

A silhouette of a person in profile, saluting with their right hand to their forehead. The background is split horizontally into a blue upper half and a yellow lower half. A dark blue rectangular box is overlaid on the lower half, containing the title and authors.

“People are still fighting.” (Lack of) Change for the Foreign Fighters for Ukraine

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International Centre for
Counter-Terrorism

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ICCT Report

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About This Project

This project is looking at the third deliverable of a project looking at pro-Russian doxing practices against pro-Ukraine foreign individuals based in Ukraine and abroad. The project, entitled “Anti-Dox: Identifying, Evaluating and Countering Disinformation in Times of War”, is supported by the European Media and Information Fund - managed by the Calouste Gulbenkian foundation.

The project is led by the think-and do-thank International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), based in the Netherlands, together with the Fundacja Reporterów (FR), a group of investigative reporters and fact-checkers based in Poland. The project aims to investigate and evaluate doxing with a view to help counter Russia’s disinformation campaign against Europe.

The authors bear sole responsibility for the contents of EMIF (European Media and Information Fund) supported publications, including this one. These contents do not have to reflect the positions of EMIF, its partners, Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation and the European University Institute (EUI).



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Executive Summary

1. Foreign fighting for Ukraine is not a new phenomenon as it started at the beginning of the Russian war of aggression in 2014. Initially, a small number of foreign fighters joined the fight but their numbers grew exponentially after the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion in February 2022. At the same time, their number was nowhere near the alleged 20,000 touted by some Ukrainian sources. Ukrainians refrain from providing data on the scale of the foreign fighter phenomenon in the country but since 2022 it has most likely remained in the low thousands.
2. The International Legion, founded on 27 February 2022, was created to act as an umbrella unit for the arriving foreigners, but quite quickly effectively split into two Legions. Moreover, many arriving fighters found their way to different Ukrainian units, which supposedly were not seeking foreign recruits. This trend has intensified recently and foreign fighting for Ukraine should not be relegated just to the experiences of the Legion in general or individual Legionnaires in particular. In fact, a global social movement of fighting/volunteering for Ukraine has come together to support the country.
3. The practice of foreign fighting for Ukraine has undergone a significant change since early 2022. No longer are its practitioners speaking of it in terms of an ideologically motivated stand for democracy/the West/Europe against autocracy. Nowadays, most of the fighters seem to express elements of a peculiar “Stockholm syndrome,” i.e. fondness for a country and a conflict which cost them so much but which they are still willing to fight for.
4. The reality of foreign fighting in and for Ukraine is still governed by a sense of randomness related to training, organisation, and administration. Many of the aforementioned issues seem to be in a flux and approached in a piecemeal and haphazard nature by the Ukrainians.
5. Originally, the practice of foreign fighting for Ukraine was often viewed through extremist lenses, as many of the original 2014 intake of volunteers came from a radical milieu. This has not changed as the issue of extremism or radicalism among such fighters has become much less prominent. Nonetheless, some radical local actors, who in the past attempted to recruit foreigners into their units, are still active in Ukraine. At the same time, the threat of radicalisation and potentially, political violence or terrorism, now emanates from a different source and not from the alleged “extremists” amongst the foreign fighters. This is now more of an issue of foreign individuals who perceive themselves as the most fervent and true backers of Ukraine, and will be disappointed with the conflict’s outcome and the alleged abandonment of Ukraine by its Western allies (especially the US). Consequently, they may - and there are instances when this has already happened - attempt to exact revenge on the less than enthusiastic allies or former allies of Ukraine.
6. Pay, contract, and length of service issues are less of a concern for the foreign fighters now than in 2022. They can now also join the National Guard (previously reserved for Ukrainian citizens), or even become officers. However, benefits for veteran foreign fighters and especially the promised insurance which was to be paid out to the families of the deceases mostly remain beyond the grasp of individual fighters or their next of kin.
7. Despite legal developments, it remains to be seen whether real change occurred in relation to foreign fighters potentially receiving Ukrainian citizenship in recognition of their service for Ukraine. The bureaucracy also remains nightmarish in relation to some

receiving the status of a resident without which they often cannot sign the contract with the country's armed forces.

8. Soldiers, including foreigners, are still asked to “chip in” financially while attempting to cover for the shortcomings of the central supply system or while upgrading one's battle kit. This creates conflicts with some of the new arrivals who are keen on saving the pay and sending it back home as a remittance.
9. Some of the new arrivals, such as the Latin American foreign fighters, are financially motivated to come to Ukraine and effectively morph into poor man's mercenaries. They appear in growing numbers but need time to adjust to the reality on the ground.
10. Different Belarusian, Georgian, and Russian mono-ethnic units continue to fight for Ukraine but their approach to the war or their focus has often changed. Belarusians are keen on preserving their manpower, Georgians are, often accused of intending to act outside of Ukraine, Russians seem to be less involved in operations in their country for the benefit of Ukraine. At the same time, some of their leaders continue to tour Ukraine or the world and share their battlefield exploits and fundraise for their units.

Introduction

On 27 February 2022, mere days after the beginning of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine, president Volodymyr Zelenskyy appealed to all who wanted to “come and fight side by side with Ukrainians” and asked them to join the defence of his country in the ranks of the newly established International Legion for the Defence of Ukraine.¹ Three years have passed since then and in early 2025 foreigners are still fighting for Ukraine.² This is the end result of the fact that, as one of the foreign civilian volunteers interviewed for this report asserted to the authors, “these people somehow fell in love with Ukraine [...and] people are still fighting. Plus, there are others, like me, volunteering in a multitude of capacities.” Having said that, she also attested to the fact that these foreigners developed a peculiar type of a “Stockholm syndrome,” an effective fondness for a country and a war which cost them so much physically and psychologically.³ A foreign fighter⁴ with the Ukrainian parachute brigade recently remarked that “I am slowly preparing to go home. Simply put, I struggle to see any more sense for this work [foreign fighting] here. Gotta get back and help ours [in his case – Poles] so that they are ready when the time comes [and Russia attacks].”⁵

Such statements provide a framework for the current report, which, to some extent, picks up where one of the authors’ earlier work left off⁶ and attempts to take stock of the foreign fighting phenomenon in and for Ukraine as of early 2025. By no means should this report be read as a fully comprehensive exercise which would account for the presence of all the fighters, their units, their war records, or their injuries. Due to the fighters’ almost non-stop movement and fluctuation – either between units or between Ukraine and their countries of origin – this is practically impossible.⁷ Focusing on some stand-out members of this community and attempting to take stock of their experience might also be misleading as some researchers would be first drawn to the most approachable or best-known of these figures. At the same time, as one of the authors has been told while doing his earlier research – “the ones online, the [T]witter, [F]acebook ones of us...well, treat that with caution. It is not that they are lying but they are, what is the word, embellishing their records and their work.”⁸

In order not to fall in this methodological trap and have the report biased by the account of the fighters or civilian volunteers who were the most known, the most often quoted by the media and the other researchers, the authors opted for a different strategy. One of them (Rekawek) reinterviewed, or – as Hana Josticova put it - “engaged in additional informal conversations in person or over social media for further information, clarification or verification of data. Informal conversations, particularly off the record, have been recognised as a useful method for gathering deep and rich data both in ethnographic and non-ethnographic research, especially when researching a politically or socially sensitive topic, and in high-risk environments.”⁹ This re-engagement included circa 50 individuals who, to a different degree, offered their views on the 2025 or post-2023 situation when one of the authors was putting together his latest report on the fighters. This author has also been included, with the authorisation of their administrators, in online spaces for both civilian volunteers and foreign fighters for Ukraine. This report will not quote from these spaces in order to protect their members but the exchanges there, as well as the ones from Reddit – open to anyone, inform the authors’ thinking on the subject.¹⁰ Moreover, this allows to bypass the dilemma of who to focus on in the current report. Due to the variety of opinions sought in an ethnographic way and viewpoints studied in free-flowing exchanges amongst the fighters and volunteers, this report aims to give a more honest, objective, and broader outlook on the state of foreign fighting for Ukraine at the end of 2024 and the beginning of 2025. It may not answer all the questions on who fights where and for what period of time, but

attempts to take a bird's eye view of the situation and account for the experiences, challenges, and issues as felt by the fighters themselves. Most of the individuals are European and Western, but some are also from former Soviet Union countries or Latin America.

The report will evolve around one central theme discussing change, or lack thereof, in the reality on the ground for the foreign fighters in Ukraine. It will discuss whether change happened in relation to a string of issues ranging from the more organisational or strategic (such as: the original idea of the International Legion, its size, composition, availability of other units for foreign fighters to join, development of a global volunteer movement for Ukraine, the fading issue/threat of extremism among the foreign fighters) to seemingly petty ones related to pay or contracts. The report will also draw attention to the fact that some of the arriving fighters, especially from outside the broader West, could effectively be called mercenaries, as their motivation to deploy to Ukraine is almost entirely pecuniary in nature.¹¹ Finally, it will focus on the fact that not much is left of the heady idealism of 2022 when foreign fighters joining Ukraine in its fight against Russia were primarily ideologically motivated and fought for a democratic weaker side against an autocratic invader. Nowadays, as was already mentioned, they have developed a “Stockholm syndrome” which keeps them grounded in the country.

At the same time, the report will account for areas which saw little change and remain a source of frustration for the fighters – the perennial “randomness” of their situation in Ukraine, the chaos or incompetence of some of their commanders, the incremental change related to citizenship and residency status, the inability of the fighters to gain some of the promised veteran or insurance benefits and the need to “chip in.” Moreover, the report will also take stock of some of the long-standing, and to some extent changing, elements of the foreign fighter for Ukraine phenomenon – the contribution of the so-called mono-ethnic units from Belarus, Georgia, and Russia to the Ukrainian war effort.

From a Few to a Global Social Movement: A Change in Foreign Fighting for Ukraine

First foreign fighters appeared in the Ukrainian ranks long before President Zelenskyy's call of 27 February 2022, i.e. in the Spring of 2014 when the war was allegedly “hybrid” and not full scale in nature. Their numbers, however, were relatively low and they had relatively little impact on the events on the battlefield.¹²

Eight years later, however, the situation changed, at least initially. Images of men queuing up to sign for Ukraine's International Legion, followed by allegedly hundreds if not thousands of men dressed in military fatigues, presumably aspiring foreign fighters for Ukraine, landing at the Warsaw or Cracow airports in Poland and then heading Eastwards by train, bus, or car into Ukraine were beamed to the world.¹³ Quite early on, the idea of forming all of them into a single entity, a 21st century version of the International Brigades from the Spanish civil war,¹⁴ was shelved as fighters with military experiences were offered rapid deployments to the frontlines, usually around Kyiv, and the rest were to spend months in training. Eventually, this led to the creation of two Legions – the one which found itself in the ranks of the Ukrainian Ground Forces (SVZSU, the “military” Legion) and the other under the Main Directorate of Intelligence of the Ministry of Defence of Ukraine (GUR, GUR Legion). These two are often mistakenly referred to as a single unit. To complicate matters further, foreigners also found their way, single-handedly or in groups, to other regular units of the Ukrainian army. This practice allowed, to some extent, the idea of foreign fighting for Ukraine to thrive or at least, profoundly change, if not metastasise.

The practice of foreign fighting in general, and the International Legion in particular, attracted waves of external scrutiny. Investigative outlets have uncovered stories of corruption, reckless leadership and fraudulent recruitment, raising questions about its structure and accountability.¹⁵ The abovementioned shortcomings have also attracted the ire of the Legionnaires themselves who authored at least two critical reports of the unit's functioning (both are in possession of the authors, so are dossiers compiled by Kyiv-based foreign correspondents who tracked the most troublesome or aspiring recruits to the Legion). These have been confidential, at least initially, and addressed to the Ukrainian high command and delineated a litany of complaints from the wing of the Legion overseen by the ground forces. These include a focus on a mismanaged, badly led, tactically conservative unit which suffered from a high rotation of personnel and logistical inefficiencies or absurdities. Moreover, one of the reports also painted a picture of a unit inundated by other structural issues: fraudulent recruitment procedures, unauthorised fundraising, the outright theft of military resources and, most damningly, totally inadequate and improvised training for the newly arriving recruits.¹⁶

As much as the aforementioned stories underscored the controversies surrounding the reality of foreign fighting in Ukraine,¹⁷ the fighters' presence in the country was appreciated by the locals. Interviews of Western volunteers in Ukrainian media help Ukrainians to feel the world's solidarity with their quest in more than military, diplomatic, or financial support.¹⁸ Oftentimes, they also help advance fundraising campaigns for drones, medical aid kits, or ammunition - a vital part of a multi-connected ecosystem of Ukrainian war effort.¹⁹

These foreigners are a part of a global social movement supporting the country in its defence against Russia.²⁰ This movement consists of groups of individuals focusing on different aspects of aiding or assisting Ukraine. It can be best portrayed while studying the ecosystem of online groups for such supporters/volunteers. One such WhatsApp collective, administered by foreigners who have been in Ukraine since 2022, acts as an umbrella for multilingual 36 subgroups which cater to, for example, volunteers of different nationalities or ones focusing on a specific region of Ukraine. This is also reflected by the fact that Ukraine has seen the creation of "volunteer centres" (such as the Lviv based International Volunteer Centre) or effectively one-stop shops for any foreigner wanting to assist Ukraine during the time of war. For the fighters, there exists a Ukrainian website which effectively allows for matchmaking between the units of the Ukrainian military as it looks for specialists or a given fighter. Of course, this service mostly focuses on locals attempting to make the most of their time within the military, but the authors are aware of cases in which this was also successfully utilised by foreign fighters in Ukrainian ranks to successfully look for and then join a different unit.²¹

An Ever-Changing Scale of Foreign Fighting for Ukraine

The early figure of around 20,000 applicants for the International Legion needs to be treated with utmost caution as in an interview, it was later noted that if "1/10 [i.e. 2,000 individuals] of this number actually gets to shoot at the Russians then this would be a success." The number of 2,000 seemed to have caught on as it was later repeated by the Legion,²² and by journalists covering Ukraine.²³ There is plenty of reporting, however, that the real numbers are higher. For example, the Georgian Legion, only one of the units accommodating foreigners fighting for Ukraine, allegedly had around 1,000 men by 2024²⁴ or that 400-600 individuals applied monthly to join the International Legion.²⁵ As will be shown, this is contradicted by the real numbers of fighters present in the ranks, and one should take the branding of different units, which refer to themselves as Legions, brigades, or battalions and suggest possessing hundreds of fighters, with a pinch of salt to say the least.

All of this does not stop the opposing side, Russia, from reporting their own estimates of the foreigners fighting for Ukraine. The Russian Ministry of Defence claimed that until March, 2024, 6,000 “foreign mercenaries” were killed in Ukraine out of 13,000 who came, out of which 2,960 were citizens of Poland, 1,042 – from Georgia, and 1,113 – from the US.²⁶ Some Russian newspaper reports even claim that currently as much as 40,000 foreign fighters are in the Ukrainian ranks, 5,000 of which are allegedly Colombian.²⁷ Interestingly, some Ukrainian sources provide clues as to the numbers of the foreign fighters – some list the deceased individuals, allegedly up to 600 dead since 2022.²⁸ They feature inconsistencies and also list civilian volunteers who perished while being present in Ukraine but a careful study of this list reveals that it offers valuable clues for the attempt to estimate the real numbers of foreign fighters present in the Ukrainian ranks. If they were to suffer the same casualties (45,100 dead out of a force of circa 980,000, according to President Zelenskyy)²⁹ as the totality of the Ukrainian army, i.e. at a rate of 4.6 percent, then their number would stand at circa 13,000. At the same time, however, the aforementioned inconsistencies and the fact that, for example, in early 2023, after the most intensive periods of fighting around Kyiv and in the east of Ukraine where the foreigners were present, the foreign fighter casualties were around “only” 100, probably suggests that the number of 600 deceased foreigners is inflated.³⁰ Consequently, their actual numbers are considerably lower than the aforementioned 13,000 and could amount to lower thousands, i.e. more than the often quoted figure of 2,000 but much less than the 20,000 sometimes quoted by Ukrainian sources.

Not Just the Legion: A Change of Units Hosting Foreign Fighters

Development of instruments such as the aforementioned website for aspiring fighters underscores the degree to which the reality of foreign fighting for Ukraine has changed. No longer is it defined by the heady speech of President Zelenskyy of 27 February 2022 and the attempt to develop the International Legion into an umbrella force for all the foreigners. In fact, the interest in the unit has been waning as it allegedly “was not given the chance to do its job and could not make a difference. Some of the fighters have suggested it was not possible as it all eventually came down to the question – ‘why do we [Ukrainian command] need a few hundred foreigners?’ And this was reflected in how the ministry’s [of defence] office responsible for us [foreign fighters] was led and then eventually, practically disbanded last year.” This summarised the changing Ukrainian approach to fielding more foreigners in the country’s armed forces – it is still possible for individuals to arrive and find a way to a unit of their choice, however, this is not overtly encouraged by the Ministry of Defence.

Consequently, the phenomenon of foreign fighting in Ukraine continues to acquire an increasingly diffuse character, and taking stock of all the fighters and their experiences is like “catching fish with bare hands.”³¹ One might also be getting the sense that there are less “fish”, or less (Western) foreign fighters fighting for Ukraine. In their place, Ukraine deploys individuals from the other regions of the world who are often motivated by other factors and issues (more on this issue in the later part of the report). Such a flexible approach by the Ukrainians leads to some bitter comments from the veteran foreign fighters based in the country: “no one in Ukraine actually owns this issue – the creation of the [umbrella unit, the International] Legion and the foreigners wanting to fight for Ukraine [...] It is almost as if they were suspicious of us. The ‘who are you/why did you come here’ question hangs in the air.”

Moreover, some of the fighters now refer to the Legion as a mere “public relations stunt” put together at a time when Ukraine was fighting for its existence as an independent country in the outskirts of Kyiv in late February and March 2022. As it later turned out, with more Western support

and the increasing trickle of modern weaponry, Ukraine had no need for foreign volunteers in its armed forces but recoiled from the idea of shutting down the Legion(s) or banning foreigners from service in its more regular units. Thus, it is possible that as much as no one owned the issue at the outset of the full-scale war then also no one was ready to lead the process of change in this respect and rid the country's armed forces of foreigners. Similarly, however, also no one attempted to lead the process of the Legion(s) repair and address at least some of the concerns stemming from media investigations or writings emanating from the ranks of the disgruntled Legionnaires. Any reformist drive from the Ukrainian authorities would not have been helped by the fact that, for example, one of the staunchest critics of the Legion's internal irregularities was himself exposed as an individual who lied about his military record upon joining the unit.³²

As was mentioned, however, the drawdown of interest in the Legion does not mean that a given determined foreigner would not be able to fight for Ukraine. The ones who get into regular units of the SVZSU have a chance to advertise their skills and consequently, receive "direct offers from other units to join them." The aforementioned offers directed to individual foreigners depend on the readiness of a given Ukrainian brigade commander to approach and then subsequently feature these fighters in their ranks. The interviewed foreigners admitted that "a lot" depends on this as not all the local officers are keen on doing so, but some attitudes might be changing. While researching the topic of foreign fighters for another publication,³³ one of the authors found out that some units of the Ukrainian military were not excessively keen on featuring foreigners as it would be difficult to integrate them into all-Ukrainian formations to, for example, handle some of the weapons systems. This, however, seems to be changing and these very units nowadays feature foreigners in their ranks.³⁴ By no means, however, are these units turning into hubs of foreign fighting replacing either of the International Legions but allow non-Ukrainian fighters more options to choose from. The units are said "not to be looking at you through the lenses of 'local or foreign,' no. All they care about is whether you are able to get by in Ukrainian."³⁵

Extremism Amongst the Fighters? A Change in Content and Perception

Back in 2014 concerns related to the flow of foreign fighters into Ukraine were largely centred on their alleged extremism and the fact that while at war they would join "political units" and forge connections with likeminded local radicals. Next, they would return home and engage in political violence or terrorism. As it transpired, some of these fighters had been politically aligned with the far-right but none later engaged in politically motivated acts at home.³⁶ Nonetheless, the arrival of foreign fighters in 2022 was also initially perceived through the lenses of their political allegiances and them allegedly constituting a "far-right Al-Qaeda," - i.e. a transnational terrorist movement congregating and training in a third country for a strike back at the homeland.³⁷ However, the issue of right-wing extremism in the ranks of foreign fighters for Ukraine has been "all talk, but not a lot of walk."³⁸

In 2025, one can see another change – this time in perception of the issue. The talk of *extremism* or *far-right* political ideas among the fighters is virtually gone from sources reporting on the issue, and is not a topic of conversation amongst the fighters themselves. The only exception is Russia or its online operators who continue to label these individuals as "nazis" or "nazi mercs [mercenaries]" on social media, while themselves employing a highly inflammatory and extremist language.³⁹

All of the above, however, does not mean that among the foreigners fighting for Ukraine one would not find those who could be "walking the walk" as far as radical right-wing politics are concerned.

It is no surprise that at the current moment, as they are all involved in war fighting, they are not exactly beaming ideological messages from the frontlines. Consequently, the likes of Denis “Nikitin” Kapustin, the commander of the Russian Volunteer Corps (RDK), a unit made of Russians who fight for Ukraine and a structure which features well known far-right individuals from Russia (and even attempted to recruit like-minded members in other European countries), refrains from any far right demagoguery while on a speaking tour with some of the members from his unit. He fondly speaks of nationalists of the region (Belarusian, Polish, Russian, and Ukrainian) who should set aside their differences and fight the Putin regime together. Moreover, he maintains that his unit will continue to prepare for the eventuality of a Russian collapse even during the expected armistice and the conflict becoming “frozen”. Interestingly, during his public appearances he proverbially tips his hat to the Azov Movement of Ukraine, which he perceives as a precursor of fighting nationalism in Ukraine and a platform for foreign individuals like himself to be given the opportunity to fight against Putin’s Russia.⁴⁰ His speaking engagements are promoted by the Azov Movement’s 3rd Assault Brigade of the SVZSU, which is led by prominent members of the original Azov Battalion of 2014.⁴¹ Moreover, Kapustin’s RDK is effectively integrated into the aforementioned brigade, which also features most of the Azov’s 2014-2015 foreign fighters who returned to Ukraine in the aftermath of the Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine.⁴²

All of this, plus the pre-2022 well known political ambitions of the 3rd Assault’s commander, Andriy Biletsky, whose unit is known for its meticulous planning and execution of its well-crafted public relations activities,⁴³ could mean that the brigade’s battlefield fame will be used to restore the political fortunes of the Azov movement in Ukraine and once again attempt to position it as a point of reference for the far-right in Europe.⁴⁴ At the same time, however, its success with the voters of Ukraine is far from certain. If the movement attempts to turn its battlefield success and prowess into political currency on its battlefield prowess then it will face stiff competition from other Ukrainian volunteer units put together by different political or other notable figures. Consequently, future attempts to rally non-Ukrainian forces to Azov’s banner might also be only mildly successful and fail to enhance the movement’s reputation beyond sections of the European far-right, which already has ties with the movement.⁴⁵

If one was to look for the threat of potential radicalisation among foreign fighters and supporters for Ukraine (including those based outside of the country) then the first worry should not be the local far-right forces, whose capacity to recruit and inspire foreign members is limited,⁴⁶ but disgruntled non-Ukrainians such as the most infamous “alumni”⁴⁷ of the foreign volunteer network, Ryan Routh. He is a former construction worker from North Carolina, who presented himself as a recruiter of Afghan soldiers fleeing the Taliban who could then serve in Ukraine. He had no military credentials to speak of and failed to get into the International Legion.⁴⁸ Later, disappointed with his efforts to recruit for the unit, he turned his attention to allegedly building a fleet of drones for the Ukrainian military – without the least approval or authorisation of Ukraine. Finally, he reappeared in the US where, allegedly, he attempted to assassinate President Trump in September 2024.⁴⁹ Such individuals might blame the West for inadequate support for Ukraine or their abandonment of Kyiv in the hour of need. Consequently, they might resort to acts of violence against symbolic targets or leaders “responsible” for this state of affairs. They will not necessarily be on the extreme or far-right politically but could motivate themselves to act as a revenge for the West’s alleged selling out of Ukraine.

Incremental Change: Citizenship and Residence Status of Foreign Fighters

If one is to discuss the (lack of) change in the reality of foreign fighting for Ukraine, then it is worth to commence the exploration of this issue with the events of 5 February 2025, when representatives of foreign fighters based in Ukraine met with the officials from the Ukrainian Ministry of Veterans. Apparently, the meeting's agenda included issues such as legalisation of the fighters' status, which is a remarkable occurrence more than a decade into the Russian-Ukrainian war and almost three years into a full-scale war. The Ministry's readiness to meet and to discuss other concerns of the fighters is commendable, however, it also indicates the slow speed with which Ukraine practically accommodates such fighters.⁵⁰

Petitions for legal protection of foreign combatants' status appeared as early as 2018.⁵¹ One of the biggest parts of this process concerns residency and citizenship. The campaigning by concerned organisations and activists continued throughout the last decade and certain additions to the Citizenship Law were passed in 2019 and 2021 to grant foreign veterans a simplified pathway to Ukrainian passports.⁵² Yet, some significant barriers remained, such as fighters with expired passports who could not renew them (by dangers of criminal persecution in their home country, as for Russians and Belarusians) or could not resign their original passport prior to application as was required. In an interview, a Belarusian fighter shared his frustrations after receiving the Hero of Ukraine award but had no pathway to citizenship.⁵³

To address those barriers and implement change, a new law was adopted on 20 August 2024, explicitly mentioning those nationalities.⁵⁴ It also postulates a right to a residence permit for everyone who signed the contract and their families, and temporarily lifts the requirement to pass a language and history exam, and demonstrate financial self-sufficiency for a citizenship.⁵⁵ After the martial law in Ukraine is lifted, however, those accepted to the nation will still have to pass those, and terminate their original citizenship, since Ukraine does not currently allow double nationality.⁵⁶ The law, however, does not clearly say how many years one needs to serve before applying – technically, there is no minimal requirement, but by the word of mouth, some users on the International Legion's Reddit page point to 2-3 years in the same unit, and the importance of being lucky with your commander on that front.⁵⁷ Even regardless of the new law, three foreign volunteers (a combat medic from New Zealand, and two fighters from Georgia and the US) were granted citizenship in October 2024 from the hands of President Zelenskyy himself.⁵⁸ Simultaneously, however, the bureaucracy around it is still allegedly a nightmare to navigate – for example, in September 2024, a foreign volunteer who allegedly “saved hundreds of lives” as a medic could not sign a military contract because he did not possess a residence permit, but to possess it he needed to have signed the contract first.⁵⁹

Apart from the aforementioned law, 2024 also brought further change in the status of foreign volunteers. National Guard opened itself to applications from foreigners with an opportunity to advance up to non-commissioned officer under the contract.⁶⁰ Later, an officer status was also opened to foreigners for both the ground forces and the National Guard, with a more integrated and uniform recruitment process.⁶¹ The three main requirements for service remain: staying in Ukraine legally (as one needs to present themselves physically in Ukrainian territory to be recruited), having no administrative or criminal records under Ukrainian law, and not being potentially tied to espionage or subversions by foreign states. Over the years, foreigners also started receiving state awards from politicians or military leaders, from a UK volunteer supplying drones awarded by a then-Commander-in-Chief of the ground forces⁶² to an American fighter rewarded by president Zelenskyy with the respected Bohdan Khmelnytskyi award.⁶³

Change at Last: From No Contracts to Mandatory Six-Month Service

The reality of foreign fighting is also influenced by the contract situation – initially, this was one of the perennial shortcomings of the International Legion and one of the key points of contention for foreigners serving in other units. Many had served for months without contracts as getting them meant returning to the unit’s initial base, e.g. in Western Ukraine, and undergoing full recruitment procedure with health, psychological checks, and screening which could take up to two weeks. Instead, these foreigners often served in an improvised fashion at first and only later conducted all the necessary testing. At the same time, they were allowed to “break contract,” - i.e. change the unit if they were able to find another one which would have them. The authors heard stories of some fighters performing this up to three times during their stay in Ukraine.

Since May 2024, however, this has now become a lot more difficult as Ukraine has introduced a mandatory six-month service.⁶⁴ Breaking it puts a given individual on a Ukrainian blacklist and effectively terminates one’s chances for a prolonged career in the SVZSU. These six months also include up to two months of mandatory training and checks which technically allows for a minimum of four months of deployment while in a given unit. So far, the authors have not yet heard of cases of foreigners being treated as deserters because they “broke contract” after May 2024, but online spaces for aspiring fighters recommend “leaving the country at once” if in such a situation as “at some point, Ukraine will eventually prosecute one such case to simply press a point home and enforce following of the mandatory service period among foreigners.”

Change: From No Pay to 70,000 Hryvnas

One of the key concerns of the foreign fighters present on the frontlines in Ukraine is remuneration. This is not surprising given the fact that 2025 marks the fourth year of the full-scale Russian invasion of Ukraine and some of these individuals have spent months, if not years, risking their lives for a foreign country’s war effort. It is also evident that the discussion among them has changed from debating how one gets paid for their service (a perennial issue at the beginning of the full-scale war) towards the amounts obtained and benefits available to soldiers on the front.

Individual units now openly advertise, even online, providing the potential recruits with the information on the base pay available (for example, 50,000 hryvnas, equating to roughly 1,200 euros per month). A lot of interest has also been registered when in 2024 the Ukrainian MOD announced that an extra benefit of 70,000 hryvnas (roughly 1,600 euros) would be paid for every 30 days “on the line” – on top of the already offered 2,200 hryvnas (roughly 55 euros) per day of combat. Consequently, all of this could add up to a salary vaguely competitive with those in the West but for positions carrying far less risk.

Lack of Change: Still Need to “Chip In”

Even if one was able to claim all the top ups and rarely left the frontline, which would be logistically and operationally difficult given the rotation of the units or teams in which the foreigners serve, then they would be confronted with another financial peculiarity of the Russo-Ukrainian war: “chipping in.” This practice amounts to soldiers of the SVZSU self-financing some items necessitated by their units. The interviewees quite openly admitted that “it depends on who leads a given brigade” as often it is their industriousness or entrepreneurial spirit that allows a given structure not to rely on the soldiers “chipping in” in order to receive specific weapons and ammunition, cars or drones, or better food. In majority of the cases, however, a soldier is

expected to “donate” money to these extracurricular efforts – there is no fixed rate and these are considered contributions. In reality, however, these purchases are effectively top ups, i.e. attempts to obtain better equipment than that offered by SVZSU. As could be expected, this is sometimes frowned upon by the newly arrived foreigners, or the ones without the local languages or no one to provide them with this cultural training.

Lack of Change: Veteran Status

As much as the pay situation changed for the foreign fighters in Ukrainian ranks, achieving veteran status and benefits thereof is still a highly contested issue. Some claim that they “have not seen a single individual achieving this” and others stress that “it takes months, if you are lucky” or that, again, “this is down to your commander who might have help with papers being pushed in Kyiv [HQ]” which issues the documents on the status. Similarly, not much hope is being put in the promised insurance pay of circa 400,000 USD, if one is to fall on the frontlines while fighting for Ukraine. Apparently, the fighters “have not yet heard if anyone got it.”⁶⁵

No Change: Everything Here Is (Still) Random

Many of the interviewed fighters still maintain that “most of the old issues are still in place.” They acknowledge that the administrative side of the military Legion has “gotten better. There is less chaos, there are contracts, people get paid on time.” Similarly, on the GUR side, which was generally seen as “better run than the other Legion,” the “pay situation got better and battleground expectations are more realistic.” Moreover, the “grifters” (petty or small swindlers) the people on whom there was so much focus in the 2022/2023 media investigations, “have dried up, mostly, and are no longer there.” That allows the remaining individuals to “at least attempt to be proper soldiers.”

At the same time, however, the same interviewees insist that some “systemic issues remain to be bettered.” This mostly involves the fact that, for example, the GUR side of the Legion “should have been more cohesive three years into the conflict,” or that the military Legion still suffers from its initially lax policy of at least considering any of the aspiring foreigners as potential recruits – “you end up not knowing who you are dealing with: possibly some pathological liar, a thief or worst, at times, a traitor?”⁶⁶ Even in 2025, the remaining fighters still complain that “many dudes here are total fools who pretend they know a thing or two,” or that they “focus too much on talking crap about one another instead of focusing on the fight.” In this sense, some of the foreign fighters present in Ukraine are outright disappointed that their colleagues see no higher sense of purpose or mission which would allow them to refrain from most ordinary gossiping which, in their view, could at least be limited or suspended in life and death situations on the frontlines. Simultaneously, often the biggest gossip mongers turn out to be the biggest “frauds” as far as their military skillset is concerned. One of the interviewed fighters stated that “for us, other foreigners – we find out about the ones who oversell themselves quite quickly. At the same time, however, almost magically – they have a tendency to resurface here or there, in another Ukrainian unit which takes time to fully check them out.”

Foreign fighters question the fact that no central training or command and control standards exist across the GUR Legion. They also complain that the military Legion has seen so many comings and goings of soldiers and casualties (although from a low base – its battalions allegedly had less than a hundred individuals and companies sometimes consisting of a single platoon)⁶⁷ that the Summer of 2024 saw the latter’s withdrawal from the frontlines for rest and recuperation but effectively reconstruction. This reality is best summarised by the one-liner of “the [military] Legion constantly keeps on changing” and that as a result of that “everything here [in Ukraine]

is random,” as provided by foreign veterans of the unit.⁶⁸ At the same time, the military Legion is mostly involved in “missions centred on holding fixed positions,”⁶⁹ which are both mundane and dangerous, and consequently tire the rank and file legionnaires.

Allegedly, the leadership of the military Legion, already under a lot of criticism in 2022, is still not up to par and tolerates and promotes the culture of total improvisation with no briefings and the Soviet mentality of “davai, davai” [‘onwards’ in Russian]. According to some, petty corruption is still practiced by some officers (such as a small bribe in exchange for days off), and combat failures of commanders go unpunished with these at worst being “demoted” into comparable jobs in other units.

Change: From Idealism to a “Stockholm Syndrome?”

Three years of full-scale war enable the fighters to reflect on their situation in Ukraine and how the conflict is going. While conversing with them, one is immediately struck by the change of tone – long gone are the idealism and optimism of the heady days of 2022. A pessimistic interviewee was adamant that the “best are dead or have gone back home, or disappeared and many are truly devastated” by the years of fighting. “Many [fighters] have moved on to different battalions [from the Legion – the usual entry point for foreigners fighting for Ukraine], others to do their own things [such as humanitarian work, providing training for the Ukrainian forces]. Nonetheless, many are fighting,” remarked one interviewee who appreciated the difficulties and controversies surrounding foreigners in Ukraine but underscored the fact that those who remained full heartedly kept contributing to the Ukrainian war effort. Nonetheless, according to another interviewee, this reality could also be explained away by their developing a peculiar Stockholm syndrome. In short, they see what the conflict does to them and how much it costs them (physically, mentally, but also resources wise), but they keep on going as “this is the only thing to be done.” This allegedly happened against the backdrop of them developing a “coping mechanism of for example, ‘I like the commander-in-chief but I do not like the headquarters staff as it makes too many mistakes.’ Or ‘I do not like the system – the government. It is senseless, bureaucratic, corrupt and ultimately, against us but I fight for the people of Ukraine, for the nation.’” This is also mixed with the conviction that an individual or a group of individuals (such as the foreign fighters) “most likely have no chance of changing things” so the best course of action is perseverance.

The interviewees predominantly maintain that “someone has to do the fighting” and that the outsiders such as them need to “stick together.” In this sense, fighting is the only antidote or the only way out of their current predicament, which, ironically, these individuals brought onto themselves by coming to Ukraine. Fighting equals an objective or a sense to their existence which is challenged by the enemy but also by the Ukrainian officers who, after years in the full-scale war, have developed an “I know better attitude” or ‘You won’t be f^&*ing telling me what to do.’” All of this, allegedly, happens for officers who “either graduated from Soviet military academies or two years ago led platoons [...] and today are in charge of battalions [and...] They do not know the difference. The difference between leading a platoon on a tactical level and the need for coordination on operational or strategic level.”⁷⁰ This leads to situations which “we all have seen. This ignorance caused deaths of our comrades” who were deployed on missions which were inadequately planned and/or badly led – the so-called “suicide missions.”⁷¹

Some of the fighters attempt to assess the aforementioned Stockholm syndrome and their Ukrainian predicament with some dark humour: “you have to be special to be here but remember, not too special,” “You have to take one for the team and suffer the consequences of being in Ukraine” or “who in their right mind would come here to die?”⁷² Moreover, they also stress that

one needs to be aware of the “reality of the war here. We are fighting for the weaker side and it will not be pretty.” At the same time, some take comfort from the fact that they took part in the process of building up the Ukrainian army and saw it morph into an entity “resembling the best European armies.” In short, they contributed to a thorough change of conditions on the ground.

Lack of Change? Belarusians, Georgians, and Russians (Still) Fighting for Ukraine

As far as foreign fighting is concerned, representatives of certain nationalities have always been prominently present in the Ukrainian ranks. At times, there were so many of them that they congregated in their own mono-ethnic, or almost exclusively mono-ethnic, units. Of these, the most recognised are the ones grouping Belarusian, Georgian, and Russian fighters. In this sense, their ongoing fighting on the side of Ukraine constitutes one of the unchanging features of this conflict. Nonetheless, once one gets into details, the picture becomes more complex. After the travails of 2022, Belarusians now take more care to protect their manpower; the Georgians grew in number and prominence but are now mostly associated with alleged nefarious foreign ventures (be it at home in Georgia or in Slovakia); and the Russians seem to be less active in “deniable” operations carried out on the territory of their country for Ukraine. Below is an update on the activities of each of these ethnic groups in the Ukrainian ranks.

Belarusian Foreign Fighters

Belarusian foreign fighters have been present on the frontlines and fighting for Ukraine since 2014.⁷³ However, it took the full scale Russian invasion in 2022 for the appearance of large mono-ethnic formations of Belarusians in the ranks of the Ukrainian military. A lot of attention has been paid to the Kalinousky Regiment, allegedly “the largest mono-ethnic formations fighting for Ukraine.”⁷⁴ The Regiment is perennially accused by the Belarusian authorities of preparing a coup against Alexander Lukashenko, the sitting president of Belarus who has just been elected for a 7th term.⁷⁵ Its members fought and suffered significant casualties in the early stages of the war. This was especially so in Lysychansk in the Autumn of 2022, and later deployed in smaller units and not in the full force of the regiment,⁷⁶ in the eastern and southern theatre of operations, but also in Belgorod in Russia.⁷⁷ The authors were also apprised of the opinions that the unit’s declared “freedom for Belarus through the victory of Ukraine” motto of its commanders,⁷⁸ should be perceived with some understandable caveats. One of the Polish fighters present in the Ukrainian ranks who then joined the aforementioned regiment commented on this state of affairs:

While at Kalinousky, you will end up involved in meaningful missions [on the front]. But this is a Belarusian regiment with slightly different aims. They want to keep as many of its soldiers alive as possible. To prepare themselves, to train so that at the right moment they would fight for the freedom of Belarus. Today their mission is to gather the know how, collection and training of personnel, construction of command structures, propaganda, building up of their own legend. They want to fight but for Belarus.⁷⁹

At the same time, an anonymous Polish volunteer who has been present as a humanitarian worker in the east of the country since 2014, is more critical of Belarusians in Ukraine in general and of Kalinousky members in particular: “Some of the Belarusians would like you to believe they are ‘veterans.’ Yeah, right. They take the easiest job, do some sentry duty for a short while and then bugger off back to Warsaw or Vilnius and tell everyone that they fought in Ukraine.” Michal Potocki, one of the authorities on the subject of Belarusians present in Ukraine who covered their deployments extensively in his reporting, appreciates both viewpoints but maintains that

the majority of the unit is still filled with ideologically motivated Belarusian fighters. He notes that “some found the Ukrainian experience too hard or were not content with things such as poor equipment, or unregulated immigration status in Ukraine. There is more of these than the relatively few laggards or the tik-tokkers who snapped selfies of themselves on sentry duty.”⁸⁰ Moreover, he underscores the fact that this is a unit which, after the losses of 2022, has limited, if any, reserves and will strive to protect its manpower.⁸¹

Georgian Foreign Fighters

Apart from the Belarusians, Georgian foreign fighters have seen the most casualties from all of the foreign contingents fighting for Ukraine.⁸² Some but by no means all have deployed to Ukraine via the so-called Georgian (National) Legion (G(N)L), a unit which functioned in the war since 2014.⁸³ After 2022, the unit in general, and its leadership in particular, attracted a considerable size of attention as some began to dispute its fundraising and spending practices.⁸⁴ The unit could count on the largesse of the so-called NAFO (North Atlantic Fella Organisation, an online counter-disinformation collective with thousands of members), which fundraised hundreds of thousands of dollars for the G(N)L. With this, however, came more scrutiny and suspicion that members of the unit might have pushed their online collaborators for more donations too eagerly. At the same time, the fact that the Caucasian units fighting for Ukraine, not only the G(N)L, despite some initial indications,⁸⁵ failed to move its members to Georgia during the recent protests against the allegedly rigged parliamentary elections, also had negative consequences for their standing in and outside of Ukraine. This is due to the fact that their ongoing legitimacy in general, and for G(N)L in particular, is based on the fact that the units maintain their opposition to the pro-Russian government of Georgia. Consequently, a failure to take a direct stand against this government at a time of backsliding of democracy in Georgia does not work to the advantage of the likes of the G(N)L.⁸⁶ More controversy in relation to the unit was created by the spurious news that Mamuka Mamulashvili, the commander of G(N)L, has been accused of assisting an alleged preparation of a putsch in Slovakia by the country’s senior advisor to the prime minister.⁸⁷

Russian Foreign Fighters

As was discussed in earlier reports, representatives of the Russian extremist milieu, predominantly fighting as volunteers or conscripts with the Russian military, are also to be found on the Ukrainian side, especially in the likes of the aforementioned RDK. The “corps,” perhaps amounting to a company as far as its size is concerned, remained a unit of choice, alongside other pro-Ukraine units consisting of Russians (Legion of Freedom or at times, the Siberian Battalion), for Kyiv’s deniable operations in Russia.⁸⁸ More recently, however, its prominent members focused their attention on their former comrades from the ranks of the Russian extremist milieu with whom they squared off the frontlines in Eastern Ukraine. Namely, their ire was centred on Alexei Milchakov, the infamous leader of the Wagner-aligned Rusich unit or group which had been fighting in the Russo-Ukrainian war since 2014.⁸⁹ In their view, he committed the ultimate sin for a Russian extremist when he published videos with Chechen fighters fighting for Russia on the frontlines in Eastern Ukraine.⁹⁰ Any friendliness with or appreciation of the Muslims, which were one of the key targets of the Russian extremists during their campaign of terrorist attacks in Russia between 2001 and 2017,⁹¹ remains a seeming point of no-return for anyone wishing to remain in the good graces of Russian extremists.

Latin Americans and Mercenaries: A New Development

Since 2014, the foreign fighting and volunteering for Ukraine has mostly been dominated by Westerners, Europeans, or the citizens of Belarus, Georgia, and Russia. After 2022, however, and

especially the last two years, saw a marked change in this respect. A Latin American volunteer present in Ukraine since 2022 admitted that different Ukrainian units now feature fighters from Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, or Peru. According to an interviewed Brazilian volunteer, some of these fighters are ideologically motivated and genuinely concerned about fighting for an attacked, weaker side but many are also “outright mercenaries or adventure seekers.” She confirmed that the majority are coming from poor backgrounds and are often clueless about the situation in Ukraine.⁹² Moreover, they often lack discipline and find themselves culturally ill at ease in Ukraine, which only adds to their mounting frustrations that “promises were not kept, pay is delayed or that they are being sent to a ‘meat grinder’.” This, however, could be put in a context of observations such as the one below (by a long-standing member of the volunteer community in Ukraine):

The presence of these guys from Latin America but mostly Colombian is, well, controversial. Nothing against these guys, no but you have to know where this is coming from. They are sent here to earn money, pure and simple, or to gather military experience for some nefarious purposes back at home. I don't know, maybe someone forced to come here? Anyway, they don't speak the language and then run into all sorts of trouble. Cry “corruption!” whenever anyone asks for any money and I get it but it is more complicated. This is the Ukrainian army – soldiers have to chip in to buy drones, cars or even ammo. They self-finance themselves in this way and imagine – you are a Colombian who is here to earn money and why are you supposed to part with it? To finance things which should be there?⁹³

This marks a thorough change as far as character of foreign fighting or volunteering is concerned, as the Latin American recruits effectively constitute poor-man's mercenaries who join this side of the conflict not for ideological or humanitarian reasons but purely for pecuniary motivations. This was a rare occurrence, as the Westerners who constituted the bulk of the foreign fighting force mostly sought, as one of them put it, “to break even but not to come out richer from this war.” In this sense, they did not neglect pay and sought it in exchange for their service in the Ukrainian military but the proverbial 70,000 hryvnas, as was discussed previously, failed to attract numerous Westerners to the cause. The monetary incentives might, however, ensure they would prolong their stay in Ukraine. At the same time, it seems that this is enough to attract a considerable number of Latin Americans into the ranks.

Conclusion

One of the foreign fighters interviewed for this report remarked while looking back at his time in Ukraine: “Why come here? You gotta be abnormal to want this. We all have problems or issues ourselves and this ain't Iraq or Afghanistan where you would fight for the dominating side.” As was shown, foreign fighters for Ukraine seem to predominantly be in agreement with such an analysis. Foreign fighting for Ukraine has lost the 2022 glamour it briefly enjoyed due to the outpouring of support for Ukraine, and has morphed into a strain which attracts less and less external attention. Only those with an aforementioned Stockholm syndrome, the ones who are “special but not too special” can tolerate and navigate its reality. They still complain of some of the unresolved strategic or petty issues which largely undermined the initial idea of the International Legion from 2022. Simultaneously, they might be appreciative of some of the positive, especially administrative, developments but will maintain that a lot of their experience is shaped by haphazard, improvisational, or outright random outbursts of activity from their Ukrainian hosts. Thus, most of the time, things change, albeit at times slowly. This, however, does not mean that a certain group of foreign individuals, now including some outright mercenaries, is

not keen on deploying to and fighting for Ukraine. It is now obvious that they will remain where they are for the foreseeable future and will only start returning home once the conflict is either ended or frozen.

Endnotes

1 Bethan McKernan, “Ukraine appeals for foreign volunteers to join the fight against Russia,” *The Guardian*, February 27, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/feb/27/ukraine-appeals-for-foreign-volunteers-to-join-fight-against-russia>.

2 Danuta Pałęga, “19-letni Filip Antosiak poległ w Ukrainie. „Przepraszam, że was oszukałem” [Danuta Pałęga, ‘19-year-old Filip Antosiak fell in Ukraine. ‘I’m sorry I fooled you’.]”, *O2*, January 31, 2025, <https://www.o2.pl/informacje/19-letni-filip-antosiak-polegl-w-ukrainie-przepraszam-ze-was-oszukalem-7120244640992032a>.

3 See: the latter section of the report for more information on the interviewees and quotes from them throughout the report. In order not to endanger them, the authors will not be publishing their names or call signs but will, at times, quote from the conversations one of the co-authors held with these individuals.

4 This report will refer to the foreigners fighting for Ukraine as “foreign fighters.” This is the commonly accepted term which is used in academic, expert and policy circles. Indeed, many of these individuals effectively started their careers as “foreign fighters,” i.e. individuals joining irregular units or contract less fighters for all sorts of units of the Ukrainian armed forces. With the passage of time, however, they all effectively became foreign soldiers or in reality, foreign volunteers for Ukraine. In order not to confuse the reader, the authors will continue referring to these foreigners as “fighters” and will call the non-military foreigners in Ukraine “volunteers” so that a better distinction between the two groups is developed and maintained. As will be shown, both groups belong to the same global social movement of supporters of Ukraine, though. See: David Malet, *Foreign Fighters: Transnational Identity in Civic Conflicts*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013 for more on the definition issues and a discussion of the phenomenon in a historical perspective.

5 Michal Bruszewski, Maciej Szopa, *Nie patrzy martwym w oczy*, [Do Not Look the Dead in the Eye] (Warszawa: Bellona, 2025), 99.

6 See e.g.: Kacper Rekawek, *A Year of Foreign Fighting for Ukraine. Catching Fish With Bare Hands?*, (Berlin: Counter Extremism Project, 2023), <https://www.counterextremism.com/content/year-foreign-fighting-ukraine>.

7 *Ibid.*

8 *Ibid.*

9 Hana Josticova, ““Freedom Fighters:” Motivations of Western Volunteers to Fight on the Side of Ukraine in the Russo-Ukrainian War, 2014-2022”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (2025), doi:10.1080/09546553.2024.2444283, 5.

10 The authors will not name the restricted spaces in order not to expose their members to any danger or threat because of their involvement in or for Ukraine.

11 See: discussion of this issue and foreign fighting in e.g. Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, “Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (2008), 31 (5): 412–33. doi:10.1080/10576100801993347; Malet, *Foreign Fighters...*

12 See: Kacper Rekawek, “Neither “NATO’s Foreign Legion” Nor the “Donbass International Brigades:” (Where Are All the) Foreign Fighters in Ukraine?”, *The Polish Institute of International Affairs* 108, no. 6 (2015): 1-12. Since then, a vast literature on the fighters appeared. See e.g. : Christian Kaunert, Alex MacKenzie, Sarah Leonard, “Far-right foreign fighters and Ukraine: A blind spot for the European Union?”, *New Journal of European Criminal Law* 14, no.2 (2023): 247-266,

<https://doi.org/10.1177/20322844231164089>; Elza Seferian, *EU Foreign Fighters in the 2022 Russo-Ukrainian War: A Glance into the Legal Protection Offered by International Humanitarian and Human Rights Law*, Saar Blueprints, (Saarbrücken: Universität des Saarlandes), 2024, DOI: 10.17176/20240515-181011-0, https://jean-monnet-saar.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/Saar-Blueprint_Elza-Seferian.pdf; Matteo Pugliese, “The International Legion of Ukraine: Exploring the Background and Motivations of Foreign Volunteers”, *Rusi Journal* 168, no.3 (2023); Hana Josticova and Huseyn Aliyev, “There won’t be a free Belarus without a free Ukraine: motivations of Belarusian volunteers fighting for Ukraine in the Russo-Ukrainian war”, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 40, no.3 (2024), doi:10.1080/1060586X.2024.2312768; Emil A. Souleimanov and Roberto Colombo, “Chechen diaspora members as foreign fighters in Syria and Ukraine: a diachronic study”, *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, (2024), doi:10.1080/14683857.2024.2356295; Nicola Guerra, “Ideologies and narratives of Italian foreign fighters in the Russian-Ukrainian war”, *European Politics and Society* 25, n.4 (2024), doi:10.1080/23745118.2023.2299827; Naira Arutyunova and Marco Bocchese, “From across the globe: understanding the motivations of pro-Ukraine foreign fighters”, *European Security*, (2024), doi:10.1080/09662839.2024.24347; Hana Josticova, ““Freedom Fighters:” Motivations of Western Volunteers to Fight on the Side of Ukraine in the Russo-Ukrainian War, 2014-2022”, *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (2025), doi:10.1080/09546553.2024.2444283; Kacper Rekawek, “A Trickle, Not a Flood: the limited 2022 far-right foreign fighter mobilization to Ukraine”, *Combating Terrorism Center Sentinel* 15, no.6 (2022), <https://ctc.westpoint.edu/a-trickle-not-a-flood-the-limited-2022-far-right-foreign-fighter-mobilization-to-ukraine/>.

There is also growing literature provided by the foreigners present in Ukraine – there exist at least two accounts of British citizens who had joined the Ukrainian army prior to the Russian full-scale invasion or multiple book interviews with Polish veterans present in the field (some of them by now deceased). Journalists reporting from the conflict also feature foreign fighters in their books on the Russo-Ukrainian war. See: Aiden Aslin, John Sweeney, *Putin’s Prisoner: My Time as a Prisoner of War in Ukraine* (Bantam: London, 2023); Shaun Pinner, *Live. Fight. Survive.: An ex-British soldier’s account of courage, resistance and defiance fighting for Ukraine against Russia* (Penguin: London, 2024); Bruszewski, Szopa, *Nie patrz....*; Piotr Mitkiewicz, Wiktor Swietlik, *Znaleźć i zniszczyć. Rozmowa z polskim ochotnikiem walczącym na Ukrainie*, [Seek and Destroy. A Conversation with a Polish volunteer fighting in Ukraine] (Warsaw: Rebis, 2024); Marcin Wyrwał, *Psy na ruskich. Polacy walczący z Rosją w Ukrainie*, [Hell to Russians. Poles fighting against Russia in Ukraine], (Warszawa: Otwarte, 2024); Tomas Forro, *Donbas, Svadobný apartmán v hoteli Vojna*, [Donbas: honeymoon apartment in Hotel War] (Bratislava: N, 2019); Tomas Forro, *Spev siren. Putovanie do srdca ukrajinskej vojny*, [Siren Song. Pilgrimage to the heart of the Ukrainian war] (Zilina: Absynt, 2024); Zbigniew Parafianowicz, *Śniadanie pachnie trupem. Ukraina na wojnie*, [Breakfast Smells of a Corpse. Ukraine at War], (Warszawa: Mando 2023). The latest publications on the topic of foreign fighters include a novel by Poland’s arguably most popular writer, himself heavily involved in supporting Ukraine (Szczepan Twardoch, *Null*, [Nothing] (Warszawa: Marginesy, 2025)) or “a gripping account of British and American volunteers fighting in Ukraine, from Kyiv to Bakhmut” (Shannon Monaghan, *To Die With Such Men. Frontline Stories from Ukraine’s International Legion* (London: Hurst, 2025)).

13 Karyna Olykova, “All the kings’ foreign fighters. Who are the volunteers serving in Ukraine’s International Legion?,” *THE INSIDER*, November 21, 2024, <https://theins.ru/en/politics/276484>.

14 See: Giles Tremlett, *The International Brigades: Fascism, Freedom and the Spanish Civil War*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2021).

15 See: Anna Myroniuk and Alexander Khrebet, “Suicide Missions, Abuse, Physical Threats: International Legion Fighters Speak Out Against Leadership’s Misconduct,” *Kyiv Independent*,

August 17, 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/suicide-missions-abuse-physical-threats-international-legion-fighters-speak-out-against-leaderships-misconduct/>; Anna Myroniuk and Alexander Khrebet, “Investigation: International Legion Soldiers Allege Light Weapons Misappropriation, Abuse by Commanders,” *Kyiv Independent*, November 30, 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/investigation-international-legion-misappropriation/>; Justin Scheck and Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Stolen Valor: The U.S. Volunteers in Ukraine Who Lie, Waste and Bicker,” *The New York Times*, March 25, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/25/world/europe/volunteers-us-ukraine-lies.html>.

16 *Ukraine Current Broad Issues and Suggested Courses of Action Brief with Supporting Documents*, July 10, 2022, confidential report; *Issues with the Foreign Legion: Attachment 1*. April 26, 2022, confidential report; *The Failure of the International Legion of Territorial Defence of Ukraine: Observations of the First Two Months*, May 2, 2022, confidential report.

17 Foreign fighting has historically had its fair share of critics and a lot of controversies which nowadays surround the likes of the International Legion do not sound novel. See: Celestine Kunkeler, ‘The Swedish Brigade: From National Romantic Heroes to European Counter-Revolutionaries?’, *European History Quarterly*, 53:1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1177/02656914221140021> or Malet, *Foreign Fighters*,,,, to appreciate previous controversies surrounding foreign fighters/volunteers in past wars.

18 Ben Makuch, “We followed a foreign fighter on his way to join the war in Ukraine”, *Vice*, March 1, 2022, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/joining-foreign-legion-ukraine/>.

19 See e.g., Rebekah Maciorowski, X, <https://x.com/bekamaciorowski>; Defacto, X, <https://x.com/DefactoHumanity>; Richard Woodruff, X, <https://x.com/frontlinekit>; Rima Med, X, https://x.com/rima_medUA.

20 See: <https://www.counterextremism.com/a-year-of-foreign-fighting-ukraine>.

21 This hopping from unit to unit by foreigners has been a feature of the war since 2022. See: Rekawek, *A Year of.., op. cit.* At the same time, it remains to be seen how the 2024 new law on contracts will affect this state of affairs. In the past, foreigners could relatively easily break contracts and e.g. attempt to join a different unit or simply return home, or even remain as civilians in Ukraine. Nowadays, this is constrained by the fact that contracts must run for at least six months before any change of unit or return home, or to civilian life, are allowed.

22 “Почав розмовляти, ніби був українцем. Чому колумбійці їдуть в Україну воювати проти Росії [He started talking as if he were a Ukrainian. Why Colombians go to Ukraine to fight against Russia]”, *BBC News*, August 8, 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/ukrainian/articles/cwy4edkl958o>.

23 Ben Makuch, “‘The Romantics Are Gone’: a year later, many foreign fighters have left Ukraine”, *Vice*, February 23, 2023, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/foreign-fighters-in-ukraine/>. In the article, Makuch also quotes Carl Larson, a foreign volunteer: “I think 1000 to 3000 [volunteers] is probably a good bet if you’re counting uniformed combatants and not including trainers and civilian volunteers of whom, there’s probably many more thousands over there.”

24 Forro, *Spiev Siren*, 518.

25 Katerina Venyuk, ““Вони вірять в Україну, а хтось так готується до Третьої світової””: Тарас Паляниця про рекрутинг іноземців [“They believe in Ukraine, and some of them are preparing for the Third World War: Taras Palianytsia on recruiting foreigner”], *Espresso Zahid*, December 23, 2024, <https://zahid.espresso.tv/viy-na-z-rosiyeyu-voni-viryat-v-ukrainu-a-khtos-tak-gotuetsya-do-tretoi-svitovoi-taras-palyanitsya-pro-rekruting-inozemtsiv>

26 “Минобороны назвало число убитых на Украине наемников [Ministry of Defense Reports Number of Mercenaries Killed in Ukraine]”, *RBC*, March 14, 2024, <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/65f31c1b9a7947cc2c1c53cd>.

27 «Иностранний легион. Арестович раскрыл число наемников в армии Украины [Foreign Legion: Arestovich Reveals the Number of Mercenaries in the Ukrainian Army].» *Аргументы и Факты*, December 2024. <https://aif.ru/politics/world/inostranny-lyegion-arestovich-raskryl-chislo-naemnikov-v-armii-ukrainy>.

28 “Список іноземних добровольців, загиблих під час російського вторгнення в Україну (Україна) [A list of foreign fighters killed during Russian invasion of Ukraine (Ukraine)]», Wikipedia Ukraine (Accessed February 2, 2025), [https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A1%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%BA_%D1%96%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B7%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%85_%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%BB%D1%8C%D1%86%D1%96%D0%B2,_%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%85_%D0%BF%D1%96%D0%B4_%D1%87%D0%B0%D1%81_%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%96%D0%B9%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE_%D0%B2%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D1%8F_%D0%B2_%D0%A3%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%97%D0%BD%D1%83_\(%D0%A3%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%97%D0%BD%D0%B0\)//](https://uk.wikipedia.org/wiki/%D0%A1%D0%BF%D0%B8%D1%81%D0%BE%D0%BA_%D1%96%D0%BD%D0%BE%D0%B7%D0%B5%D0%BC%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%85_%D0%B4%D0%BE%D0%B1%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2%D0%BE%D0%BB%D1%8C%D1%86%D1%96%D0%B2,_%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%B3%D0%B8%D0%B1%D0%BB%D0%B8%D1%85_%D0%BF%D1%96%D0%B4_%D1%87%D0%B0%D1%81_%D1%80%D0%BE%D1%81%D1%96%D0%B9%D1%81%D1%8C%D0%BA%D0%BE%D0%B3%D0%BE_%D0%B2%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%B3%D0%BD%D0%B5%D0%BD%D0%BD%D1%8F_%D0%B2_%D0%A3%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%97%D0%BD%D1%83_(%D0%A3%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B0%D1%97%D0%BD%D0%B0)//).

29 “Zelenskyy: 45,100 Ukrainian soldiers killed in action,” *Ukrinform*, February 5, 2025, <https://www.ukrinform.net/rubric-ato/3956503-Zelenskyy-45100-ukrainian-soldiers-killed-in-action.html>.

30 Ben Makuch, “‘The Romantics Are Gone’.”

31 See: Rekawek, *A Year of Foreign Fighting for Ukraine*.

32 The controversy centred on the press or comms officer of the Legion who was accused of embezzling the unit’s funds. The soldier who pressed the case most vigorously, and put together a “dossier” on the former Legionnaire, embellished his military record when joining the Legion. When the latter was exposed by the media, the credibility of the initial accusations was undermined.

33 Ibid.

34 See: <https://x.com/AprilHuggett?t=mjg3YnJbnJS25pjx87dnA&s=09>.

35 Marcin Wyrwal, *Psy na ruskich. Polacy walczący z Rosją w Ukrainie*, [*Hell to Russians. Poles fighting against Russia in Ukraine*] (Warszawa: Otwarte, 2024), loc. 1459, kindle edition. Such evidence is partly contradicted by Swietlik, Mitkewicz, *op. cit.*, p. 157 when they discuss the actual lack of flexibility on the ground by the Ukrainian units which e.g. wished not to “subcontract” capabilities they lacked (related to taking care of the wounded and having them evacuated by fully equipped ambulances) even as these were available from a humanitarian organisation offering assistance. Moreover, the alleged flexibility and the improvisational nature of the Ukrainians is also constrained by the fact that “Ukrainian structures do not cooperate with each other [...] It

starts on the top, it is structural. SBU [Ukrainian Security Service] cooperate only with SBU. ZSU [Ukrainian Armed Forces] only cooperates with ZSU [...] National Guard only with the National Guard. See: *Ibid.*, p. 57.

36 See: Kacper Rekawek, *Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: Brown-Red Cocktail* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022) for a discussion of the issue.

37 For a discussion of the issue, see: Kacper Rekawek, “No “Far Right Al-Qaeda”: Azov’s Foreign Fighters,” in: Christian Kaunert, Alex MacKenzie, and Adrien Nonjon (eds.), *In the Eye of the Storm Origins, Ideology, and Controversies of the Azov Brigade, 2014-2023*, (Berlin: ibidem, 2024,) 231-59.

38 See: Rekawek, *Western Extremists and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022 - All Talk, But Not a Lot of Walk*.

39 See: <https://icct.nl/project/anti-dox-identifying-evaluating-and-countering-disinformation-times-war> for ICCT’s work on this issue within the framework of the ANTI-DOX project.

40 The authors have been briefed on Kapustin’s speech for an audience in Lviv from 6 February 2025.

41 See: Rekawek, *Foreign fighters...*, for a detailed discussion of the issue.

42 3rd Assault Brigade now also includes a former Azov Regiment, an entity besieged in Mariupol in 2022 which came out of the original Azov movement, foreign fighter who was captured in Mariupol and then went through the “Donetsk People’s Republic” prison system, and was later exchanged back to Ukraine via Saudi Arabia.

43 Bruszewski, Szopa, *Nie patrz w oczy...* 88.

44 See: Rekawek, *Foreign fighters...*, for a detailed discussion of the issue.

45 *Ibid.* See also: Michael Colborne, *From the Fires of War: Ukraine’s Azov Movement and the Global Far Right*, (Stuttgart: ibidem, 2022).

46 See Rekawek, *All Talk...*

47 There are also other, lesser, degrees on infamy among the “alumni” of the foreign fighter community in Ukraine. A Czech volunteer, later convicted in his home country, was accused of stealing valuables from abandoned homes in conflict zones , not only exploiting for personal gains but further tarnishing the image of the Legion. See: “Raboval a sloužil na Ukrajině. Soud bývalému vojákovì zpřísnil trest na osm let [He Looted and Served in Ukraine. The Court Increased the Former Soldier’s Sentence to Eight Years],” *iDNES.cz*, January 13, 2025, https://www.idnes.cz/zpravy/domaci/cech-vojak-ukrajina-valka-rabovani-trest-soud.A250113_144809_domaci_1chuc.

48 Scheck and Gibbons-Neff, “Stolen Valor.”

49 “Ryan Wesley Routh Indicted for Attempted Assassination of Former President Trump,” *U.S. Department of Justice*, September 24, 2024, <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/ryan-wesley-routh-indicted-attempted-assassination-former-president-trump>.

50 The meeting was reported on by different social media platforms of foreign fighter units based in Ukraine.

51 “«Свобода» вимагає спрощення легалізації іноземців, які воювали за Україну [Svoboda demands simplification for legalisation of foreigners who fought for Ukraine]”, *Svoboda*, September 20, 2018, <https://svoboda.org.ua/news/svoboda-vymagaye-sproshhennya-legalizatsiyi-inozemtsiv-yaki-voyuvaly-za-ukrayinu/254853/>.

52 “Верховна Рада спростила надання громадянства України захисникам-іноземцям [Verkhovna Rada simplifies granting of Ukrainian citizenship to foreign defenders]”, *Ministry of Veteran Affairs of Ukraine*, December 14, 2024, <https://mva.gov.ua/ua/news/verhovna-rada-sprostila-nadannya-gromadyanstva-ukrayini-zahisnykam-inozemtsyam>.

53 CRAF Media, ГЕРОЇ України без українського паспорта / «БЕЗСМЕРТНИЙ» — настане час кожному воювати [HEROES of Ukraine without Ukrainian passports / ‘Immortal’ – the time will come for everyone to fight]”. YouTube, March 22, 2023, 4:35 to 5:54, interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bseCpVKaQ8Q>. This was also a perennial issue for some of the most loyal foreign, and not Russian or Belarusian, fighters in the Ukrainian ranks who fought in the likes of e.g. Azov Regiment since 2014.

54 3939-IX. Verkhovna Rada, *Проект Закону про внесення змін до деяких законів України щодо правового статусу іноземців та осіб без громадянства, які беруть участь у захисті територіальної цілісності та недоторканності України [Draft Law on Amendments to Certain Laws of Ukraine on the Legal Status of Foreigners and Stateless Persons Participating in the Defence of the Territorial Integrity and Inviolability of Ukraine]*, <https://itd.rada.gov.ua/billInfo/Bills/Card/42471> (accessed February 3, 2025).

55 “Residence and Acquisition of Ukrainian Citizenship by Foreigners Serving in the Armed Forces of Ukraine: Everything You Need to Know”, *Visit Ukraine*, January 13, 2025, https://visitukraine.today/blog/2896/all-about-residence-and-acquisition-of-citizenship-by-a-foreigner-in-ukraine-after-or-during-service-in-the-afu?srsId=AfmBOootPRv_MB1MifguWwopPBrD5E9LdxcGos8QEhXhcj3vYELsJhbm#what-changes-were-adopted-in-the-new-draft-law-no-9585.

56 Maria Yemets, “Рада приняла за основу закон о множественном гражданстве [Rada accepts a foundation for the law on dual citizenship]”, *European Pravda*, December 17, 2024, <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2024/12/17/7200902/>.

57 Miserable_Sweet_4593, Reddit post at the “Ukraine Foreign Legion” subreddit and discussion under it, 2024, https://www.reddit.com/r/ukraineforeignlegion/comments/1cx3zyf/have_any_of_you_guys_actually_gotten_citizenship/.

58 “Президент вручив захисникам України найвищі державні нагороди [President awarded the highest state awards to defenders of Ukraine]”, *Kashtan News*, October 10, 2024, <https://www.kashtan.news/prezydent-vruchyv-zakhysnykam-ukrainy-nayvyshchi-derzhavni-nahorody/>.

59 Karina Bondarenko, “Врятував сотні життів, але не може підписати контракт із ЗСУ: у Києві стався скандал із добровольцем [Saved hundreds of lives, but cannot sign the contract with ZSU: a scandal with a volunteer in Kyiv]”, *TSN*, September 9, 2024, <https://tsn.ua/exclusive/vryatuvav-sotni-zhittiv-ale-ne-mozhe-pidpisati-kontrakt-iz-zsu-u-kiyevi-stavsya-skandal-iz-dobrovolcem-foto-2651898.html>.

60 “Ukraine opens National Guard service to foreigners under new decree”, *The New Voice of Ukraine*, February 22, 2024, <https://english.nv.ua/nation/Zelenskyyy-opens-ukrainian-national-guard-to-foreigners-50395115.html>.

61 “Ukraine approves bill allowing foreigners to serve as military officers”, *The New Voice of Ukraine*, September 17, 2024, <https://english.nv.ua/nation/ukrainian-parliament-approves-bill-allowing-foreigners-to-serve-in-military-under-contract-50451600.html>.

62 Seliconovyi Zanaves, “Richard Woodruff - A ‘British Cossack’ Volunteering in Ukraine Since June 2022 for Front Line Kit.”, *YouTube*, November 26, 2024, interview, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ezqiVXcqCxo>.

63 Defense Intelligence of Ukraine (DIU), Telegram post, October 7, 2024, <https://t.me/DIUkraine/4608>.

64 See: <https://visitukraine.today/blog/3800/they-will-be-able-to-terminate-the-contract-only-after-six-months-changes-are-also-expected-for-foreigners-in-the-armed-forces> for more on the issue.

65 Mitkewicz, Swietlik, *Znalezc i zniszczyc...* 28.

66 *Ibid.*, 233.

67 *Ibid.*, p. 47.

68 Wyrwal, *Psy na ruskich*, loc. 3367.

69 *Ibid.*, loc. 775. This is in contrast to the GUR Legion whose teams are often used for reconnaissance and sabotage missions behind the enemy lines.

70 Mitkewicz, Swietlik, *Znalezc i zniszczyc...*, 227.

71 Anna Myroniuk and Alexander Khrebet, “Suicide Missions, Abuse, Physical Threats: International Legion Fighters Speak Out Against Leadership’s Misconduct,” *Kyiv Independent*, August 17, 2022, <https://kyivindependent.com/suicide-missions-abuse-physical-threats-international-legion-fighters-speak-out-against-leaderships-misconduct/>.

72 Mitkewicz, Swietlik, *Znalezc i zniszczyc...* 229.

73 Hana Josticova and Huseyn Aliyev, “There won’t be a free Belarus without a free Ukraine: motivations of Belarusian volunteers fighting for Ukraine in the Russo-Ukrainian war”, *Post-Soviet Affairs* 40, no.3 (2024), 209.

74 *Uklad Otwarty*, “Drony zmieniły wojnę na Ukrainie-wywiad z Pawłem “Dziadźką” Szurmiejem, dowódcą Pułku Kalinowskiego,” [Drones changed the war in Ukraine – an interview with the commander of the Kalinouski Regiment], December 2024, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MEynZ5mV4MU>.

75 “Lukashenko: Enemies of Belarus are Preparing to Join the Republic with NATO by 2030,” *Pravda EN*, January 26, 2025, <https://news-pravda.com/world/2025/01/26/1007350.html>.

76 Many of the foreigners present in Ukraine doubt whether Kalinousky could truly be referred to as a “regiment” as its rotating membership is allegedly in the low hundreds. At the same time, however, other mono-ethnic Belarusian formations also exist and fight in the ranks of the Ukrainian military and the Belarusian contingent has seen high casualties of its members since 2022 – to the author’s best knowledge, only Georgian casualties exceed these of the Belarusians.

77 *Uklad Otwarty*, “Drony zmieniły wojnę ...”

78 *Ibid.*

79 Mitkiewicz, Swietlik, *Znalezc i zniszczyc...*, 244.

80 Author's phone conversation with Michal Potocki, 6 February 2025.

81 *Ibid.*

82 See: Rekawek, *A Year of...*

83 See: Rekawek, *Foreign fighters...* for a detailed description of the unit.

84 See: Tomas Forro, "Ruská psychologická operácia Gruzínska légia v skutočnosti trvá už piaty mesiac. Fico nad ňou len prevzal záštitu," [In fact, the Russian psychological operation Georgian Legion has been going on for five months. Fico only took over the auspices of it], *Dennik N*, 4 Februar 2025, <https://dennikn.sk/4446991/ruska-psychologicka-operacia-gruzinska-legia-v-skutocnosti-trva-uz-piaty-mesiac-fico-nad-nou-len-prevzal-zastitu/> for a recent discussion of the accusations directed against the G(N)L.

85 See, e.g. a 1 December 2024 twitt by a prominent member of the so-called Caucasus Legion on the issue: https://x.com/lado25031988/status/1863210239677346014?t=w_DFH5oZFVLDSIRALpuMMg&s=19.

86 This shortcoming has been further exacerbated by the controversy around the unit's commander, called a "Russian psychological operation" by Forro – see: *Ibid.*, who claimed to have been poisoned by the Russian agents and then published his blood test results to strengthen his case. His publishing of this information came under a lot of scrutiny and subsequently, ridicule when some of the observers found that the published test results are perfectly normal and fail to substantiate the pressed case according to which Mamulashvili had been poisoned.

87 Mamulashvili was photographed in Slovakia during events supporting the launch of Tomas Forro's second book on Ukraine in 2024 (*Spev Siren*). The Georgian fighter is featured in the book and has known Forro for years. During one of the events he was photographed with an organiser of anti-government protests in Slovakia, which took place on 24 January 2025. This allegedly proved the connection between the Slovak opposition and that of Georgia as Mamulashvili never hid his rejection of the pro-Russian government in Tbilisi and his sister was a parliamentarian for one of the country's pro-Western parties. See: <https://dennikn.sk/4437425/velitel-gruzinskej-legie-reaguje-na-smer-to-je-zabavne-ze-robim-prevrat-uz-aj-na-slovensku/>.

88 Bohdan Vodnaruk, "Хто влаштував «брянські заворушення». Інтерв'ю з начштабу Російського добровольчого корпусу [Who organised the "Bryansk disturbance". Interview with the Chief of Staff of the Russian Volunteer Corps], *Glavcom*, April 3, 2023, <https://glavcom.ua/longreads/khto-vlashtuvav-brjanski-zavorushennja-intervju-z-nachshtabu-rosijskoho-dobovolchoho-korpusu-917481.html>. In particular, the Chief underlines that operations within Russia are their – and not Kyiv's – initiative.

89 Commander and founder of RDK), telegram post, January 8, 2025. As a rule, ICCT does not provide the links to telegram channels of activists/members of groups covered in its reports.

90 *Ibid.*

91 Johannes Due Enstad, "Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Putin's Russia", *Perspectives on Terrorism* 12, no.6 (2018)

92 They are said to be recruited via special groups on different social media which put them in touch with their compatriots who are already in Ukraine. Moreover, early 2025 saw an attempt to create a first fully Portuguese speaking unit, effectively a team adjacent to one of the indigenous Ukrainian units, on the frontlines in Ukraine. Responding to some of the aforementioned concerns of Latin American fighters, the unit advertised itself with an add mentioning the base salary and the fact that its members are “guaranteed” a certain time purely for training.

93 See: Mitkiewicz, Swietlik, *Znalezc i zniczyc...*, 32. For a view substantiating the pecuniary focus of the Colombians: “Yes, people come here for money. South Americans. Columbians. In their view, these 100 bucks a day, which were originally on offer before the salaries went down, was a great deal. I get it.” Wyrwal, *Psy na ruskich*, , loc. 753. features an unflattering portrayal of the Latin American foreign fighters as “they come but they only do sentry duty. Once order to an assault, they break contracts, reenlist somewhere else, train for two months and when it comes to an assault, they again break their contracts. And on and on.” This practice should, after the introduction of the 2024 laws on military contracts, should now be more difficult to copy as breaking of such a contract is now more difficult while in the ranks of the Ukrainian army.

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Kacper Rekawek, PhD is a Senior Research Fellow and Programme Lead (Current and Emerging Threats) at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague. Prior to joining the ICCT Kacper worked on issues related to countering terrorism and countering violent extremism while in academia (at C-Rex, Center for Research on Extremism at the University of Oslo; the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St. Andrews; SWPS University in Warsaw + a PhD at Queen's University Belfast), think tanks (the Polish Institute of International Affairs, PISM + secondments to RUSI, London and Al Ahram Centre, Cairo) and the third sector (Countering Extremism Project in New York/Berlin and GLOBSEC in Bratislava). Rekawek has successfully led multinational research projects related to international security in general and terrorism and countering terrorism in particular (e.g. the comparative analyses of the state of European jihadism, supported by PMI Impact and Counter Extremism Project, which involved partners in 11 countries). He has worked on a number of other international projects, including efforts supported by the European Commission and NATO. He is a member and participates in the activities of the Society for Terrorism Research, European Expert Network on Terrorism Issues and the Radicalisation Awareness Network.

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