

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Ukrainian Right-Wing Extremists: Exploring Their Involvement in the Ongoing War and Outlining Potential Threats for Post-War Ukraine

Martin Zilvar¹

Abstract

As the Russia-Ukraine war constitutes the most severe security challenge Europe has faced since the Cold War's end, many states have realized the fragility of statehood, which an aggressor can destroy overnight. Although this concern is valid, it should not overshadow other security threats. Unlike other authors addressing the phenomenon of foreign fighters in the war, the present article investigates the involvement of Ukrainian right-wing extremists regarding the pre-2022 development, during which the growing sociocultural nationalism, militarism, and tolerance of ultranationalist and ethnonational groups helped shrink their isolation. While they might have played an important role in Ukraine's territorial defence, heavily armed and combat-skilled right-wing extremists might pose a severe threat to Ukraine's post-war restoration. Initially, whereas a literature review indicates the hitherto research and positions the article's inquiry within it, existing theoretical approaches define the observed actors. Based on the open-source intelligence data collection from Telegram and content analysis, the article identified several Ukrainian and also foreign right-wing extremists involved in the war despite its focus on the former. It concludes that the predecessor authors' debated threats associated with the latter, i.e., physical threats, organizational challenges, and wider societal consequences, should be primarily applied to Ukraine.

Keywords

Russia-Ukraine War; Right-Wing Extremism; Ukraine; Foreign Fighters; Security Threats.

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¹ Department of Political Science, Faculty of Social Studies, Masaryk University Brno, Czech Republic
ORCID: [0009-0004-1679-3284](https://orcid.org/0009-0004-1679-3284), e-mail: martin.zilvar@mail.muni.cz

Introduction

While writing this article, Ukraine has relentlessly been defending its territory from Russia for almost two years in a war not seen in Europe since the horrors of World War II. Despite the latter's initial expectation to win in a few weeks (Sauer and Roth 2023), neither side seems to be able to strike a decisive attack. For this reason, many exclusively focus on the most significant topics resonating with such status quo, like maintaining the Western aid to much less resourceful Ukraine, without which the country could not compete in the attritional environment. Although those issues are the most viable nowadays, they should not disregard others potentially developing in the background.

Before discussing the article's research objective, it firmly dismisses the baseless Russian denazification narrative adopted as the invasion's justification. Not only did such actors hold no political power in Ukraine before 2022, but Russia itself has long had problems with them (Wallner 2022). Despite that, the security and academic community should not disregard the potential involvement of Ukrainian right-wing extremists in the war in fear of exploitation by Russian propaganda. As the Revolution of Dignity and the post-2014 events showed, not only did various such groups emerge during this time, but their stigmatized public view started shifting thanks to their important role in defending Eastern Ukraine against the Russian-backed separatists (Likhachev 2018; Cohen 2018; Umland 2019). There is another reason for studying their presence in the war. Although hardly foreseeable nowadays, the war will end one day like any other in the past. When this happens, war-torn Ukraine will unquestionably face several obstacles in its restoration. Considering the pre-2022 growing sociocultural nationalism and militarism, as well as rising social tolerance of ultranationalist and ethnonational groups (Umland 2020), the concern is whether an extremist challenge might be one of them, as crises have historically represented great opportunities for regime change. By analyzing social media content on Telegram, the article endeavours to answer the following research question: "What Ukrainian right-wing extremist groups are involved in the Russia-Ukraine war?"

To do so, it proceeds as follows. In the next section, a literature review outlines the hitherto research on Ukrainian right-wing extremism and positions the article's inquiry within it. Then, the article anchors the observed actors in existing theoretical approaches. Subsequently, the selected methodological choices are presented. The penultimate section presents the discovered findings, and a discussion of their implications concludes the article.

Literature Review

Reading through the existing literature on right-wing extremism in Ukraine indicates that the research has developed around two fundamental axes reflecting the country's political development, i.e., pre-Euromaidan Ukraine (Laryš 2008; Shekhovtsov 2011; Rudling 2012; Ghosh 2012; Likhachev 2013; Umland and Shekhovtsov 2013; Kersten and Hankel 2013; Bustikova 2015; Risch 2015; Hurska 2016) and post-Euromaidan Ukraine (Likhachev 2018; Umland 2019; Blazakis et al. 2019; Katchanovski 2020; Umland 2020; MacKenzie and Kaunert 2021; Wijenberg and Zuijdewijn 2021; Colborne 2022; Kaunert, MacKenzie and Léonard 2023; Gelashvili 2023; Rekawek 2023a; 2023b; Gelashvili 2024). Also, both further expanded into cornerstones reflecting important occurrences, influencing this political

spectrum. Centering on the former, most authors addressed the political development of Ukrainian right-wing extremists from the years of significant marginalization after 1991 to their resurrection triggered by the Svoboda party's electoral successes, which also attracted some scholars. For instance, Bustikova (2015) surveyed its voters to indicate their electoral attitudes explaining the party's rise. Aside from the research on the evolution of Ukrainian right-wing extremists, Rudling (2012) focused on the origins of organized antisemitism in Ukraine, emphasizing its two traditions. In addition, Kersten and Hankel (2013) compared antisemitic and xenophobic hate crimes in Poland, Ukraine, and Russia. Another potential angle was shown by Hurska (2016), analyzing the emergence of the widespread narrative of fascist Ukraine.

In contrast, the latter was influenced by the Revolution of Dignity and the post-Euromaidan events, providing authors with several research angles for their observation. For example, Katchanovski (2020) explored the far-right's role during the Maidan massacre and other violent occurrences, suggesting that while radical nationalists and neo-Nazi organizations had significant but minority representation among the Maidan leadership and protesters, they held a crucial role in political violence such as attempting to seize the presidential administration and the parliament. Umland (2020) compared the far-right in pre- and post-Euromaidan Ukraine, outlining the growing sociocultural militarization and tolerance of ultranationalist and ethnocentric groups. Similarly, Likhachev (2018) analyzed the threat posed to young Ukrainian democracy by the reinvigorated position of the radical right and extreme right groups after 2014. Besides, Kulyk (2014; 2016) explored the impact of the post-2014 events on Ukrainian nationalism. During this time, other scholars paid attention to the phenomenon of volunteer battalions, forming after the outbreak of the Donbas War, primarily the Azov Battalion, as well as the broader Azov movement (Puglisi 2015; Karagiannis 2016; Saressalo and Huhtinen 2018; Käihkö 2018; Umland 2019; Colborne 2022; Mutallimzada and Steiner 2023). Regarding this, some authors focused on foreign fighters in the war (Rekawek 2015; Mareš 2017; Beslin and Ignjatijevic 2017; Rewek 2020; Murauskaitė 2020; MacKenzie and Kaunert 2021; Wijenberg and Zuijdewijn 2021; Rewek 2023a). Such development compelled Blazakis et al. (2019) to consider Ukraine a battlefield laboratory of white supremacists and neo-Nazis. In addition, Gelashvili (2023) investigated the mobilization dynamics influencing the far-right from 2004 to 2020. Considering such extensive research, the article does not address the development of the Ukrainian right-wing extremist milieu and recommends Likhachev's (2013), Umland and Shekhovtsov's (2013), and Umland's (2020) publications, as well as Colborne's (2022) comprehensive analysis of the Azov movement, for understanding it.

Considering the Russia-Ukraine war, the hitherto research has paid attention to the presence of foreign fighters and the security threats emerging from such returnees to their home counties (Pugliese 2023; Ratelle 2023; Kaunert, MacKenzie and Léonard 2023). While Rewek (2023b) mainly focused on them as well, he also addressed some Ukrainian far-right groups that successfully recruited foreigners since the war's beginning. Having said that, the article endeavours to contribute to the existing literature by following those latest publications but turning its attention to the involvement of Ukrainian right-wing extremists in the war, deserving similar attention as incoming foreign fighters, especially regarding the post-war restoration of Ukraine. By doing so, to the author's best knowledge, the following paragraphs constitute the first such attempt.

Defining Right-Wing Extremism

Before exploring the empirical reality in Ukraine, it is vital to anchor the analyzed actors in the existing literature to outline their theoretical nature. Extremism represents religious, social, or political beliefs substantially distinct from those general society accepts (ADL 2017). What must be acknowledged and emphasized is that various political systems reflect the definition differently. For this reason, one must seek the liberal democratic perspective, reflecting the nature of Ukraine's political system. From this view, extremism represents hostile standpoints and activities targeted against the fundamental values, institutions, and frameworks protected by democratic constitutions, such as universal human rights, political pluralism, etc. (Mareš 2003, 21). Such tendencies are embedded in an ideological framework of defining and accompanying features, i.e., "*authoritarianism, anti-democracy and an exclusionary and/or a holistic kind of nationalism, and xenophobia, racism, and populism,*" respectively (Carter 2018, 174), shaping their manifestation and mobilization.

As much as those characteristics lay the principal groundwork for the matter, they are insufficient in distinguishing between two cornerstone actors comprising the far-right political spectrum, i.e., radicals and extremists, as the article focuses solely on the latter. Despite several shared similarities, the key difference lies in extremist's hostility toward democracy and acceptance of violence as a legitimate instrument for achieving political objectives, which may range from its incitement over hate crimes to terrorism (Mudde 2000, 12; Mareš 2003, 33; Bjørgo and Ravndal 2019, 3; Kaunert, MacKenzie and Léonard 2023, 252). Besides, right-wing extremists consider their ethnicity, race, or nation superior to other groups living in society. Such beliefs in social hierarchy, which are inherently contradictory to the democratic view of equality, emerge from the perceived biological exceptionality and superiority of the white race. Hence, they strive to establish a new political order that would favour and be dominated by it (Chmelík 2000, 7-8; Mareš 2003, 22)

Despite this rather monolithic theoretical framing, the right-wing extremist milieu must be perceived as a heterogeneous ecosystem comprising various coexisting currents. Centring on contemporary Europe, Pauwels (2021) outlined anti-Islam and anti-immigrant movements, identitarian movements, far-right sovereign citizen movements, and single-issue extremists as its most prominent current cornerstones, aside from the traditional ones, i.e., neo-Nazis and neo-fascists (ultranationalists) (Ibid. 4-5). Knowing this, one must also acknowledge the inside evolution of this political spectrum. While the latter two exist on its fringe and are often subjected to repression in European countries, the others have quite successfully consolidated their existence in a way that allows them to participate in the liberal democratic arena, as those actors intentionally mask anti-democratic beliefs by implementing pseudo-democratic views. Therefore, even many neo-Nazis and neo-fascists have started associating with the less stigmatized currents (Umland and Shekhovtsov 2013, 36-37).

To bridge the theoretical with the empirical, the following Ukrainian political parties and subcultural groupings—having from lower tenths to a few hundred activists—reflect the outlined definition of right-wing extremism. While the All-Ukrainian Union Party 'Svoboda,' National Corps, and Right Sector constitute the former, the Azov movement's affiliates, i.e., Centuria, Wotanjungend, NordStorm, Avangard, Alternativa, Solaris, Tradition and Order, Revanche, Freikorps, and Karpatska Sich, as well as

the Brotherhood, C14, the OUN Volunteer Movement, the UNA-UNSO, and the Revolutionary Right Forces represent the latter (Likhachev 2018, 2-3; Colborne 2022, 66-78.).

Methodology

Initially, the article faced a decision whether to proceed deductively or inductively. While the former motivates researchers to design studies according to existing theories, the latter emphasizes data collection and seeking converging patterns (DeCarlo 2018, 153-156). As the data-oriented approach prevailed, it advanced inductively. Centring on a particular research design, the article adopted the case study method, allowing scholars to gain *"an in-depth, multi-faceted understanding of a complex issue in its real-life context"* (Crowe et al. 2011, 1), embedded in the atheoretical form recommended for inquiries that are *"neither guided by established or hypothesized generalizations nor motivated by a desire to formulate general hypotheses"* (Lijphart 1971, 691), as it represented the most appropriate framework for answering the research question.

Considering data collection, it proceeded according to the open-source intelligence (OSINT) approach, allowing inquiries to *"gather and analyze data that are in principle accessible to any organization or individual"* (Trottier 2015, 530-531). Although OSINT has historically been associated mainly with law enforcement and intelligence agencies, digitalization has shifted its employment to journalists and academics (Westcott 2020, 390). That said, it was the most appropriate data collection method for the article because of its focus on Telegram and relevant secondary sources. Accordingly, it advanced in two subsequent stages. Firstly, the article collected data from the Ukraine Front⁴⁴ (@ukrainefront88) Telegram channel, having approximately 3,700 subscribers at the analysis' beginning, from January 20 to June 29, 2023, to identify initial evidence indicating the involvement of any Ukrainian right-wing extremist group in the war. Second, after locating each group, it explored its Telegram channel. By doing so, some even validated the evidence about the presence of another group as their content portrayed members of different groups, e.g., Centuria and NordStorm or Wotanjugend and the Russian Volunteer Corps. Also, the article used secondary sources to strengthen the discovered evidence and triangulate the collected data.

Regarding data analysis, the article scrutinized the collected data through content analysis, allowing researchers to investigate *"a wide variety of data sources, including textual data, visual stimuli, and audio data"* (Stemler 2015, 1), utilizing both available analytical approaches. Although it began with deductive codes resembling the research question, i.e., Ukrainian groups and extremist symbols, the article gradually moved to inductive coding due to the much more rigorous evidence in the collected data, overlapping other concerning areas of interest. Thus, various additional codes were included in the analysis, i.e., intergroup relations, organizational affiliation, openness to recruiting foreigners, non-military activities, foreign fighters, and foreign volunteer corps, allowing the article to describe the observed phenomenon more rigorously.

Before presenting the findings, it is noteworthy that two limiting factors were connected with the analysis. Despite the article's ability to explore and identify several Ukrainian right-wing extremists involved in the war, some groups might have remained undiscovered due to the missing evidence in the collected data. In other words, the analysis discovered only those directly portrayed or referred to

in the observed Telegram channels. Also, the article could not estimate each identified group's exact or approximate size.

Findings

Identified Ukrainian Right-Wing Extremist Groups in the Russia-Ukraine War

After scrutinizing the data, the article identified the following Ukrainian right-wing extremist groups: Blood & Honour Division Ukraine and Combat 18,² Wotanjugend, Misanthropic Division,³ Right Sector, Azov, Revanche Battalion, Karpatska Sich, NordStorm, and Centuria. Regarding the latter two, the data indicates that both are likely interconnected, as NordStorm's fighters often appear to be affiliated with Centuria. For instance, they wear patches or are portrayed with symbols of both groups.

From the collected data, it seems that members of the smaller one, e.g., Blood & Honour and Combat 18 or Misanthropic Division, are spread across different units of the Ukrainian army. Such reasoning is embedded in the evidence gathered from the former's Telegram channel, justifying the promotion of fundraising for various branches where its members serve, such as the 57th Motorized Brigade or an unspecified volunteer unit. Also, Wotanjugend supports it because, according to the data, its members fight within the Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK), debated below. In contrast, those with a much broader membership base seem to command independent operating units. Even though Karpatska Sich is subordinated to the Special Operations Forces of the Ukrainian Army, it has two special forces groups and one mortar battery unit, according to an interview with its leader, Taras Deiak (Petervari 2023). Also, the Revanche Battalion, a volunteer unit formed from the Tradition and Order, and the Right Sector's 67th Mechanized Brigade—created from the Ukrainian Volunteer Corps—likely operate autonomously. Despite the agreement with the Ukrainian Command about the latter's incorporation into the Special Operations Forces as the 7th Center of Volunteer Corps, some of its battalions formed the 67th Mechanized Brigade, subordinated to the Ground Forces of Ukraine (Militaryland 2022).

NordStorm and Centuria might also seem to operate independently; however, their fighters operate within the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade, subordinated to the Ground Forces of Ukraine. Although such a discovery would not be surprising under normal circumstances, this brigade conspicuously resembles the original Azov Battalion. That said, the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade is not the Azov Regiment, which exists within the National Guard. It was formed after the Russian invasion by the latter's veterans and Azov movement's representatives as a volunteer unit within the Territorial Defense in the Kyiv Oblast (AB3Army, n.d.a; Mazurenko 2023; Rekawek 2023b). However, not only did it adopt the Azov label, but Andriy Biletsky—the Azov Battalion's founder and the National Corps' leader—is its commander. Also, different Azov affiliates command its battalions. Whereas a fighter "Rollo," an Azov Regiment veteran and former leader of Centuria's Kyiv branch, commands its 1st Assault Battalion, other Azov Regiment veterans, nicknamed "Slip" and "Bison," lead the 2nd Assault Battalion and 2nd Mechanized

² While the former is a Ukrainian chapter of the transnational neo-Nazi group founded by Ian Stuart Donaldson, the latter represents its armed wing recognised as a terrorist group (ADL, n.d.; Counter Extremism Project, n.d.a)

³ A Ukrainian paramilitary branch of the international militant neo-Nazi movement, which is believed to have operated in Ukraine since the beginning of the Donbas War (Vaux et al. 2021; Harp 2022).

Battalion, respectively. Besides, an individual recognized as "BOT," a former Right Sector and Donbas Battalion⁴ combatant, leads its 1st Mechanized Battalion (AB3Army n.d.a).

Besides the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade's personnel ties with the Azov movement, its openness to recruiting foreigners also reminds the original Azov Battalion. While the analysis cannot approximate the exact number serving in its battalions, it is concerning how easily one can apply for a recruitment interview and, critically, potentially obtain the opportunity to undergo two-week military training at its training centre. Indeed, candidates must pass official eligibility tests to qualify for military service; however, applicants receive the training while awaiting the results. In other words, should candidates not comply with the predetermined requirements, they would obtain the training anyway (AB3Army, n.d.b).

Discovered Foreign Right-Wing Extremists in the Russia-Ukraine War

Aside from the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade's openness to recruiting foreigners, the analysis also found evidence indicating the presence of foreign right-wing extremists in the conflict. The Ukraine Front⁴⁴ channel portrayed several individuals associated with a concrete group or, at least, nationality. Before presenting them, it is noteworthy that the Russian, German, and Polish Volunteer Corps' fighters are excluded from this subsection, as the following one addresses them. Thus, they were: Estonians of the Active Club Estonia,⁵ French belonging to the Group Union Défense⁶ and KOB Jeunesse Boulogne,⁷ Poles of the National Radical Camp,⁸ Croatians linked to Bad Blue Boys,⁹ Russians of the Format 18,¹⁰ as well as unaffiliated Latvians, and one Spanish.

Another discovered evidence indicating the involvement of foreign right-wing extremists is associated with the Revanche Battalion. Not only did the Ukraine Front⁴⁴ channel show French volunteers inside its headquarters with explicit neo-Nazi tattoos, i.e., the Othala Rune, Kolovrat, Black Sun, and Celtic Cross, but a Facebook post of the Nationalist group¹¹ also acknowledged that its members with Poles of the National Radical Camp joined the Revanche Battalion (Nacionalisté 2022). Besides, its Telegram channel also supports such reasoning. While a published video from June 6, 2023, indicates that the battalion trains recruits in English, a shared post from July 15, 2023, explicitly presents its openness to register foreign volunteers. Besides, the Revanche Battalion maintained the pre-2022 ties with Russian

⁴ A volunteer unit formed in April 2014 by Semen Semechenko, later incorporated into the National Guard of Ukraine (Militaryland 2023a).

⁵ An Estonian branch of the neo-fascist and militant accelerationist Active Club movement (CTEC 2023).

⁶ A French right-wing extremist group founded in 1968 at the University of Paris-II Panthéon-Assas that reemerged around 2022 (Deschamps 2022).

⁷ A youth hooligan movement associated with the French football club Paris St-Germain, whose currents lean towards right-wing extremism (Luck 2021).

⁸ The most active neo-fascist group in contemporary Poland, which follows its antisemitic predecessor from the 1930s (Pankowski 2012, 3).

⁹ Croatian hooligans of the football club GNK Dinamo Zagreb, whose members are associated with neo-Nazism and neo-fascism (Pravda 2023).

¹⁰ A Russian neo-Nazi skinhead group, founded by Maksim Martsinkevich, banned in December 2010 (Holzer, Laryš, and Mareš 2019, 69).

¹¹ Translated from the Czech original Nacionalisté, a neo-Nazi group earlier known as the National and Social Front (MVČR 2020).

neo-Nazi Denis Kapustin (Colborne 2022, 78), according to a post suggesting that a group of Russian volunteers and he served in its units earlier. That said, it seems reasonable to assume that the Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK), commanded by Kapustin himself, emerged from the Revanche Battalion. This assumption is supported by the RDK's Telegram post from August 27, 2023, suggesting that its initial operations had been mutually conducted.

The Phenomenon of Foreign Volunteer Corps

As already noted, the RDK is an independent unit operating under Denis Kapustin's command, in which Wotanjugend activists serve. Also, the article identified two other such volunteer corps, i.e., German (NDK) and Polish (PDK), centred around the RDK.

Indeed, the RDK cannot be automatically considered right-wing extremist as some of its members were recruited from Russian emigres living abroad (Pikulicka-Wilczewska 2023) or Russian prisoners of war held by Ukraine; however, one must not ignore the extremist leaning associated with the group. Not only is Denis Kapustin a prominent figure in this milieu, but several RDK fighters have also been linked to this spectrum (Gault 2023). Also, the analyzed evidence supports such assumptions, as the collected data contained posts and videos portraying its members with explicit neo-Nazi symbols. For example, not only did the group's vehicle and pick-up truck have the number 1488 depicted on their license plates, but its armoured personnel carrier had a swastika sprayed on its bodywork. Besides, while one RDK fighter performed the Nazi salute in a group photo, another combatant likely had a Black Sun tattoo—the analysis cannot persuasively say so as it was only partially visible. Other RDK affiliates wore the Russian Liberation Army (POA) insignia on their uniforms. Also, one recruit had a Nordic Resistance Movement logo on his T-shirt,¹² and two RDK fighters carried a Völkischer Beobachter flag.¹³

Moreover, it is also noteworthy that the RDK is likely aware of the burden linked to displaying explicit right-wing extremist symbols, as it seems to intentionally hide them. For instance, such an effort is evident in two shared videos on Telegram from June 22, 2023, and December 15, 2023. While the former captures newly arriving recruits and blurs not only their faces but also pictures on their T-shirts and tattoos, the latter portrays the RDK's fighters during a ceremonial event where one very likely had a Black Sun patch on his shoulder—it was not fully captured. However, the patch was blurred when the same individual appeared again in the next scene. Also, it is concerning that, like the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade and the Revanche Battalion, the RDK is transparent about its openness to recruiting foreigners, offering them general military, firearm, tactical, medical, and physical training if successful at recruiting interviews. Unlike the former, which also has an application form for foreigners on its website, the RDK explicitly asks applicants about their political views (RDK, n.d.).

In contrast, the NDK and PDK are much smaller than their Russian counterpart, which logically explains their likely incorporation within the latter's units and more passive online activities. Unlike the RDK, whose Telegram posts seem almost professional, the former two share many fewer posts. Centering on the PDK, it does not offer much analyzable evidence indicating its ideological leaning. Therefore, it

¹² A transnational neo-Nazi movement with official chapters in Sweden, Finland, and Norway (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.b).

¹³ Völkischer Beobachter was a newspaper published by the Nazi Party from the 1920s to 1945 (Britannica 2016).

is listed only due to its affiliation with the RDK. On the contrary, the NDK provides much different evidence. Although it shares less content than the RDK, the group is much more open about its right-wing extremist leaning. Not only did its Telegram channel portray NDK's fighters with the Nazi Eagle, the number 14, and its full wording as well, but the published content also commemorated notorious Nazi Germany figures, i.e., Rudolf Hess, Joachim Peiper,¹⁴ Sepp Dietrich, Léon Degrelle,¹⁵ and Herbert Schweiger,¹⁶ as well as the victims of the 1923 Munich Putsch. Also, another post portrayed the NDK's combatants with the Misanthropic Division's flag, the Black Sun pictured on a car's rear windshield, and the Blood and Honour symbol. The comparison between the current events and the Ukrainian-German collaboration during World War II is also apparent from the channel, referring to the 14th Waffen Grenadier Division of the SS—also known as the Galicia Division. Besides, it also seems probable that the NDK might maintain some links with the German neo-Nazi political party Der Dritte Weg (the Third Way), whose representative was pictured with its fighter and Denis Kapustin while delivering supplies.

Exploiting the Heroism for Self-Promotion Among Ukrainian Youth

While the previous subsections mainly addressed the frontlines, the analysis also indicated concerning evidence that goes beyond the trenches. Ukrainian right-wing extremists are not only involved in the war, but some also seem to exploit their participation for legitimization and self-promotional activities at educational institutions and free time activities of Ukrainian youth. Although the analysis associated such efforts only with Karpatska Sich and Centuria, NordStorm and the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade, thanks to their collaboration, other groups might have also engaged in similar activities. Analyzing their Telegram channels indicates that although they primarily concentrate on the war efforts, their actions also concern organizing workshops for students and schoolchildren, during which their fighters lecture them about military skills, combat experience, first aid, and other topics. For instance, the latest such activities were held at Lyceum No.20 in Ivano-Frankivsk, Uzhhorod Lyceum IMAGE, and the Lyceum of Vasyl Stepanovych Grenji-Donsky in Uzhhorod in the case of Karpatska Sich, and Ternivka Lyceum No.7 and Glevakhove Academic Lyceum regarding Centuria. Indeed, they would not surprise anyone during wartime under normal circumstances; however, the obvious problem is that both are openly adherent to right-wing extremist ideologies. It is striking to see Taras Deiak lecturing and taking photos with schoolchildren wearing his military gear with the group's insignia, partially depicting the Black Sun, or teenagers training with a fighter with Centuria and NordStorm patches on his jacket.

Discussion

Initially, despite the article's inability to estimate each identified group's approximate or exact size, their fighters very likely represent only a small share of the 500,000 Ukrainian active military personnel (Statista 2023). Such reasoning particularly applies to Blood & Honour Division Ukraine and Combat 18, Wotanjugend, Misanthropic Division, NordStorm, Centuria, Karpatska Sich, the RDK, the NDK, and

¹⁴ An Obersturmbannführer of the 1st SS Panzer Division, Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler (Reynolds 2009).

¹⁵ A founder and leader of the Belgian collaborationist Rexist Party, who later commanded the Walloon Legion fighting within the Waffen SS (Britannica 2023).

¹⁶ An Austrian Untersturmführer of the 1st SS Panzer Division Leibstandarte SS Adolf Hitler, considered the grey eminence of the German-Austrian neo-Nazi scene (Die Presse 2011).

the PDK. On the other hand, should the article follow the general understanding of troop proportion, when according to the U.S. Department of Defense (n.d.), a battalion consists of 1,000 soldiers, and a brigade constitutes 5,000 combatants? While future research is needed, such approximations might indicate the manpower of the Revanche Battalion, 3rd Separate Assault Brigade, and 67th Mechanized Brigade, as the latter two are officially incorporated into the Ground Forces of Ukraine and, crucially, control a wide range of military equipment, including tanks, armoured personnel carriers, or artillery systems (Militaryland 2023b, 2023c).

Having identified them, one must acknowledge that such reality is not surprising. Not only had some already participated in the Donbas War, but Ukraine's general mobilization did not differentiate between ordinary citizens and extremists. Besides, knowing the latter's ideological standpoints, it is reasonable to anticipate that they might have been among the first conscribed volunteers. Also, the disparity in human resources between both foes and the war's attritional nature requires Ukraine to continuously reinforce an enormous number of troops. Therefore, any combat-ready individual, even adhering to right-wing extremist beliefs, is tremendously helpful. Although Ukraine cannot be blamed for this, such development is quite concerning from a long-term perspective. The reason lies in their incongruent ideological beliefs with the democratic character of the Ukrainian political system. Indeed, the discovered right-wing extremist groups have likely played an important role in Ukraine's tenacious territorial defence; however, their intentions might have differed from those of ordinary citizens. While the latter risks their lives to protect Ukrainian independence and democracy, the former's causes might be rather opportunistic than compassionate. Although the article does not undermine their willingness to preserve their motherland's sovereignty, its reasoning is embedded in their violence-advocating and inequality-promoting worldviews, inherently incompatible with the liberal democratic framework they have been defending.

To fully understand such a threat, it is vital to synthesize and extrapolate the pre-2022 sociocultural situation in Ukraine with the identified participation of right-wing extremists in the conflict to a point in the future when the war ends, and Ukraine will have to start operating like a normal country again. Although hardly foreseeable nowadays, like other conflicts in the past, the peace treaty will be signed one day. After that, aside from various apparent obstacles, combat-experienced and heavily armed right-wing extremists, who had scorned the democratic values even before the Russian invasion, might feel encouraged to employ more militant means to exploit the opportunity and transform the state according to their ultranationalist and ethnocentric beliefs, as the reconstruction period represents an appealing opportunity to do so. Should the war end today, Ukraine would suddenly find on its territory the smaller groups like Blood & Honours Division Ukraine or Misanthropic Division, whose members were likely spread across different branches of the Ukrainian army, and those controlling some units like Karpatska Sich and the RDK, including the NDK and PDK, but, crucially, the Revanche Battalion, Right Sector's 67th Mechanized Brigade, and Biletsky's 3rd Separate Assault Brigade.

Indeed, nobody can predict their actions after the war's end. Would they lay down weapons and give up equipment, even should the Ukrainian government accept a peace treaty incongruent with their demands? Or would this political spectrum strive to gain more influence? Although only the future will provide the answers, considering Likhachev's (2018) report, it seems reasonable to anticipate that their members might very likely continue, at least, in pre-war activities rooted in imposing their beliefs on

Ukrainian society in a non-violent and violent manner. That particularly applies to those whom they perceive as political and ideological opponents, such as feminists, liberals, human rights advocates, as well as sexual, ethnic, and religious minorities (Ibid.).

What might also concur with this threat lies in widening the pre-2022 sociocultural nationalism and militarism, contributing to the growing tolerance of ultranationalist and ethnonational groups (Umland 2020, 260-265). Should the Ukrainian public become increasingly sympathetic toward their ideological standpoints, the respective actors might feel encouraged to accumulate political power after the war's end. Of course, such reasoning remains speculative. Despite that, as much as the Revolution of Dignity and Donbas War initiated this process, it seems reasonable that the Russian aggression might have only exacerbated it. That said, the findings regarding Karpatska Sich and Centuria's organization of workshops and lectures for schoolchildren and students about military skills, combat experience, first aid, etc., indicate that their involvement in the war likely grants such groups striven legitimacy in the view of the wider society, as schools, for example, are willing to allow their representatives to interact with their students.

Finally, yet importantly, despite its sole focus on the involvement of Ukrainian right-wing extremists in the war, it could not ignore the evidence present in the collected dataset indicating the willingness of some groups to recruit foreigners, i.e., the Revanche Battalion, the RDK, and the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade, and the presence of foreign right-wing extremists on the frontlines. Indeed, future research must elaborate on those findings to strengthen the empirical evidence; however, the article aligns with Katz's (2022) argument reflecting her interpretation of communication on white supremacists and neo-Nazi platforms. According to her, although the Russian invasion initiated a mobilization wave inside this ideological milieu, such individuals do not travel to Ukraine to defend and preserve its democratic political system. They approach the war as a nonrecurring opportunity for militarizing and accelerating their ultimate ideological objective, leading to the formation of a fascist ethnostate, resembling the Taliban's prolonged fight against the Soviets and NATO (Ibid.). Knowing this, the article concurs with Kaunert, MacKenzie and Léonard (2023), emphasizing three principal threats associated with returning foreign right-wing fighters. In their perception, such individuals may become involved in traditional physical threats ranging from various kinds of criminality and firearm smuggling over political violence against ideological opponents and enemies to full-blown terrorism. Also, they might engage in long-term organizational challenges as acquired military skills and combat experience often allow them to gain a leadership position inside domestic extremist scenes, influencing their everyday operations and ideologies, potentially leading to increased violence. Besides, returning right-wing foreign fighters have the power to cause wider societal consequences rooted in legitimizing their inflammatory beliefs by aligning with the non-extremist society, especially under the concurrent presence of polarizing political dynamics like migration or economic crises (Ibid. 260-265).

Considering this and the discovered findings, while the article agrees with this very recent publication, it argues that those threats must be primarily applied to Ukraine rather than other countries. Indeed, foreign right-wing extremists present in the war unquestionably constitute a significant threat to their countries of origin; however, Ukraine is much more endangered by them as its right-wing extremists are not only involved in the war but also control heavily armed and equipped, independently operating

units. Furthermore, the country will also be confronted with the presence of foreign groups, such as the RDK, whose members could not return to their home countries after the war's end.

Conclusion

The article followed the recent publications on the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, addressing the foreign fighter phenomenon. Although such research is vitally important, it constitutes only one side of the coin. Thus, it explored the involvement of Ukrainian right-wing extremists to get the whole picture. By collecting data from Telegram in an open-source intelligence manner and scrutinizing them through content analysis, the article identified the following Ukrainian groups: Blood & Honour Division Ukraine and Combat 18, Wotanjugend, Misanthropic Division, Right Sector, Revanche Battalion, Karpatska Sich, Azov, NordStorm, and Centuria, as well as three foreign volunteer corps, centred around the RDK together with individuals of the Active Club Estonia, the Group Union Défense, KOB Jeunesse Boulogne, National Radical Camp, Bad Blue Boys, and Format 18 despite its sole focus on the former. Besides, the analysis indicated a conspicuous similarity between the original Azov Battalion and the 3rd Separate Assault Brigade, which is not only led by the same commander, Andriy Biletsky, but veterans of the Azov Regiment also lead its battalions. Also, the article outlined concerning evidence about Karpatska Sich and Centuria's non-military activities for Ukrainian schoolchildren and students. And it connected Ukraine with the identical security threats linked to returning foreign right-wing fighters to their home countries by the preceding authors.

Hence, future research should concentrate on the following areas. First, it should continuously monitor the discovered actors, particularly those controlling independently operating units, i.e., Karpatska Sich, the RDK, Revanche Battalion, 67th Mechanized Brigade, and 3rd Separate Assault Brigade, to estimate their manpower and keep a check on their potentially developing political ambitions, including non-military activities for the general public, reflecting those of the groups from which they emerged. Also, it is vital to investigate other groups that might not have been mentioned in the data. Second, it should continue monitoring the presence of foreign fighters in the war and the openness of the Ukrainian groups to recruiting them, with the emphasis given on their potential transnational links, reflecting the NDK's possible ties with the German neo-Nazi political party Der Dritte Weg. Third, it should map the development of sociocultural attitudes toward ultranationalist and ethnocentric groups in Ukrainian society vis-à-vis the ongoing Russian aggression.

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