonians backing Ukraine, and only a few fighting on the Russian side (see Figure 1 on page 7).

Among the 20-or-so estimated French fighters flocking to both sides of the battle, many can be categorized as disappointed ideologues as well. France’s historical sympathies for communism are well known, and a number of young French fighters with previous combat experience in Afghanistan came to defend the Russian side, as to them it represents “the final bulwark against liberal Anglo-Saxon globalism and the decadent West” (Jackson 2014). But the Frenchmen who had joined the right-wing Azov battalion to fight for Ukraine also point to the primarily political and ideological drivers behind their choice to

get involved (Allen 2015).

Similarly, a few fighters from Poland could be found on either side of the conflict, with those supporting Russia espousing strong anti-NATO and anti-globalization sentiments, while those who supported Ukrainian rebels cited diametrically opposite need to defend liberal democracy (Jackson 2014).

Among the well-known albeit arguably less extreme examples in this category is Chris Garrett – a British veteran volunteer de-miner and fundraiser for the pro-Ukraine Azov battalion – who claims to have been moved to action by Ukrainian Facebook posts calling for help from experienced fighters in defending the country’s sovereignty (Allen 2015, DFR Lab Nov 2016). A sentiment of rejection of the Western-decadence has prompted men to different types of non-violent albeit more ideologically colored action. For instance, the American Russell Bentley came to fight on the pro-Russia side; he identifies as a communist and has called the U.S. government fascist – he runs a podcast, a Youtube channel, and a website covering the battles in Ukraine (DFR Lab Sep 2016). Interestingly, another young American Santi Pirtle claims to have come to Ukraine driven by similar contempt for the overly frivolous U.S. culture – but chose to fight with the pro-Ukraine Pravyi Sector (Clapp 2016). Colombian Alexis Castillo Idodeai, who came to fight on the pro-Russia side with the Vostok battalion, was a member of the communist “Essence of Time” movement and was prompted to action by the perceived atrocities against the Russians: “we could not sit on our hands while Nazis from Right Sector bombed peaceful cities and killed civilians” (DFR Lab Sep 2016).

The significant right-wing presence from Scandinavia, as well as Italy, Austria, and Germany have found they could channel their nationalist and/or white-supremacist sentiment into the battlegrounds in Ukraine.

The widely known Swedish far-right veteran Mikael Skillt claims to have joined the pro-Ukraine Azov battalion to fight for the “survival of white people” (Jackson 2014). Fighters from Italy seem to have been drawn to the more extreme left-wing and right-wing factions in Ukraine – reportedly, these were mostly unemployed males with some military training and criminal records, and a history of participating in radical political movements (Scimia 2015). Those joining the pro-Russian Vostok battalion felt they were helping “resistance against the “fascist” and “repressive” government in Kyiv”, while those supporting Ukraine tended to join the Pravyi sector – but most fighters from Italy seemed to share a disdain for the U.S., NATO and the EU (Scimia 2015).

While there has been no shortage of in-depth profiles of extreme right-wing fighters, gloating over their cause and proud to take part in the battle, that is but the most intense shade of the ideologically-driven foreign fighters – it ought not lead one to infer that all ideologically-driven fighters are extremists. Many men in this category seem to emphasize and value their ideological convictions and the shaping of a desired world order – and shaping it through battle is but one and the most extreme way. Indeed, many seem to have come to fight in Ukraine reluctantly, out of perceived necessity – in contrast to the extremist elements, who seem to prioritize collective action, often violent, over ideological nuance. It is also important to recognize that most men with the more extreme views have held them before joining this conflict, and some were even on the law enforcement radar for that reason.

Overall, the conflict in Ukraine has attracted no small number of individuals from abroad, who are convinced the world is about to fall apart and somebody has to do something. They have actively chosen to be that somebody, with the range of actions spanning both violent and non-violent. The

curious part is that oftentimes men with the same (or very similar) sentiments, such as the disappointment with the consumerist society or the lack of response to other global conflicts, have ended up on the opposites fighting sides in Ukraine.

3. Armed opposition

In addition to the foreign fighters coming to get another chance to refight their historic conflicts with either Russia or Ukraine, a faction has come driven by the desire to turn their political opposition to Putin and his cadre into an armed struggle, despairing about the hapless political processes at home. Many ethnic Russians fighting on the pro-Ukraine side could be found in this category (Euromaidan Press 2017), but because of the primary focus on foreign and European parties involved, they will not be discussed here in greater detail, although this by no means reduces the significance of their struggle or their presence, which spotlights the fighters from Belarus – one of the most numerous single-nation presences in Ukraine (similar in scope to the Georgians and Chechens).

Most of these men come to Ukraine with no prior military training or experience. Some of them are dissidents running from persecution by the FSB and its supporting structures – they or their families having either experienced that already, or where certain persecution would come if their activities became any more visible. For instance, one young man has come to fight in the Ukraine after being sentenced to prison for posting “No fear” stickers in Minsk: “For Lukashenka, I’m a terrorist. Our families are constantly harassed by the KGB” (Legiec April 2017). Other illustrative examples come from an interview with a Latvian fighter, where he recalled “A Belarusian computer specialist who was unable to withstand the captivity in Belarus”, as well as a Russian veteran, who “is by nature a democrat, wants to overthrow the Putin regime, but he thinks the fight

inside Russia is pointless” (Vikmanis 2015). Most of the Belarusian men have joined the Tactical Group Belarus – part of the pro-Ukraine right-wing Pravyi Sector battalion, although some also blend in Azov and Aidar battalions.

Nevertheless, a large portion of Belarusians come to fight on the pro-Russia side – they would be captured in the disillusioned ideologues category above, as they seem to be deeply convinced of the narrative about Russia being under siege by the West, and the need to defend pan-Slavic unity.

Overall, the conflict in Ukraine has provided a theater to settle not only lasting international, but also intra-national struggles. This armed political opposition ranges from Russians, who have come to symbolically fight Putin’s regime, to Belarusians, who came to fight against a local repressive regime supported by Putin.

4. Battle Chasers

Any on-going conflict in the world inevitably attracts a number of fighters mostly seeking the battle itself, rather than a particular cause – and Ukraine is no exception. This category includes experienced individual foreign fighters, who come to join one conflict after another⁶, as well as inexperienced civilian adventurers, curious about tasting the battle. Of the latter type, most get turned away by the fighters they reach out to, but a few such inexperienced adventurers have nevertheless made it to the Ukrainian battlefield.

A fighter from Sweden interviewed for this study recalled receiving around 50 requests from people willing to join the battle, of which no more than 5 had military experience – 2 of them ended up finally showing up in Ukraine, but one soon got killed in a car accident while the other could not handle the reality of trench warfare and left without seeing any battle in the end. A Lithuanian NGO worker regularly present in Ukraine similarly reported receiving dozens of Facebook requests by inexperienced adventurous youths, and turning them down. However, there seems to be no shortage of battle chasers elsewhere in the Western world – countries unshaken by conflict for decades.

A known Austrian fighter Ben Fischer, accused of war crimes in Ukraine, is one of the examples in this category: a military man, who had deliberately rotated through Kosovo and Iraq looking for a battle experience (unsuccessfully), attempted to enlist in the French Foreign Legion (also unsuccessfully) and was finally glad to join the pro-Ukraine right-wing Pravyi Sector fighters (Clapp 2016). Nevertheless, Fischer also claims to have been “disillusioned by the war and the enforcement of the Minsk agreement,” and claimed to support an armed overthrow of the current hapless government in Kiev (DFR Lab Nov 2016) – showing characteristics of a disillusioned ideologue.

In 2016, an Australian veteran came to fight with the Pravyi Sector attracted by action Facebook posts by American fighters he knew (Rubinsztein-Dunlop et al. 2018). A

⁶ The experienced individuals here are not considered mercenaries – many have other professional experience and none report being primarily motivated by financial rewards. Nevertheless, it is important to note reportedly substantial presence of private military contractors, who usually arrive and operate in units, rather than single individuals – and thus fall outside the scope of this analysis. Often these are nationals of one of warring parties, i.e. Russia or Ukraine, and thus would fall outside of the geographic scope of this paper’s analysis – but given their exposure to the same risk factors and reportedly limited access to post-conflict reintegration support mechanisms, this category of returnees could pose a potential risk of violent radicalization.

year later, a young Australian neo-Nazi and gun owner reported searching the internet for weeks looking for battalions that take in volunteer foreign fighters – he had considered going to fight ISIS in Syria first, but the fear of terrorism charges led him to go to fight with the pro-Ukraine battalion instead (Rubinsztein-Dunlop et al. 2018). Two Americans, who had come to fight on the pro-Ukrainian side, reportedly got bored with the lack of action and subsequently left to seek more intense combat experiences in South Sudan and Venezuela (Mejer 2019).

It is also important to note that, in addition to experienced Western fighters and adventurous youth, some of the men of the Chechen Sheikh Mansur battalion, discussed

above, can also be classified as battle chasers. These few are supporters of the Islamic State, and have fought in its ranks in Syria and/or Iraq (Racz 2017).

Overall, the conflict in Ukraine has inevitably attracted some battle chasers – including a very small number of adventurous civilians, who either managed to withstand the scrutiny of recruiters, or simply showed up on the battlefield. However, the analysis of available data and the in-depth interviews suggest that the number of such battle chasers is much smaller, and their fates often much less glorious (and rather short-lived) compared to what the media accounts might lead one to believe.

II. Concerns and Lessons (Not) Learned

Most of the current academic understanding about the typical behavioral patterns of, and potential risks associated with, the returning foreign fighters rest on the extensive research about conflicts in the Arab world – from Iraq and Somalia to Yemen and Libya, as well as Syria and the international terror campaigns linked with Al-Qaeda and ISIS. The different cultural and political background of the conflict in Ukraine means that while some of these insights might still apply, they ought to be re-examined with care against the particular local context.

The most common concern is that the battle hardened fighters will come back **radicalized** by the combat and ideas they fought for, and put their skills to use locally – establishing domestic chapters of international extremist organizations or founding new extremist groups. However, the tactics adopted by foreign fighters in Ukraine – on either side of the conflict – seem to mimic guerilla warfare more closely, rather than suicide bombings more common in the extremist Islamic circles (and this seems to hold true also for

the one Islamic battalion of Sheikh Mehsud in Ukraine). Furthermore, despite numerous arrests and charges of acts of terrorism brought against the returnees, discussed in the section on State Approaches below, it is important to note the lack of – at least publically identified – presence of known international or regional terrorist organizations in Ukraine. Instead, the fighter motivational profiles described above suggest that fighters arriving in Ukraine tend to already hold more extreme political views and possess at least some military training. They are often already on the local law enforcement radar, and so it is less about capable young men getting radicalized and equipped to fight, and more about radicals getting better trained and networking among the like-minded. Indeed, there seemed to be no shortage of foreign fighters who, upon encountering the broad spectrum of fighters on their, as well as the enemy side, have come out with a more moderate worldview, akin to the sentiment described by a pro-Russian fighter self-identifying as anarchist “I got bored with it, all this opposition of right wing and left wing people. I found friends among

the enemies and I got to understand that it was all just a game” (Meger 2019).

A common related concern is that the returnees will serve as heroic examples and **recruit**, or help the recruiters attract, new fighters for the cause. This seems to be a somewhat valid risk in Ukraine, albeit it seems to be most pronounced while the fighters are still on the battlefield rather than upon their return. Namely, the absolute majority of foreign fighters claim to have been inspired by social media posts by other fighters on the battlefield, and have found their way to Ukraine through social networks – reaching out to the fighters they knew or approaching unfamiliar prominent fighters. Thus far, there are only a few publicly known cases of returnees serving as a recruitment point to attract new fighters (in Italy and Czech Republic), potentially because by the time these fighters may make the decision to return they might be experiencing the fatigue and/or loss of faith in an armed solution to the conflict. Nevertheless, there might be another long term risk – as some of the returning foreign fighters are sentenced and jailed for their activities, they could contribute to radicalization in their homeland’s prisons.

Nevertheless, through no additional active effort on their part, the foreign fighters may become **inspirational examples** for others to take violent action – through self-radicalization. For instance, Malet (2015) has found that the heroic effect of foreign fighters serving as inspiration to others through social media is much greater while they are still active in the conflict, compared to when they return home. In another example Mares (2017) has found that the heroic coverage about a pro-Russian Czech soldier killed in combat in Ukraine mobilized both, the right- and left-wing, political extremists in the country. It is difficult to assess whether and how much additional risk there might be associated with the physical return of the fighters, as observing their combat actions on social

media, without any direct personal contact seems sufficient to inspire self-radicalization in individuals so inclined. A noteworthy example here would be the Christchurch shooter – an Australian extremist, who claims to have visited Ukraine (although does not appear to have participated in the fighting) and references the conflict in the infamous manifesto he distributed as justification for shooting up a mosque in New Zealand in 2019. With the growing international prevalence of lone-wolf terrorism (as opposed to organized terrorist groups), the concerns about self-radicalization are justifiably on the rise – but it seems yet again that radicalism is feeding into the conflict in Ukraine more so than the other way around: the Christchurch manifesto has been promptly translated into Russian, Ukrainian, and other less-common languages and was reportedly making the rounds among the far-right fighters, including the Azov battalion (Bellingcat 2019).

It is further worth considering the **latent threat** posed by returning foreign fighters. Through time spent in the conflict new networks of relationships are forged that share a particular worldview, and the fighters tend to keep in touch after returning home. Subsequently, such networks can be used to collect and/or share intelligence about the situation in the home country. More significantly, they could be used as a latent spearhead for disruptive action, or as a transformational agent operationalizing domestic supporters of a particular cause. One example shedding light on the disruptive potential of returning fighters was the foiled 2016 coup in Montenegro: the plot to murder the prime minister on the day of election involved several right-wing extremists, who have fought in Ukraine, as well as two Russia’s GRU agents (Beslin and Ignjatijevic 2016; Bellingcat 2018). In this regard, returning fighters in the disillusioned ideologues category would be of particular concern – sufficiently dissatisfied with the state of the world to risk their life in a foreign

country, now better trained and networked such cadre could likely be convinced to assist in anti-government / anti-minority / white-supremacist activities. The returning ethnic Russian fighters supportive of the Putin regime, who are citizens of other countries, would be of particular concern in this regard.

Following the discussion on the potential security risks that returning foreign fighters could pose, it is worth also presenting some of the **mitigating factors** that have thus far prevented some of the international concerns about radicalization and terrorism from coming to fruition. Hegghammer and Nesser (2015) estimate that in Islamists circles, approximately only 1 in 360 (i.e., 0.28%) returning foreign fighters proceed to bring the fight back home and plot attacks against their homeland. Drawing, again, on the literature on Islamic fighters in Iraq and Syria, Byman (2015) offers a summary of the key explanations: approximately half of the foreign fighters – often the most radical and enthusiastic – end up dying on suicide missions or the front lines of combat; some continue moving from conflict to conflict without spending much time in their homeland; others become disillusioned with fighting as a solution to the problems they

see; and many of those potentially bent on bringing the armed fight back home still lack the competence to do so alone and/or do not receive international support for their intended local cell activities. In Ukraine, the death rate would not be anywhere near that high, as suicide bombing is not a prevalent tactic, and most of the foreign fighters have arrived in the last, and the less violent and intense, stages of the conflict. Continued battle seeking certainly seems to be channeling fighters from that category towards more violent conflicts elsewhere in the world, rather than back home. However, disillusionment with fighting as a solution seems much discussed, but it is difficult to judge its prevalence among the fighters. Based on the personal interviews with the returnees and the open source literature, disillusionment applies to some of the ideologically motivated individuals with prior military training who did not hold extreme views prior to coming to combat, and also to many of the battle chasers without prior military experience. These individuals seem more inclined to return, give up the fight, and publicly discuss their experiences, but this would only mean a higher remaining concentration of radical-minded foreign fighters in Ukraine, who will not be able to stay there indefinitely.

III. State Approaches to Returnees

Effective functioning of the state security apparatus is often mentioned as key to preventing the returning foreign fighters from engaging in violent extremism – and it seems that in all the nations from which fighters have flocked to Ukraine, the national security services have kept tabs on them since, for better or worse. Since many states approach returning fighters as a potential security risk and choose to deal with this risk through criminal prosecution, this section starts by reviewing the different law enforcement approaches the states have adopted to this end. It proceeds to present

the alternative routes – various re-education and re-integration mechanisms. However, it is necessary to acknowledge that both of these approaches inherently isolate the returning foreign fighters from the rest of society, and – by design or in case of failure – can exacerbate the feeling of “otherness” and risk sharpening their antagonism. Essentially, the “more positive othering” that singles out a person to be re-educated or monitored, or the “more negative othering” that prosecutes and imprisons or fines them, risks amplifying the very core factors in radicalization that these measures are designed to reduce.

The concern about the potential for violent extremist activities conducted by foreign fighters who return from Syria and Iraq, has led a growing number of countries to adopt laws that allow them to put these returnees on trial for terrorist activities abroad. Hegghammer and Nesser (2015) suggests that pre-emptive arrests geared towards minimizing this threat were by far more extensive than anything related to previous conflicts, and that they have contributed to reducing the potential threat of acts of terrorism. However, only a few countries have used this new legislation designed to counter terrorism at home and abroad to charge fighters returning from the conflict in Ukraine. The present variety of punitive approaches is such that the states dealing with this issue do not lend themselves neatly into categorization, and ought to be considered in small groups by verisimilitude, according to their current practices (see Table 2 below). Most of those caught in the prosecutorial net were pro-Russian fighters – officially unacknowledged, but nevertheless sometimes saved from prosecution by the Russian state. The legal status of pro-Ukrainian fighters seems more diverse and complex: some have served in battalions that are under the official command of the state of Ukraine (like Azov or Aidar), others were part the Pravyi Sektor movement that grew political and social branches in addition to the fighting capability, while others still fought in independent units (like most Chechens and Georgians).

In the elusive categories of state approaches to returning fighters from Ukraine, the first one could be considered as primarily punitive. Within it, the punitive measures would vary, as some states chose to treat this as an act of terrorism (or support for one), using Iraq and Syria as a precedent, while others chose to apply criminal measures (usually for possession of arms or illicit funds), and still other states have turned to their special legal provisions prohibiting foreign fighting in general. Regardless of the formal punitive

approach, the implementation differed significantly – from a formalized political slap on the wrists, to serious prison sentences. Of the countries discussed in this study as originators of foreign fighters in Ukraine, the UK, Czech Republic, Italy, Spain, Belarus, Latvia, and Serbia would fall within this primarily punitive category.

The first EU citizen to face punishment for fighting in Ukraine was Ben Stimson from the UK – his fighting for the pro-Russian side was termed as assisting acts of terrorism, and he was given a 5 year prison sentence (Coynash 2019). Following this conviction, there were serious considerations given to the equivalence of treatment of fighters on the pro-Russian and pro-Ukrainian sides. The UK's official position on the matter remains that each case is to be assessed individually, depending on the acts committed by individuals on the battlefield, but establishing the reliability of evidence has been problematic. Subsequently, some of the interviewed fighters lamented that Chris Garrett (the abovementioned British deminer fighting with the pro-Ukraine Azov battalion) was also repeatedly picked up for questioning by the police for his involvement in acts of violence – although he was not formally prosecuted, and official accounts on the matter are scant.

In addition, in Czech Republic in 2019, 10 fighters were under criminal investigation for their participation in the pro-Russian separatist campaign, and one Czech army veteran had been charged with acts of terrorism for fighting to support the breakaway republics – facing 5-20 years in prison (Coynash 2019). This might be the strictest punitive measures brought against a foreign fighter returning from Ukraine to date.

Spain was another early prosecutor of its citizens fighting on the pro-Russian side, arresting eight young men in 2015 on

TABLE 2. Range of Punitive Approaches to Fighters in Ukraine

	CZ	BY	UK, IT	ESP	LV, Serbia	EST	Australia	PLN, SK
Approach	punish	punish	punish	punish	punish	extradite	watch	denial
Charges	terrorism, criminal	foreign fighting	terrorism	criminal	foreign fighting	terrorism	foreign fighting	criminal

charges of “possessing arms and explosives, complicity in murders and assassinations, and influencing the neutrality of Spain” (Draper 2015). However, most of these investigations seem to have been dropped, lacking supportive evidence (Matveeva 2017).

In 2015, Italy introduced an anti-terrorism law that threatened citizens going to fight abroad with prison sentences of 3-10 years, and also made punishable auxiliary activities, such as recruitment, financial support, and social media activities (Scimia 2015). By 2018, up to 20 men have been arrested in Italy on charges of recruiting fighters to go into Ukraine – they were reportedly of neo-Nazi convictions, linked with the pro-Russian Rusich fighter unit, – and 25 more men who had found on the pro-Russian side have been listed as wanted for questioning (Wesolowsky Kreshko 2018). In 2019, three more men associated with the fascist political party of Forza Nuova were arrested for fighting on the pro-Russian side – with a cache of Nazi plaques, automatic weapons, and even a complete missile discovered on their premises (CBS 2019). However, Italy seems to be applying justice to these fighters selectively: among those prosecuted for fighting on the pro-Russian side, associates of the Lega Nord (a nationalist and pro-Russian ruling party of Italy’s deputy PM Matteo Salvini) seem to be receiving a free pass. A son of one of the Lega Nord’s members who went to fight on the pro-Russian side was even publicly praised for it (Wesolowsky

Kreshko 2018). Moreover, the right-wing Italians fighting on the Ukraine side are not being prosecuted, and are being provided a legal cover by Ukraine (Scimia 2015), at least for the duration of their stay.

Belarus has been the only country where the state security services summarily prosecute all returnees from Ukraine – combatants and non-combatants – as mercenaries (Astapenia 2015). This exceptional treatment is likely related to their presence in Ukraine being an act of more forceful political opposition, rather than Belarus’ stricter policy against foreign fighting in general, or the behavior of Belarusians in Ukraine.

By mid-2019 Serbia – a state, which Ukraine has repeatedly petitioned to address the problem of a large influx of its nationals into the conflict – has pressed criminal charges against 45 men for fighting in a foreign conflict (all on the pro-Russian side). Most of the accused have pleaded guilty, and had their sentences reduced or suspended, conditional upon no repeated offence; four men have been sentenced to six months under house arrest (Zivanovic 2018, Metodieva 2019). Given that these men were involved in some of the most notorious pro-Russian units, including the Wagner Brigade, and how the issue has been increasingly straining the diplomatic relations between Ukraine and Serbia, Serbia might be classified as applying the most formalist law enforcement approach that is barely a slap on the wrists for the offenders.

While the European states discussed above apply analogous legal approaches to their citizens who went to fight in Syria or Iraq, and Ukraine, Australia might be one of the exceptions that treats these conflicts decidedly differently on legal grounds. While all of the Australians who have gone into the Ukraine conflict on either side have been under the watch of law enforcement agencies since their return, the official legal stance is that they have not violated these foreign fighter laws (Rubinsztein-Dunlop et al 2018), and have thus not been prosecuted.

Another, somewhat exceptional, course of action has been chosen by Poland. The country officially denies any presence of its citizens among the fighter ranks in Ukraine, while at the same time threatening them with criminal prosecution should they return (Jackson 2014). The Slovak approach was somewhat comparable: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs was not able to confirm the presence of Slovak fighters in Ukraine, but condemned such behavior, while the Intelligence Service did acknowledge Slovak participation in the conflict and expressed concerns about their possible radicalization (Cuprik 2015).

In the Baltic states, the treatment of returning foreign fighters seems to be a mixed bag, in terms of law enforcement

responses. In 2016, Estonia extradited its citizen, an ethnic Russian who fought on the pro-Russian side, to Ukraine on terrorism charges (Coynash 2019). Meanwhile, Latvia chose to prosecute its returnees but treated these activities differently than terrorism – in 2019, it sentenced a pro-Russian fighter from Daugavpils (of non-citizen status) to 5 years in prison for participation in armed conflict outside Latvia (Coynash 2019). In Lithuania, there is no public record of persons having been put on trial for taking part in the conflict in Ukraine on either side, although several pro-Russian fighters were investigated.

Overall, it is important to note that official prosecutorial approaches to fighters returning from Ukraine into their home countries are still under formation and differ significantly from country to country (as summarized in Table 2). This stands in contrast to a seemingly general EU-level acceptance of the need to prosecute the fighters returning from Syria or Iraq on terrorism charges, and the broad adoption of associated legal codes. With fighters returning from Ukraine, there is a lack of uniformity not only in the legal approach to the punitive practice, but also in its implementation, and even still, most countries have only chosen to consider applying it to fighters on the pro-Russian side.

IV. Fates of Returning Fighters

This section looks more closely into the fates of some of the returning fighters, and the social attitudes they tend to be met with. These positive and negative experiences are much more scarcely reported in public sources and more difficult to glean from personal interviews, compared to the accounts of their fighting. It is also worth noting that the concept of returning is a somewhat fluid

one, as many combatants have tended to go into Ukraine for repeated stints of several weeks or months at a time. Since none of the interviewees or persons identified in the public accounts expressed intent to go back there, they can be considered having returned – but so would the fighters presently residing in their home countries if they would be in between the stints.

Marginalization was one of the most common outcomes of the returnees from either side of the conflict. A Swedish fighter on the pro-Ukrainian side interviewed for this project, who could be classified as a disillusioned ideologue, felt the experience had isolated and disadvantaged him. Prominent radical right-wing fighters, regularly engaged – and demonized – by the Swedish media, have led to a neo-Nazi scare in the country. As a result, being known as a fighter automatically branded him as a similar type of radical in the eyes of society. He was regularly visited and questioned by the police, struggling to find employment, and was considering changing his legal name and moving to a different country to start anew. Coverage of a known Australian fighter, best categorized as battle chaser, indicates similar discontent with extensive attention by the local authorities, struggling to shake off the label of a potential threat to society after his six-month involvement on the pro-Ukrainian side (Rubinsztein-Dunlop et al 2018, Bucci 2019). A Georgian fighter on the pro-Ukrainian side interviewed for this project, who could be classified as a veteran with historical grievances, experienced a more complex form of marginalization. The current Georgian government with pro-Russian leanings had him and several other Georgian fighters forcibly repatriated from Ukraine, and he was subsequently regularly questioned, struggled to find employment, and found former acquaintances avoiding him for fear of being persecuted by the government as well – although in private many have welcomed him as a hero. He described this marginalization and confrontation with the security services as fairly typical among the pro-Ukraine fighters, many of whom have subsequently relocated either to Ukraine or

elsewhere in Europe. This spread-out due to marginalization is especially noteworthy, given the large Georgian presence among the foreign fighters.

To date, the foreign fighters who have found themselves marginalized upon return, have not been known to get involved in politics⁷, join violent movements, or commit acts of violence. Given the breadth of motives and backgrounds of these marginalized fighters, **the lack of violent radicalization** – despite the strong pushing factors of social exclusion and resentment combined with combat skills – is noteworthy. One of the staying factors that came up in a few interviews was going into the conflict with the clear *prospect of return*, and the need to be able to continue working and living a regular life upon returning – this spurred on the need for self-preservation, keeping fighters away from the most intense battles and controversial companions. A few other potential staying factors could be associated with the theater of war type of restrictions, whereby the suspension of norms against the use of violence and adapting a certain lifestyle become acceptable only in a specific place for a specific time. Once the fighter exits this time-space frame by returning home, the norms proscribing violence kick back in. Concerning the choice to limit the violence to the selected territory, the disillusioned ideologues seemed to be moved to act abroad by the injustices they saw unfold abroad – despite facing some frustration with the politics and or environment in the home country, they nonetheless seem to choose to focus on the injustices seen abroad rather than engaging in non-violent or violent protest actions at home first. Concerning the specific target against which the violence was justified, many in the marginalized category

7 It is worth noting that a growing number of Ukrainian volunteer fighters have been elected to parliament since 2015: commanders from the Azov and Aidar battalions were elected as independents, and commanders from the Pravyi Sektor, Donbas battalion, Dnipro 1, and Mirotvorcheskii unit have joined political parties (see Puglisi 2015).

report willingness to continue fighting Russia in other forms or in countries other than Ukraine, and many in the category of veterans with historical grievances have evidently done so. By contrast, these men showed no willingness to join a fight in Syria or Iraq – unlike the battle chasers – emphasizing the target specific nature of their decision to take-up arms. Nevertheless, while some fighters might have an inherently more mentally balanced approach to the challenges they were faced with in the conflict and upon return, and might not view violence as the immediate or preferred response, those with inherent anti-social propensities, low empathic skills and other signs of potential mental instability might not take so mildly to marginalization.

There was already a small number of foreign fighters who did get engaged in a streak of violence, or threatened to do so. Arguably, their propensity for radical action and violence was detectable before their engagement in the conflict. Rather than being prompted to radicalization by their experiences or eventually putting their newly acquired battle skills to violent ends – as is commonly feared – these men seem to have **gone into the conflict with the specific purpose** of gaining the necessary skills to conduct the acts of violence. For instance, in 2017, two Swedish members of the neo-Nazi Nordic Resistance Movement (which is fiercely anti-immigrant) have reportedly gone into Ukraine to train with a Russian battalion fighting there, and upon their return bombed a center for asylum seekers in Sweden (Bucci 2019). Another comparable case is an American member of the Rise Above Movement (white supremacists), who travelled to Europe in 2017 to celebrate Hitler's birthday, and he met with members of the pro-Ukrainian Azov battalion (he was not known to go on to actually fight in Ukraine) – he subsequently went on to assault protestors during the Charlottesville rally (Bucci 2019).

Regarding other paths of concern discussed in section II, returning members do seem to have potential to be used as **latent tools** for silencing political opposition, or more specifically – opinions that run counter to Russia's interests. A notable example of this type is a Slovak pro-Russian fighter who upon his return in 2016 started threatening a local journalist with violence (including death threats) over his coverage of the Ukraine conflict (Mares 2017). Meger (2019) has also noted a case of two foreign fighters, who have returned to Australia in 2018 and have cultivated ties to local extreme right-wing groups, including participating in protests and rallies. Overall, interviewees reported regular Russian efforts to recruit and spur to violence the members of battalions (and their associated groups) with the more extreme views on both sides of the conflict – including the pro-Ukrainian Azov battalion as one of the more right-wing examples.

Nevertheless, there were also more **neutral and/or positive** personal outcomes of returning foreign fighters. A Lithuanian interviewed for this study, who had supported the pro-Ukrainian efforts and could be classified as a battle chaser with prior military experience, reported experiencing a boost in confidence upon return, which helped him start his own business. Even still, he reported being confronted with criticism over the decision to go to Ukraine – which seems curious, given the firm and vocal backing of Ukraine as Lithuania's official state position. Comparably, the pro-Russian fighters from Serbia, who are not criminally prosecuted, are not construed as a threat in public discourse (Metodieva 2019) – with Serbia taking the mirror-opposite official state position to that of Lithuania's and backing Russia in this conflict – but the returnees have not reported marginalization or negative social feedback.

Unsurprisingly, the in-depth interviews indicate that most foreign fighters have kept in touch in some way or another with

the people they've met on the front lines. Interestingly, Matveeva (2017) has found that in most countries some of the returnees from both sides of the conflict in Ukraine have banded into more formalized national or international **unions**, based around the idea of volunteerism. These examples range from the Union of Donbas Volunteers (international) to Donbassforeningen (Sweden) or Coordinamento Solidale per il Donbass (Italy), among others. Regardless of whether they are right- or left-leaning, most of these movements seem to share the traits of disillusionment with the Western capitalist world order – as described in the disillusioned ideologues category.

Overall, the data analysis and in-depth interviews suggest that the most feared outcome – the radicalization of foreign fighters in Ukraine – with the potential to turn to violence upon return home – has so far not been observed, and remains a somewhat remote possibility. The nature of action being so target- and locale-specific suggests, that for most foreign fighters in this conflict engaging

in violence upon return is unlikely. Indeed, most have chosen not to get involved in even more benign forms of domestic activism, such as protests or politics. Nevertheless, a number of individuals with demonstrable propensity for violence have managed to either go into battle in Ukraine, or get in touch with those who did, and the concern over potential extremist activities could be rightfully channeled here. Since many of them were on the law enforcement watch lists prior to their connection to the conflict in Ukraine, such a connection might only serve as an additional warning sign. The study indicates that the two greatest concerns with returning fighters is their marginalization or becoming tools of external influence. With active Russian recruiting in the field, some countries have already seen attempts to use the returnees for political purposes or even to incite violence. The potential consequences of social marginalization run much deeper, and risk producing second or third order effects that might eventually lead to violent outcomes – especially among persons with lower social skills and sparser support networks.

V. Conclusions and Implications

This study has analyzed four basic types of foreign fighters coming from Western, mostly European, countries to fight in support of one of the warring parties in Ukraine. Experienced veterans coming to resettle old scores with either Ukraine or Russia seemed to be the most common type. The second most prevalent category was mostly civilian highly ideologically engaged men, who went to fight in Ukraine because they were convinced that the modern Western world order and lifestyle was failing them in particular, and has pushed the Ukrainian or Russian societies into conflict in general. The study has identified a new, frequently overlooked category of armed opposition, mostly represented by Belarusians and

Russian citizens, who felt they have exhausted the means of political activism (through art, literature, and NGO work) in their home countries. The battle chasers, perhaps more commonly encountered in captive media profiles, actually formed the minority of those present in the conflict – most of the adventurous civilians tended to be weeded out before making it to war or quickly got disappointed in its realities, while the battle-hardened veterans gradually moved on to other, more active conflicts.

Having looked at the common social concerns and analysed the different ways, with which European governments are choosing to deal with their returning fighters, the study

concludes that the **disillusioned ideologues** and battle chasers of the **adventurous civilian** type are of the **greatest concern**. The analysis suggests that the aggrieved veterans, prompted to action by (foreign) target-specific motivation, would be unlikely to burst out against other (including domestic) targets. The available data indicates that the veterans seem to activate for battle only where the “nemesis” is present – e.g., bringing the fight against Russia from Chechnya or Georgia into Ukraine, but not other conflicts. While upon return from their original warfighting experience some of these men had gotten involved in other illicit activities (e.g., trafficking or other gang activities), they do not seem to have a record for involvement with politically radical or other terrorist groups. In this respect, individuals representing political opposition, who have decided to take up arms, are similarly oriented against a specific target. This group has mostly never engaged in any form of violence prior to entering the conflict in Ukraine, and even there, many have taken up non-violent support functions. Thus the core concerns over the potential for radicalization and violence among the foreign fighters returning from Ukraine should be directed towards the highest risk groups: the disillusioned ideologues and civilian battle chasers – and the subsequent analysis focuses on them.

Their potential to inspire, enable, and otherwise contribute to radical political and social movements at home seems enhanced by the experience of mixing with other fighters of similar conviction. These fighters have the potential to pose a latent destabilizing threat from **socio-political** perspective, and their activities ought to be monitored more carefully for this aspect. The overall pre-occupation with returning fighters as a potential terrorism threat (in light of the discourse on the fighters in Syria and Iraq) seems **misplaced**. The study suggests that the singular cases who seem ready, willing, and able to conduct such acts of violence attempt

to get trained in Ukraine or by experienced fighters from Ukraine – in other words, the concern ought not be about persons going to Ukraine and turning radical, but about the radicals committed to violence and trying to learn from, or getting inspired by, the fighters or events in Ukraine.

In general, it seems that in searching for **analogies** and drawing inferences for assessing the risks, fighters flocking to the Islamist cause in Syria and Iraq tend to be brought up as the first choice of a precedent – however, they make for poor comparisons. As noted at the outset of this study, in these conflicts, driven in no small part by religious sentiment, a significant portion of the arriving individual foreign fighters receive training, get armed, and are organized in small groups for a prolonged campaign in order to actively take part in either sporadic attacks or suicide missions – all of which stands in contrast to the conflict in Ukraine. The second analogy that could potentially be more insightful is the Spanish civil war of 1936-1939, which unfolded in a catholic European country, and pitted the right- and left- wing ideologists, fascists and communists against each other in a country trying to decide its status. Even though the conflict in Ukraine is not a civil war, in addition to the somewhat similar cultural and religious background, the Spanish civil war offers an insightful historic precedent of a situation where large numbers of foreigners came to aid both fighting sides there out of ideological conviction or desire to put their battle skills to use. As the Spanish civil war concluded, most countries have agreed to assist their nationals returning from combat financially and logistically, and despite widespread fears that they would bring the spark of communism or fascism back home to energize the local masses against the government, where these movements did take root, these returnees were not their backbone – although some did get involved in politics and social movements (see, e.g., Tammikko 2018). A third set of analogies potentially

more helpful for understanding the push and pull factors affecting the foreign fighters in Ukraine could be the extensive literature on the right- and left-wing extremism. Rather than focusing the combat aspect of their experience, lessons and insights could be drawn from the mechanisms through which these movements spread across countries, and what types of persons tended to get involved in the more extreme ideological end, or even turn to violence. Indeed, Ukraine is already reeling under the political and social

implications of the increasingly extreme right-wing nationalist individuals coming out of Azov, Aidar, and Pravyi Sektor fighter groups and various youth, political, and informal groups associated with them. It is not a stretch to get concerned about the gust of wind under the sails of similar movements elsewhere in Europe as the conflict in Ukraine starts to wind down – with some parties inevitably feeling scorned by any peace deal to be.

VI. Recommendations

The first recommended policy step would be to establish a clear **position** towards the citizens going to fight in Ukraine: is it encouraged or discouraged? How will it be treated from a legal standpoint? Will the same rules and conditions be applied to fighters joining both sides of the conflict – or if not, why? The issue is, unsurprisingly, highly politicized in Europe, with different domestic factions supporting different sides of the conflict, and the legal frameworks still in development. However, extended ambiguity risks creating a situation where punitive legislation could be used to target political opposition linked to the conflict in Ukraine (not necessarily in combatant capacity), or where seemingly selective application of justice exacerbates domestic tensions between right- and left-leaning organizations of various degrees of radicalization. The public messaging should cover the appropriateness of active support to the different sides of the Ukraine conflict in various forms (e.g., charity and NGO work – domestic or in the field, - versus taking part in combat), and be coordinated with the foreign policy stance.

Given the considerable influence of social and traditional media in the heroic portrayals of fighting in general and certain fighters in particular, and its subsequently significant facilitating role in getting new volunteers

to the battlefield, governments wishing to reduce the number of their citizens going to fight in Ukraine should consider **flagging and limiting** this coverage. Similar to the best practices in covering news stories about suicides, when the method is not disclosed and helplines are provided, new stories covering fighters present in, or returning from, Ukraine could limit the publishable content about aspects such as the fighter's identity, location, and means of traveling to the conflict, in addition to avoiding heroic aspects of the stories. In particular, it would seem worthy accompanying such news stories with the contacts of local support services, such as psychological assistance in general or veteran psychological services in particular, social workers able to assist with housing or employment in general, or counselling for exit from radical organizations in particular (if such services are available in the news-publishing country). Regarding social media posts and potential communications regarding joining the conflict in combat role they could be flagged and/or removed, manually or with the help of algorithms - similar to the current practices of flagging inappropriate pornographic or criminal content. The scope and type of coverage would largely depend on whether these measures are agreed upon a pan-European, regional, or national level.

In addition, significant effort ought to go into **prevention**, namely, the intelligence services flagging and tracking the activities of persons in right- and left-wing organizations that take extreme positions, especially ones that could be linked with the narratives currently playing out in Ukraine. This should be considered a particular risk factor in combination with combat training of any kind – from gun shooting skills and hunting hobbies, to broader survivor challenge courses, to experience in the armed services or law enforcement, or a criminal record for violence. Still, the acute picture of the mental state and propensity for violence might be difficult to establish in youth cases, petty offenders, and persons marginally involved in such networks. Sharing intelligence on such at risk persons with regional authorities, particularly those monitoring entry to and from Ukraine, is paramount to ensuring that the groups most at risk do not enter the combat zone where they could be trained and/or further radicalized. Nevertheless, monitoring the political and social activism of returning fighters ought to be significantly higher on the priority list of national intelligence services – with the current preoccupation of preventing violence, the risk is that the types of potentially destabilizing influences that unfold over a longer period could be overlooked.

The final recommendation regarding the returning foreign fighters would be to strengthen the network available to support their **reintegration** into the society. Social marginalization and alienation could push persons to join radical circles at home, or connect to the ones abroad and/or establish a local faction of it. While clearly not all marginalized foreign fighters turn to radicalism or violence, all those who did turn have faced social exclusion, oftentimes even before heading off to the battle. On the one hand, the types of persons who went to fight in Ukraine, and their combat

activities there, differ quite dramatically from foreign fighters joining radical Islamist causes. In terms of exposure to war trauma, they might be more closely compared to local armed service veteran experiences and, if deemed appropriate, similar counselling and/or reintegration assistance should be offered. On the other hand, persons in the disillusioned ideologues category might be more deeply immersed in political activism, both in Ukraine and upon return, potentially self-selecting into roles that involve less combat and more associated support tasks. Here, for persons deemed at risk, counselling geared towards exiting radical circles might be more appropriate than the war trauma support. In addition, it is important to consider the returning fighters who are being held in prison, awaiting trial or serving their sentence there – without careful assessment, counselling, and monitoring, incarcerating persons at risk would not only risk furthering their self-radicalization by othering, as mentioned above, but could open them to a literally captive audience of potential new recruits for radical political or violent causes. Furthermore, countries experiencing a considerable inflow of immigrants from Ukraine, who may have been exposed to, or actively participated, in combat, should consider extending these services to them as well – especially since their availability in Ukraine is extremely limited at this point. Overall, it is important to actively consider measures that could help reduce the risk of social stigmatization of fighters and related persons. Emphasizing their multiple other social identities (role(s) in the family, professional skills, religious affiliation etc.) could help gradually reduce the significance of the fighter identity.

To sum up, national government agencies of European countries keen to engage and collaborate in addressing concerns over foreign fighters in Ukraine ought to take up consistent positions on the matter; take steps to

stop glorifying the battle; step-up prevention of radicals seeking combat experiences; and support fighter reintegration to avoid marginalized grievances exploding. Moreover, the significantly more focus should be shifted towards monitoring and countering radical political activities rather than the currently narrow approach to limit the government

actions to countering violence, if any. While the devil is unsurprisingly in the details of implementation and in mustering the political will to address the issue head on, it is important to appreciate the nuances involved and to put aside the notion that continuing to flirt with ambiguity will somehow lead the storm to pass.

References

- Allen, C., “Meeting the British and European Fighters at War in Ukraine,” *VICE*, 25 Aug 2015, https://www.vice.com/en_uk/article/xd7axz/european-british-fighters-in-ukraine-920?fbclid=IwAR3RSWgDCeyZ_r y J J m E t T x y f k L S - - vL56MQR6Uhr_3FzNqZw9GMFp6cPN0
- Astapenia, R., “Belarusian Combatants in Ukraine: Heroes or Criminals?,” *Belarus Digest*, 4 Sep 2015, <https://belarusdigest.com/story/belarusian-combatants-in-ukraine-heroes-or-criminals/>
- Barber, T. “Ukraine conflict attracts foreign fighters – on both sides,” 22 April 2015, *Financial Times*, <https://www.ft.com/content/ceccfcb1-3335-3497-ac53-759bcff7a4e2>
- Bellingcat, “Second GRU Officer Indicted in Montenegro Coup Unmasked, 22 Nov 2018, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2018/11/22/second-gru-officer-indicted-montenegro-coup-unmasked/>
- Bellingcat, “The Russians and Ukrainians Translating the Christchurch Shooter’s Manifesto,” 14 Aug 2019, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2019/08/14/the-russians-and-ukrainians-translating-the-christchurch-shooters-manifesto/>
- Bertelsen, P. “Danish Preventive Measures and De-radicalization Strategies: The Aarhus Model,” Jan 2015, *PANORAMA*, pp. 241-253, https://psy.au.dk/fileadmin/Psykologi/Forskning/Preben_Bertelsen/Avisartikler_radikalisering/Panorama.pdf
- Beslin, J. and Ignjatijevic, M., “Balkan foreign fighters: from Syria to Ukraine,” June 2017, *EUISS*, <https://www.iss.europa.eu/sites/default/files/EUISSFiles/Brief%2020%20Balkan%20foreign%20fighters.pdf>
- Bucci, N., “Five Australians free to return after fighting in Ukraine far-right 'finishing school' alongside Russian nationalist militia,” 23 April 2019, *ABC*, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-23/five-australians-free-to-return-after-ukraine-conflict/11004438>
- Byman, D. “The Homecomings: What Happens When Arab Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria Return?” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vo. 38, No. 8 (2015), pp. 581-602
- CBS, “Italian cops detain 3 men, seize guns, a missile and Nazi plaques,” 15 July 2019, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/italy-guns-missile-nazi-memorabilia-arrests-far-right-links-ukraine-war-today-turin-2019-07-15/>
- Clapp, A., “Why American Right-Wingers Are Going to War in Ukraine,” 20 June 2016, *VICE*, https://www.vice.com/en_us/article/exk4dj/nationalist-interest-v23n4
- Coynash, H., “Czech national charged with terrorism after fighting for Russian-backed militants in Ukraine,” 01 Feb 2019, *Kharkiv Human Rights Protection Group*, <http://khpg.org/en/index.php?id=1548645601>
- Cuprik, R., “Slovak fighters in Ukraine prompt legal change,” *Slovak Spectator*, 17 June 2015, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20057964/unclear-rules-over-service-in-foreign-army-will-change.html>
- DFRLab (Atlantic Council’s Digital Forensics Research Lab), “A Serb, a Texan, and a Colombian Walk Into a War,” 23 Sep 2016, <https://medium.com/dfrlab/a-serb-a-texan-and-a-colombian-walk-into-a-war-9a0389dda2ba>

DFRLab, “The Foreign Fighters Battling for Ukraine,” 14 Nov 2016, <https://medium.com/@DFRLab/the-foreign-fighters-battling-for-ukraine-c314e3c3e6e2>

Draper, L., “Disbanded Brothers: What Happens When Ukraine’s Foreign Fighters Return Home,” *Newsweek*, 4 Nov 2015, <https://www.newsweek.com/disbanded-brothers-what-happens-when-ukraines-foreign-fighters-return-home-335906>

Euromaidan Press, “Meet the foreign fighters defending Ukraine from Russian aggression,” 29 Nov 2017, <http://euromaidanpress.com/2017/11/29/meet-the-foreign-fighters-defending-ukraine-from-russian-aggression/>

European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS), “The Return of Foreign Fighters to EU Soil: Ex-post Evaluation,” May 2018, https://wb-iisg.com/wp-content/uploads/bp-attachments/5634/EPRS_STU2018621811_EN-1.pdf

GLOBSEC Policy Institute, “GLOBSEC Megatrends 2018,” April 2018, https://www.globsec.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/Globsec_Megatrends_2018.pdf

Hegghammer, T. and Nesser, P., “Assessing the Islamic State’s Commitment to Attacking the West,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9 No. 4 (2015), <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/440/html>

Jackson, P., “Ukraine war pulls in foreign fighters,” 1 Sep 2014, *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-28951324>

Legiec, A., “Conflict in Ukraine and Foreign Fighters – Interview with a volunteer from Belarus,” 19 April 2017, *Eastbook*, <https://www.eastbook.eu/en/2017/04/19/conflict-in-ukraine-and-foreign-fighters-interview-with-a-volunteer-from-belarus/>

Legiec, A., “Profiling Foreign Fighters in Eastern Ukraine: A Theoretical Introduction,” in Kacper Rekawek (Ed.), *Not Only Syria? The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters in a Comparative Perspective*, 2017 (IOS Press), pp. 22-30

Malet, D. “What Does the Evidence Tell Us about the Impact of Foreign Fighters on Home-Grown Radicalization?,” *Radicalisation Research*, July 6, 2015, <http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/debate/malet-foreign-fighters-home-grown-radicalization/>

Mares, M., “Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: Risk Analysis from the Point of View of NATO,” in Kacper Rekawek (Ed.), *Not Only Syria? The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters in a Comparative Perspective*, 2017 (IOS Press), pp. 31-39

Matveeva, A., *Through Times of Trouble: Conflict in Southeastern Ukraine Explained from Within*, Lexington Books, 2017, pp. 232-4.

Meger, S., “War junkies: Why foreign fighters are flocking to Ukraine,” ABC, 4 May 2019, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-04/ukraine-foreign-fighters-meger/11054728>

Metodieva, A., “Balkan Fighters In Eastern Ukraine: Why Are They There?,” 29 April 2019, <https://www.ridl.io/en/balkan-fighters-in-eastern-ukraine-why-are-they-there/>

Mil. Today, “Three Radical Distinctions Between Syrian and Ukrainian Conflicts,” 15 Dec 2015, <http://mil.today/2015/Weapons9/>

Puglisi, R., “Heroes or Villains? Volunteer Battalions in Post-Maidan Ukraine,” 2015, Istituto Affari Internazionali, <http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiw1508.pdf>

Racz, A., “The Elephant in the Room: Russian Foreign Fighters in Ukraine,” in

Kacper Rekawek (Ed.), *Not Only Syria? The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters in a Comparative Perspective*, 2017 (IOS Press), pp. 60-73

Reed, A. and Pohl, J., "Tackling the surge of returning foreign fighters," July 14, 2017, NATO Review, <https://www.nato.int/docu/review/2017/Also-in-2017/daesh-tackling-surge-returning-foreign-fighters-prevention-denmark-rehabilitation-programmes/EN/index.htm>

Rubinsztein-Dunlop, S., Dredge, S., and Workman, M., "From Neo-Nazi to Militant: The Foreign Fighters in Ukraine who Australia's Laws won't Stop," *ABC*, 7 May 2018, <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-05-01/foreign-fighters-return-to-australia-with-military-training/9696784>

Scimia, E., "The Multi-Faceted Reality of Italian Foreign Fighters in Ukraine," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Vol. 12 No. 187, 16 Oct 2015, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-multi-faceted-reality-of-italian-foreign-fighters-in-ukraine/#.VjshMberSUK>

Secrieru, S., "Come and Go: Trajectories of Foreign Fighters in and out of Moldova," Rekawek, in Kacper Rekawek (Ed.), *Not Only*

Syria? The Phenomenon of Foreign Fighters in a Comparative Perspective, 2017 (IOS Press), pp. 108-124

Tammikko, T., "The Threat of Returning Foreign Fighters: Finnish State Responses to the Volunteers in the Spanish and Syria-Iraq Civil Wars," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 30 No. 5, 2018, pp. 844-861.

Vikmanis, G., "Cīnijos par Latviju. Saruna ar latvieti, kurš karojis Ukrainas brīvprātīgo bataljonā," 3 March 2015, *LA.lv*, <http://www.la.lv/latvietis-kurs-karojis-ukrainas-brivpratigo-b-ataljona-cinijos>

Wesolowsky, T. and Kreshko, Y., "Italy Moves To Crack Down On Its Fighters In Ukraine's Donbas," Radio Free Liberty Europe, 16 Aug 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/italy-moves-to-crack-down-on-its-fighters-in-ukraine-s-donbas/29437946.html>

Zivanovic, M., "Donbass Brothers: How Serbian Fighters Were Deployed in Ukraine," 13 Dec 2018, *Balkan Insight*, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/12/13/donbass-brothers-how-serbian-fighters-were-deployed-in-ukraine-12-12-2018/>



Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis
Didžioji g. 5, LT-01128 Vilnius
Tel. +370 612 25727
info@vilniusinstitute.lt
www.vilniusinstitute.lt