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Radicalisation, Foreign Fighters and the Ukraine Conflict: A Playground for the Far-Right?

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Abstract: Ukraine has been viewed by some as having become a training ground, networking opportunity, and general hub for the far-right due to the conflict in the east of the country, which began in 2014. With this type of terrorism on the rise in the West and events like the storming of the US Capitol Building in January 2021 fresh in the memory, it should come as no surprise that any such possibilities will generate concern. To investigate the types and extent of the threats posed by participants in the Ukraine conflict, we scrutinise the activities of a few alumni that we know of to date, as well as highlighting neglected historical episodes of right-wing fighters. We make three arguments here based on occurrences so far. Firstly, we know little about far-right foreign fighters and more attention needs to be paid to historical instances of the phenomenon. Secondly, some limited but diverse threats have already arisen from the Ukraine conflict and others may emerge in the future, but it would be unwise to overplay and homogenise the problem. Finally, it is Ukraine itself that probably faces the greatest challenges from its domestic far-right, although, if left unchecked, it may affect others in providing a space for, and permitting the growth of, connections with like-minded individuals and groups based elsewhere. Despite our warning about exaggerating the problem, Western security services should be taking the far-right very seriously at present, such as in relation to potential infiltration of them by such elements.

Keywords: terrorism and counter-terrorism; foreign fighters; far-right; extremism; radicalization; Ukraine conflict



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1. Introduction

The far-right, which can be defined as ‘an overlapping web of groups and ideologies based on racially, ethnically, or culturally defined superiority of one group and inferiority of all others (e.g., white supremacism, neo-Nazism, fascism)’ is on the rise (Koehler 2019, p. 2). Terrorism of this type has even been posited as a possible ‘fifth wave’ in relation to Rapoport’s (2012) ‘wave theory’—the argument that modern international terrorism has been cyclical, underpinned by a dominant energy for four prior waves, with each one lasting somewhere in the region of forty to forty-five years (Auger 2020). In Western states, the far-right accounted for 17.2 per cent of terrorist attacks in 2018, rising by 320 per cent over the five years prior (Global Terrorism Index 2019). Although a variety of causes for this rise could be hypothesised, we focus on and scrutinise the claim that Ukraine is becoming a ‘critical node’ or ‘battlefield laboratory’ for the far-right, possibly along the lines of how jihadist foreign fighters utilised Afghanistan, Chechnya, and other states for training camps, swapping tactics, and networking (Russia Matters 2020c; Soufan Centre 2019, p. 31). Particular attention has been paid to the 17,000 or more foreign fighters who travelled to the Donbas region in east Ukraine, where the conflict has been ongoing since 2014. An estimated 15,000 of those that mobilised are believed to be Russian (12,000 on the side of the separatists and 3000 fighting for Ukraine), and there are also Russian troops out of uniform, despite Moscow’s denial of this. Several hundred of the remaining number are

thought to hail from Western states and hold far-right beliefs, and it is these that we focus on here ([The Guardian 2019c](#); [Koch 2019](#), p. 8; [Legiec 2019](#); [Soufan Centre 2019](#), p. 29).

Foreign fighters motivated by many different belief systems have been extensively covered, with jihadists being most frequently focused on in recent times, especially those who joined Islamic State (IS) ([Arielli 2012, 2020](#); [Hegghammer 2010/11](#); [Malet 2013](#); [Tam-mikko 2018](#)). Much concern has surrounded the possibility of violence and other challenges upon their return, although there is mixed evidence for this in history ([Altier et al. 2019](#); [Byman 2015](#); [Cragin 2017](#); [Malet and Hayes 2018](#); [Milton 2020](#); [Reed et al. 2017](#); [de Roy van Zuijdewijn 2016](#)). Despite this, the same attention has not been extended to far-right foreign fighters either historically or more contemporarily. This is surprising given that they have appeared in several conflicts over the last century alone. We know little about why they went, the networks they were involved in before going and on return, how they reached the battlefields, what they did in the conflicts, and their activities post-foreign fighting. These same questions could be asked of the far-right fighters in Ukraine today. Threats posed by such fighters are not historically unprecedented, with there being a few examples of the involvement of returnees in training far-right militias in the US, as well as subsequent violent activity by European fighters ([Belew 2018](#); [Ibrahim and Karcic 2019](#)). We mostly focus on foreign fighters, but also consider other associated ways in which Ukraine has been used by the far-right.

We make three arguments here based on occurrences so far. Firstly, we know little about far-right foreign fighters and more attention needs to be paid to historical instances of the phenomenon. Secondly, some limited but diverse threats have already arisen from the Ukraine conflict and others may emerge in the future, but it would be unwise to overplay and homogenise the problem. Finally, it is Ukraine itself that probably faces the greatest challenges from its domestic far-right, although, if left unchecked, it may affect others in providing a space for, and permitting the growth of, connections with like-minded individuals and groups based elsewhere. Despite our warning about exaggerating the problem, Western security services should be taking the far-right very seriously at present, such as in relation to potential infiltration of them by such elements. Our paper is structured in three main sections. To begin with, we discuss the absence of far-right foreign fighters in studies of the more general phenomenon and provide historical evidence to suggest that threats posed by returnees are possible. Secondly, we discuss the importance of the far-right in Ukraine and explain the appeal of the conflict for such foreign fighters. Finally, we move on to an investigation of the alumni of the conflict, selecting a few different types of threats that have subsequently emerged. These individuals shine a light on many aspects of the contemporary far-right. While not being too dismissive and recognising that it only takes one or a handful of individuals to harm a lot of people, between our alumni, it is difficult to see signs of a truly imminent and massive co-ordinated threat materialising. Our conclusion considers some of the longer-term problems that such foreign fighters might pose, as well as suggesting avenues for future research.

2. Far-Right Foreign Fighters and Terrorists: Challenges Neglected?

Today, the main terrorist threat to the US is seen as stemming from white supremacy ([Jones et al. 2020](#)); the fastest growing terrorist challenge in the UK is from the far-right ([The Guardian 2019b](#)); and a number of EU member states, especially Germany, are experiencing the rise of groups and violence that are inspired by extreme right-wing beliefs ([The Economist 2020](#); [Europol 2020](#)). Some recent terrorist attacks have been significant in scale and ambitious in terms of desired objectives, such as those by Anders Behring Breivik in Norway in 2011, Dylann Roof in the US in 2015, and Brenton Tarrant in New Zealand in 2019, all of whom hoped to incite racial conflict. Furthermore, scholars have recently warned of the possibility of right-wing terrorism becoming a more transnational problem ([Caini and Parenti 2009](#); [Mammone et al. 2012](#)). It seems to be the case that far-right movements are better-connected than they were in the past due to improved technology, among other factors. However, caution is necessary in that we do not see far-right groups as

monolithic or as capable of planning or even desiring co-ordinated attacks across countries. Indeed, we are keen not to repeat the mistakes made in relation to jihadist terrorists, where aligned groups had regional or national concerns that Al Qaeda core did not necessarily share (Cronin 2006, p. 41). In a similar way, there are different kinds of far-right groups, which may not always align themselves with each other, despite the presence of linkages of some kind, or may do so merely opportunistically. It is important to be aware of such distinctions, including revolutionary, reactive, vigilante, racist, millenarian, and youth counterculture types, as Sprinzak (2012) shows. Indeed, particularism may have been, as well as continuing to be, an obstacle to co-operation with others on the far-right. Having said this, white supremacism or white nationalism may now provide an overarching adhesive ideology for these disparate elements, but this does not mean that the far-right and white supremacism are synonymous. This section highlights the neglected issue of far-right foreign fighters in historical conflicts and their links to terrorism and more. In particular, we focus on what they did on return in order to both justify our call for more historical research and to provide context for the current circumstances.

Foreign fighters, which are 'non-citizens of conflict states who join insurgencies during civil conflict', have become of growing interest to scholars over the past few decades, and a range of cases have been examined (Malet 2013, p. 9). However, right-wing foreign fighters, and their myriad post-conflict activities, are conspicuously absent in both historical and more contemporary studies. This is odd considering several cases and the recent focus and concern about jihadist returnees, as well as rising problems with the far-right. There are several under-researched instances of right-wing volunteers in conflicts, including the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, the Rhodesian Bush War of the 1960s and 1970s, Nicaragua in the 1980s, the Balkan wars of the 1990s and the Middle East and Syria and Ukraine in the 2010s (Arielli 2012; Belew 2018; Ibrahim and Karcic 2019; Koch 2019; Malet 2013).

In terms of specific examples, Belew (2018, p. 78) has connected US right-wing volunteer fighters and mercenaries in the above conflicts with extremist movements in the US. She clearly documents the links between the US-based Civilian Military Assistance (CMA) group, which was involved in Nicaragua in the 1980s and conducted border patrols in the US using tactics similar to the earlier Ku Klux Klan Border Watch, and what she calls the white power movement. Furthermore, Belew (2018, p. 80) demonstrates that, although the US contingent in the Rhodesian Bush War was small—somewhere between 40 and 2300—'it left an indelible cultural imprint'. Far-right individuals from other states also travelled to fight in Rhodesia, although we should be aware that the conflict was framed by the government under Ian Smith as a battle against communism, thereby making it likely to appeal to anti-communists also, who must be separated from white supremacists (Centre for the Analysis of the Radical Right 2020; Evans 2007). Rhodesia has recently become of great interest in the white supremacist imagination, and historical links to the extreme right in the West warrant further investigation (New York Times 2018).

Similarly, Europe has been no stranger to far-right activity. In terms of threats from returning foreign fighters in history, one instance from the 1990s is worthy of discussion. Jackie Arklov, who was involved in torture while participating in the Balkan conflict, started a terrorist group on return to Sweden, and was convicted of killing two police officers in 1999 (The Guardian 1999). More generally, the Balkan episodes of the 1990s have been argued to be key in inspiring a generation of Christian terrorists (Ibrahim and Karcic 2019). However, such individuals have too rarely been subject to significant academic research.

We should be aiming to find out what more of these far-right fighters did on their return, with the problems being that they did not necessarily fight for recognised terrorist groups abroad and some may have even been involved in domestically popular causes or offering useful deniability for governments, however uncomfortable recognition of these possibilities might be. Furthermore, it may simply be that their activities on return have not been classified as terrorism or as being of concern. One of the great dangers herein is that right-wing violence has been played down in Western states by individualising it when instead intolerant attitudes towards minorities are more widespread and that even those

far-right narratives that allegedly reject violence can end up inspiring it (Berntzen and Sandberg 2014). It is also possible that the problem has been one of separating terrorism from hate crime or political activism and thus to do with legal definitions or turning a blind eye to the problem for reasons of political convenience. These are causes for concern because the longer a threat is neglected, the more of a problem it could become. One powerful and very concerning example of this neglect relates to how far-right individuals and groups have become infiltrated the security services of Western states, thereby allowing serious problems to emerge before being addressed, as has happened in both the US and Germany in their security apparatuses recently (Deutsche Welle 2020a; German 2020).

In short, far-right foreign fighters in historical and contemporary conflicts have been neglected, and this is despite evidence of harmful activities post-conflict, this type of violence being on the rise, and concern about other foreign fighters. Caution is warranted in not viewing this as a monolithic threat, and to ensure that we understand different kinds of relationships and underlying belief systems that may be quite different when subjected to proper scrutiny. Given this set of challenges, we now turn to a discussion of the Ukraine conflict to better understand the circumstances in the country and why it has been viewed as attractive to the far-right, including foreign fighters.

3. Ukraine and the Far-Right

Eastern Europe has, for a long time, been viewed as a region with popular far-right movements, although these are very diverse and not necessarily connected to each other (Bustikova 2018). Far-right elements in Ukraine gained notoriety during the Euro-maidan revolution of 2013–2014, which led to the removal of pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovich and a turn towards the West (Freedom House 2018). They were, however, a neglected problem before the revolution (The Guardian 2014). It now appears to be the case that the far-right are a powerful component of Ukraine's political landscape, even if not electorally popular, as well as some elements of it being increasingly well-connected to like-minded others in Europe and the US – a problem that has the potential to grow and harm others (Soufan Centre 2019, pp. 31–39).

The extant literature is divided over the importance of the far-right in Euromaidan, with some downplaying their role and others saying that their actions were more important than their numbers might suggest (Shekhovtsov and Umland 2014; Katchanovski 2020; Ishchenko 2016, 2020). However significant their role overall, such actors were heavily involved during the revolution and participated in high-profile activities, even beyond Kyiv, with one such significant occurrence being the so-called 'Maidan Massacre', in which more than 100 people were killed. It has even been alleged that people were killed from Maidan positions rather than by the police in an event that was crucial for the toppling of Yanukovich (Katchanovski 2020, pp. 8–9). Well-known far-right groups such as Right Sector have also been linked with the clashes in Odessa from late 2013 to mid-2014, with one confrontation between rival protestors on 2 May 2014 leading to the deaths of over forty people and injuries to many more (Hale et al. 2018, p. 851). The far-right, therefore, seem to have had influence beyond its numbers during the Euromaidan revolution.

Not only this, but far-right groups have been closely linked to the fighting that erupted in the east of Ukraine in 2014, with the emergence of the volunteer battalions. Following the Euromaidan revolution, Russia moved in to intervene in Ukraine, which led to the former's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula. Russia's moves have been the subject of much discussion, with Moscow denying violent involvement in the Donbas, while academic literature has questioned whether the conflict was initiated due to internal issues in Ukraine or interstate problems (Hauter 2019). With Russia's intervention and Ukraine's military being woefully underprepared, Kyiv turned to volunteer battalions, with thousands of individuals, many with little training, answering this call (Aliyev 2016; Karagiannis 2016). Although not all were far-right movements and people who joined far-right formations may not have known about their ideological background, a number of these have become notorious in the following years, such as the Azov Regiment, as we detail below (Umland 2019, p. 109). It

has been reported that there have been somewhere in the region of 10,000 civilian casualties since 2014 due to fighting in the Donbas region, which has generally been of a low intensity ([Council on Foreign Relations 2020](#)). Several ceasefires have been announced, with the latest starting on 27 July 2020 ([Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2020a](#)). Even so, it seems likely that occasional fighting will continue into the future.

After having provided context on the far-right in Ukraine, Russia's activities, and the creation of the volunteer battalions that foreign fighters later joined, we now progress on to discuss the aforementioned fighters in greater detail. Specifically, we identify two important issues that are prevalent in foreign fighter literature. Firstly, why these fighters have travelled to fight in Ukraine and who they are fighting for; and secondly, who they are and where they have come from. It is important that we have a general view before assessing the extent to which they may pose a threat afterwards, a task we perform in the next section. While we focus on the far-right, it is worth mentioning at this stage that there may be other threats from the far-left, although this is beyond the scope of this paper ([Koch 2019](#)). The reason for emphasis on the far-right is that it seems to be a growing threat in the West, whereas the far-left is less so. Nonetheless, we do not discount this possibility, and we briefly revisit the issue of future challenges in the conclusion, where we consider the potential simultaneous homecomings of several types of foreign fighter.

3.1. *Why Fight in Ukraine and for Whom?*

Foreign fighters started to appear in this conflict from 2014 onwards, joining the aforementioned volunteer battalions, although neither side intentionally mobilised those on the far-right at this point ([Rekawek 2020](#), p. 3). What we know about foreign fighters more generally is that their reasons for travelling to fight in conflicts abroad are as numerous as they are, although some have tried to draw attention to socio-economic issues or religiosity as causes or motivations, at least in relation to IS ([Arielli 2012](#); [Dawson and Amarasingam 2017](#); [Malet 2013](#); [Pokalova 2019](#)). One commonality across different cases that has been highlighted is how conflicts attracting foreign fighters have been defensively framed in the belief that this will appeal to targeted transnational identities ([Malet 2013](#)). There is some evidence that the Ukraine conflict has been presented as protecting the frontiers of Europe from Muslims, Russians, or communists, a message that those on the present far-right would seem to be particularly susceptible to ([ABC News 2019b](#)). However, far-right fighters have fought on both sides of the Ukrainian conflict and thus not just in 'defence' of the West. The discourses of the far-right in Ukraine married to the foreign fighters' own dissatisfaction appear to have been key in several decisions to fight in the country, leaving behind the hated West to fight real or imagined enemies ([Rekawek 2020](#), p. 3). Evident in the interviews that the authors know of to date is that these individuals would like serious political change in their own countries, such as a nationalist revolution or 'a Donbas in my country', but are too weak to achieve this and claim to disapprove of terrorism. What is certainly the case is that the organisations they have joined were not set up, nor have as their main objective, sending fighters back to commit attacks in their home country ([Rekawek 2020](#), pp. 3, 25).

The Azov Regiment, Right Sector, and Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists were or are overtly far-right, while others are or were not so, including the Georgian National Legion. The first of these and the movement it has spawned have become particularly notorious, with Brenton Tarrant bearing one of its symbols, it being known for forging links with other Western far-right organisations, a push to deem it a foreign terrorist organisation in the US, and concern about its continuing role and activities of its former leaders ([Atlantic Council 2020](#); [Lister 2020](#); [Umland 2019](#)). However, Kyiv soon recognised the problems and negative attention brought about by the foreign fighters, including for the purpose of Russian propaganda. It therefore disbanded and integrated these groups into the military by 2016, although some rogue elements persisted into 2019. Thus, some far-right volunteers were present in Ukraine in the early stages of the conflict and others have continued to be, but the numbers are unlikely to now or have ever been very high at any specific point ([Russia Matters 2020a](#)). On the Russian side, some far-right groups are participating in

the conflict, such as the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), among whose aims include the creation of a 'Right-Wing International' ([The Atlantic 2018](#)). This organisation is known to have links to European groups, including the Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve and the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), with a Russia-Scandinavia 'conveyor belt' being speculated on ([Rekawek 2020](#), pp. 25–26). The NRM, a neo-Nazi organisation, was responsible for an attack on a Gothenburg refugee centre in 2017, as well as others ([Counter-Extremism Project 2019; 2020](#)). Numbers of far-right fighters on this side are difficult to establish, although they are unlikely to be high due to them demanding a high-quality of volunteer, reliance on the Russian military, and the leftist preferences of the leadership. Ultimately and further hindering the appeal of the conflict and opportunities for far-right foreign fighters is the lack of infantry combat occurring since 2016 ([Russia Matters 2020b](#)).

More subtle and less clearly violent links should not be downplayed and must be mentioned before progressing, with it having been suggested that music festivals, mixed martial arts, and political conferences offer important issues and venues over which the Western far-right can network in Ukraine ([Bellingcat 2020a; Centre for Global Policy 2020](#)). Furthermore, the country is believed to offer a more permissive environment for this type of activity than others ([Bellingcat 2020b](#)). We revisit this issue later on with at least one individual who has become involved in foreign fighting via this route.

3.2. *Who Are the Fighters and Where Have They Come from?*

We now move on to a breakdown of the 17,000 foreign fighters (not including Russians soldiers out of uniform) who have participated in the conflict since 2014. To begin with the largest contingent, an estimated 15,000 Russians have been involved in the fighting in Ukraine. The other 2,000 or more came from other states, although, to be clear, not all are far-right. There are relatively large groups from Belarus (800), Germany (165), and Serbia (106), as well as France (65), Italy (55), the US (35), the UK (15), and Australia (9), which could all be considered important states facing far-right problems at present. Nordic states combined also number somewhere in the region of 87. In all, that makes about 800 from North America; EU member states, candidates, and the UK; and Australia and New Zealand ([Soufan Centre 2019](#), p. 29). Although precise numbers are hard to establish, somewhere in the region of low to mid hundreds of foreign fighters who joined the conflict probably hold far-right beliefs ([Koch 2019](#), p. 8).

It is believed that many of the fighters were previously or continue to be involved in the far-right milieu of the states they travelled from, with some also having been involved in political activism or having military training. Many likely know each other and have chosen sides due to personal or group connections over belief system, something that suggests shallowness of conviction or escapism ([Rekawek 2020](#), pp. 3–4). It should be of concern that some ex-military are involved in far-right networks given the skills they may have learnt in their training or historical deployments, but it also suggests that they have little need of further training and could have passed skills on before fighting in Ukraine. They may, however, continue to have contacts in militaries.

Two studies that the authors know of have looked in greater depth at the fighters who have participated in the conflict, conducting interviews to do so. The first conducted eighteen interviews with fighters of seven different nationalities, as well as many others who had come into contact with the fighters and experts on the European far-right scene ([Rekawek 2020](#), p. 6). This piece divides the foreign fighters into three categories. Firstly, 'resetters', who looked to use the conflict to reset or redefine themselves in their new home of Ukraine or the separatist republic. They are likely the smallest group. Secondly, 'ghosts' or those who did short stints on the front line but avoided publicity. This is a much larger group than the resetters. Thirdly, the 'adventurers' are high-profile participants and looking for fights. These could also be seen as 'war junkies', and this is probably a smaller category than the ghosts ([Rekawek 2020](#), p. 20). The other study that draws on interviews with returning foreign fighters, both left and right, analyses the cases of forty-nine participants in this conflict, highlighting four archetypes ([Muraskaite 2020](#)). Firstly,

‘veterans with historical grievances’ from historical conflicts, who want to settle old scores with Ukraine or Russia. Secondly, the ‘disillusioned ideologues’, from both the left and the right, who have become frustrated with where they live and chosen to fight in Ukraine to do something about it. Thirdly, ‘armed opposition’, who are more focused on intra-national struggle, such as Russians who are anti-Putin. Fourthly, ‘battle chasers’ or war junkies who try to participate in almost any going conflict. We are most interested in the second group, which appear to be one of the more numerous (Muraskaite 2020, pp. 7–13). Of course, these fighters could straddle one or more of the above categories. In the end, what we have here is a diverse group of individuals who may be looking at settling old scores and bring ‘enthusiasm, resources, and know-how to extremist movements’ on their return (Muraskaite 2020, p. 1).

This should be of concern because a cursory glance at current Western far-right movements suggests that they are experiencing growth, as well as possibly forging links with Ukraine, Russia, or elsewhere. Germany has somewhere in the region of 32,000 extremists, with perhaps 13,000 of these cases prepared to use violence (Deutsche Welle 2020b). In the UK, while few appear to have travelled to Ukraine, there may be as many as 600–700 people who are members of far-right groups, and they are seemingly more violent than in the past (The Guardian 2018). The US, with its many militias and far-right terrorist groups that have often received more coverage than those in Europe, have also established and maintained links with Ukrainian groups (Jones 2018). As an example, three members of the American terrorist group The Base, clearly inspired by Al Qaeda, were planning to travel to Ukraine to fight for Kyiv in 2019 before being stopped, a trend that has apparently been observed among such groups of late (Lewis et al. 2020, pp. 8–9). Finally, Australia and New Zealand numbers are low; however, after the recent experience of Brenton Tarrant, this contingent should not be neglected. Some who fought in Ukraine have connections back home in Australia (ABC News 2019a).

To sum up this section, the Ukraine conflict, but also Ukraine more generally, has offered a permissive environment for people of this political persuasion to gather than other states, and connections do seem to have been forged between the Ukrainian and Western far-right. The foreign fighter threat, however, is complicated. The conflict pulled in 2,000 (excluding Russians), although the evidence provided here suggests that most of these have probably come and gone now that there are few serious training opportunities, and there were never that many present at the same time anyway. What is more, no group was attempting to recruit foreign fighters with the objective of turning them into terrorists on their return home—the role that Al Qaeda intentionally played as a jihadist ‘vanguard’ movement in the 1980s and 1990s. Their participation is, therefore, incidental to the conflict. Furthermore, Ukraine is far from in the condition that Afghanistan or any of the states that Al Qaeda and its affiliates used in the 1990s and 2000s to create training camps and attract volunteers. Even so, we need to look at this issue in more granular detail and so, in the next section, we identify and discuss alumni from the conflict who have posed various types of threat. As we demonstrate, there are many challenges here, but they will probably not turn out to be as great as initially feared. We need a more nuanced and less alarmist view than the one that seems to prevail today.

4. Threats Posed by Returnees from the Ukraine Conflict

In order to obtain an early impression of what to expect from the foreign fighters who participated in the Ukraine conflict, we focus on a set of alumni who have made themselves notorious for a range of different activities since returning. Due to the recent nature of the conflict, we cannot necessarily expect serious consequences immediately, but we may take from our cases below some idea of what to expect. Milton (2020, p. 144), for instance, warns against focusing on the short-term threat of returning foreign fighters, showing with the 9/11 attackers that the average lag between foreign fighter experience and the attacks was about nine years. Admittedly, this was in relation to jihadist foreign fighters, and others have shown that real concern should be in the period of the year or so after return

([Malet and Hayes 2018](#), p. 10). Regardless of the likely problematic comparison, historical episodes may give us some guide. Ultimately, it would be unwise to ignore the possibility of long-term challenges related to the Ukraine conflict.

We have selected five aspects of far-right political violence that can be related to Ukraine. We look firstly at a would-be terrorist, Gregoire Moutaux; secondly, at US veterans, Craig Lang and Alex Zweifelhofer, and the networks in which they are involved; thirdly, we examine the 2016 Montenegrin coup plot; fourthly, a recruiter for Ukraine, Francesco Saverio Fontana; and finally, a participant in the ‘security detail’ in the French ‘yellow vest’ protests, Marc de Cacqueray-Valmenier/Marc ‘Hassin’. Worth observing in these studies of individuals are the milieus from which they come, and we show how they are all far-right in some way, but of different kinds. This diversity makes it difficult to believe that many serious transnational ties will have developed and will persist in the long-term. If they do, these will be small numbers. Together, these cases demonstrate how complex the consequences of the Ukraine conflict are likely to be. Any more general inferences drawn from these cases must be done with caution.

4.1. The Would-Be Terrorist: Gregoire Moutaux

In 2015, Frenchman Gregoire Moutaux obtained weapons in the east of Ukraine, specifically five AK-47s, two grenade launchers, 5000 rounds of ammunition, and 125 kg of explosives with the alleged intention of launching attacks during the 2016 European football Championships in France ([France24 2018](#)). Before he was stopped on the Polish-Ukraine border, he may have been planning up to fifteen attacks, including on a mosque, synagogue, and state institutions ([Huffington Post 2016](#)). He has been described as ‘an ultra-nationalist’ ([The Times 2016](#)), far-right insignia were found in his home in France, Ukrainian intelligence services state that he was ‘in touch with military units fighting in Donbas’, and ‘[t]he Frenchman spoke negatively of the activities of his government on mass migration of foreigners to France, the spread of Islam and globalisation. He also said he wished to stage a number of terrorist attacks in protest’ ([BBC News 2016](#)). For these offences he received a six-year prison sentence in 2018 ([France24 2018](#)). This is less a case specifically of foreign fighting, and more those inspired by right-wing beliefs in contact with some in Donbas and willing to exploit this unstable circumstance for their own ends. This may be indicative of the kinds of problems we may expect from the far-right in the future—that is, individual or small groups planning and conducting spontaneous attacks with limited connections to Ukraine or like-minded groups. Further supporting this is that we have seen several cases of individuals or small groups connected virtually undertaking attacks for far-right causes over the past ten years, including Breivik and Tarrant. In addition to this, we have the aforementioned instance of the NRM, which can be linked to Russian movements. However, it is not clear whether these participants engaged in any way in fighting in Ukraine. It is unlikely that Russia would be keen to encourage or even permit people that had been trained within its borders to launch large-scale terrorist attacks in Western states. Nonetheless, we need to keep an eye on such developments and relationships.

To date, we can say that there has probably been little more than terrorist plotting and limited attacks that can be linked to the Ukraine conflict. It seems far more complicated than far-right terrorists being trained with the intention of returning to commit attacks and more that loosely connected individuals and small groups may be involved in spontaneous events in the future. This is not a challenge that should be dismissed lightly, especially given the circumstances, but there is not yet strong evidence of terrorism from Ukraine—and certainly none that has been seriously co-ordinated.

4.2. The American Veterans: Craig Lang and Alex Zweifelhofer, the Military, and the US Far-Right

Craig Lang was formerly in the US military before being discharged in 2014. Thereafter, he looked to participate in the fighting in Ukraine, joining the Georgian Foreign Legion and then Right Sector before returning to the US in 2016 because the pace of the war slowed

and became bogged down in trench fighting (Lister 2020, p. 37). He has been accused of, and is on trial for, the robbery and murder of a Florida couple, Serafin and Deana Lorenzo, who were killed in 2018 (ABC News 2020). Neither he nor his alleged accomplice in this act, Alex Zweifelhofer, are thought to harbour far-right sympathies. However, they worked with Right Sector. To add to this, Lang was in contact with known white supremacists on his return to the US. Jarret William Smith, who was in a Telegram group that counted the Ukrainian publisher of Brenton Tarrant's manifesto among its members, is believed to be one of these, and he later joined the US army (Lister 2020, p. 37). Whatever the reason for Lang and Zweifelhofer's participation in the conflict, they travelled afterwards to fight Al-Shabaab in Kenya and Somalia, but were stopped en route in South Sudan (Lister 2020, p. 37). When the murder mentioned above occurred, they claim to have been saving to go and fight against Nicolas Maduro, the Venezuelan leader (The Washington Post 2019).

Lang and Zweifelhofer are complicated in the sense of them not having clearly extreme right-wing views, but they were evidently continuously involved in right-wing causes and become part of such networks. They also would not have required any training and would have been potentially dangerous no matter where they were or what their cause. What may be interesting and underexplored is how many former military individuals globetrot fighting for such causes. Perhaps this is a poorly known about continuation of the phenomenon mentioned earlier of former US military personnel continuing to fight for selected but clearly right-wing political causes after retiring from the military (Belew 2018). The Syrian conflict may further highlight such problems. With this in mind, it seems important that militaries do more to prepare former soldiers to return to civilian life. Not only this, but after the storming of the Capitol building in January 2021, the US will need to take the far-right more seriously, including those who have and continue to try to gain combat experience in Ukraine.

4.3. *The Montenegrin Coup Plotters, 2016*

This example shows how the activity in eastern Ukraine, as well as implicating the far-right, may also involve Russia. This could be viewed as part of Moscow's destabilisation strategy and attempts to prevent Eastern European states joining the Western 'sphere of influence' (The Atlantic 2018). The coup plotters involved here are a motley crew of Serbian ultranationalists, Montenegrin opposition politicians, Russian secret service agents, and others, and some of these ties, as well as the genesis of the plot, can be traced back to the Ukraine conflict (BBC News 2019).

In 2016, a coup was attempted in Montenegro, specifically over the country's attempt to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and involving some who fought on the pro-Russian side in the conflict in Donbas (The Guardian 2016). The plan was to seize the parliament, kill then prime minister Milo Djukanovic, and install a new anti-Western and Russian-friendly government. One of the plotters, Aleksandar Sindjelic, was involved in the Serbian paramilitary group the 'Serbian Wolves', which sent fighters, including himself, to eastern Ukraine. He thereafter became a key witness (New York Times 2016; US Congress 2018). This plot involved at least one other participant in the fighting in Ukraine, Nemanja Ristic, who has been described as a Serbian 'right-wing agitator'. Furthermore, the plot appears to have been started with contacts that Sindjelic met in eastern Ukraine while fighting there (Sunday Telegraph 2017). Bellingscat (2018) has investigated this issue and has found connections to two Russian military intelligence officers (GRU), Eduard Shishmakov and Vladimir Moiseev, both of whom have been linked with prior Russian destabilisation activities in Europe in the past. In 2019, fourteen of those involved were sentenced to time in prison, which included the aforementioned Russian agents (in absentia) and opposition politicians (The Irish Times 2019). Despite this, in February 2021, the sentences of those involved in the coup were overturned and a retrial ordered, citing 'violations of criminal law' (ABC News 2021). What occurs next here will need to be closely followed.

Once again, we see a complicated picture here. We have contacts that were fostered between Russian intelligence services, Serbian ultranationalists, and pro-Russian Montene-

grins that can be traced back to Ukraine. What this does is suggest how the conflict has been used by the Russian government to further its agenda in Eastern Europe, although this may be an individual and opportunistic occurrence rather than larger in scale. Furthermore, it shows a diverse far-right that is not necessarily white supremacist in nature.

4.4. *The Recruiter: Francesco Saverio Fontana*

As mentioned above, some of the far-right fighters in Ukraine know each other from networks they were involved in prior to travelling. From this, the questions of how they are connected, how they got to the conflict zone, and what links exist between far-right groups could be asked. We have seen already how far-right groups are better connected than they were in previous years. [Holman \(2016, p. 6\)](#) writes of the importance of a facilitator to connect the national and the transnational or the potential foreign fighter with the battlefield. Although his examples relate to jihadism, there are instances of both overt—that is, freely available information on social media online, which has been argued to be most important in attracting fighters ([Muraskaite 2020, p. 4](#))—and covert facilitation in the Ukraine conflict. It even seems to be the case that some foreign fighters have attempted to reach out to others on social media, noticeably Facebook ([Time Magazine 2021](#)). This section, however, focuses on covert facilitation, which consists of ‘family, friendship, prison, and activist networks’ ([Holman 2016, p. 7](#)). We draw attention here to one specific facilitator to show how far-right links surrounding this conflict have developed. There are others, but Francesco Saverio Fontana, an Italian far-right mercenary who has been involved with extremist groups in his native country since the 1970s and with links to Ukraine, is one person who has been known to be looking for recruits to send to Donbas. He appears to have had links to Right Sector and the Azov Regiment and the Misanthropic Division (MD), which is a new and small transnational group that has connected, for example, the Portuguese and Ukrainian far-rights ([FOIA Research 2020b](#); [Hope Not Hate 2017](#)). There is evidence of him showing up in several states, from the UK to Portugal and Brazil to recruit for the MD, and some of these have gone on to fight for Azov ([FOIA Research 2020a](#)). Furthermore, he is known to have met with other well-known individuals on the far-right while visiting Ukraine, such as Mikael Skilt, a notorious Swedish sniper with similar views ([BBC News 2014](#); [FOIA Research 2020a](#)). Fontana’s visits to the UK have included the creation and strengthening of bonds between far-right organisations, such as the MD, Combat 18, and National Action, and there are also links to citizens from the Republic of Ireland ([Hope Not Hate 2018](#)).

Clearly, this case demonstrates how the conflict in Ukraine attracted sympathetic individuals, as well as then creating recruitment networks that did not exist at the beginning. Even so, Fontana’s visits to other countries have been met with mixed success in terms of numbers and quality of those recruited. It is also yet to be seen for how long these ties will persist following the conflict.

4.5. *The Disruptor: Marc de Cacqueray-Valmenier/Marc ‘Hassin’*

Finally, we look at a different dimension of the occurrences in Ukraine that highlights more subtle but still problematic ties between European far-right groups. This demonstrates how at least one individual was involved in the ‘security detail’ in the French ‘yellow vest’ protests that occurred from 2018 ([Rekawek 2020, p. 17](#)). Engaging with the causes of the protests and their legitimacy is beyond the scope of this article, but there are at least problematic elements at work here in the sense of known far-right extremists being involved in such disruptive activities. As well as this, it indicates ties between far-right individuals and groups through music and mixed martial arts, including the Ukrainian Asgardsrei music festival, which has been running for five years and has links to the Azov Regiment ([Bellingcat 2020a](#)). Furthermore, Ukraine has specifically been viewed as a place where far-right extremists meet up and network in quite overt conditions given sympathetic views in parts of the country ([Bellingcat 2020b](#)).

One individual who has participated in such events is Marc de Cacqueray-Valmenier (also known as Marc 'Hassin'), as well as being a member of far-right groups in France, such as the Defence Group Union (GUD) and Zouaves Paris. During the yellow vest protests in France, there were ugly scenes of fighting between different protestors, noticeably fascist and anti-fascist contingents. This fighting included individuals such as Marc 'Hassin'. Since then, it is believed that Parisian extremists have regrouped in Lyon, which is believed to be their stronghold ([Popular Front 2020](#)).

Furthermore, to continue the issue of ties between far-right individuals, Hassin announced that he participated in the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh on the Armenian side, with his concern appearing to be that '[t]he future of our continent and our civilization is at stake in Nagorno-Karabakh' ([Web24 News 2020](#)). Evidently, there is an issue here with these conflicts on the perimeter of 'Europe' being seen as part of a larger battle between Western and Eastern civilisations, but especially with Muslims being an important issue for the far-right.

Here is an instance of more subtle links between Ukraine and the Western far-right. 'Hassin' was evidently in far-right networks and travelled to Ukraine as a centre for political activity, but he was only involved in protests on return. However, since then, he has travelled to fight in the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan, although it is not clear why he decided to do so. Given that there is a consistent history of far-right involvement in Hassin's case and that he may have learnt more skills when he became a foreign fighter, it will be worth keeping track of this individual.

5. Conclusions

Is Ukraine becoming a hub for the far-right? The answer is clearly more complicated than earlier reports seemed to suggest, which had essentially put forward that it could become an Afghanistan for the far-right.

On the one hand, there can be little doubt that there are some reasons to be concerned. The far-right is a problem for the country and may become one for others if left unchecked and connections are made, persist, and grow. The influence of the far-right, its popularity on the streets, the seemingly more permissive environment in Ukraine than elsewhere, and the possibility that some leading players might be idolised due to their role in fighting Russia are all to be concerned about. Developments such as the Azov movement and the connections it has made with far-right groups elsewhere should also be monitored closely. A further concern, which this article has touched on, is on possible terrorist attacks and destabilising activities, especially those linked to Russia, which tolerates far-right groups in its territory and has reached out to them in the West ([Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty 2020b](#)). With so many foreign fighters of different causes returning at the same time, we may see violence between them transported from their causes, although there is little evidence of this to date. Additionally, this article has uncovered far-right connections to state security apparatuses and globe-trotting mercenaries working for right-wing causes. What will these people do if the fighting stops and they return home? And how bad is the far-right infiltration of security services? It is possible that this has been going on longer and be worse than thought, as Germany recently found out with its disbanding and restructuring of some of its special forces units, specifically the Kommando Spezialkräfte (KSK), due to right-wing infiltration ([Deutsche Welle 2020a](#)).

Criminal challenges for states are less of a concern because they can be dealt with through more orthodox means, but they can nonetheless be a nuisance. However, this helps show how far extreme right sympathies have spread and how diverse their activities are, and that these may translate into foreign fighters, as has been the case with Marc 'Hassin'. It is also worth mentioning that these are not esoteric beliefs in a different language and emanating from a different culture in the way that jihadist beliefs were. Instead, intolerant attitudes are on the rise and have even been encouraged by far-right leaders, some of whom have managed to achieve a level of popularity. Thus, these ideas may have greater potential to gain traction than jihadism. The recent shock over how many Americans voted for Don-

ald Trump in the 2020 election should make it clear that far-right beliefs are quite popular in some circles, and it must be a worry that even mainstream politicians have helped pedal anti-Semitic conspiracy theories, such as ‘cultural Marxism’ ([The Guardian 2019d](#)). Popular populist politicians have helped do similarly, and the links between such rhetoric and violence have been recognised in academic literature ([Wahlström et al. 2020](#)). Examples of such ideas inciting violence are growing and include the October 2018 Tree of Life synagogue attack in the US and the radicalisation of Darren Osborne, who carried out a terror attack against Muslims in London in 2017 ([The Guardian 2019a](#)). In particular, it is worth considering the importance of social networks and how the far-right connects like-minded individuals and disseminates their material.

On the other hand, there are several reasons that would seem to suggest against Ukraine becoming a hub for the far-right. It is difficult to find significant evidence of white supremacism specifically as an overarching adhesive ideology that has connected many people and groups that were not so before, although we do not doubt that this has and is happening to a point. What we appear to have instead is a variety of far-rights that do not necessarily have a lot in common and may retain loose ties, but there is little chance of an imminent co-ordinated threat developing from events to date. Before anything else, there is yet to be serious evidence of terrorism or extensive political violence linked to the conflict. There is no clear leader or strategist who is plotting future moves for the far-right around the world. Indeed, many activities following from Ukraine appear to be more opportunistic and spontaneous. The area seems to have taken on a ‘dream’ status for the far-right, more of an idea than a reality and probably more from the bottom up rather than clear attempts to recruit from above. After all, training opportunities have dried up as it has become more difficult to join in with the fighting, and there has been little in the way of infantry combat in recent years. Not only this, but interviewees have expressed little interest in terrorism, if we are to take them at their word. Added to this is ([Byman 2015](#); [Hegghammer and Nesser 2015](#), p. 20) recognition that several factors may obstruct foreign fighters being problems before or on return: death or capture in the conflict zone, disillusionment, moving to another conflict, disinterest in attacking the West, lack of instructions, and incompetence.

Much further research could stem from this article. Firstly, we need to know more about the foreign fighters who participated in the conflict, including what attracted them, who they met up with, and what they did on return from the conflict. Although challenging, it is essential that primary research be undertaken on this issue. Secondly, what is Russia’s role in assisting the far-right in Europe, especially the groups that train European terrorists and are tolerated by the state? More generally, greater knowledge about its wider disruptive activities in the West seems urgent. Thirdly, more research needs to take place on militaries and security apparatuses given concern about infiltration by the far-right and a blind eye being turned to activities. This may be an especially significant issue if they assist others or leave to participate in conflicts abroad. Finally, how is the far-right appealing to people, and what have they learnt from the jihadist groups?

In the final analysis, it seems unlikely that this is the last that we will hear of Ukraine and its links with the far-right. It has been used and dreamt of by those with far-right beliefs to network, train, and as a source of weapons, but our assessment of some prominent alumni yield a belief that it has also probably been over-hyped.

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