

THE **SOUFAN** CENTER

## SPECIAL REPORT

# FOREIGN FIGHTERS, VOLUNTEERS, AND MERCENARIES: *Non-State Actors and Narratives in Ukraine*

April 2022



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AND MERCENARIES:**  
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Cover photo: *Man carrying combat gear leaving Poland to fight in Ukraine, March 2, 2022 (AP Photo/Markus Schreiber)*



# CONTENTS

<b>List of Abbreviations</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>List of Figures</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Key Findings</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Introduction</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Non-State Actors Fighting for Ukraine</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>Non-State Actors Fighting for Russia</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Transnational Far-Right Violent Extremists</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>How is the Far-Right Talking About the Conflict Online?</b>	<b>23</b>
<b>What Role Does Disinformation Play in the Conflict?</b>	<b>26</b>
<b>Conclusion: Implications and Policy Recommendations</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Contributors</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>About The Soufan Center</b>	<b>38</b>

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>AWD</b>	Atomwaffen Division
<b>CAR</b>	Central African Republic
<b>CTED</b>	United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate
<b>ECOWAS</b>	Economic Community of West Africa
<b>FI</b>	Foreign Influence
<b>GIFCT</b>	Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism
<b>MDM</b>	Mis-, Dis-, and Mal-information
<b>PFI</b>	Potential for Impact
<b>PMC</b>	Private Military Contractors
<b>SALW</b>	Small Arms and Light Weapons
<b>SDGT</b>	Specially Designated Global Terrorist
<b>SST</b>	State Sponsors of Terrorism

## LIST OF FIGURES

<b>Figure 1: Map of Ukraine</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>Figure 2: Comparing Foreign Influence between Narratives</b>	<b>29</b>
<b>Figure 3: Comparing Potential for Impact between Narratives</b>	<b>30</b>

## KEY FINDINGS

- The introduction of non-state actors to a battlefield invariably adds complexity to a conflict—Ukraine is no exception. It will be important for states to consider the myriad of implications should their citizens travel to the conflict zone, and upon their return.
- While Russian President Vladimir Putin claims the “de-Nazification” of Ukraine was the pretext behind his invasion, Russia is the aggressor and the party to the conflict deploying mercenaries, terrorists, and extremists, while Ukraine is relying primarily on foreign volunteers motivated by Ukrainian independence and sovereignty.
- Russia has relied heavily upon disinformation while continuing to leverage relationships with far-right extremists. These impacts will extend beyond the war itself, perhaps serving as a galvanizing force in transnational far-right extremist networks.
- **Recommendations include:**
  - Clarify the legal framework governing foreign fighters and prepare for potential needs and challenges upon their return;
  - Consider designating Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism;
  - Strengthen international cooperation to counter disinformation, hate speech, and incitement online;
  - Strengthen inter-agency cooperation to counter disinformation from foreign adversaries, both within states and through international partnerships;
  - Ensure effective implementation of existing international instruments to inhibit transnational organized crime networks and others from exploiting the illicit movement of small arms and light weapons, and strengthen upstream measures aimed at preventing illicit acquisition of small arms and light weapons (SALW); and
  - Provide vetted or screened channels for communities to give direct support to Ukraine and ensure that funds and material goods are not misdirected or exploited by criminals and other illicit actors.



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## INTRODUCTION

When Russian President Vladimir Putin claimed that Russia’s unprovoked military invasion of Ukraine was launched to pursue the “de-Nazification” of Ukraine, it evoked a level of “gaslighting”—attempting to make others question their own reality—that has come to define the Kremlin’s approach to geopolitics. Just as Russia bombed hospitals in Aleppo and casually blamed the atrocities on “terrorists,” Moscow now seeks to stoke the flames of transnational far-right extremism and violence in support of the atrocities it is committing in Mariupol and elsewhere throughout Ukraine. Rather than fighting against neo-Nazis, Putin has been supporting far-right extremists, including white supremacists, for years. Russia has nurtured neo-Nazis and used mercenaries and other extremists to wage a separatist war in Ukraine, while also seeking to execute Russian foreign policy abroad, and has deployed disinformation and misinformation tools to manipulate the narratives.

Insurgencies, civil wars, and conflagrations between states have long served as magnets for foreign fighters, mercenaries, and volunteers seeking to support a range of different ideologies and causes.<sup>1</sup> After Russia initially invaded Ukraine in 2014, the next five years would see a mobilization of approximately 17,000 foreign fighters from over 50 countries to the battlefield, nearly 90% of whom came from Russia to fight with the pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas, attracting foreigners supporting violent far-right ideologies.<sup>2</sup>

Russia’s first invasion of Ukraine ended in a stalemate by 2019; by early 2022, Russia mounted a force of 150,000 soldiers on Ukraine’s borders before invading the country for a second time on February 24, 2022. The response from the international community has been overwhelming, with NATO countries sending unprecedented amounts of sophisticated weaponry to Ukraine.<sup>3</sup> So far, NATO countries have also set relatively clear limitations on the type of support, given Ukraine’s status as a non-NATO country, in an attempt to avoid escalation with Russia. In addition, because of the crush of sanctions, multinational corporations have withdrawn from

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<sup>1</sup> Cora Engelbrecht, “Far-Right Militias in Europe Plan to Confront Russian Forces, a Research Group Says,” *New York Times*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/25/world/europe/militias-russia-ukraine.html>.

<sup>2</sup> The Soufan Center, “White Supremacy Extremism: The Transnational Rise of the Violent White Supremacist Movement,” September 2019, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Report-by-The-Soufan-Center-White-Supremacy-Extremism-The-Transnational-Rise-of-The-Violent-White-Supremacist-Movement.pdf>, p.30.

<sup>3</sup> David E. Sanger et al., “Arming Ukraine: 17,000 Anti-Tank Weapons in 6 Days and a Clandestine Cybercorps,” *New York Times*, March 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/06/us/politics/us-ukraine-weapons.html#:~:text=In%20less%20than%20a%20week,capital%2C%20and%20other%20major%20cities>.

Russia, decimating the value of the ruble. Ordinary Russians have been forced to suffer while Putin and Russian oligarchs scramble to protect their own fortunes and futures.

**Figure 1: Map of Ukraine**



This report will consider three important and interrelated dynamics in Ukraine. First, the report will address the phenomenon of non-state actors traveling to the battlefield, including foreign fighters, foreign volunteers, and mercenaries deployed as part of private military contractors (PMCs), like the notorious Wagner Group. These foreigners have flowed into Ukraine in what are believed to be record numbers, encouraged in some cases by their own government officials. Second, the report will examine the narratives about the conflict and their strategic implications, particularly in terms of how far-right extremists promote their views and talk about the conflict, the role of Russia, and other ideological aspects. Third, the report will examine the evolution of the information environment, including the role of disinformation in the conflict and how the Kremlin is relying on propaganda to further its objectives, such as stoking transnational far-right extremism. The report will conclude with recommendations and observations for policymakers, government officials, and others attempting to discern fact from fiction in Ukraine, as well as those tasked with handling the challenges associated with returnees heading home from the conflict.

Some scholars have made the point that those individuals traveling to fight for Ukraine, and enlisting in the Ukrainian armed forces, should be labeled as “foreign volunteers.” Individuals who travel to fight alongside militias, separatists, or terrorist groups are more aptly categorized as “foreign fighters”—or, following the adoption of the universally binding Security Council

resolution 2178 in 2014, foreign *terrorist* fighters when there is a designated group involved.<sup>4</sup> As legal scholar Ben Saul has noted, under international law, foreign fighting is only prohibited where it is for the purpose of taking part in terrorist acts.<sup>5</sup> Those deployed as “soldiers of fortune,” as part of a private military contractor, are considered mercenaries.<sup>6</sup> Nonetheless, Russia has said it would consider all foreigners joining the conflict as “mercenaries,” and the general lack of agreement on which type of fighter constitutes which class has dangerous implications regarding whether an individual qualifies for protection under the Geneva Conventions, as well as how they are perceived and treated accordingly by belligerents to the conflict.

The estimated numbers of foreign fighters mobilized to Ukraine have been wide-ranging. For example, Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy referenced 16,000 foreign volunteers who traveled to Ukraine over the first two weeks of the conflict. Later, Ukraine’s Foreign Ministry shared an updated figure of 20,000 individuals who had applied to join the International Legion of Defense of Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> However, questions remain regarding whether these numbers included members of the Ukrainian diaspora or only foreign nationals, and whether all of the individuals who registered at Ukrainian embassies in their respective countries of origin actually followed through and made the trip. Some have already started returning home, jarred by the horrors and brutalities of war. Over the course of several years during the apex of fighting in Syria, 40,000 foreigners traveled to fight with groups like ISIS.<sup>8</sup> In just one month in Ukraine, if the true scale of foreign volunteers has reached even half of the reported estimates of 20,000 people (to account for a difference between the number of those who expressed interest and those who actually went), the scale is significant, considering how early on it is in this conflict.

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 (2014), accessed via <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2178>. While the resolution offers a broad outline of what the term foreign *terrorist* fighter encompasses, it does not specify any groups that may trigger the label; in the absence of a universally accepted definition of terrorism this term has elicited debate and criticism about the risks of instrumentalization and/or misapplication.

<sup>5</sup> Ben Saul, “Foreign fighters in Ukraine may get caught in legal crossfires,” *The Australian*, March 4, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> David Malet, “The Risky Status of Ukraine’s Foreign Fighters,” *Foreign Policy*, March 15, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/03/15/ukraine-war-foreign-fighters-legion-volunteers-legal-status/>; for the purposes of this paper, TSC will use the term “foreign fighters” to describe those traveling to Ukraine with the aim of engaging in combat, irrespective of group they join.

<sup>7</sup> Michael Lipin, “Foreigners Fighting for Ukraine Elicit Scorn, Ambivalence, Support from Governments,” *VOA*, March 22, 2022, <https://www.voanews.com/a/foreigners-fighting-for-ukraine-elicite-scorn-ambivalence-support-from-governments-/6496319.html>.

<sup>8</sup> The Soufan Center, “Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign Fighters and the Threat of Returnees,” October 2017, <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/beyond-caliphate/>.



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## NON-STATE ACTORS FIGHTING FOR UKRAINE

Thousands of foreigners have flocked to Ukraine with the intention to fight for the Ukrainian people and a democratically elected government, embodied by President Zelenskyy. However, it is also likely that some of these individuals will be motivated by nefarious intentions and shaped by far-right ideologies. As extremism scholar Cynthia Miller-Idriss has written, “among foreign fighters traveling to Ukraine, the vast majority have no ties to white supremacist extremism.”<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, there is a risk that some far-right violent extremists, including white supremacists and neo-Nazis, will attempt to fight with Ukraine against the Russians.

As the outflow of foreign support to Ukraine comes into sharper focus, much attention and interest has centered on the Azov movement. The battalion of the same name has earned a reputation for its fighting acumen and effectiveness on the battlefield, repelling Russia during its 2014 invasion of Ukraine; it has since been absorbed into the national armed forces and become more distanced from right-wing narratives.<sup>10</sup> Concerted efforts on the part of the Ukrainian government and military over the past eight years have marginalized the role of extremists, and “the bulk of the population continues to reject [the] exclusionary radical right-wing extremism.”<sup>11</sup> While previously associated with the far-right movement, in recent years, Azov has been largely regularized under the command and control of the Ukrainian armed forces, which has worked to winnow extremists from its midst, though undoubtedly some remain.

There have been reports that some Azov fighters have been dipping bullets in pig fat, designed to be used against Muslim Chechen fighters sent to Ukraine under the command of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov as part of Russia’s military offensive.<sup>12</sup> But for the most part, these anecdotes serve as just that—interesting stories, but little more. According to experts on the

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<sup>9</sup> Cynthia Miller-Idriss, “Fighting Russia in Ukraine Sadly Appeals to Racist, Far-Right Extremists,” *MSNBC*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.msnbc.com/opinion/msnbc-opinion/fighting-russia-ukraine-sadly-appeals-far-right-extremists-n1290901>.

<sup>10</sup> Kacper Rekawak, “Ukraine’s Foreign Legion: 12 Important Points,” C-REX Center for Research on Extremism, March 18, 2022, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/news-and-events/right-now/2022/ukraine%E2%80%99s-foreign-legion-.html>; see also, Medea Benjamin and Nicolas J.S. Davies, “Are There Really Neo-Nazis Fighting for Ukraine? Well, Yes—But It’s a Long Story,” *Salon*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.salon.com/2022/03/10/are-there-really-neo-nazis-fighting-for-ukraine-well-yes—but-its-a-long-story/>.

<sup>11</sup> Jason Blazakis and Colin Clarke, “From Paramilitaries to Parliamentarians: Disaggregating Radical Right Wing Extremist Movements,” *Resolve Network*, December 2021, [https://resolvenet.org/system/files/2021-12/RSVE\\_REMVE\\_BlazakisClarke\\_December%202021.pdf](https://resolvenet.org/system/files/2021-12/RSVE_REMVE_BlazakisClarke_December%202021.pdf).

<sup>12</sup> Rimal Farrukh, “Ukraine’s ‘Neo-Nazi Battalion Is Greasing Bullets in Pig Fat for Russia’s Muslim Soldiers,” *Vice News*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/xgd73j/ukraine-neo-nazi-battalion-azov-bullets-pig-fat-chechen-russia>.

European far-right like Anton Shekhovtsov, the Azov of 2022 is nothing like the group from eight years ago, since those seeking to fight with Azov today are motivated, for the most part, by Ukrainian nationalism and not far-right extremism.<sup>13</sup> Despite the evolution of the movement since 2014, its brand still remains popular with far-right extremists, and its future trajectory will bear watching.<sup>14</sup>

It is important to maintain some perspective and note the very small proportion of foreign volunteers in Ukraine espousing far-right views to date, while still remaining watchful of how such dynamics could evolve. Accordingly, it behooves analysts to assess dispassionately the potential security risks associated with large outflows of volunteers, and for states to consider the full range of implications. As terrorism scholar Daniel Byman has noted, “the presence of right-wing extremists should give governments pause when they consider whether to encourage their nationals to go and fight.”<sup>15</sup> In a webinar hosted by The Soufan Center (TSC) focused on foreign fighters in Ukraine on March 29, Byman observed that “these sorts of conflicts, involving lots of foreigners, can end up becoming petri dishes for lots of very dangerous behavior and often dangerous things that we don’t anticipate at the time.”<sup>16</sup>

Some of the foreigners traveling to join the Ukrainian side have had particularly short stints, leaving after just a few days or weeks, in some cases lacking the training and preparation to handle the hardships that come with fighting in a war. For some, it remains an adventure, an opportunity to snap some “selfies” from a war zone and promote it on social media. A number of foreigners have chafed at the idea of having to sign a contract.<sup>17</sup> Still others, including members of the so-called Boogaloo movement in the United States, reportedly left after having a bad experience with the Georgian Legion, a foreign fighter volunteer unit in Ukraine actively receiving Westerners.<sup>18</sup> There are reports of foreign volunteers growing frustrated with a lack of weapons, ammunition, and equipment.<sup>19</sup> The mix of civilians and those with some law

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<sup>13</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, “Don’t Confuse Patriotism and Nazism: Ukraine’s Azov Forces Face Scrutiny,” *Financial Times*, March 29, 2022, <https://www.ft.com/content/7191ec30-9677-423d-873c-e72b64725c2d>.

<sup>14</sup> Rita Katz, “Neo-Nazis are Exploiting Russia’s War in Ukraine For Their Own Purposes,” *Washington Post*, March 14, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/14/neo-nazi-ukraine-war/>.

<sup>15</sup> Daniel Byman, “Foreign Fighters in Ukraine? Evaluating the Benefits and Risks,” *Lawfare*, March 2, 2022, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/foreign-fighters-ukraine-evaluating-benefits-and-risks>.

<sup>16</sup> Daniel Byman, TSC Foreign Fighter Webinar, March 29, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuAYrJ59MIE>.

<sup>17</sup> Alexander Clapp, “Fighters with Ukraine’s Foreign Legion are Being Asked to Sign Indefinite Contracts. Some Have Refused,” *The Economist*, March 11, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/1843/2022/03/11/fighters-with-ukraines-foreign-legion-are-being-asked-to-sign-indefinite-contracts-some-have-refused>.

<sup>18</sup> Matt Stieb, “The Beefing Boogaloo Boys of Ukraine,” *New York Magazine*, March 17, 2022, [https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/american-military-volunteers-ukraine.html?utm\\_source=tw](https://nymag.com/intelligencer/article/american-military-volunteers-ukraine.html?utm_source=tw).

<sup>19</sup> Sudarsan Raghavan, “No Gun. No Helmet. No Action: The Frustrations of Some Novice Americans Who Signed Up to Fight in Ukraine,” *Washington Post*, March 20, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/03/20/ukraine-foreign-fighters-americans/>.

enforcement or military training raises concerns and questions about the wider awareness of the laws of armed conflict, and whether this will in the long term further increase the risks to both foreigners and Ukrainian combatants should the adversary fail to acknowledge their status under international law.<sup>20</sup>

As terrorism scholar Vera Mironova pointed out in our recent webinar, many of the Western foreign fighters who have arrived in Ukraine have been kept in the western part of the country, primarily in Lviv. The biggest differentiating factor, according to Mironova, is combat experience. Some of these individuals, including many Americans, have grown frustrated, because they have not been allowed to fight on the front lines. There is already conflict between different groups of Americans depending upon their own domestic political views, to include whether they are pro- or anti-vaccination, for example, with groups reportedly self-segregating according to vaccination status.<sup>21</sup> The responsibility for front lines combat among foreign fighters supporting Ukraine has mostly been left to: Belarussians, Georgians, Chechens, and foreign fighters from the immediate region, particularly those who speak Ukrainian, Russian, or both (although there are small numbers of Westerners in some of these ranks, including former special forces personnel); those familiar with the terrain; and those familiar with the style of fighting and who possess combat experience fighting in conventional military units or irregular militias. These regional foreign fighters are the most battle hardened and have the most relevant combat experience. There is great concern about what will happen to these groups of foreign fighters as the conflict continues, or in the event it winds down—particularly if it remains an unresolved stalemate.

Following the rise of the ISIS in 2014, the UN Security Council adopted universally binding resolutions—2178 (2014) and 2396 (2017)—that were specifically designed to prevent the travel and recruitment of foreign terrorists, and their return, respectively. In response, numerous states implemented new laws and policies, raising the possibility that in some contexts, those traveling to conflict zones may run afoul of counterterrorism legislation and measures, especially where the definition of terrorist groups is not clearly defined.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, a number of measures have been adopted to track the travel of individuals of concern, as well as address the needs and challenges posed by returnees, which could again become relevant in addressing the flows of individuals to and from Ukraine.

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<sup>20</sup> Joshua Keating, “Ukraine Isn’t World War III—But It’s Getting Much More International,” *Grid News*, March 18, 2022, <https://www.grid.news/story/global/2022/03/18/ukraine-isnt-world-war-iii-but-its-getting-much-more-international/>.

<sup>21</sup> Vera Mironova, TSC Webinar, March 29, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HuAYrJ59MIE>.

<sup>22</sup> Naureen C. Fink and Colin P. Clarke, “Foreign Fighters Are Heading to Ukraine. That’s a Moment for Worry,” *Politico*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/03/10/foreign-fighters-are-heading-to-ukraine-thats-a-moment-for-worry-00016084>.



As the conflict continues, the mobilization of foreign volunteers could expand and accelerate, highlighting the need for states to prepare early on to address the range of possible outcomes and risks associated with this phenomenon. Importantly, when Security Council resolutions 2178 and 2396 were adopted, there was unparalleled international consensus about the status of ISIS and its affiliates, reflected in the listing of ISIS and al-Qaeda under the “1267” counterterrorism sanctions regime. Regarding Syria, terrorism and foreign fighters were rare topics about which all five permanent members of the Council could mostly agree.<sup>23</sup> However, in Ukraine that consensus will be markedly absent, raising the possibility that the counterterrorism rubric may be manipulated by states and place individual volunteers at risk.

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<sup>23</sup> Naureen Chowdhury Fink, “Putin is Calling in Favors from Syria and Africa. It’s a Dangerous Move,” *CNN*, March 16, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/16/opinions/putin-foreign-fighters-syria-africa-ukraine-fink/index.html>.

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## NON-STATE ACTORS FIGHTING FOR RUSSIA

On the Russian side, a mix of violent non-state actors are fighting alongside, or as a complement to, traditional Russian military forces. These include mercenaries, members of terrorist groups, and other violent extremists motivated by various ideologies, including racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism. The significance, histories, and roles of these groups, including the infamous Wagner Group and the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), are detailed below.

### *The Wagner Group*

Russia has long been known to utilize military proxies to wage deniable or so-called “gray zone” warfare and promote the Kremlin’s interests in foreign conflicts. The most notorious of these proxies is the Wagner Group, a private mercenary group created in 2014 by Yevgeny Prigozhin, an oligarch with close ties to Vladimir Putin, which Russia has previously deployed in places like Syria, Libya, and Mozambique.<sup>24</sup> The Wagner Group itself has been described by some as “an opaque network of titular companies and private military contractors that simultaneously further the Kremlin’s interests abroad.”<sup>25</sup> Named after the German composer Richard Wagner, Adolph Hitler's favorite musician, the group is rife with Nazi imagery.<sup>26</sup> Wagner’s leader, Dmitry Utkin, reportedly is adorned with numerous Nazi tattoos, including a swastika, a Nazi eagle, and SS lightning bolts.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, the group’s foot soldiers have left behind neo-Nazi markings in the war zones where they have operated.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> The Soufan Center, “IntelBrief: The Wagner Group: A Russian Symphony of Profit and Politics,” April 21, 2020, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-the-wagner-group-a-russian-symphony-of-profit-and-politics/>.

<sup>25</sup> Amy Mackinnon, “New Report Exposes Brutal Methods of Russia’s Wagner Group,” *Foreign Policy*, June 11, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/06/11/russia-wagner-group-methods-bouta-killing-report/>.

<sup>26</sup> “What is the Wagner Group, Russia’s Mercenary Organisation?” *The Economist*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/03/07/what-is-the-wagner-group-russias-mercenary-organisation>; see also, Seth G. Jones et al., “Russia’s Corporate Soldiers: The Global Expansion of Russia’s Private Military Companies,” Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), July 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/russias-corporate-soldiers-global-expansion-russias-private-military-companies>.

<sup>27</sup> Sergei Khazov-Cassia and Robert Coalson, “Russian Mercenaries: Vagner Commanders Describe Life Inside the ‘Meat Grinder,’” *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*, March 14, 2018, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russian-mercenaries-vagner-commanders-syria/29100402.html>.

<sup>28</sup> Nick Sturdee, “The Wagner Group Files,” *Newlines Magazine*, September 27, 2021, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/the-wagner-group-files/>; Candace Rondeaux et al., “Wagner Group Contingent Rusich on the Move Again,” New America Foundation, January 26, 2022, <https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/blogs/wagner-group-contingent-rusich-on-the-move-again/>.



Yevgeny Prigozhin, left, serves food to Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin during dinner at Prigozhin's restaurant outside Moscow, Russia on November 11, 2011. (AP Photo/Misha Japaridze, Pool, File)

In Ukraine, Wagner Group mercenaries played a central role in the illegal annexation of Crimea in 2014, and they have gone on to support pro-Russia separatists waging war eastern Ukraine.<sup>29</sup> The Wagner Group has also engaged in conflicts beyond Europe, including sub-Saharan Africa, North Africa, the Levant, and South America.<sup>30</sup> Wagner mercenaries were recently deployed to guard critical infrastructure and bolster government authorities in the Central African Republic (CAR) and Mozambique, and have been reported to be operating in Mali, where Russian mercenaries are interfering with the international community's efforts to fight terrorism. As the Brookings Institution's Federica Saini Fasanotti has noted, the Wagner Group's support to the fragile government of President Faustin-Archange Touadéra in CAR coincided with a Prigozhin-linked company being awarded diamond and gold mining licenses.<sup>31</sup>

As described above, the Wagner Group's activities in Ukraine long pre-date the current conflict. In fact, the group's existence dates to Russia's illegal 2014 invasion of Crimea,<sup>32</sup> in which the Wagner Group engaged in direct military action. Over time, the Wagner Group's paramilitary activities would span the globe, as the organization would serve as a projectile fueling the Russian Federation's geostrategic objectives, including, but not limited to, the siphoning of natural resources in Africa or propping up dictators like Bashar al-Assad in Syria.<sup>33</sup> In doing so, the Wagner Group, despite its close associations to President Putin, is able to provide the

<sup>29</sup> Paul Shinkman, "Russia Deploys Wagner Group to Eastern Ukraine in Risky Attempt to Break Stalemate," *U.S. News and World Report*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2022-03-28/russia-deploys-wagner-group-to-eastern-ukraine-in-risky-attempt-to-break-stalemate>.

<sup>30</sup> Kimberly Marten, "The Puzzle of Russian Behavior in Deir al-Zour," *War on the Rocks*, July 5, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/07/the-puzzle-of-russian-behavior-in-deir-al-zour/>.

<sup>31</sup> Federica Saini Fasanotti, "Russia's Wagner Group in Africa: Influence, Commercial Concessions, Rights Violations, and Counterinsurgency Failure," Brookings Institution, February 8, 2022, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/02/08/russias-wagner-group-in-africa-influence-commercial-concessions-rights-violations-and-counterinsurgency-failure/>.

<sup>32</sup> The Soufan Center, "IntelBrief: The Wagner Group: A Russian Symphony of Profit and Politics," April 21, 2020, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-the-wagner-group-a-russian-symphony-of-profit-and-politics/>.

<sup>33</sup> The Soufan Center, "IntelBrief: The Role of the Wagner Group in Russia's Full-Scale War with Ukraine," February 24, 2022, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2022-february-24/>.



Russian Federation with a thin veneer of plausible deniability as it engages in the pursuit of finance, influence, and vigilantism not in keeping with international norms.<sup>34</sup>

The Wagner Group is increasingly influential in Mali, where the government has sought to expel French counterterrorism forces in its favor. Reports during fall 2021 suggested that the interim government of Mali would pay \$10.8 million per month to bring in 1,000 mercenaries from the Wagner Group to train Mali's military and provide security. "Despite the fact that Mali has a lot of partners on the ground, we have to find new partners who can help improve the security situation," Mali's interim prime minister said at the United Nations in September, asserting, "We can seek partnership either with Russia or with any other country."<sup>35</sup> A few months later, when several UN Security Council members moved to sanction the Malian government, in alignment with the Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS), Russia and China blocked these, preserving the Wagner Group's operating space.<sup>36</sup> French Ambassador to the United Nations Nicolas De Riviere condemned the deployment of mercenaries from the Wagner Group "who are known to threaten civilians, loot resources, violate international law and the sovereignty of states."<sup>37</sup> He expressed regret that Mali's transitional authorities "are using already limited public funds to pay foreign mercenaries instead of supporting the national forces and public services for the benefit of the Malian people."<sup>38</sup> In response, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that the company has a "legitimate" right to be in Mali, because it was invited by the transitional government, insisting that the Russian government is not involved.<sup>39</sup>

A series of tweets from the Wagner Group's Twitter account foreshadowed the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The first message cryptically declared, "the north wind was coming."<sup>40</sup> The second message that day noted, "we're waiting,"<sup>41</sup> and the third challenged the reader, "are you

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<sup>34</sup> "What is the Wagner Group, Russia's Mercenary Organisation?" *The Economist*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.economist.com/the-economist-explains/2022/03/07/what-is-the-wagner-group-russias-mercenary-organisation>.

<sup>35</sup> Jeff Seldin, "Mali Seeking 'Better Ways' to Contain Terrorism," *VOA*, September 28, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/a/mali-seeking-better-ways-to-contain-terrorism-/6248356.html>.

<sup>36</sup> "Russia, China Block UN Security Council from Supporting New Sanctions on Mali," *France 24*, January 12, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220112-un-security-council-falls-short-of-imposing-new-sanctions-on-mali-after-elections-delay>.

<sup>37</sup> Edith Lederer, "Russia and China block UN support for sanctions on Mali," *ABC News*, January 12, 2022, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/russia-china-block-support-sanctions-mali-82213381>.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Twitter, Reverse Side of the Medal, February 23, 2022, <https://twitter.com/RS0TM/status/1496475755009785857>.

<sup>41</sup> Twitter, Reverse Side of the Medal, February 23, 2022, <https://twitter.com/RS0TM/status/1496587349341392905>.

ready?”<sup>42</sup> The fourth message simply stated, “Day Z.”<sup>43</sup> That was followed by the Russian word, “ЗАХОДИМ,”<sup>44</sup> which can be translated a number of ways depending on the context, but likely means, in the context and timing of the tweet, “we’re going in.” More recently, the Latin letter “Z” has become a symbol of the Russian invasion, often used on propaganda and marked on Russian military equipment such as tanks. The use of the letter “Z” has prompted much speculation regarding its meaning.<sup>45</sup> Its usage by the Wagner Group ahead of the recent press speculation is a possible indication that the group was long prepared to go into Ukraine even before the Russian invasion.



A Russian army tank, with “Z” painted on the side, moves through a street on the outskirts of Mariupol, Ukraine on March 11, 2022. (AP Photo/Evgeniy Maloletka)

The Wagner Group has faced close scrutiny since its first foray into Ukraine. In fact, the group and its leadership have faced significant sanctions—some of which predate the group’s participation in the February 24 invasion—by the United States,<sup>46</sup> European Union,<sup>47</sup> and United Kingdom,<sup>48</sup> among others. As a result of this pressure, the Wagner Group has taken to using aliases to circumvent economic and public relations pressures. For instance, in a recent

<sup>42</sup> Twitter, Reverse Side of the Medal, February 23, 2022, <https://twitter.com/RS0TM/status/1496587374628904966>.

<sup>43</sup> Twitter, Reverse Side of the Medal, February 23, 2022, <https://twitter.com/RS0TM/status/1496591686918627330>.

<sup>44</sup> Twitter, Reverse Side of the Medal, February 23, 2022, <https://twitter.com/RS0TM/status/1496591759220133893>.

<sup>45</sup> Neil MacFarquhar, “The Letter ‘Z’ Has Become a Symbol for Russians Who Support the Invasion of Ukraine,” *New York Times*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/07/world/europe/russia-letter-z-ivan-kuliak.html>

<sup>46</sup> “Treasury Designates Individuals and Entities Involved in the Ongoing Conflict in Ukraine,” United States Department of Treasury, June 20, 2017, <https://www.treasury.gov/press-center/press-releases/pages/sm0114.aspx>.

<sup>47</sup> “EU Imposes Sanctions on Russian Mercenary Group Wagner Over Human Rights Abuses,” *France24*, December 13, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/europe/20211213-eu-imposes-sanctions-on-russian-mercenary-group-wagner-over-human-rights-abuses>.

<sup>48</sup> “Malian Government and the Wagner Group: Minister for Africa’s Statement,” United Kingdom Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office, September 29, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/malian-government-and-the-wagner-group-minister-for-africas-statement>.

interview, a member of the Wagner Group explained that they were recruiting under new names, such as the “Hawks.”<sup>49</sup> The name changes made by the Wagner Group are reportedly part of an effort to obfuscate the group’s past, which included allegations of human rights abuses in multiple countries.<sup>50</sup> By some estimates, nearly 90% of the Wagner Group’s manpower and resources have been moved from other theaters into Ukraine as of mid-March, highlighting the important role they are expected to play in the conflict.<sup>51</sup> As these forces are moved out of active conflict zones abroad, or removed from contexts in which they are bolstering governments, it could lead to new power vacuums and opportunities for exploitation by terrorist groups or militias, including in Libya.

Since Russia invaded Ukraine, President Zelenskyy has reportedly survived over a dozen assassination attempts.<sup>52</sup> To perpetrate these, Western media has reported that as many as 400 Wagner mercenaries may have been sent to Kyiv.<sup>53</sup> By March 28, British military intelligence estimates indicated that up to 1,000 Wagner mercenaries had been deployed to Ukraine.<sup>54</sup> According to Christopher Chivvis, formerly the U.S. national intelligence officer (NIO) for Europe, Putin could respond to NATO arming Ukraine by sending Wagner mercenaries or other irregular forces to conduct attacks on European soil.<sup>55</sup> A combination of private military contractors and highly-trained terrorists would be a massive threat to stability in Europe if this is one of the asymmetric options Putin chooses to rely upon as the war drags on.

### ***The Russian Imperial Movement***

Beyond private military contractors and mercenaries, the Kremlin allows terrorist groups to carve out a safe haven on Russian territory, including the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM), which the State Department designated as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) entity in 2020. As a result of its listing as an SDGT, any assets RIM may have in the U.S. formal financial

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<sup>49</sup> Hanan Razek and Ilya Barabanov, “War in Ukraine: How Russia is Recruiting Mercenaries,” *BBC News*, March 12, 2022, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-60711211>.

<sup>50</sup> Mark Townsend, “Russian Mercenaries in Ukraine Linked to Far-Right Extremists,” *The Guardian*, March 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/20/russian-mercenaries-in-ukraine-linked-to-far-right-extremists>.

<sup>51</sup> Conversation with U.S. government official, mid-March 2022.

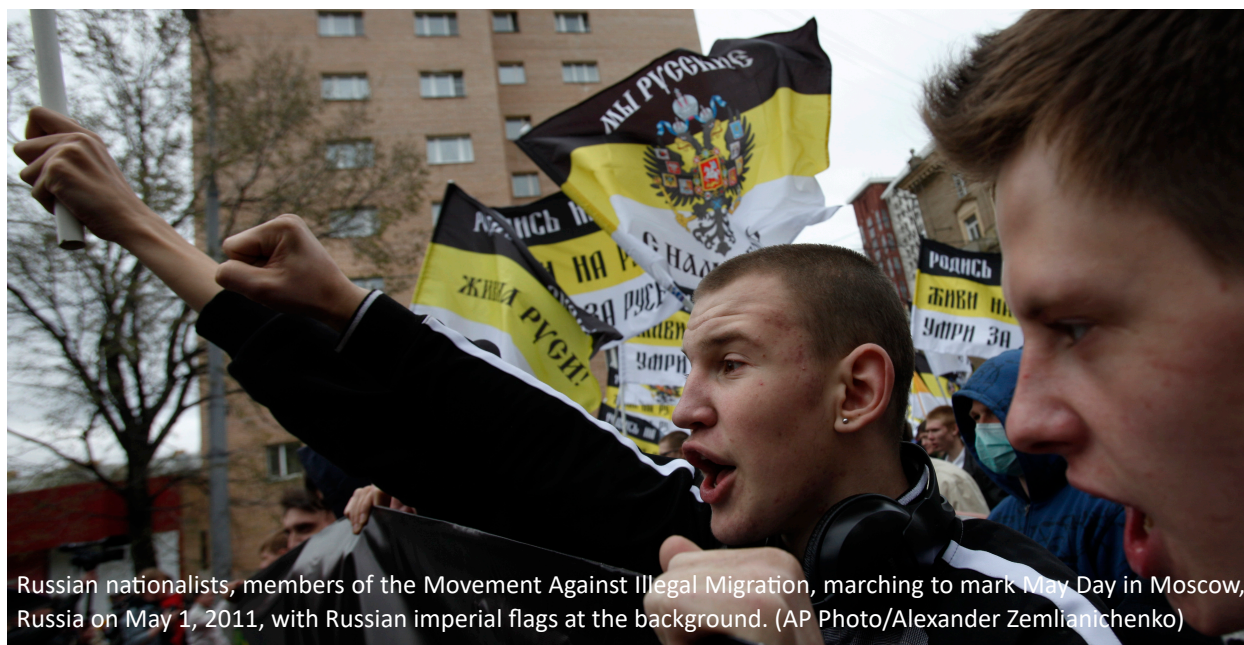
<sup>52</sup> Namita Singh, “Ukraine’s Zelensky Has Survived More than a Dozen Assassination Attempts, Adviser Claims,” *The Independent*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/ukraine-zelensky-assassination-attempts-russia-b2032759.html>.

<sup>53</sup> Manveen Rana, “Volodymyr Zelensky: Russian Mercenaries Ordered to Kill Ukraine’s President,” *The Times*, February 28, 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/volodymyr-zelensky-russian-mercenaries-ordered-to-kill-ukraine-president-cvcksh79d>.

<sup>54</sup> “British intelligence says Russia’s Wagner Group deployed to eastern Ukraine,” *Reuters*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/british-intelligence-says-russias-wagner-group-deployed-eastern-ukraine-2022-03-28/>.

<sup>55</sup> Christopher S. Chivvis, “I’ve Studied the Possible Trajectories of the Russia-Ukraine War. None are Good,” *The Guardian*, March 8, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/mar/08/russia-ukraine-war-possible-trajectories>.

system are blocked. Moreover, anyone who provides support to RIM could be prosecuted for material support to a terrorist group. Stanislav Anatolyevich Vorobyev founded RIM in 2002. With the Kremlin's tacit approval, RIM operates paramilitary camps near St. Petersburg, training neo-Nazis and white supremacists from across Europe to commit terrorist attacks.<sup>56</sup> In 2016, RIM-trained terrorists conducted a series of bombings targeting a shelter for refugees and other soft targets in Sweden.<sup>57</sup>



Russian nationalists, members of the Movement Against Illegal Migration, marching to mark May Day in Moscow, Russia on May 1, 2011, with Russian imperial flags at the background. (AP Photo/Alexander Zemlianichenko)

Like the Wagner Group, RIM has aided Russia's wars abroad, including in eastern Ukraine but also in Libya.<sup>58</sup> Organizations like RIM play an important role in internationalizing the violent far-right movement and extending the Kremlin's narrative into extremist milieus. As scholars Shelby Butt and Daniel Byman have noted, while RIM "does not have overt Kremlin backing," it is "tolerated by the authorities" and "works with extremists in the United States... and in Europe... against a 'globalised elite' who reject traditional values."<sup>59</sup> The relationship could grow closer as the Kremlin finds a greater need to liaise with a group like RIM to exploit its capabilities. Putin will have no shortage of recruits. Some have described Russia as having "a thriving ultra-

<sup>56</sup> Charlie Savage et al., "U.S. Will Give Terrorist Label to White Supremacist Group for First Time," *New York Times*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/06/us/politics/terrorist-label-white-supremacy-Russian-Imperial-Movement.html>.

<sup>57</sup> The Soufan Center, "Inside the Russian Imperial Movement: Practical Limitations of U.S. Sanctions," April 2020, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/TSC-Report-Inside-the-Russian-Imperial-Movement-Practical-Implications-of-U.S.-Sanctions.pdf>.

<sup>58</sup> "Russian Imperial Movement." Stanford University Mapping Militant Organizations, modified February 2021. <https://cisac.fsi.stanford.edu/mappingmilitants/profiles/russian-imperial-movement>.

<sup>59</sup> Shelby Butt and Daniel Byman, "Right-wing Extremism: The Russian Connection," *Survival*, 62:2, 2020.



nationalist scene” which the authorities tolerate because its members are found to be useful.<sup>60</sup> As elaborated upon below, this tracks closely with narratives and themes emphasized in the social media used by pro-Russian far-right extremists online.

RIM maintains links to the Wagner Group through Task Force Rusich, a far-right unit within Wagner that is also linked to pro-Kremlin online communities.<sup>61</sup> Rusich, which has a logo featuring the *Kolovrat*, or Slavic Swastika, was formed by Alexey Mikchakov and Yan Petrovsky after they graduated from a training camp run by the Russian Imperial Legion, the military wing of RIM.<sup>62</sup> Rusich played an instrumental role in the Donbas in 2014 and has been accused of numerous war crimes. Rusich has attempted to recruit new members to fight in Ukraine on VKontakte (VK), a social media site popular in Russia, though concrete estimates are currently difficult to obtain. RIM’s connections to the Russian Orthodox Church and the ultranationalist movement more broadly throughout Russia give it a unique ability to rally new recruits.<sup>63</sup> RIM is believed to maintain close ties with far-right movements in the West, including the Traditionalist Worker’s Party in the United States and the National Democratic Party in Germany.<sup>64</sup> Vorobyev admitted in a podcast with an American journalist that RIM keeps in touch with American citizens, a key strategy to foment polarization and sow distrust of Western governments.<sup>65</sup> Matthew Heimbach, an American far-right extremist, once posed with a Hezbollah shirt in front of a flag representing the Russian president. He has also met with RIM leaders on U.S. soil. The views Heimbach espouses—anti-Western and anti-U.S.—form part of a complex political identity gaining traction among far-right extremists in the West.<sup>66</sup> Heimbach was central figure in the 2017 Unite the Right Rally in Charlottesville, Virginia and has spoken glowingly of Putin in the past, describing the Russian president as the “the leader of the free world.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Tara John and Tim Lister, “A far-right battalion has a key role in Ukraine’s resistance. Its neo-Nazi history has been exploited by Putin,” *CNN*, March 30, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/03/29/europe/ukraine-azov-movement-far-right-intl-cmd/index.html>.

<sup>61</sup> Mark Townsend, “Russian Mercenaries in Ukraine Linked to Far-Right Extremists,” *The Guardian*, March 20, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/20/russian-mercenaries-in-ukraine-linked-to-far-right-extremists>.

<sup>62</sup> Candace Rondeaux et al., “Neo-Nazi Russian Attack Unit Hints It’s Going Back Into Ukraine,” *Daily Beast*, January 26, 2022, <https://www.newamerica.org/future-frontlines/blogs/wagner-group-contingent-rusich-on-the-move-again/>.

<sup>63</sup> Daveed Gartenstein Ross, Colin P. Clarke, and Samuel Hodgson, “The Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) and its Links to the Transnational White Supremacists Extremist Movement,” International Centre for Counterterrorism (ICCT) – The Hague, April 24, 2020, <https://icct.nl/publication/the-russian-imperial-movement-rim-and-its-links-to-the-transnational-white-supremacist-extremist-movement/>.

<sup>64</sup> Anna Kruglova, “For God, For Tsar and For the Nation: Authenticity in the Russian Imperial Movement’s Propaganda,” *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1990826>.

<sup>65</sup> Verified Podcast: The Next Threat, Episode 2, “The Russian,” February 1, 2022, <https://www.verifiedpod.com/>.

<sup>66</sup> The Soufan Center, “IntelBrief: Salad Bar Redux: Is Heimbach’s Extremism Emblematic of The Current Threat Landscape?” July 29, 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2021-july-29/>.

<sup>67</sup> Emily Tamkin, “How the American Right Stopped Worrying and Learned to Love Russia,” *New York Times*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/02/27/opinion/ukraine-putin-steve-bannon.html>.

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## TRANSNATIONAL FAR-RIGHT VIOLENT EXTREMISTS

A key component of the Kremlin's campaign to destabilize the West and promote distrust in Ukraine's liberal democratic and Europe-leaning government is to use transnational white supremacists as proxy fighters and to promote racially and ethnically motivated violent extremism.<sup>68</sup> A number of American neo-Nazi ideologues and propagandists have traveled to Russia, as the *New York Times* reported in 2016, to attend networking conferences to grow and expand their networks, illustrating the transnational links among this movement.<sup>69</sup> It is important to note that Russia's involvement with far-right extremism is not new. On the contrary, Russia has been laying the groundwork for its relationship with the transnational far-right for years, bringing members of white nationalist groups together with Russian ultra-nationalists. At various points over the past several years, Russia has hosted events such as the International Russian Conservative Forum in St. Petersburg. Far-right Russian political party Rodina, along with members of RIM, announced the formation of the "World National Conservative Movement," ideologically aligned against "liberalism and multiculturalism" along with other "Western principles."<sup>70</sup> Events like the International Russian Conservative Forum have brought together members of far-right groups from throughout the world, including members of Golden Dawn (Greece), the National Democratic Party (Germany), British Unity (U.K.), Generace Identity (Slovakia), Forza Nuova (Italy), and far-right extremists from France, Denmark, Scandinavia, and Romania.<sup>71</sup>

The connections between Russia and the far-right run deep. Russia has allowed one of America's most dangerous neo-Nazis to enjoy sanctuary in the country. In 2020, reports circulated that Rinaldo Nazzaro, an American and the leader of the white supremacist paramilitary group The Base, was living in Russia. Further, Nazzaro was reported to be

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<sup>68</sup> The Soufan Center, "White Supremacy Extremism: The Transnational Rise of the Violent White Supremacist Movement," September 2019, <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Report-by-The-Soufan-Center-White-Supremacy-Extremism-The-Transnational-Rise-of-The-Violent-White-Supremacist-Movement.pdf>,

<sup>69</sup> See: Alan Feuer and Andrew Higgins, "Extremists Turn to a Leader to Protect Western Values: Vladimir Putin," *New York Times*, December 3, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/03/world/americas/alt-right-vladimir-putin.html>; Max Seddon, "Racists, Neo-Nazis, Far Right Flock to Russia for Joint Conference," *BuzzFeed News*, March 22, 2015, <https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/maxseddon/europes-far-right-comes-to-russia-in-search-of-shared-values>; Zach Dorfman and Jana Winter, "U.S. Intelligence Report Details 'Indirect' Russian Government Support for Western Neofascist Groups," *Yahoo News*, February 10, 2022, <https://news.yahoo.com/us-intelligence-report-details-indirect-russian-government-support-for-western-neo-fascist-groups-233831082.html>.

<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth Grimm Arsenault and Joseph Stabile, "Confronting Russia's Role in Transnational White Supremacist Extremism," *Just Security*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/68420/confronting-russias-role-in-transnational-white-supremacist-extremism/>.

<sup>71</sup> Anton Shekhovtsov, "Russian Politicians Building an International Extreme Right Alliance," *The Interpreter*, September 15, 2015, <https://www.interpretermag.com/russian-politicians-building-an-international-extreme-right-alliance/>.

personally directing the group from the safety of St. Petersburg.<sup>72</sup> Since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, chatter on extremist online channels suggests Nazzaro may have stepped down from this role.<sup>73</sup> The FBI describes The Base as a "racially motivated violent extremist group" that "seeks to accelerate the downfall of the United States government, incite a race war, and establish a white ethno-state." Reports indicate that a video posted online in March 2019 showed Nazzaro in Russia flaunting support for Putin, wearing a t-shirt with the Russian leader's image and the phrase, "Russia, absolute power."<sup>74</sup> The Base is an important node in the broader far-right extremism ecosystem, popular in the West, and linked to numerous other white supremacist and neo-Nazi organizations, including the Atomwaffen Division (AWD), which has been proscribed as a terrorist group in the United Kingdom.<sup>75</sup> The Base serves as an umbrella group for far-right extremists interested in the transnational dimension of the movement.<sup>76</sup> The Base's primary objective is to "unify militant white supremacists around the globe and provide them with paramilitary training in preparation for a 'race war.'"<sup>77</sup>

In courting the far-right and white supremacy extremists internationally, Putin has added a powerful instrument to the Kremlin's toolbox, enabling it to undermine democratic institutions, one of Moscow's overarching objectives.<sup>78</sup> Russia-backed white supremacists and extremists trade ideas and resources, both online and offline, to empower likeminded partners in countries around the world. Many white supremacists supporting Russia believe they share a common enemy. The online ecosystem of white supremacy is flooded with rhetoric against a system they call "globalism."<sup>79</sup> This worldview, all too common in such extremist spaces, argues that there is a nefarious global cabal that carries out the work of shadowy elites that control the economy

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<sup>72</sup> Daniel DeSimone et al., "Neo-Nazi Rinaldo Nazzaro Running US Militant Group The Base from Russia," *BBC News*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51236915>.

<sup>73</sup> "Militant Neo-Nazi Accelerationist Group Confirms Departure of Founder," SITE Intelligence Group, March 9, 2022, <https://ent.siteintelgroup.com/Far-Right-/Far-Left-Threat/founder-of-militant-neo-nazi-group-officially-steps-down.html>.

<sup>74</sup> Daniel DeSimone et al., "Neo-Nazi Rinaldo Nazzaro Running US Militant Group The Base from Russia," *BBC News*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51236915>.

<sup>75</sup> "White supremacist group, Atomwaffen Division, banned in the UK," U.S. Home Office, April 23, 2021, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/white-supremacist-group-atomwaffen-division-banned-in-the-uk>.

<sup>76</sup> "The Globalization of Far-Right Extremism: An Investigative Report," CTC Sentinel, July/August 2021, Vol. 14, Iss. 6, <https://ctc.usma.edu/the-globalization-of-far-right-extremism-an-investigative-report/>.

<sup>77</sup> "Alleged Members Of Hate Group 'The Base' Arrested In Georgia, Another In Wisconsin," *NPR*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/17/797399834/3-alleged-members-of-hate-group-the-base-arrested-in-georgia>.

<sup>78</sup> The Soufan Center, "A Perfect Storm: Insurrection, Incitement, and the Violent Far-Right Movement," October 2021, [https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/TSC-Report\\_Oct2021\\_A-Perfect-Storm-Insurrection-Incitement-and-the-Violent-Far-Right-Movement\\_final.pdf](https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/TSC-Report_Oct2021_A-Perfect-Storm-Insurrection-Incitement-and-the-Violent-Far-Right-Movement_final.pdf).

<sup>79</sup> Liam Stack, "Globalism: A Far-Right Conspiracy Theory Buoyed by Trump," *New York Times*, November 14, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/15/us/politics/globalism-right-trump.html>.

and the media; extremist rhetoric against this “system” always includes racist and anti-Semitic references.<sup>80</sup>

In their struggle against this organized “anti-white” (and anti-Russian) global conspiracy, white supremacists argue that they must fight the forces of Western liberal “degeneracy” that have taken over North America, Europe, Australia, and beyond. At the global level, this conspiracy includes a range of international bodies like the European Union, the World Bank, the World Health Organization, and NATO. Some see Putin as their savior from the fate of “white genocide,” motivated by a belief in “the Great Replacement,” wherein whites are supplanted and subsumed by minorities. This concept, or versions of it, has been mentioned in the manifestos of several far-right extremists over the years, including Anders Breivik, Brenton Tarrant, and Patrick Crusius. Many white supremacists are aligned with Putin’s challenge to the Western liberal status quo and the rules-based international order.

In addition to supporting right-wing narratives, Russia has used disinformation and leveraged conspiracy theories, such as “QAnon,” to polarize society.<sup>81</sup> In the United States, for example, this well-documented support has gone to right-wing populists across Europe and North America, as well as to some of the darkest elements in the far-right extremist space.<sup>82</sup> This includes support to anti-LGBTQ+ ideology and a revanchist and chauvinist approach to foreign policy that many far-right extremists admire and seek to emulate.

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<sup>80</sup> Francesco Farinelli, “Conspiracy Theories and Right-Wing Extremism—Insights and Recommendations for P/CVE,” Radicalisation Awareness Network, 2021, [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-04/ran\\_conspiracy\\_theories\\_and\\_right-wing\\_2021\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/system/files/2021-04/ran_conspiracy_theories_and_right-wing_2021_en.pdf).

<sup>81</sup> The Soufan Center, “Quantifying The Q Conspiracy: A Data-Driven Approach to Understanding the Threat Posed by QAnon,” April 2021, <https://thesoufancenter.org/research/quantifying-the-q-conspiracy-a-data-driven-approach-to-understanding-the-threat-posed-by-qanon/>.

<sup>82</sup> See: Franklin Foer, “Putin’s Puppet,” *Slate*, July 4, 2016, [http://www.slate.com/articles/news\\_and\\_politics/cover\\_story/2016/07/vladimir\\_putin\\_has\\_a\\_plan\\_for\\_destroying\\_the\\_west\\_and\\_it\\_looks\\_a\\_lot\\_like.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/cover_story/2016/07/vladimir_putin_has_a_plan_for_destroying_the_west_and_it_looks_a_lot_like.html); Elizabeth Grimm Arsenault and Joseph Stabile, “Confronting Russia’s Role in Transnational White Supremacist Extremism,” *Just Security*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.justsecurity.org/68420/confronting-russias-role-in-transnational-white-supremacist-extremism/>.



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## HOW IS THE FAR-RIGHT TALKING ABOUT THE CONFLICT ONLINE?

Not all the narratives about Russia’s war in Ukraine are state-driven; many also derive from the reactions of audiences, both online and offline, whose views have been shaped by domestic factors and their relationship with—or distrust of—their own governments, the media, and longstanding institutions. Transnational far-right violent extremists have cultivated an entire ecosystem online, one that is filled with violent fantasies, casual misogyny, and racist diatribes that denigrate minorities while exalting the glory of the white race and chauvinist notions of masculinity.

Putin’s delusional call to “de-Nazify” Ukraine, for example, has resonated deeply within groups of Western extremists online, particularly in the United States. In virtual spaces already dominated by far-right extremists, including neo-Nazis and white supremacists, Russia’s invasion of Ukraine has elicited a wide range of reactions. Altogether, this is rather unsurprising, as the individuals, groups, and networks that comprise the violent far-right online ecosystem have never been monolithic. Many of the individuals and groups in the far-right extremist space, particularly those in the United States, have displayed a strong affinity for Putin. One disinformation narrative pushed by likely Kremlin-backed actors that has found fertile ground among U.S. online audiences casts a false and dangerous narrative that President Zelenskyy is a chief mastermind and enabler of human trafficking rings in Ukraine. The false “evidence” levied against Zelenskyy includes the fact that he is Jewish and thus part of the “global elite.” This rhetoric also points to his support for LGBTQI+ individuals, who the Kremlin disinformation apparatus claims seek to exploit children in order to groom them, aligning with well-worn QAnon conspiracies which claim that liberal Democratic politicians knowingly support the trafficking and sexual abuse of children. The latter narrative has a long-standing resonance within far-right extremist groups such as the Proud Boys, which frequently employ this type of homophobia and anti-LGBTQI+ rhetoric in their propaganda.

Hateful anti-Semitic language is also ubiquitous in online far-right message boards, which rail against the “Zionist Occupied Government” and the United Nations. Far-right trolls praise Putin

and denigrate the West as soft, mocking those who support LGBTQI+ rights.<sup>83</sup> The far-right and white supremacists consistently rail against what they refer to as “degeneracy.” By this they are referring to a range of progressive social issues, especially related to gender equality and LGBTQI+ rights, which they view as an assault on their power and idealized social order.<sup>84</sup>

Neo-Nazis have monitored the war in Ukraine closely, discussing online the economic sanctions imposed on Russia by the West and the withdrawal of multinational corporations, as well as the exodus of Russian citizens sympathetic to the West from the country. In watching global financial institutions, tech companies, brands, businesses, and media withdraw from Russia in response to Western sanctions or simply in solidarity with Ukraine, some within the far-right have found cause for celebration.<sup>85</sup> The image of purging Russia of foreign elements is framed in terms of cleansing Russian society of the corrupting economic, social, and political influence of the West. Indeed, in Putin’s speech in late February, he referenced the West’s attempts to “destroy our traditional values and impose on us their pseudo-values that would corrode us.”<sup>86</sup> For the far-right, it is to be celebrated that Russia will be purged of the social ills emanating from Western media, money, tech, entertainment—and even pornography. Through this warped lens, they see their own violent political fantasies realized. Sanctions will insulate “from the Leftist freakshow in America,” celebrates one neo-Nazi, while another celebrates that the “cultural attacks on Russian youth (porn, Disney, social media) evaporated overnight.”<sup>87</sup>

When it comes to high-profile national and international events, these actors are inherently opportunistic. They look to the conflict in Ukraine from the perspective of how the crisis can serve and reinforce their own localized interests and aspirations for political violence at home, respectively. Many far-right extremist actors support Russia, some support Ukraine, and others are entirely agnostic to the outcome of the conflict, but the accelerationists among them root for bloodshed and anomie, believing this will hasten the demise of liberal democratic and pluralist societies in the West. For analysts currently monitoring their online activities, there are interesting observations from their narratives that can inform policymakers and security

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<sup>83</sup> Sara Aniano, “Far-Right Responses to Russia’s Invasion of Ukraine,” *Global Network on Extremism & Technology (GNET)*, March 7, 2022, <https://gnet-research.org/2022/03/07/far-right-responses-to-russias-invasion-of-ukraine/>.

<sup>84</sup> Cassie Miller, “White Nationalist Threats Against Transgender People Are Escalating,” Southern Poverty Law Center, June 26, 2019, <https://www.splcenter.org/hatewatch/2019/06/26/white-nationalist-threats-against-transgender-people-are-escalating>.

<sup>85</sup> Stephanie Foggett, Mollie Saltskog, and Colin Clarke, “How are Putin’s Far-Right Fans in the West Reacting to his War?” *War on the Rocks*, March 18, 2022, <https://warontherocks.com/2022/03/how-are-putins-far-right-fans-in-the-west-reacting-to-his-war/>.

<sup>86</sup> Brian Stieglitz, “Putin’s terrifying warning to the West: ‘To anyone who would consider interfering from the outside - if you do, you will face consequences greater than any you have faced in history’ as he claims he is ‘de-Nazifying’ Ukraine,” *Daily Mail*, February 23, 2022, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-10545641/Putins-gives-chilling-warning-West-early-morning-TV-broadcast.html>.

<sup>87</sup> The Soufan Center monitors a range of online spaces utilized by the far-right and neo-Nazis, and carefully considers when the names of channels and accounts should be shared publicly. In an effort to not drive audiences to these individuals, these accounts and names have been withheld.

practitioners as they continue to grapple with an emboldened and increasingly transnational far-right. After all, certain far-right extremists will focus on specific sets of targets, which can allow law enforcement to focus defenses and allocate resources more efficiently.<sup>88</sup>

In Scandinavia, the largest neo-Nazi organization in the region, the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM), has determined that neither Ukraine nor Russia is worth the group's official support.<sup>89</sup> The NRM is an important player in the transnational far-right extremist landscape, once mentioned by name in the Trump administration's National Strategy for Counterterrorism as a group that represented a significant transnational threat.<sup>90</sup> In commentary and statements posted online since Russia's invasion of Ukraine, they have empathized with "both sides" of the argument but implore their followers to see that neither side is worth dying for. Again, their organizational position ties into broader and well-established white supremacist narratives that lament so-called "brother wars."<sup>91</sup> This position posits that the movement cannot celebrate wars in which white men are killed by each other's bullets, in which white women and children—a scarce resource in their twisted worldview—are lost to conflicts among brothers. On the question of their members militarily supporting the fight in Ukraine, one Scandinavian neo-Nazi organization concluded that their members should "take part in the important struggle" at home.<sup>92</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Colin Clarke and Jacob Ware, "How Far-Right Terrorists Choose Their Enemies," *Foreign Policy*, February 9, 2022, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/02/09/far-right-terrorism-extremism-target-selection-jihad-enemy/>.

<sup>89</sup> Simon Lindberg, "Which side are we on in the Ukraine war?" Nordic Resistance Movement, March 6, 2022, <https://nordicresistancemovement.org/which-side-are-we-on-in-the-ukraine-war/>.

<sup>90</sup> "National Strategy for Counterterrorism of the United States of America," Office of the Director of National Intelligence, October 2018, [https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news\\_documents/NSCT.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/NCTC/documents/news_documents/NSCT.pdf).

<sup>91</sup> "White Supremacists, Other Extremists Respond to Russian Invasion of Ukraine," Anti-Defamation League (ADL), March 3, 2022, <https://www.adl.org/blog/white-supremacists-other-extremists-respond-to-russian-invasion-of-ukraine>.

<sup>92</sup> Simon Lindberg, "A message to all nationalists thinking of going to fight in Ukraine," Nordic Resistance Movement, March 10, 2022, <https://nordicresistancemovement.org/a-message-to-all-nationalists-thinking-of-going-to-fight-in-ukraine/>.

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## WHAT ROLE DOES DISINFORMATION PLAY IN THE CONFLICT?

Even though, by most accounts, Ukraine has prevailed in the information domain, Russia still maintains a vast disinformation apparatus that it wields to influence multiple target audiences, not only domestically, but regionally and internationally. Moreover, it is clear that there is some divergence regarding perceptions of Russia in different regions, particularly where anti-Western or anti-American sentiments may be more prevalent. In the Arab world, this is apparent in the coverage of the pro-Iranian Arabic media outlets, such as *Almayadeen* and *Almanar*, which, in general, abide by the Russian narrative, not only in justifying the war, but also in narrating its daily developments. This position seems to be shared by many intellectuals (especially leftists and Arab nationalists) in the region, even those writing or appearing in official media outlets that seem pro-Western otherwise.<sup>93</sup>

While many in the region do condemn what is conceived as an “illegitimate invasion of a country by a larger and more powerful neighbor,” and do “applaud the bravery of the Ukrainians for resisting,” others seize the opportunity to highlight the western “double standards” and “hypocrisy.”<sup>94</sup> Gulf-sponsored media outlets, on the other hand, seem to follow western coverage in general, but with much less enthusiasm than expected. This could be explained also by the fact that the Gulf and Arab states’ approach to the conflict is far from being straightforward.<sup>95</sup> Interestingly, however, it is not uncommon to find calls on these very outlets for a more “neutral” or “objective” position that take the region’s interests into consideration.<sup>96</sup> This has been reflected in the careful positioning by the United Arab Emirates and India, currently elected UN Security Council members, whose abstentions on critical votes in the Council condemning Russia highlighted the importance they place on balancing relations with the West with longstanding political and defense partnerships with Russia.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Imād Būzū, “*Kayfa yubarrir al-jumhūr al-‘arabī ta’yīdahū li-ghazw ‘Ūkrānyā*”, March 16, 2022, <https://www.radiosawa.com/ara-mn-zawyt-akhry/2022/03/16/يبرر-الجمهور-العربي-تأييده-لغزو-أوكرانيا/>.

<sup>94</sup> “Quick Thoughts: Mouin Rabbani on the Middle East and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine,” *Jadaliyya*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.jadaliyya.com/Details/43936/Quick-Thoughts-Mouin-Rabbani-on-the-Middle-East-and-the-Russian-Invasion-of-Ukraine>.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>96</sup> See also articles by Sawsan al-Shā’ir in *al-Sharq al-Awsaṭ*, a major Saudi pan-Arab newspaper.

<sup>97</sup> The Soufan Center, “IntelBrief: India Preserves Relations with Russia after Ukraine Invasion,” March 29, 2022, <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2022-march-29/>.

Russia's claim of "de-Nazifying" Ukraine—a baseless pretext for the war—has been propagated from the highest echelons of the Kremlin to the front lines.<sup>98</sup> Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov has denounced so-called "neo-Nazis" in Ukraine, and Russia's foot soldiers have reportedly been duped into believing this lie, leaving them demoralized and betrayed when they find themselves fighting against ordinary Ukrainians simply defending their homes and families.<sup>99</sup> This falsehood also forms a considerable part of the national propaganda effort in Russia, seeking to influence and shape Russian citizens' views of the war. Several young Ukrainians have reported that family members—even parents—in Russia do not believe their experiences of war and destruction in Ukraine and refuse to acknowledge that Russia has committed any atrocities, reaffirming the view that there are Nazis in Ukraine that need to be removed.<sup>100</sup>

Like countless other countries, Ukraine is not free of domestic extremists; indeed, an understanding of far-right extremism in Ukraine would be remiss without including the wider global context of an increasingly transnational, interconnected, and emboldened far-right. However, Russia's problematic connections to transnational far-right movements only serve to highlight the degree to which Putin's claims are pure disinformation. Ukraine's democratically elected president, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, is Jewish and lost family members in the Holocaust, as well as had family members who fought against Nazi Germany in the Soviet Red Army.<sup>101</sup> His profile stands in stark opposition to Putin's—a strongman who has been supporting neo-Nazis and white supremacists for years, including mercenaries and separatists who have waged war on Ukraine since 2014. Putin is not fighting neo-Nazism in Ukraine or anywhere else; he nurtures its foot soldiers and ideologues for personal and political gain. This context makes his gaslighting about Ukraine even more abhorrent to many audiences around the globe.

Russia has also exploited the tools of propaganda and disinformation in the war on Ukraine to influence sentiments at home and abroad. The Kremlin's aggressions in the sphere of information warfare have been met with resistance from not only Ukraine, but also the United States, the United Kingdom, and European allies who have effectively debunked several Russian

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<sup>98</sup> Rachel Treisman, "Putin's Claim of Fighting Against Ukraine 'Neo-Nazis' Distorts History, Scholars Say," *NPR*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/03/01/1083677765/putin-denazify-ukraine-russia-history>.

<sup>99</sup> Mia Jankowicz, "Captured Russians Said Their Leaders Lied About the Plan to Invade Ukraine, Leaving Them Unprepared for Fierce Resistance," *Insider*, March 7, 2022, <https://www.businessinsider.com/putin-lied-to-russian-soldiers-left-them-unprepared-attack-nyt-2022-3>.

<sup>100</sup> Valerie Hopkins, "Ukrainians Find That Relatives in Russia Don't Believe It's a War," *New York Times*, March 6, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/06/world/europe/ukraine-russia-families.html>.

<sup>101</sup> Gillian Brockell, "Putin Says He'll 'Denazify' Ukraine. Its Jewish President Lost Family in the Holocaust," *Washington Post*, February 25, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2022/02/25/zelensky-family-jewish-holocaust/>.

false flag operations and disinformation narratives in near-real time.<sup>102</sup> These efforts should be lauded for their effectiveness, but as the war rages on, Russia will continue its “firehose of falsehood”<sup>103</sup> strategy, which has implications ranging from elevating extremist sentiments in the West to geopolitics, especially in the Indo-Pacific theater. While some of the disinformation narratives observed since the start of the war are overtly pro-Russia and anti-Ukraine, some are more insidious and aimed at stoking anti-government and anti-democratic sentiments in the long run, especially those that could motivate individuals to commit acts of violence.

In monitoring and analyzing Russian propaganda and disinformation on Ukraine, we have observed several narratives espoused by likely Kremlin-backed/aligned actors that reinforce already existing extremist narratives on the far-right in the West. One strand of disinformation seeks to discredit and stoke fears about foreign fighters, volunteers, and mercenaries seeking to join the conflict on the pro-Ukraine side, labeling them as terrorists and extremists and raising the specter of some entanglement with counterterrorism measures raised earlier in this brief. Within the disinformation surrounding foreigners seeking to join the conflict, one narrative falsely alleges that the CIA is training terrorists from ISIS to deploy to Ukraine. This specific narrative not only enflames anti-government sentiment, suggesting that the United States is covertly utilizing a notorious terrorist organization, but is also likely an attempt by the Kremlin to deflect from reports that Russia is recruiting volunteers from Syria to join the pro-Russian forces in Ukraine.<sup>104</sup> This rhetoric would also give Russia a false narrative to further amplify in the case that volunteers from Syria fighting for Russia commit war crimes, deflecting blame to the United States.

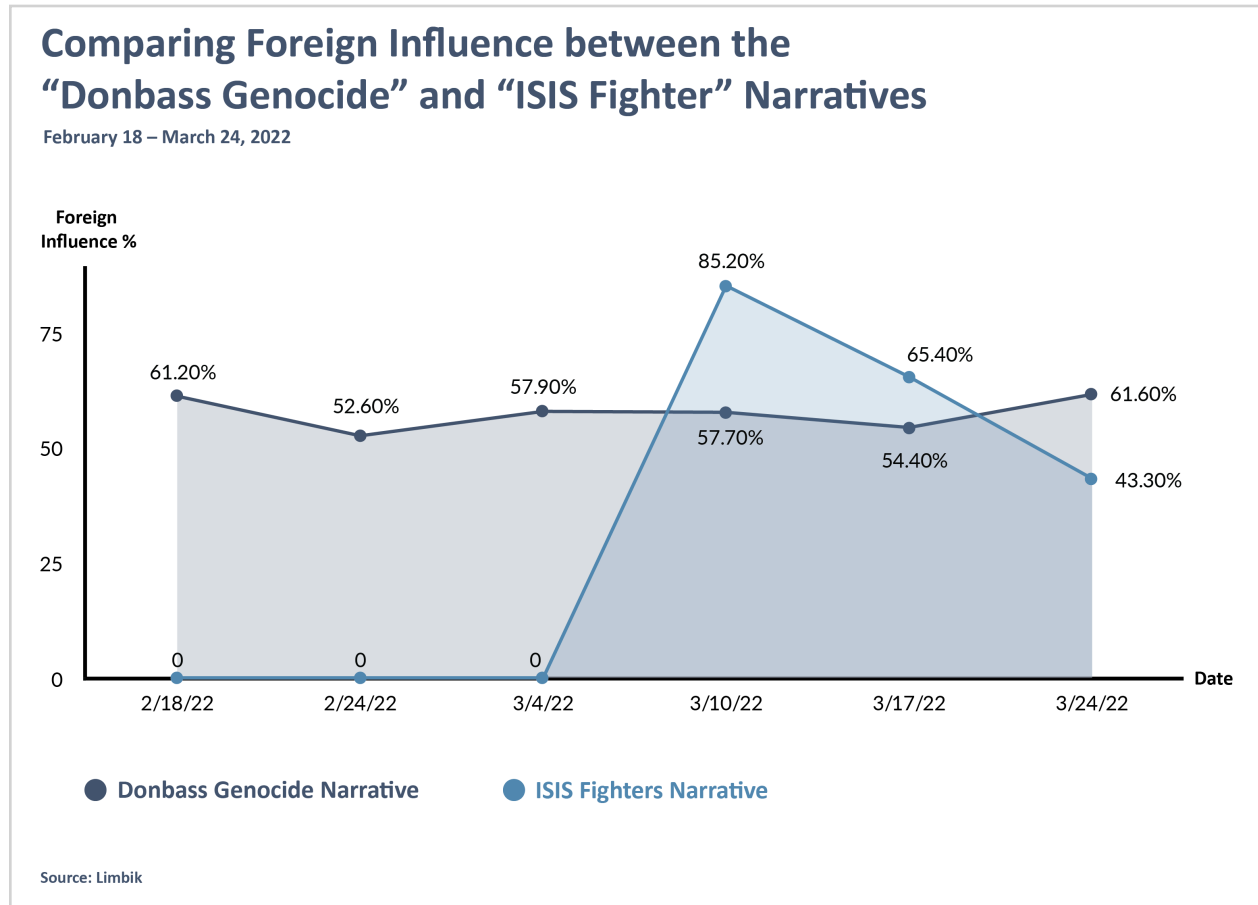
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<sup>102</sup> Nandita Bose, “Analysis: How the Biden White House is fighting Russian disinformation,” *Reuters*, March 4, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/how-biden-white-house-is-fighting-russian-disinformation-2022-03-04/>; Vera Bergengruen, “How Putin Is Losing at His Own Disinformation Game in Ukraine,” *TIME*, February 25, 2022, <https://time.com/6151578/russia-disinformation-ukraine-social-media/>; Zachary Basu, “CIA director: Putin’s ‘propaganda bubble’ is failing in Ukraine,” *Axios*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/russia-ukraine-information-war-putin-hospital-02a6a214-3d02-4400-ad0b-4396dc48f0c7.html>.

<sup>103</sup> Christopher Paul and Miriam Matthews, “The Russian ‘Firehose of Falsehood’ Propaganda Model: Why It Might Work and Options to Counter It,” RAND, 2016, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/perspectives/PE198.html>.

<sup>104</sup> Thomas Falk, “Ukraine war: Why is Russia encouraging foreign fighters to join?” *Al Jazeera*, March 23, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/3/23/russias-foreign-fighters>.

**Figure 2: Comparing Foreign Influence between Narratives**



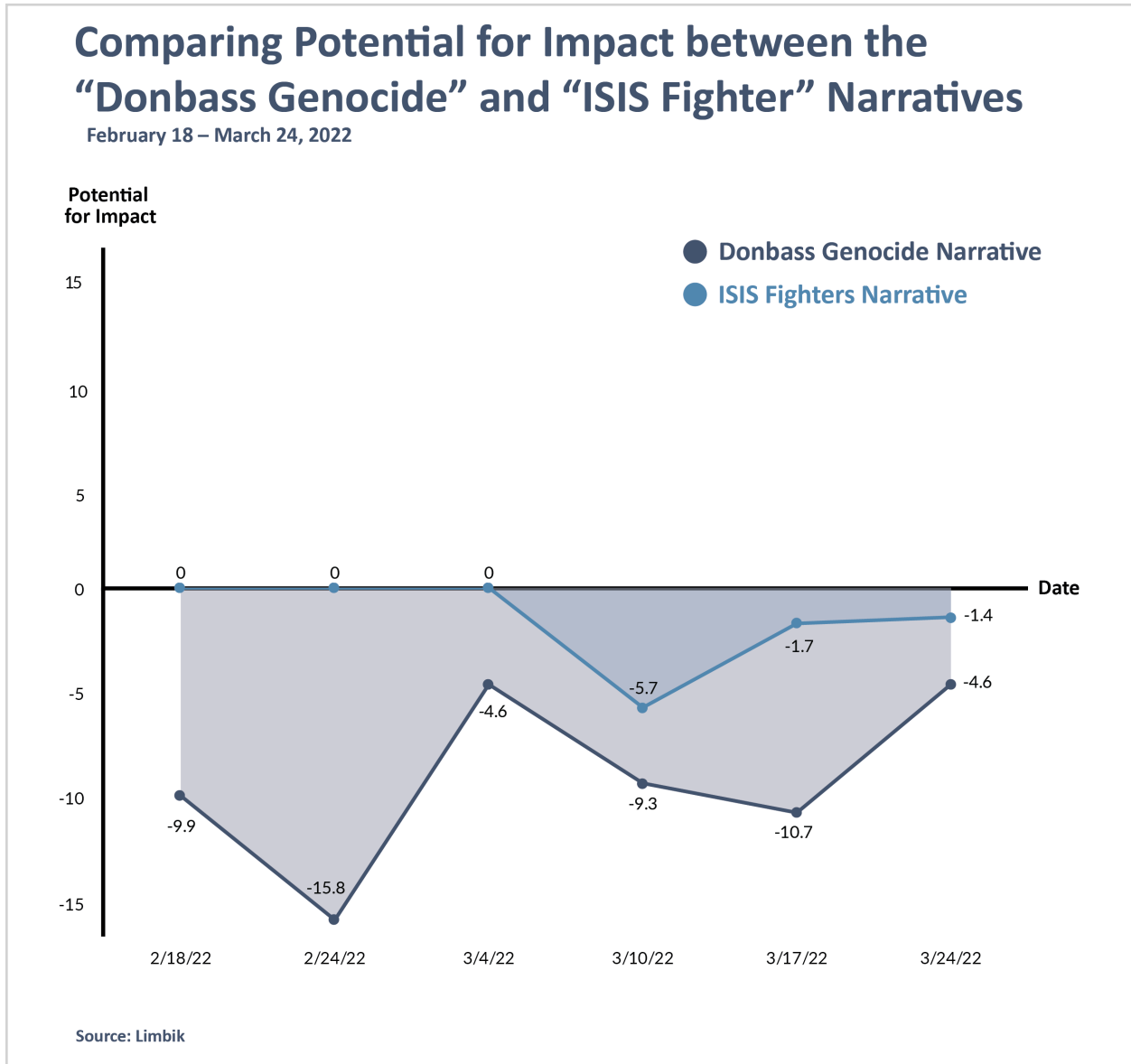
This graph indicates week-over-week change in the level of Foreign Influence (%) among all online artifacts within the “Donbass Genocide” and “ISIS Fighters” disinformation narratives between February 18 and March 24, 2022.

In partnership with the information defense company, Limbik, The Soufan Center has been continuously analyzing the Foreign Influence (FI)<sup>105</sup> and Potential for Impact (PFI)<sup>106</sup> of myriad Russian-aligned narratives using Limbik's proprietary artificial intelligence/machine learning-powered Information Defense System. Initial findings suggest that Russian stories associated with the CIA training ISIS terrorists and supporting neo-Nazis show a higher propensity for impact among U.S. adults than narratives that eschew these themes. As such, it is anticipated Russia will continue promoting similar narratives going forward.

<sup>105</sup> Foreign Influence is defined as the total number of artifacts from known foreign accounts and artifacts with a Foreign Influence probability greater than 98.0 percent, as a percentage of artifacts created during the monitoring period; Foreign Influence considers artifact similarity across 25+ features with known Foreign Influence artifacts.

<sup>106</sup> Narrative PFI is quantified by combining indexed Believability and indexed Virality. In other words, (i) are artifacts related to the narrative likely to be considered Believable by a majority of U.S. adults or a defined segment of the population and (ii) are the related artifacts more likely than topically-similar artifacts to elicit interactions across applicable social media platforms. Positive PFI reflects a narrative with an increased likelihood of resonating with U.S. adults or a defined segment of the population, whereas, negative PFI reflects a narrative with a lower likelihood of resonating than topically-similar social media artifacts. However, PFI should be evaluated across monitoring periods, as, for example, a narrative showing negative PFI may have increased considerably from the prior monitoring period.

**Figure 3: Comparing Potential for Impact between Narratives**



This graphic indicates the week-over-week change in the Potential for Impact (PFI) score within a U.S. adult audience of the “Donbass Genocide” and “ISIS Fighters” disinformation narratives between February 18 and March 24, 2022.

Another narrative purports that western volunteers and the Azov Battalion, which has historically received western volunteers, adhere to neo-Nazi ideology and receive training from the U.S. intelligence apparatus. China-backed/aligned actors have also piggy-backed on this rhetoric for their own political gain. For example, one anti-U.S. narrative pushed by China points to the Azov Battalion's alleged violent involvement in Hong Kong protests as trained agents of



the West.<sup>107</sup> It is evident that Beijing also continues to capitalize on disinformation narratives connected to the war in Ukraine for its own political gain.

## THE SOUFAN CENTER WEBINAR



On March 29, 2022, The Soufan Center hosted a webinar entitled, “Foreign Fighters, Volunteers, & Mercenaries: Parsing Non-State Actors in the Ukraine-Russia Conflict.” In response to rapidly evolving dynamics in Russia’s war with Ukraine, this webinar similarly explored the complex challenges posed by the increasing number of non-state actors engaging in the conflict, to include foreign fighters, volunteers, and mercenaries. The nuanced discussions therein directly contributed to the conclusions in this report. Speakers included Daniel Byman, Vera Mironova, Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Stephanie Foggett, and Colin P. Clarke.

## Watch the Webinar



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<sup>107</sup> Huang Lanlan and Cui Fandi, “GT investigates: Evidence suggests US may have supported neo-Nazi Azov Battalion,” *Global Times*, March 07, 2022, <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202203/1254217.shtml>.

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## CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the conflict between Russia and Ukraine is only weeks old, it is essential that governments and policymakers begin planning for the fallout and related challenges that result from foreign fighters, volunteers, and other conflict voyeurs returning from the battlefield to their countries of origin.<sup>108</sup> The battlefield in Ukraine is incredibly complex, with a range of violent non-state actors—private military contractors, foreign fighters, volunteers, mercenaries, extremists, and terrorist groups—all in the mix, while disinformation is used to shape the themes and narratives that emerge.

Given the inflow of weaponry and fighters to the battlefield, the ongoing conflict in Ukraine could spur years of instability throughout the region, as the world has witnessed in other conflicts, including in the Balkans. High availabilities of weapons, including small arms and light weapons (SALW), often lead to black markets and other illicit trafficking and smuggling networks, breeding criminality and working at cross-purposes to those attempting to implement humanitarian agendas or pursue post-conflict stabilization efforts.

Moreover, the conflict is taking place against the backdrop of great power competition. If the conflict expands, there is the risk of spillover violence and shockwaves throughout parts of the Caucasus and Central Asia. Regional powers could soon become more involved, engaging in score settling and backing various proxy groups.

Russia's poor military performance will have profound implications for the global order and relegate Moscow to a second-rate power, leading Putin to continue lashing out in unpredictable and violent ways. Given the war crimes already committed, and atrocities that mount by the day, there is little doubt that Russia will remain a pariah state for the foreseeable future, essentially ensuring continued and potentially worsening Russian isolation.

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<sup>108</sup> Naureen Chowdhury Fink, "Putin is calling in favors from Syria and Africa. It's a dangerous move," *CNN*, March 16, 2022, <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/03/16/opinions/putin-foreign-fighters-syria-africa-ukraine-fink/index.html>; see also, Naureen Chowdhury Fink and Colin Clarke, "Foreign Fighters Are Heading to Ukraine. That's A Moment for Worry," *Politico*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/03/10/foreign-fighters-are-heading-to-ukraine-thats-a-moment-for-worry-00016084>.

**Recommendation #1: Clarify the legal framework governing foreign fighters and prepare for potential needs and challenges upon their return.**

States should begin preparing immediately for the risks associated with both outflows of foreign fighters, as well as their potential return. States should consider developing a registry of citizens volunteering to travel and conduct preliminary screenings if possible (conversations with officials in some states suggest some are already doing so).<sup>109</sup> Moreover, tools such as passenger travel tracking (e.g. API, PNR) could also be used to track travel. States should clarify the legal framework for those traveling, ensuring careful demarcation from counterterrorism legislation, and prepare to meet some of the needs and challenges of fighters when they return home.

**Recommendation #2: Consider designating Russia as a state sponsor of terrorism.**

The Biden administration should consider adding Russia to the U.S. Department of State's list of State Sponsors of Terrorism (SST).<sup>110</sup> Russia meets the legal criteria for listing—that in an ongoing fashion, it has provided safe haven to the Russian Imperial Movement, a U.S. State Department sanctioned terrorist group pursuant to Executive Order 13224.<sup>111</sup> Moreover, the Russian Federation has provided sanctuary<sup>112</sup> to the leader of the neo-Nazi group known as the Base, a group that has attempted to carry out terrorist attacks on U.S. soil.<sup>113</sup> Finally, Russia's pattern of overseas political assassinations meets the legal threshold for listing of state sponsors of terrorism.<sup>114</sup> Specific to the war in Ukraine, the Wagner Group, a tool of the Russian government, has been linked to efforts to assassinate President Zelenskyy.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Naureen C. Fink and Colin P. Clarke, "Foreign Fighters Are Heading to Ukraine. That's a Moment for Worry," *Politico*, March 10, 2022, <https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2022/03/10/foreign-fighters-are-heading-to-ukraine-thats-a-moment-for-worry-00016084>.

<sup>110</sup> Jason Blazakis, "Op-Ed: America is a safe haven for domestic terrorists. What can we do about it?" *Los Angeles Times*, December 5, 2021, <https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2021-12-05/america-safe-haven-domestic-terrorists-guns>.

<sup>111</sup> Robyn Dixon, "Inside white-supremacist Russian Imperial Movement, designated foreign terrorist organization by U.S. State Department," *Washington Post*, April 13, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-white-supremacist-terrorism-us/2020/04/11/255a9762-7a75-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/russia-white-supremacist-terrorism-us/2020/04/11/255a9762-7a75-11ea-a311-adb1344719a9_story.html).

<sup>112</sup> Daniel De Simone, Andrei Soshnikov, and Ali Winston, "Neo-Nazi Rinaldo Nazzaro running US militant group The Base from Russia," *BBC News*, January 24, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-51236915>.

<sup>113</sup> Alexander Mallin, "Newly released FBI tapes show white supremacist members of 'The Base' plotting terror attacks," *ABC News*, November 4, 2021, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/newly-released-fbi-tapes-show-white-supremacist-members/story?id=80975917>.

<sup>114</sup> "Russian spy: Nerve agent 'used to try to kill' Sergei Skripal," *BBC News*, March 7, 2018, <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-43323847>.

<sup>115</sup> Max Colchester, "U.K. Says Russian Mercenary Group Aims to Assassinate Ukraine's President," *Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 2022, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-k-says-russian-mercenary-group-aims-to-assassinate-ukraines-president-11648137870>.

**Recommendation #3: Strengthen international cooperation to counter disinformation, hate speech, and incitement online.**

As extremists seek to harness Russia's war in Ukraine to further advance their own hateful creed—whether in the form of online radicalization, nurturing transnational networks, or providing logistical support for individuals who travel to join in the fighting—it is imperative that the U.S. and allies remain vigilant against these developments and counter calls or attempts for mobilization to violence, whether through state-backed disinformation campaigns or monitoring extremists seeking battlefield experience. The U.S. and its allies should invest in international cooperation to fight far-right extremism, leveraging the work done by the United Nations and bodies like United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee Executive Directorate (CTED) and other multilateral bodies, as well as entities like the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT), Tech Against Terrorism, and the Christchurch Call to build momentum for more concerted and sustainable efforts to challenge online incitement and violent far-right messaging. A key part of this challenge will be to strengthen public-private partnerships that can bring together not only technology and communications firms, but also a wider range of actors including small businesses in affected contexts, specialists focused on education, community engagement, and youth, for example.

**Recommendation #4: Strengthen inter-agency cooperation to counter disinformation from foreign adversaries, both within states and through international partnerships.**

Given the blurred lines between likely state-backed disinformation campaigns purported by foreign adversaries and its resonance among U.S. online audiences, including domestic violent extremists, the U.S. government should take an inter-agency approach to monitor and combat the spread of mis-, dis-, and mal-information (MDM). This inter-agency mechanism should take a more transparent approach to its work as compared to other intelligence activities of the U.S. government in order to effectively gain credibility and trust among the private sector, NGOs, and citizens. The U.S. must also work closely with its counterparts overseas to devote more attention and resources to the role of disinformation in intra and inter-state conflicts.

**Recommendation #5: Ensure effective implementation of existing international instruments to inhibit transnational organized crime networks and others from exploiting the illicit movement of small arms and light weapons, and strengthen upstream measures aimed at preventing illicit acquisition of SALW.**

States should work with international entities, like the UN Office of Drugs and Crime, the UN Office of Counter-Terrorism and CTED, as well as bilateral partners, to more effectively implement existing international instruments to monitor the flow of SALW. This should also include thorough implementation of measures to address the trafficking in arms, drugs, and human beings, including the Protocol against the Illicit Manufacturing of and Trafficking in Firearms, their Parts and Components and Ammunition, supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime; the International Instrument to Enable States to Identify and Trace, in a Timely and Reliable Manner, Illicit Small Arms and Light Weapons; and the United Nations Programme of Action (PoA) to Prevent, Combat and Eradicate the Illicit Trade in Small Arms and Light Weapons in All Its Aspects; as well as relevant Security Council resolutions, including 2370 (2017) and 2482 (2019). Moreover, states should also invest in strengthening upstream measures aimed at preventing or deterring illicit acquisition of such weapons, components, and systems. This includes security cooperation activities focused on building partner capacity in areas like border control and defense institution reform and targeted training of law enforcement agencies.

**Recommendation 6: Provide vetted or screened channels for communities to give direct support to Ukraine and ensure that funds and material goods are not misdirected or exploited by criminals and other illicit actors.**

In light of the overwhelming desire in many communities to provide humanitarian assistance and support to Ukraine, governments should establish and circulate information about vetted and screened channels for providing financial and humanitarian support directly to Ukraine. This provides not only a means of ensuring that such support is not lost, misdirected, or exploited by criminals and other illicit actors, but also provides opportunities for activism for those who will not travel or provide frontline support.

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## **Stephanie Foggett**

### *Research Fellow*

Stephanie Foggett is a Research Fellow at The Soufan Center and Director of Global Communications at The Soufan Group. Her work at TSC focuses on: multilateral security cooperation; counter-terrorism cooperation with international organizations and governments; crisis management; and narratives and strategic communications as it relates to security.

## **Mollie Saltskog**

### *Research Fellow*

Mollie Saltskog is a Research Fellow with The Soufan Center. She contributes research and analysis to The Soufan Center on special projects relating to national security, geopolitics, and counterterrorism. Her areas of expertise include counterterrorism and geopolitics in Central Asia, Chinese foreign policy, white supremacy extremism, and modern disinformation.

## **Amanda Schmitt**

### *Program and Communications Officer*

Amanda Schmitt is the Program and Communications Officer at The Soufan Center. She has prior experience in research and project management across the United Nations, nonprofit, and public sectors, with a regional focus on the Middle East across humanitarian policy, forced migration, international law, and conflict analysis.

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## **ABOUT THE SOUFAN CENTER**

The Soufan Center (TSC) is an independent non-profit center offering research, analysis, and strategic dialogue on global security challenges and foreign policy issues, with a particular focus on counterterrorism, violent extremism, armed conflict, and the rule of law. Our work is underpinned by a recognition that human rights and human security perspectives are critical to developing credible, effective, and sustainable solutions. TSC fills a niche role by producing objective and innovative reports and analyses, and fostering dynamic dialogue and exchanges, to effectively equip governments, international organizations, the private sector, and civil society with key resources to inform policies and practice.



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