Testimonies of Victims of Russian (Extremist) Doxing

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ICCT

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About This Project

This project is looking at the second 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.

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Introduction

Since October 2024, ICCT and its partner – Reporters' Foundation (*Fundacja Reporterow*) has been engaged in research on the phenomenon of doxing within the context of Russian disinformation operations against the EU.[1] The disinformation is mainly conducted by Telegram channels that dox hundreds of European citizens who rushed to assist Ukraine in its defence against the Russian aggression. Not only does it disclose their private information but also frames them as right-wing extremists and mercenaries while itself using extremist (racist, homophobic, misogynist etc.) terms. It aims to undermine the European resolve to support Ukraine, both at societal and governmental level, and threatens its active participants (fighters, trainers, logisticians or humanitarians), with direct, offline consequences of their actions.

This report presents testimonies of the doxed foreign fighters or volunteers (i.e. individuals not directly involved in combat but e.g. fundraising for Ukrainian military units or supplying them with non-lethal aid). These were collected in late 2024 and early 2025 by the project's principal investigator, Kacper Rekawek. Rekawek conversed with the said individuals over a secure communications app, either in English or in Polish, and transcribed their responses to question(s) related to their experience with doxing. As will be shown, the length of these responses varied, depending on an interviewee. The interviewer took care not to interrupt nor guide the interviewees so that they would be able to fully, preferably in proverbial one go were able to tell him what happened and how they felt. Thus, the testimonies might, at times, have a rough edge to them as they were meant to be an honest take on an issue which plagues the foreign fighter/volunteer contingent in Ukraine.

This document includes six such recollections from our interviewees, providing an insightful and detailed recollection of doxing practices, and a testimony which has recently been published in an interview with a Polish foreign fighter. While the interview was conducted in Polish, there remain elements relevant to the discussion here. For this reasons, the discussion on doxing as part of the interview has been translated and added here for reference. We are of an opinion that more such statements and testimonies will come to light in the next months or years, be it during the Russo-Ukrainian war or after its completion or suspension. It is also entirely possible that many of the foreign fighters or volunteers will connect some of the seemingly innocent but in fact doxing situations they were exposed to and link it to some later events which have transpired since then. For now, it seems, many of the fighters do not seem to be too bothered about being doxed, although – as it is visible below – there are exceptions to this rule. The reasoning here is mostly along the lines of them not being worried about doxing as they are constantly under fire of the Russians.

This approach, however, does not hold for all of the foreign fighters or volunteers for Ukraine. As the testimonies below illustrate, there remain cases and situations in which doxing by Russian or pro-Russian individuals has real life consequences for the doxed and/or their families. Moreover, some fighters - and this has specifically come out in the podcast ICCT published on the topic (also a deliverable of its ANTI-DOX project)[2] - to some extent courted it while "livestreaming their crossing of the [Polish-Ukrainian] border" to announce their intention to enter the conflict on the side of Ukraine.[3] This and other such exposures (e.g. live Tweeting while on the base with a given unit) enabled the Russians to start mapping out the membership of the pro-Ukraine foreign fighter contingent and consequently, start outing or doxing its members.

One of the most tragic stories arising from the doxing saga is that of Jean-François Ratelle, or "Hrulf," the self-proclaimed leader of the Norman Brigade (NB), a makeshift unit made up of foreign fighters. As was mentioned in the ANTI-DOX podcast, the aforementioned brigade was

nothing more than a team of early volunteers put together by Hrulf, a former Canadian artilleryman with an alleged stint in the French Foreign Legion.[4] NB had its branding, logo, flag, and distinct communication channels, which allowed the unit to market itself widely to both arriving wannabe foreign fighters, and to the likes of the international media. At the same time, however, there was relatively little clarity of the unit's overall goal as different members seemed to have disagreed on whether they would fight, train, or act as providers of aid to Ukraine or Ukrainian units. Moreover, Hrulf did not take any criticism lightly and at times argued with his (former) subordinates through the (social) media. Donald Bowser, whom ICCT interviewed for a podcast within the framework of the ANTI-DOX project, recalls that Hrulf would not shy away from issuing threats to individuals from outside the NB, who were allegedly unfairly critical of his actions.[5]

Nonetheless, NB or some of its members found themselves on the front, where Hrulf eventually perished in the winter of 2024. Before meeting this fate, however, he was doxed by one of the channels studied by both ICCT and *Fundacja Reporterów* for the ANTI-DOX project. This was no unusual feat as, at the time of writing, the channel has featured thousands of foreigners involved in fighting or volunteering for Ukraine. Nonetheless, only a small number, including some distressed members of the so-called Chosen Company – a high profile unit of foreigners within the Ukrainian 59th Brigade, actually interacted with the aforementioned Telegram channel in the aftermath of being featured on it. In short, they would argue back or discuss the style and the content of their doxing with its perpetrators, often in sarcastic or abusive way. Hrulf engaged in similar behaviour online, while attempting to convince the pro-Russian doxing contributors of the inaccuracy of their claims related to him. A few days later Hrulf was killed in the Belgorod oblast (region) in Russia, where different Ukrainian units, including those featuring foreign fighters, were involved in highly publicised raids.[6] Before the news fully broke, however, the aforementioned doxers were celebrating Hrulf's demise, and stated that their "curse" got better of him. Donald Bowser notes:

> *Hrulf was always on social media, always discussing everything. He spent his days fighting on Signal, on Twitter, fighting with different groups and volunteers. Then he goes on the specific doxing channel and fights there... You don't want be doxed? Stay off the social media. This is always the challenge as most of it [social media appearances] revolves around money collection. People go out and have to be public in order to get the resources.*

ICCT's research team was told via sources close to the NB that the unit commander's death looked suspicious and might not have been a mere coincidence. In their view, Hrulf was specifically targeted by the Russians because of him being a well-known foreign fighter and the earlier arguments he had with the pro-Russian/Russian doxers. This could have turned him into a marked man. At the time of writing this, under the ANTI-DOX project, ICCT and Reporters' Foundation are investigating such claims and cannot conclusively state that his death was a result of a specifically targeted attack. As will be shown below in the fifth testimony, the truth might be more blurry and Hrulf's death could have been the result of a set of coincidences, which may had something to do with him being doxed and responding to the doxing while leaving behind a digital footprint. In some cases, as one of the testimonies claims, one's footprint just might but does not have to be sought by a given Russian commander. The latter first must be alerted to the existence of a given person of interest and then have the will and means to track down and target such an individual. Donald Bowser confirmed this approach in the ANTI-DOX podcast while remembering a story from 2022:

> *A friend of mine who was a volunteer [for Ukraine] – he did a live TV broadcast. He was trapped in Chernihiv [a city in Ukraine]. And I called the TV producer whom I knew and I said – 'Get that off the air. Because, guess what – you are gonna get him killed.*

And tell that he is out of Chernihiv and safe.' Then I asked around and of course, there was chatter on the Russian side: 'Oh, we got a Canadian there. Can we nab him?'[7]

In short, the Russian side is opportunistic as far as targeting foreigners is concerned – if they expose themselves via their public or media appearances or are exposed by their doxers, then something might happen to a given individual. This is not, however, automatic or perfectly synchronised.

Before moving on to the testimonies of the doxed individuals, one also has to consider the Ukrainian angle in this process. Non-foreign soldiers in the ranks of the Ukrainian army were also doxed by Russian – something that has been going on since 2014 and, at times, it takes an even more brutal and inhumane turn. Consider this statement from Anastasiia Morozova of *Reporters' Foundation*, ICCT's partner in the project who investigated the issue for ANTI-DOX project:

Ukrainian families, while looking for their lost or captured sons or daughters, usually accompany their posts on the issue with photos and personal info of their loved ones. They share their names, surnames, date of birth, unit number or the brigade's name with which they had been deployed. However, a soldier while in captivity can, for their own safety, refuse to provide the captors with full personal data. At the same time, such Ukrainian posts, when matched with a given prisoner, allow for their quicker identification. A soldier can also be wounded and remain trapped in an occupied territory. In such cases, spreading the word of his being lost in action could complicate the rescue mission as the enemy will attempt to locate him first. At times, a given soldier might simply lost contact with his unit, nothing more. But if his family provides outsiders with details such as his place of service, last contact, circumstances of disappearance etc., this might lead to seriously threatening the operational security of the said soldier's unit. Moreover, such information allows scammers working for the other side to blackmail the grieving families who are desperate to locate their loved ones. Maria Pavena, senior specialist for persons missing in extraordinary circumstances, responsible for Central and Northern Ukraine at the Ministry of Internal Affairs in Ukraine, comments on this: 'An example – scammers found contact details of a certain woman on the social media. They demanded 15,000 USD and threatened that her next of kin, who was in Russian captivity, will be subjected to harsh treatment if she refuses to pay up. He was to stand naked in the street for the whole night. And they filmed "him," and send the movie to the victim of the scam.'[8]

This practice mixes elements of harassment, fraud – as the victims are "fake," - and blackmail in order to intimidate and trick a grieving family into paying for information or release of the loved ones. Moreover, it also reverse engineers the doxing process as it relies on voluntarily provided information, which is available online as it had been provided by the family, so that further harms, this time offline in nature, could be targeted at those looking for their lost/missing or dead relatives.

Doxing Statements/Testimonies from Foreign Fighters/ Volunteers for Ukraine

Polish Foreign Fighter for Ukraine

"Guys did profile on Tinder, uploaded their photos in uniforms there. There was a lot of trouble because of this. It is only 40-50 km between Kharkiv and Russia or the frontline and these services have to find your location to function properly. And consequently, some girl got in touch with the lads and got a lot of data from them [...] Personal data. Then it all ended on Telegram. When she saw the guy was called Tom, and he gave her his Facebook, then she quickly looked him up and especially his new "friends" and some of these guys were in uniforms. All were with the [International Legion] and she was able to quickly put together a database of such individuals [...] I do not know if that was the Russian propaganda or ordinary Russians but the data ended up on Telegram on the Russian profile called XYZ [GIVES NAME OF THE RUSSIAN CHANNEL].

These guys who fell for it, they were twenty somethings. People who live by the social media. This is their world from which they cannot really be extracted. Not all of them are smart. Different people, mostly living in their Tinders, Instagrams, they want to brag, show off.

When Daniel Sztyber, one of the Polish fighters for the International Legion, died there was an in memoriam post on Instagram or Facebook. And many of our guys gave a "like" underneath. They simply liked it. Someone later went through it and checked who gave the like. My friend from Canada, who did, had a a profile which said nothing on military or war but in his avatar, he had something linking him to Ukraine. The same avatar was out there in the profile of another guy from our platoon but he also had military photos there. And bang, they connected the dots and came to the conclusion that they were members of the same group. So my friend, the Canadian, had his real name and surname there, nothing dumb. The only thing – he gave this like and had the same avatar. His family later had a horrid time. They had him, his employers, his mum and dad, his workplaces. They were sending emails, "references" to his workplaces, text messages with threats. They also pinged his parents saying he was dead. They also did memes with him as they found his other photos. Finally, however, nothing bad happened. You know, nothing really bad..."[9]

Foreign Correspondent Based in Kyiv since 2022

"Doxing? Yes, I had one case. A mild attempt, Summer of 2024. One guy, Red-Fash, pro-Russian. I laughed at him, telling him he lost his shit, he was wrong, had no knowledge of Ukraine. He got my real name which was not hard to find. He found my number, he tried to elicit a reaction from me. He thought he was doxing me they way the far-left and the far-right do it all the time. My response, however, is always the same. I doxx myself even more. This is an emotional terrorism, an attempt to elicit an emotional reaction. They say – "we can get you wherever and my response is – 'Try!" And then I go for it even harder. You put my address up? I will put a photo of my phone up. You rip off my shirt? I will rip off my pants. Once they see you aint scared – they are not gonna do anything. If they don't find you scared then they will wonder if they might get the same from you. Doxing is popular against journos and they tend to react to it. "Look what happened!" but you are then feeding them. I turned it into a game. It does not really intimidate me. I willingly moved to a warzone. People are like – "You are not in Ukraine!" So I send them a photo.

I am part of the analogue generation – not young enough to be intimidated by the online threats but also old enough to remember the white pages. We were all there, you see? It was limited to your city but it was all there."

Former International Legion Member

"Doxing? I had too much to do and no time to be concerned, really. I had a more public role with the Legion so, yeah, the Russian media featured me on a couple of occasions. Yeah, mercenary, neo-Nazi lawyer etc. None of this had a practical impact on me and nothing really happened. I knew this would be coming, however, the doxing. Happened to all of us who took any public role. But it was different for volunteers, not fighters. These were coming and going to Ukraine, some wanted to keep a low profile and ended up having problems at work because someone told their employers they were doing this and that for Ukraine. And you had to explain it all. It is now like this a bit with me. I got back to my country, am a lawyer and some people look at me as I had been crazy. But at the same time, others are saying – well, he is a hero so they give me a pass. It is a mixed bag then.

Yes, the volunteers had it rougher here. The fighters – well, unless you were on active service and effectively gone AWOL and the news, because of doxing, came back to your unit. So something that was supposed to have been a holiday turned into a) fighting for Ukraine and then b) hell upon coming back to your unit at home. But generally, when you sign up for the legion, it is a high level of commitment with high tolerance level for danger. Being doxed then can almost be a validation. And you are threatened any day of your existence here, with a rifle in a trench so you will not care about doxing, to be honest."

Foreign Volunteer Present in Ukraine since 2014, Mostly in Eastern Ukraine

"Look, I have been here for ages, for years now. And I am a female, young one at that and what I mostly get is messages saying that I "suck some Banderite cock." My male friends are called paedophiles. That is the regular fare here. Doxing is supposed to make your life difficult but I remember the time when it was more than just harassment – Russians had websites which were screaming: "kill this person!" or "liquidate that guy!" With a photo and a caption over your face. By the way, Ukrainians also do it. The Russians might be doing it just like you – there is grant, yes, for real. You research it and then do not research it but instigate it and benefit from some research into us. Yes, i believe there are grants for these "trackers" […] Where does data originate from? It is being hacked. Look, at the unit level, the Ukrainians are always in a panic that they have been hacked. The same is for the MOD.

I do not, however, believe this is all centralised with the Russians. Ok, someone gets a grant and does the doxing. Someone else does the targeting on the frontlines and sometimes, just sometimes, these two activities cross paths and you end up with some doxed fighter dead. This is not, I repeat, synchronised, no. Bad luck for us, good luck for them. But, of course, if you attract too much attention then you can expect trouble. I mean, e.g. you are a foreigner and you attempt to sell war trophies, equipment of fallen Russians. They won't forger this, not in a hurry. And you are already doxed and then something might, just might happen to you as they will e.g. look for your phone in the vicinity of the frontline. A friend of mine had such a situation. He was a local journo, from Donetsk oblast, and they hated him as a traitor. And we learnt from the Ukrainians, who hacked the Russians, that there would be a shelling of a house he was supposed to go to at a special

point of the day, on a given Tuesday or something. Guess what – it was shelled exactly at that time. So fair play to the Ukrainians but the Russians somehow found out."

Foreign Fighter Present on the Frontlines since 2014, Captured by the Russians in 2022 and Released the Same Year. Now Back on the Frontlines

"Do I care? I mean, I went through the Russian or to be more accurate, Donetsk prisons. But yes, doxing happens and so what? Nothing happens later. Where do the Russians get the data? Come on, the recruitment centres are hacked every, what, three-four months?"

Foreign Fighters Who Fought in Ukraine Between 2022 and 2024. He is Now Living in Ukraine

"Yeah, I was doxed by the [GIVES NAME OF THE DOXING RUSSIAN CHANNEL]. Not much can happen, really, afterwards and they will not come and try me at home. I seriously doubt it. They must have gotten the data from the social media and/or, somehow, Ukrainian government data. Alternatively, someone might have simply sold it to them. We have been discussing the possibility of a mole being present in the ranks. It kind of dawned on us when the doxing started hitting people who are not online but yet, there they were – photos and data online. So it was no longer a cause of someone combing through our profiles on the social media. But we never got round to investigating this as nothing really happened to any one of us because of this. Moreover, we might not have even noticed as you know, we are on the frontlines so this is like, the last thing you worry about."

Foreign Civilian Volunteer, Involved in Recruitment for Some of the Foreign Fighter Units Present in Ukraine

"It was pretty straightforward and I would connect it to being stopped for a checkby the Territorial Defence Forces while out in Kyiv. You hand over the passport and days later you suddenly get "fan" mail. The same happened to "my" foreign fighters who handed their passports over at the check. And then out of a sudden I see my wife, who is Russian, being outed and smeared in the Russian media. They discussed her pieces on these hideous talk shows and "discussed" her. Nothing happened to us, as of yet, but you can imagine the concern when you are actually a Russian citizen being exposed in a such a way."

Endnotes

1 See: https://icct.nl/project/anti-dox-identifying-evaluating-and-countering-disinformation-times-war for more on ANTI-DOX. This project is supported by the European Media and Information Fund (EMIF), managed by the Calouste Gulbenkian foundation.

2 ICCT, *War on Ukraine: Foreign Fighters, Doxxing and (State) Terrorism*, 27 February 2025, https://icct.nl/multimedia/war-ukraine-foreign-fighters-doxxing-and-state-terrorism.

3 Ibid.

4 Jacob Serebrin, "Two Quebecers become the latest Canadian foreign fighters to die in the Ukraine-Russia war," *National Post*, 24 March 2024, https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/two-quebecers-become-the-latest-canadian-foreign-fighters-to-die-in-the-ukraine-russia-war

5 ICCT, *War on Ukraine: Foreign Fighters, Doxxing and (State) Terrorism*, 27 February 2025, https://icct.nl/multimedia/war-ukraine-foreign-fighters-doxxing-and-state-terrorism.

6 Tristan Peloquin, "Deux combattants québécois fauchés," [Two Quebec Fighters Moved Down], *La Presse*, 19 March 2024, https://www.lapresse.ca/actualites/2024-03-19/guerre-en-ukraine/deux-combattants-quebecois-fauches.php.

7 *War on Ukraine: Foreign Fighters, Doxxing and (State) Terrorism*, op. cit.

8 ICCT's research team conversation with Anastasiia Morozova of the Reporters' Foundation, 27 February 2025.

9 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, pp. 50-1.

About the Author

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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.