

Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: Multiple Ideological Agendas, One Tactical Goal

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 852

August 2023

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Just like the war in Afghanistan in the 1980s and the civil war in Syria in the 2010s, the war in Ukraine has produced an environment conducive to the involvement of foreign fighters. Most are welcomed as long as their militant activities remain geared toward undermining Russia's efforts on the battlefield. A whole range of actors have therefore [decamped](#) to Ukraine to fight Russian forces, including far-right Russian activists, Islamists, and diverse ethnic entrepreneurs from the post-Soviet space, as well as Europeans from the extreme far right and some far-left fighters from outside the region (Kurdish People's Defense Units and National Bolsheviks from Western Europe).

In the past, these violent actors often fought against each other. However, such ideological competitions and political tensions have temporarily been set aside as these groups work toward common objectives. They have adopted a more pragmatic and action-oriented approach, focusing on fighting the Russian armed forces with a view to ultimately overthrowing the current Russian regime. This strategy dramatically downplays the importance of ideological priorities, producing temporary, unholy alliances with unpredictable potential consequences. It has, however, demonstrated the existence of a fractured yet sizable social base united by the struggle for political representation in the Russian context – with potential repercussions on the Russian political scene, in the North Caucasus, and across Eurasia.

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Who Are the Main Foreign Actors on the Ukrainian Battlefield?

Soon after the full-scale invasion in February 2022, the Ukrainian government approved the creation of the Ukrainian Foreign Legion, which [recognized](#) thousands of foreign volunteers as part of the country's Territorial Defense Forces. The specifics of the Foreign Legion's composition, size, and activities remain opaque. Publicly available information suggests that the core of the Legion is made up of multiple units, created mostly on the basis of the volunteer's nationality. Following a thorough vetting process conducted by the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defense, Kyiv has provided some of these groups with direct support, including weapons, and integrated them into Ukraine's armed forces. In other cases, the government has helped fighters travel to Ukraine (often with Poland's approval), providing them with logistical support and even citizenship.

Russians in Ukraine's Foreign Legion

One of the most visible units is the Russian Volunteers Corps (*Russkii Dobrovol'cheskii Korpus*, RDK), officially active since August 2022. Its backbone [comprises](#) citizens of the Russian Federation who fought as part of the Azov Battalion. A parallel unit is the "Freedom of Russia" Legion (*Legion Svoboda Rossii*, LSR), formed by Russian prisoners of war in Ukraine in March 2022 and later expanded by the addition of Russian volunteers. In May 2023, the RDK and LSR [announced](#) their decision to join forces. They have since gained huge media exposure thanks to their incursions into Russia's Belgorod and Bryansk oblasts: supported by Ukrainian military intelligence, they launched military raids to target Russian checkpoints and capture materiel.

The "Civil Council" (*Grazhdanskii sovet*), created in November 2022, provides assistance to the RDK and other structures centered around Russian citizens in recruiting volunteers. Recently, the Civic Council [announced](#) the formation of the Siberian battalion, to include Asiatic peoples of Russian Siberia and the Far East, and a Turkic subsection, "Turan," to include Turkic-speaking minorities. The latter, which [appeared](#) in the fall of 2022, is led by the ethnic Kyrgyz Almaz Kudabek and [includes](#) Tatars, Uzbeks, members of the Turkish far-right paramilitary organization Grey Wolves, and Azeris. The final group constitute the largest share of the battalion and are [represented](#) by Magomed Dzhafarov, himself a member of the Grey Wolves.

Other than these groups, Chechen units represent the most active combatants from the Russian Federation in Ukraine. The battalions named after Sheikh Mansur and Dzhokhar Dudaev are made up mostly of Chechen refugees living in Europe and combatants who fought the Russians in Chechnya – many of whom have [been](#) active in Ukraine since war began in the Donbas in 2014 – as well as Ingush and Dagestanis.

After fighting as an independent unit in 2014-15, the Dzhokhar Dudaev battalion was integrated into the Ukrainian army. The Sheikh Mansur battalion followed a more unorthodox path. In 2014, it initially [fought](#) alongside the Right Sector Ukrainian Volunteer Corps and the Azov battalion, the two main Ukrainian right-wing paramilitary organizations, but it subsequently split from them. Unlike all the other Chechen battalions fighting in the Donbas war, which soon integrated into the Ukrainian armed forces, it remains an independent, volunteer-based battalion.

The 2022 war created the opportunity for Chechens to expand their political and military activities. On the military side, three additional Chechen groups joined the fight against the Russian forces. The Dzhokhar Dudaev battalion created the Adam group, an elite military unit that participated in the defense of Kyiv and the incursions into Russian-occupied territory. Akhmed Zakaev created the Separate Special Purpose Battalion of the Ministry of Defense of the Armed Forces of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (OBON) in order to join the International Legion of Territorial Defense of Ukraine.

Later in 2022, Ajnad al-Kavkaz, a Chechen militant faction that fought in Syria for more than seven years and is composed of veterans of the Second Chechen War, traveled from the Middle East to Ukraine via Poland to join Zakaev's forces. After obtaining Ukrainian citizenship, their leader, Rustam Azhiev, was named deputy commander-in-chief of the Ichkerian forces. Since then, the group has collaborated with Ukrainian military intelligence and launched cross-border operations in Russia.

On the political side, Akhmed Zakaev and the Dzhokhar Dudaev battalion have [presented](#) the war as the first step toward overthrowing current Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and restoring the so-called Chechen Republic of Ichkeria (ChRI). Zakaev has led the Ichkerian government in exile since the establishment of the Caucasus Emirate in 2007. Two other groups composed of Chechens from the diaspora are competing to take over the leadership of the ChRI. They are organized around former members of the Chechen administration as well as influential members of the diaspora and the government in exile. The various actors disagree about what the future Ichkerian government and constitution should look like, including the role therein for Western-style democracy and Sharia law.

Other Fighters from the Former Soviet Union

The Ukrainian Foreign Legion also hosts groups from other neighboring states, all of which see the fight in Ukraine as interwoven with their own struggle against Russian imperialism.

Mamuka Mamulashvili, a former member of the Georgian army who fought in the 1992-93 Abkhazia war, Chechnya in the 1990s, and Georgia's war with Russia in 2008, [founded](#) the Georgian Legion in 2014. The Legion became part of the Ukrainian army in 2016 and its ranks swelled following the 2022 invasion. It has since fought in many of the most

intense battles of the war, including the defense of Kyiv and the battle of Bakhmut. The Georgian Legion frames its fight as part of a broader campaign against Russia. Its broader ideological views are less advertised, according to the Legion a level of flexibility in its alliances on the battlefield. It has, for instance, [fought](#) alongside nationalist and Islamist Chechen groups, as well as Carpathian Sich, a nationalist Ukrainian group. It has also integrated non-Georgian fighters – including Hungarians, Roma, and Ukrainians, as well as U.S. and British citizens – into its units.

The Kastuś Kalinoŭski regiment, established in March 2022, is made up of Belarusian fighters. The core of the regiment were members of the former Tactical Group “Belarus,” which fought in the Donbas in 2014-15 before being disbanded in 2016. Some of the Kalinoŭski regiment’s fighters participated in the 2020 protests in Belarus before returning to Ukraine via Poland. As a result, the regiment is perceived as a political body that, unlike Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya’s opposition-in-exile, has real potential to challenge the Lukashenka regime – even if Tsikhanouskaya recently [opened](#) the door to collaboration with the regiment. Its fighters have suffered important losses – including the regiment’s commander, Ivan Marchuk – in the fight against Russian forces in Ukraine.

Battalion Krym, a relatively small unit that has existed since 2014 and is now part of the Ukrainian Foreign Legion, consists mainly of Crimean Tatars but also [includes](#) Chechens and Circassians as well as ethnic Russians. Its leader, Crimean Tatar Isa Akaev, supports the Civil Council. The group’s multiethnic nature is underlined by the role played by Mu’az Kabardinets, a Circassian involved in many of the propaganda videos the battalion has uploaded to Telegram. Kabardinets is a known member of the “Muslim Corpus ‘Kavkaz’” (*Musul’manskii korpus ‘Kavkaz’*), another group active in Ukraine that collaborates with the Krym battalion. Its main objective is the expulsion of Russians from Crimea. The Russian Federal Security Service has accused the battalion of recruiting residents of Russia and Crimea to organize subversive activities there.

Contradictory Ideological Orientations...

Although all these groups of foreign fighters appear to share a practical objective, their desired political outcomes often diverge significantly. Historical and ideological antagonisms, such as those between Russian ultranationalists and Muslims, continue to fuel tension.

The presence of a Russian far-right milieu in Ukraine is nothing new. Ukraine became home to several Russian right-wing radicals in the late 2000s, and their presence grew more visible in the 2010s. During the Donbas war in 2014, some Russian neo-Nazis joined the Ukrainian side, often as part of the Azov Battalion. According to some experts, between 2014 and 2019, about 3,000 Russians [participated](#) in hostilities on the side of Kyiv. In the years following the Donbas war, many Russian far-right leaders [relocated](#) to Kyiv to avoid criminal prosecution in Russia. This can be explained not only by the Ukrainian

government's warm welcome of any opponents of Russia, but also by the deep relationship between the Russian and Ukrainian far right that [predated](#) 2014 and persisted – at least in part – until the two broke off relations.

The far-right section of the ideological spectrum is occupied by RDK. Its leader, Denis Nikitin (Kapustin), openly embraces neo-Nazism and has connections to white supremacist circles in Western Europe and the United States. A notorious football hooligan, Nikitin [developed](#) White Rex, a brand sponsoring weight-lifting and mixed martial arts (MMA) tournaments. White Rex's entrance into the world of Western European far-right combat sports [was](#) a key development on this professionally organized, fight-focused scene with radical far-right messaging. RDK's official Telegram channel [propagates](#) xenophobic, anti-immigration, and anti-Muslim rhetoric. Nikitin himself has expressed support for the Azov regiment and moved to Kyiv in 2017. RDK [advocates](#) for the dissolution of the Russian Federation – which it sees as the continuation of the tsarist and Soviet multinational empires that exploited ethnic Russians – and the emergence of an ethnically homogeneous Russian state.

LSR's agenda is less obvious than that of RDK, and it is unclear if it can be framed as genuinely more democratic and less far-right than its competitor. Its leader is Ilya Ponomarev, a former Russian MP who was the only one to vote against the annexation of Crimea in March 2014; he is currently based in Kyiv. The Legion [positions](#) itself as an ideologically neutral formation that recognizes the ethnic diversity of the Russian Federation and aims primarily to topple the incumbent Russian elites. During the 6th Free Nations of Post-Russia Forum, held in Washington, DC, in the spring of 2023, Ponomarev was among the few to caution against the dissolution of the Russian Federation, instead suggesting the remodeling of current center-periphery relations to make them more inclusive of non-Russian groups.

The Civil Council is perhaps the most Europe-oriented of the groups of Russian exiles. It [acknowledges](#) the European Convention on Human Rights as the foundation of its current activities and the basis for future political institutions. The Convention is primarily understood as a means of protecting basic human rights and combating all forms of discrimination. The Council is open to amending its use of the Convention to include Islamic dogmas and thereby reflect some combat volunteers' religious beliefs. It [considers](#) the Russian Federation to be a failed state and supports the right of all nations to self-determination.

Muslim battalions in Ukraine hold a wide range of ideological perspectives and religious views. Their differences and cleavages are reminiscent of those observed in the North Caucasian diaspora in Western Europe. The generational cleavage between traditionalist, Soviet-educated individuals and more fundamentalist youths favoring Sharia is visible in Ukraine, but without much impact on the ideological foundations of the different groups. The Dzhokhar Dudaev battalion has incorporated former jihadists as well as ChRI

partisans and fundamentalists. One of the reasons for this ideological diversity is that jihadist groups like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State have called upon their supporters not to get involved in what they have [described](#) as a war of “crusaders.”

Muslims [criticize](#) both RDK and LSR and mistrust their outspoken (RDK) and latent (LSR) Islamophobia and xenophobia. However, they view RDK and LSR as temporary fellow travelers and short-term pragmatic allies in their effort to challenge the Russian regime. Moreover, RDK’s advocacy for national self-determination and the creation of ethnically homogenous and politically autonomous states on the territory of the Russian Federation overlaps with the political aspirations of many Muslim combatants who belong to ethnic-minority communities.

Potential mediators between the most fervent ideological opponents, RDK and Muslim-majority battalions, are Slavic converts to Islam. The case of the recently killed Belarusian Daniil “Mujahid” Lyashuk [demonstrates](#) how converts contribute to blurring the boundaries between jihadists and ultranationalist circles by [emphasizing](#) shared warrior aesthetics.

...but also Shared Features

While we lack the data to build a sociological portrait of pro-Ukrainian foreign fighters, these movements share two central features. The first is an image of masculinity associated with warfare culture: far-right and Islamic groups share a cult of body training, psychological and physical resilience to pain, and an ability to commit violence in the name of an ideal (whether this is personified by the mythical “Euroethnic warrior” or the jihadist). The second relates to the ethno- or religious nationalism of these groups, which universally oppose what they see as the Russian imperial structure. All dream of (culturally, ethnically, religiously) homogenous state structures, the creation of which would require the fragmentation of the current Russian Federation. Dominant among Russian far-right groups is the idea that Russian nationalism has become the main force opposing Russian imperialism.

Conclusion

While it is too early to judge the medium- and long-term impact of these foreign legions in Ukraine, the rift between pro-empire and anti-empire figures within the Russian nationalist movement may well have repercussions at home once the Russian political landscape reopens, as we saw during the Bolotnaya protests of 2011-12, when liberals and nationalists protested together (or at least in parallel) against the Kremlin. The presence of Muslim fighters on both sides of the frontlines means that tensions in the North Caucasus will likely retain their transnational character. And perhaps most importantly, these oppositional groups will benefit from combat experience and equipment skills, accelerating the large-scale militarization of the whole of Eurasia as hundreds of

thousands of men come out of the war in Ukraine with deep experience of war and resulting trauma.

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