Far-Right Foreign Fighters and Ukraine: A Blind Spot for the European Union?

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Abstract

The decline of Daesh in the Middle East has not meant that the issue of foreign fighters is no longer relevant to the EU. There is now another major conflict on the EU's doorstep that has also been drawing significant numbers of foreign fighters for a few years, namely the Russo-Ukrainian War. This article investigates the phenomenon of far-right foreign fighters travelling from Europe to Ukraine. It makes three main inter-related arguments. First, although far-right extremists travelling to Ukraine constitute only a very small proportion of all the individuals joining the conflict and have turned up in smaller numbers than what had been predicted at some point, they represent a security risk to the EU and its Member States for a range of reasons. Second, despite these concerns, it is important not to exaggerate

the scale of the presence of far-right foreign fighters in Ukraine, notably because this may play into the hands of the Russian authorities that have described the invasion of Ukraine as a 'denazification' mission. Third, whilst fully keeping the previous point in mind, it would nevertheless be in the interest of the EU and its Member States to place the issue of far-right foreign fighters travelling to Ukraine on the policy agenda, even if their number is relatively small. This is particularly important considering the rise of right-wing political violence, the potential for transnationalisation, the current strength of societal discontent in some European states, and the mainstreaming of previously fringe beliefs. A more coordinated approach towards dissuading those at risk of travelling to Ukraine could be developed, alongside preparing for the eventual return of those who have already travelled to the region.

Keywords

European Union, Ukraine, Foreign fighters, Terrorism, Far-right, Extremism

Introduction

Following years characterised by terrorist activity in some European states, but only limited cooperation in counter-terrorism across Europe, the terrorist attacks on 11 September 2001 (or '9/11') were a watershed event.[1] They acted as a catalyst for the swift development of EU counter-terrorism cooperation, which notably included the adoption of the Council Framework Decision of 13 June 2002 on Combating Terrorism (2002/475/JHA). This can be seen as the cornerstone of EU counter-terrorism cooperation, since it laid down a common definition of terrorist offences, as well as the rules for competence and for legal cooperation amongst Member States for prosecuting individuals who have committed terrorist acts.[2] Since then, EU counter-terrorism cooperation has significantly grown, albeit not in a linear manner. Its

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[1] Christian Kaunert and Sarah Léonard, 'The Collective Securitisation of Terrorism in the European Union', *West European Politics*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 2019, pp. 261-277.
[2] Eugenia Dumitriu, 'The E.U.'s Definition of Terrorism: The Council Framework Decision on Combating Terrorism', *German Law Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 5, 2004, p. 590.

development has been characterised by periods of inertia followed by sudden accelerations, usually in response to a perceived crisis.[3]

The large numbers of European foreign fighters travelling to Iraq and Syria from 2013 onwards, generally – but not exclusively – in order to join Daesh, was one of these crises that propelled forward EU cooperation in counter-terrorism once again.[4] In particular, the EU adopted various measures on the prevention of radicalisation, including the adoption of a revised EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Terrorism in June 2014 and the establishment of the Internet Referral Unit at Europol, the so-called 'detection of travel for suspicious purposes', the further approximation of criminal legislation on terrorist offences[5], in addition to strengthening cooperation with third countries.[6] As Daesh began to lose control of some of the territories it had conquered, the flows of foreign fighters began to slow down before reversing.

However, the decline of Daesh in the Middle East has not meant that the issue of foreign fighters is no longer relevant to the EU. There is now another major conflict on the EU's doorstep that has also been drawing significant numbers of foreign fighters, namely the Russo-Ukrainian War. Although this full-scale war began in February 2022, a significant conflict had already been simmering between the two states for a few years. Both phases of the war (2014-2021; 2022-present) have been characterised by the involvement of foreign fighters. By 2021, it was estimated that 'more than 17,000 foreign fighters [had] joined one of the armed parties

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[3] Javier Argomaniz, 'Post-9/11 Institutionalisation of European Union Counter-terrorism: Emergence, Acceleration and Inertia', *European Security*, Vol. 18, No. 2, pp. 151-172.

[4] Christopher Baker-Beall, 'The Threat of the "Returning Foreign Fighter": The Securitization of EU Migration and Border Control Policy', *Security Dialogue*, Vol. 50, No. 5, 2019, pp. 437-453.

[5] Directive (EU) 2017/541 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 March 2017 on Combating Terrorism and replacing Council Framework Decision 2002/475/JHA and amending Council Decision 2005/671/JHA, OJ L 88, 31 March 2017, pp. 6–21.

[6] European Parliamentary Research Service, 'Foreign Fighters – Member State Responses and EU Action', PE 579.080, Brussels: European Union, 2016.

in the conflict in Ukraine', a large proportion of whom were Russians or Russian speakers.[7]

The Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to a new influx of foreign fighters. As explained by Murauskaite, 'Ukraine announced that over 20,000 prospective volunteer fighters from 52 countries had registered on its officially designated website, with Russia shortly thereafter announcing that 16,000 fighters from the Middle East would be joining its ranks'[8], although it would appear that significantly lower numbers of individuals eventually travelled to Ukraine.[9] Amongst these foreign fighters, there has been a small minority of individuals with far-right views.[10] Even if the number of individuals concerned is very limited, they have given rise to potentially significant security risks. This is even more so in the current political context that has been marked by a noticeable rise in right-wing political violence, which some have interpreted as a 'fifth wave' of terrorism.[11]

However, it is striking to note that, to date, the travel of far-right foreign fighters to Ukraine has received little attention at the EU level. It has certainly not been problematized in the same way as the issue of the foreign fighters travelling to Iraq and Syria in the 2010s. When examining EU documents, one can only find some passing references or allusions to this issue. For example, the foreword to the European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2022 briefly mentions that '[this] war has already attracted several radicalised individuals from

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[7] Gijs Weijenberg and Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, 'The Forgotten Front: Dutch Fighters in Ukraine', The Hague: ICCT, 2021, available at: https://icct.nl/publication/the-forgotten-front-dutch-fighters-in-ukraine/ (accessed on 10 January 2023).

[8] Egle E. Murauskaite, 'Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: What Concerns Should Really Be on the Agenda?', *Russia Matters*, 18 August 2022, available at: https://www.russiamatters.org/analysis/foreign-fighters-ukraine-what-concerns-should-really-be-agenda (accessed on 10 January 2023);

[9] Kacper Rekawek, ed., *Western Extremists and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022: All Talk, but Not a Lot of Walk*, Counter Extremism Project, available at: https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/2022-05/Western%20Extremists%20and%20the%20Russian%20Invasion%20of%20Ukraine%20in%202022_May%202022.pdf (accessed on 10 January 2023).

[10] Counter Extremism Project, 'Foreign Fighters in the 2022 Russia-Ukraine War: An Initial Assessment of Extremist Volunteers', Policy Brief, 8 March 2022, available at: https://www.counterextremism.com/topics/russia-ukraine-war (accessed on 20 April 2022).

[11] Leonard Weinberg, *The End of Terrorism?* London: Routledge, 2011, p. 125.

Member States who have joined the fight on both sides' and that 'the ongoing war is likely to spark violent extremist reactions and mobilisation, particularly in the online domain'.[12] Elsewhere, the report states that '[f]oreign fighters returning from conflict areas may engage in violence, spreading terrorist propaganda and recruiting followers in Member States, and may attempt to orchestrate attacks in the EU', but does not specifically link this threat to the Russo-Ukrainian War.[13]

In practice, however, such concerns have not led to any concerted effort to clearly dissuade or prevent all EU residents from travelling to Ukraine and engaging in private warfare. Although there have been some individual initiatives by some Member States[14] and the so-called 'Vendôme Group' - which gathers France, Germany, the Netherlands, Italy, Spain and Luxembourg - declared that they 'univocally discourage Europeans to join the fight on the battleground', various statements have been simultaneously made – including by some of the governments that belong to the Vendôme Group – to indicate that people travelling to fight on the Ukrainian side would not be prosecuted.[15] Thus, compared to other dimensions of the Russo-Ukrainian War, such as economic sanctions, energy supply or military assistance, the matter of European individuals travelling to Ukraine in order to participate in the conflict has received very limited attention at the EU level to date.

This article argues that the neglect of the involvement of far-right foreign fighters in the Russo-Ukrainian War is problematic for the EU, because it carries potentially significant security

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[12] Europol, 'European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2022', Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2022, p. 3.
[13] Europol, 'European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2022', p. 76.
[14] See Nicky Harley, 'German security officials visit far-right extremists to warn them not to travel to Ukraine', 6 April 2022, available at: https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/uk-news/2022/04/06/german-security-officials-visit-far-right-extremists-to-warn-them-not-to-travel-to-ukraine/ (accessed on 3 June 2022).
[15] Teun van Dongen, Gijs Weijenberg, Martijn Vugteveen, and Joshua Farrell-Molloy, 'Foreign Volunteers in Ukraine: Security Considerations for Europe', The Hague: ICCT, available at: https://icct.nl/publication/foreign-volunteers-in-ukraine-security-considerations-for-europe/ (accessed on 11 January 2023).

risks. In order to develop this argument, this article proceeds as follows. First, it examines the existing literature on foreign fighters. This section shows that significantly less attention has been given to right-wing foreign fighters than jihadist foreign fighters. Although this is understandable to some extent, this is nevertheless puzzling because the few studies on right-wing foreign fighters have suggested that those may pose a significant security risk upon their return. Second, the article develops an analytical framework for assessing the threat of returning foreign fighters. Third, this analytical framework is applied to the case of the far-right foreign fighters travelling to Ukraine.

Right-Wing Foreign Fighters as a Neglected Issue in Europe

The phenomenon of 'foreign fighters' has received a significant amount of scholarly attention in the last few years. Whilst it is acknowledged that various scholars and institutions have put forward different definitions over the years and that this debate is far from settled[16], for the purpose of this article, foreign fighters are defined as 'non-indigenous, non-territorialized combatants who, motivated by religion, kinship, and/or ideology rather than pecuniary reward, enter a conflict zone to participate in hostilities'.[17]

Although foreign fighters had already received some scholarly attention previously, the interest in this phenomenon vastly increased for governments and scholars alike because of the significant number of individuals who travelled to Iraq and Syria in the last few years in order to join jihadist groups, most notably Daesh. From a European perspective, this particular interest can be explained by the significantly higher number of foreign fighters from Europe

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[16] See Alex P. Schmid, 'Foreign (Terrorist) Fighter Estimates: Conceptual and Data Issues', ICCT Policy Brief, The Hague: ICCT, 2015, available at: http://icct.nl/app/uploads/2015/10/ICCT-Schmid-Foreign-Terrorist-Fighter-Estimates-Conceptual-and-Data-Issues-October20152.pdf (accessed on 27 June 2022).
[17] Cerwyn Moore and Paul Tumelty, 'Foreign Fighters and the Case of Chechnya: A Critical Assessment', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, Vol. 31, No. 5, pp. 412-433, 2008.

involved in this conflict compared to previous hostilities, as well as the concerns about the possible involvement of returning foreign fighters in terrorist activities on European soil, as illustrated by the case of the Franco-Belgian cell responsible for terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels in 2015-2016.[18] Consequently, the bulk of the literature on foreign fighters has focused on this specific group of jihadist foreign fighters. Some scholars have considered their backgrounds and motivations, highlighting the importance of factors such as political and ideological considerations, the quest for status or kinship, as well as feelings of not being part of Western societies. In addition, whilst there has been some research on the local effects of the participation of foreign fighters in conflicts, there has been more interest in assessing the potential threat that foreign fighters may pose to Western countries upon their return.[19]

In contrast, far-right foreign fighters have tended to receive considerably less attention in both historical and contemporary studies. This is rather surprising, given the significance of their role in several conflicts in the last decades. There have been reports of involvement of right-wing foreign fighters in various conflicts, including the Spanish Civil War in the 1930s, the Rhodesian Bush War of the 1960s and 1970s, the 'Contra War' in Nicaragua in the 1980s, the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, as well as several conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine in the 2010s.[20] However, these cases have remained largely under-researched. Notable exceptions have been Christopher Othen's book on *Franco's International Brigades*[21] and Kathleen

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[18] Sam Mullins, *Jihadist Infiltration of Migrant Flows to Europe: Perpetrators, Modus Operandi and Policy Implications*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.

[19] For a useful review of the literature on foreign fighters, see Emil A. Souleimanov, 'Why Jihadist Foreign Fighters Leave Local Battlefields: Evidence from Chechnya', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, https://doi.org/10.1080/01402390.2021.1933954, 2021.

[20] Nir Arielli, 'In Search of Meaning: Foreign Volunteers in the Croatian Armed Forces, 1991-95', *Contemporary European History*, Vol. 21, No. 1, 2012, pp. 1-17; Nir Arielli, 'Foreign Fighters and War Volunteers: Between Myth and Reality', *European Review of History / Revue Européenne d'Histoire*, Vol. 27, Nos 1-2, pp. 54-64; Ariel Koch, 'The Non-Jihadi Foreign Fighters: Western Right-Wing and Left-Wing Extremists in Syria', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 33, No. 4, 2021, pp. 669-696.

[21] Christopher Othen, *Franco's International Brigades: Foreign Volunteers and Fascist Dictators in the Spanish Civil War*, London: Reportage Press, 2010.

Belew's work, which has highlighted the connections between American right-wing volunteers and mercenaries in the above conflicts with extremist movements in the United States. She has shown the ties between the US Civilian Military Assistance group, which was involved in Nicaragua, and the white power movement, as well as demonstrating that, despite its small size, the American contingent in the Rhodesian Bush War 'left an indelible cultural imprint'.[22] In addition, in *Revolutionaries for the Right*, Kyle Burke has highlighted the involvement of right-wing foreign fighters originating from several European countries in the Yugoslav Wars in the 1990s.[23] In an article entitled 'The non-Jihadi foreign fighters', Koch has been one of very few authors to highlight the involvement of right-wing extremists in the war in Syria. Whilst highlighting how 'Christianity clearly played a central role on driving volunteers to join the "anti-ISIS [Islamic State of Iraq and Syria] Caravan"'[24], as well as the importance of online recruitment[25], his conclusion was that '[we] do not know exactly how many of these extremists have joined the fighting or where they are exactly, and fully understanding the extent of this phenomenon and its potential threats requires additional research on national and international scales'.[26]

This relative neglect of right-wing foreign fighters is puzzling and arguably problematic. This is because, as notably suggested by the American case, the involvement of extreme-right and right-wing foreign fighters in conflicts abroad might eventually bolster right-wing extremism – and possibly, right-wing terrorism - in Europe. This is particularly relevant, since a significant

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[22] Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018, pp. 79-81.
[23] Kyle Burke, *Revolutionaries for the Right: Anticommunist Internationalism and Paramilitary Warfare in the Cold War*, Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2018.
[24] Ariel Koch, 'The Non-Jihadi Foreign Fighters: Western Right-Wing and Left-Wing Extremists in Syria', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 33, No. 4, p. 677.
[25] Ibidem, pp. 679-680.
[26] Ibidem, p. 684.

number of EU Member States have seen the rise of right-wing extremism in recent years.[27] In the foreword to the 2022 European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT), the Executive Director of Europol emphasised that 'lone actors associated with jihadist and right-wing violent extremism remain the biggest threat associated with potential terrorist and violent extremist attacks in the EU'.[28]

Right-wing extremism can be defined with regard to ideology and methods.[29] In terms of ideology, right-wing extremism is characterised by three core beliefs: the existence of a natural hierarchy amongst individuals and groups in society, a preference for authoritarianism, and an anti-democratic stance, usually involving the aim to destroy democratic political systems.[30] In terms of methods, the key characteristic of right-wing extremists is to see the threat or actual use of violence in pursuit of their aims as being legitimate. Such violence may notably take the form of incitement to violence, terrorist attacks or hate crime.[31] Although these features can be identified at a general level, it is important to remember that right-wing extremism is far from constituting a monolithic block. Pauwels, for example, has described it as comprising the following subcurrents: Neo-Nazi movements, Anti-Islam and anti-migration movements, identitarian movements, ultranationalist and neofascist movements, far-right sovereign citizen movements and single-issue extremists.[32]

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[27] European Parliament, 'Right-wing Extremism in the European Union', Study requested by the LIBE Committee, PE700.953, Brussels: European Union, 2022.

[28] Europol, 'European Union Terrorism Situation and Trend Report 2022', Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2022.

[29] 'Right-wing Extremism in the European Union', p. 11.

[30] Idem.

[31] Ibidem, p. 12.

[32] Radicalisation Awareness Network, 'Contemporary Manifestations of Violent Right-wing Extremism in the EU: An Overview of P/CVE Practices', Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2021, available at: https://home-affairs.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-04/ran_adhoc_cont_manif_vrwe_eu_overv_pcve_pract_2021_en.pdf (accessed on 11 January 2023).

When analysing recent developments in the evolution of far-right extremism, scholars have highlighted three significant trends. First, there has been some blurring of the distinction between far-right extremist groups and political parties.[33] For instance, in Germany, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*BfV*) placed Alternative for Germany (*AfD*) under surveillance for far-right extremism in March 2021.[34] Its youth section, known as the Wing (*Flügel*), had already been placed under surveillance the year before[35], following a far-right attack conducted in the town of Hanau, which resulted in the death of nine people of African, Middle Eastern or Asian origin. In Italy, Luca Traini shot and injured six African migrants in the city of Macerata in 2018. Traini had previously stood for election with the League (known as the Northern League at the time) in the town of Corridonia and had ties to the Italian far-right movement and former party CasaPound Italia.[36] Links between the League and CasaPound are well known and go back to the 2014 elections to the European Parliament when the League candidate Mario Borghezio was elected Member of European Parliament thanks to CasaPound's votes.[37] Borghezio attracted media attention in 2011 for his infamous comments on Anders Breivik. He described Breivik's ideas as 'good' - some even 'very good' – and blamed the occurrence of violence on 'the immigrant invasion'.[38] Second, the presence of right-

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[33] Michael Morell and Russ Travers, 'International and Domestic Terrorism Threats' in Intelligence Matters with Michael Morell produced by CBS News, podcast, ART19, 36:13, available at https://www.cbsnews.com/news/deputy-homeland-security-adviser-russ-travers-terrorist-threats-intelligence-matters-podcast/ (accessed on 14 April 2021).

[34] 'Germany places entire far-right AfD under surveillance — reports', Deutsche Welle, 3 March 2021, available at https://www.dw.com/en/germany-places-entire-far-right-afd-under-surveillance-reports/a-56757489 (accessed on 3 March 2021).

[35] Far-right parties form new group in European Parliament", Deutsche Welle, 14 June 2019, available at https://www.dw.com/en/far-right-parties-form-new-group-in-european-parliament/a-49189262 (accessed on 10 March 2022).

[36] Tobias Jones, 'The fascist movement that has brought Mussolini back to the mainstream', The Guardian, 22 February 2018, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/feb/22/casapound-italy-mussolini-fascism-mainstream (accessed on 15 April 2022).

[37] Chiara Piselli, 'Matteo Salvini e CasaPound, un rapporto lungo cinque anni', Open online, 2 May 2019, available at: https://www.open.online/2019/05/02/matteo-salvini-e-casapound-un-rapporto-lu'ngo-cinque-anni/ (accessed on 3 April 2022).

[38] 'Borghezio: "Idee di Breivik condivisibili" E Calderoli chiede scusa alla Norvegia', La Repubblica, 26 July 2018, available at: https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2011/07/26/news/borghezio_norvegia-19635604/ (accessed on 3 April 2022).

wing extremists in the law enforcement community and in the military has been documented in some European countries – a phenomenon that has also been observed in the United States.[39] For instance, an investigation by *Der Spiegel* in Germany revealed that around 400 suspected 'incidents of right-wing extremist, racist or anti-Semitic activity' involving police officers had been recorded in recent years.[40] A recent study on right-wing extremism in the military, which examined 12 Western countries, concluded that, amongst the EU Member States included in the survey (i.e. Germany, Austria, France, Spain, Italy, Greece, Belgium, and the Netherlands), Germany appeared to be the most heavily affected.[41] Third, there is evidence that extreme-right individuals and groups have become increasingly connected internationally. This has been to a significant extent facilitated by the internet, which has enabled right-wing extremists to spread their ideas. The internationalisation of the far-right scene has also taken place offline, through the participation of right-wing extremists in a range of collective events, including political rallies and marches, concerts and violent sports competitions, in particular Mixed Martial Arts.[42]

Returning Foreign Fighters: Assessing the Threat

This section draws on the literature on foreign fighters in order to develop an analytical framework for assessing the threat of returning foreign fighters, which will be subsequently

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[39] Daniel Koehler, 'A Threat from Within? Exploring the Link between the Extreme Right and the Military', The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2019; Seth G. Jones, Catrina Doxsee and Grace Hwang, 'The Military, Police, and the Rise of Terrorism in the United States', Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2021.

[40] Bartsch Matthias et al., 'The Dark Side of State Power: Exploring Right-Wing Extremism in Germany's Police and Military', Der Spiegel, 13 August 2020, available at: https://www.spiegel.de/international/germany/the-dark-side-of-state-power-exploring-right-wing-extremism-in-germany-s-police-and-military-a-0600aa1e-3e4e-45af-bfc9-32a6661e66ef (accessed on 5 September 2020).

[41] Teun van Dongen, Yannick Veilleux-Lepage, Eviane Leidig and Hanna Rigault Arkhis, 'Right-Wing Extremism in the Military: A Typology of the Threat', ICCT Research Paper, The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, 2022, available at: https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2022/05/Right-wing-extremism-in-the-military-1.pdf (accessed on 10 January 2023).

[42] Manuela Caini and Linda Parenti, 'The Dark Side of the Web: Italian Right-Wing Extremist Groups and the Internet', *South European Society and Politics*, Vol. 14, No. 3, 2009, pp. 273-294; Andrea Mammone, Emmanuel Godin, and Brian Jenkins (eds), *Mapping the Extreme Right in Contemporary Europe*, London: Routledge, 2012; 'Contemporary Manifestations of Violent Right-wing Extremism in the EU', pp. 6-7.

applied to the case of far-right foreign fighters travelling to Ukraine. However, it is important to emphasise that the existing literature has been largely developed on the basis of the experiences with Al Qaeda and Daesh.[43] One may question whether the experience of Western states with returning jihadist foreign fighters may be entirely relevant when seeking to assess the threat of returning far-right foreign fighters. However, as already mentioned, the literature on foreign fighters is to a large extent limited to literature on *jihadist* foreign fighters. Furthermore, the experience of returning jihadist fighters is arguably relevant when one recalls that right-wing extremists have been inspired by jihadist groups, such as Al Qaeda and Daesh.[44]

Different frameworks have been offered to examine the multi-dimensional threat posed by foreign fighters upon their return. Reed et al. have developed a framework highlighting four 'distinct but interconnected' parameters to consider, namely 'the travel of foreign fighters, their return to their countries of residence, the threat posed by lone actors and sympathisers who carry out attacks at home, and finally, an increasing polarisation of society'.[45] De Roy Zuijdewijn, in an attempt to go beyond a primary focus on the physical challenge, has looked at three aspects of the fallout, namely physical threat, ideological influence, and social fallout.[46]

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[43] Mary Beth Altier, Emma Leonard Boyle and John Horgan, 'Returning to the Fight: An Empirical Analysis of Terrorist Reengagement and Recidivism', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 33, No. 4, pp. 836-860, 2021; Daniel Byman, 'The Homecomings: What Happens when Arab Foreign Fighters in Iraq and Syria Return', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 38, No. 8, 2015, pp. 581-602; R. Kim Cragin, 'The Challenge of Foreign Fighter Returnees', *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, Vol. 33, No. 3, 2017, pp. 292-312; David Malet and Rachel Hayes, 'Foreign Fighter Returnees: An Indefinite Threat?', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 32, No. 8, 2020, pp. 1617-1635; Daniel Milton, 'Lessons from September 11 About the Post-Conflict Threat Posed by Foreign Terrorist Fighters', *Journal of Policing, Intelligence, and Counter-Terrorism*, Vol. 15, No. 2, 2020, pp. 136-153; Elena Pokalova, *Returning Islamist Foreign Fighters: Threats and Challenges to the West*, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020; Alastair Reed, Johanna Pohl, and Marjolein Jegerings, 'The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighter Threat: Making Sense of an Evolving Phenomemon', *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism*, 2017, available at: https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ICCT-Reed-Pohl-The-Four-Dimensions-of-the-Foreign-Fighters-Threat-June-2017.pdf (accessed on 23 July 2020); Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn, 'Terrorism and Beyond: Exploring the Fallout of the European Foreign Fighter Phenomenon in Syria and Iraq', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 10, No. 6, 2016, pp. 82-96.
[44] Soufan Center, 'White Supremacy Extremism', p. 28.
[45] Reed et al., 'The Four Dimensions of Foreign Fighter Threat', p. 3.
[46] de Roy van Zuijdewijn, 'Terrorism and Beyond'.

Milton has focused more on the individuals involved and their specific roles, such as network supporter, global operative, recruiter, and entrepreneur.[47]

Drawing upon these works, a four-component analytical framework for assessing the threat of returning foreign fighters can be outlined, as follows:

1) Conflict context, objectives, and the participation of foreign fighters: the causes of the conflict and why it has drawn in foreign fighters, the opportunities presented for networking and skillset development, as well as the long-term possibilities for participation;

2) Physical threat: evidence of specific activities undertaken in the conflict zone and political and criminal violence to date and in the short-term;

3) Organisational challenges: longer term challenges, including leadership and creation of networks, ideological influence, and logistical support;

4) Wider societal consequences: how foreign fighters are dealt with by governments on return, social problems stemming from foreign fighters, and individual challenges posed.

Conflict Context, Objectives, Opportunities, and Long-Term Participation

When seeking to evaluate the threat of foreign fighters, one of the first issues to consider is why people travel to join conflicts. Over the years, a variety of factors and motivations have been advanced in answer to this question. [48] In order to better understand the cause being fought for and what pulls individuals in, it is necessary to identify the main protagonists and the

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[47] Milton, 'Lessons From September 11', pp. 145-149.

[48] Lorne Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam, 'Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for *Hijrah* to Syria and Iraq', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 40, No. 3, 2017, pp. 191-210; David Malet, 'Foreign Fighter Mobilisation and Persistence in a Global Context', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 27, No. 3, 2015, pp. 454-473; Elena Pokalova, 'Driving Factors Behind Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq', *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, Vol. 42, No. 9, 2019, pp.798-818.

dominant belief systems in circulation.[49] One has to take into account the possibility that the leadership of an organisation or network will actively attempt to send back foreign fighters to stir up trouble in their country of origin or that individuals will use the arena as a training ground for their own objectives. Opportunities for networking and learning skills, as well as the long-term hospitality of the state in question, must also be considered. For instance, the establishment of training camps in Afghanistan enabled the professionalization of many jihadists, who gained a range of skills through training.[50] It has been estimated that between 10,000 and 20,000 individuals attended the Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and that fourteen camps were registered with the Taliban until about the year 2000. In addition, there were other training camps run by the Taliban and other Arab and non-Arab terrorist groups in Afghanistan.[51] This shows how close relations between a government and terrorist groups created the conditions that enabled the training of thousands of terrorists – albeit of varying ability – and the opportunity for networking, with the end result being what has been referred to as a 'global insurgency'.[52] Furthermore, Malet has suggested that the persistence of jihadism has been partially due to the policies of the home states of foreign fighters, which, in his view, prevented reintegration 'and created cohorts of stateless, and now professionalized, actors who perpetuate in weakly-governed conflict zones'.[53] Some of these individuals then travel the world to fight in other conflicts or become involved in terrorist activities. Similarly favourable circumstances have also been identified in other countries, such as Yemen, Somalia, and Sudan.

Physical Threat

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[49] Daniel Byman, *Al Qaeda, The Islamic State, and the Global Jihadist Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), p. 9.
[50] Daniel Byman, *Road Warriors: Foreign Fighters in the Armies of Jihad*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019.
[51] Sean Maloney, 'Army of Darkness: The Jihadist Training System in Pakistan and Afghanistan, 1996-2001', *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2015, p. 520.
[52] David Kilcullen, 'Countering Global Insurgency', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 4, 2005, pp. 597-617.
[53] Malet, 'Foreign Fighter Mobilisation and Persistence in a Global Context', p. 454.

The involvement of returning foreign fighters into terrorist attacks on domestic soil is undoubtedly one of the main issues of concern for governments. However, research has shown that returning foreign fighters may present other physical threats. In order to better ascertain them, one must begin by identifying the activities that returning foreign fighters have been involved in or trained to carry out during the conflict in which they were involved. Quantitative estimates of how many foreign fighters eventually become domestic terrorists vary widely. For example, in an article published in 2013, Hegghammer argued that roughly one in nine foreign fighters returned to Western states to commit attacks after fighting abroad (i.e. 107 out of 945) between 1990 and 2010.[54] However, a later study by Hegghammer and Nesser suggested that, with regard to foreign fighters involved in the war in Syria, the proportion was significantly lower.[55] However, given that it only examined data collected until June 2015, these conclusions did not reflect the full picture of the actions of foreign fighters returning from the war in Syria and could not fully take lag effects into account. Regardless of the precise numbers, there have been several instances of foreign fighters of various persuasions committing attacks on return to Europe, such as the attacks in Paris in November 2015.[56]

The contrast between the results of the two studies reported above draws attention to the temporal aspect of the phenomenon of foreign fighters. In that regard, Malet and Hayes have examined 134 foreign fighters who returned to Western states between 1980 and 2016. They have shown that most attacks occurred within a year (more precisely, ten months on average) of the foreign fighter's return.[57] Nevertheless, Milton has urged caution when it comes to

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[54] Thomas Hegghammer, 'Should I Stay or Should I Go? Explaining Variation in Western Jihadists' Choice Between Domestic and Foreign Fighting', *American Political Science Review*, Vol. 107, No. 1, 2013, pp.1-15.
[55] Thomas Hegghammer and Petter Nesser, 'Assessing the Islamic State's Commitment to Attacking the West', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 2015, pp. 14-30.
[56] R. Kim Cragin, 'The November 2015 Paris Attacks: The Impact of Foreign Fighter Returnees', *Orbis,* Vol. 61, No. 2, 2017, pp. 212-226.
[57] Malet and Hayes, 'Foreign Fighter Returnees', p. 10.

focusing on the short-term threat of returning foreign fighters, showing with the case of the 9/11 attackers that the average lag between foreign fighter experience and the terrorist attacks was nine years.[58] Thus, one must be careful not to overly focus on the short term. It is necessary to go beyond terrorist attacks in order to also consider the possible involvement in wider political violence and dissent through membership of extremist groups. Many foreign fighters had criminal pasts. It should therefore come as no surprise to see involvement in criminal activities once they return. Indeed, experts have been concerned that foreign fighters returning from the war in Syria might join or re-join 'radical milieus or criminal gangs'.[59] Their involvement in foreign conflicts may have developed skills that will enable them to be more 'successful' criminals[60], thereby contributing to the so-called 'crime-terrorism nexus'.[61] Thus, as argued by Ritzmann in a tweet written during the Annual Conference of the European Expert Network on Terrorism Issues (EENeT) in 2017, '[considering] increasing extreme right/left polarisation and violence, having more battle hardened militiamen/women around is surely a security concern'.[62]

Organisational Challenges

As shown notably by research into the foreign fighters who travelled to Iraq and Syria, returning foreign fighters may pose a series of challenges to the authorities, which go far beyond their perpetration of a terrorist attack.[63] The first of these challenges is the provision of leadership to others. Nesser has argued that foreign fighters have often played the role of

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[58] Milton, 'Lessons From September 11', p. 144.
[59] Radicalisation Awareness Network, 'Responses to Returnees: Foreign Terrorist Fighters and Their Families', available at: https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/sites/homeaffairs/files/ran_br_a4_m10_en.pdf (accessed on 29 July 2020), p. 23.
[60] Martin Gallagher, '"Criminalised" Islamic State Veterans: A Future Major Threat in Organised Crime Development', *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 10, No. 5, 2016, pp. 51-67.
[61] Alexander Kupatadze and Javier Argomaniz, 'Understanding and Conceptualizing European Jihadists: Criminals, Extremists or Both?', *European Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 16, No. 3, 2019, pp. 261-277.
[62] Quoted in Ariel Koch, 'The Non-Jihadi Foreign Fighters: Western Right-Wing and Left-Wing Extremists in Syria', *Terrorism and Political Violence,* Vol. 33, No. 4, 2021, p. 669.
[63] De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 'Terrorism and Beyond'.

entrepreneurs, developing terrorist cells and networks and being granted respect thanks to their experience.[64] Entrepreneurs are generally considered to be credible and inspirational to others on the basis of their combat experience and training. Without such figures, it is likely that many terrorist cells would have never been formed. Examples of such leaders include Djamel Baghel, who ran an Al Qaeda network in Europe in 2001, and Mohammad Siddique Khan, the leader of the cell that undertook the London attacks in 2005.[65] It appears that experiences abroad may render foreign fighters more competent individual terrorists.

A second matter to consider is that of ideological guidance and influence. Entrepreneurs tend to be influential because they appear more knowledgeable about religious or political affairs than their followers.[66] Some conflicts involving foreign fighters have gained almost mythical status. This is notably seen in the case of the Soviet-Afghan War, which is recounted as a conflict where a group of holy warriors with very few means apparently defeated a superpower. The foreign fighters concerned have been held in high regard in jihadist circles and may return to their home country or travel to the next conflict with greater conviction, knowledge, and respect due to being veterans. Noted fighters, such as Usama bin Laden, Abdullah Azzam, and Ayman al Zawahiri, notably derived their leadership from their involvement in such conflicts and inspired others as a result. Furthermore, conflicts such as Bosnia, Iraq, and Somalia provided greater credibility to Al Qaeda's ideas of defensive jihad.[67] The involvement of foreign fighters in these conflicts, including their presence in training camps, such as in Sudan in the early 1990s, greatly facilitated networking amongst jihadists and led to the development of lasting ties. In a similar fashion, some right-wing fighters returned from the conflict in Nicaragua in the 1980s and benefitted the white supremacist cause in the US, as shown by

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[64] Petter Nesser, *Jihadist Terrorism in Europe*, London: Hurst, 2018, pp. 13-14.
[65] Ibidem, p. 14.
[66] Ibidem, pp. 13-14.
[67] De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 'Terrorism and Beyond', p. 88.

Belew.[68] Of course, times have changed, in particular with the development of the internet. This tool has been shown to play a crucial role for many right-wing extremists when it comes to learning, spreading ideas, communicating, and recruiting co-conspirators.[69]

The third organisational element to consider concerns training and logistical support. In a study of foreign fighters, Milton has shown how 11 out of the 45 foreign fighters in his dataset can be categorised as providing logistical support, such as 'financial, travel, research, or other support to the operatives who carried out the September 11 attacks'.[70] Amer Azizi, for example, has been connected to both 9/11 and the Madrid bombings, seemingly playing the role of emissary for the Al Qaeda leadership and participating in planning meetings.[71] Mohammad Haydar Zammar is another individual who was involved in 9/11, specifically exercising religious influence and taking part in recruitment activities, although he has claimed to have had no idea what exactly was being planned for that day.[72] Overall, such individuals may be less dangerous than those who represent a direct physical threat. Nevertheless, they play a significant role with regard to the recruitment of individuals and the planning of terrorist attacks. Without them, a terrorist group or network would not be able to function effectively.

Wider Societal Consequences

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[68] Centre for the Analysis of the Radical Right, 'Foreign Fighters and the Global War for White Supremacy', available at: http://www.radicalrightanalysis.com/2020/02/22/foreign-fighters-and-the-global-war-for-white-supremacy/ (accessed on 30 July 2020); Belew, *Bring the War Home.*

[69] Paul Gill, Emily Corner, Maura Conway, Amy Thornton, Mia Bloom, and John Horgan, 'Terrorist use of the Internet by the Numbers: Quantifying Behaviours, Patterns, Processes', *Criminology and Public Policy*, Vol. 16, No .1, 2017, pp. 99-100.

[70] Milton, 'Lessons from September 11', p. 141.

[71] Los Angeles Times, 'Madrid Suspect Charged in 9/11', 2004, available at: https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2004-apr-29-fg-terror29-story.html (accessed on 24 July 2020).

[72] Washington Post, 'This is the Man who Recruited the 9/11 Hijackers', 2018, available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/world/wp/2018/11/30/feature/this-is-the-man-who-recruited-the-9-11-hijackers/ (accessed on 24 July 2020).

Evidently, the potential ripple effects of foreign fighters go far beyond their involvement in direct violence or their contribution to the organisation of violent activities. In that respect, how governments deal with returning foreign fighters is key. This notably comprises how this is publicly communicated, although it may also depend on whether the foreign fighting was viewed as being for a socially acceptable cause. If not, it is likely that citizens will be concerned about returning foreign fighters. European states have tended to treat jihadist foreign fighters rather harshly, notably by not assisting them (or their family) to return home, attempting to strip them of their citizenship, or threatening them with immediate arrest should they attempt to return.[73] Such an approach is problematic in several respects.[74] First, such measures raise important questions in relation to compliance with international law and human rights law, in addition to tarnishing the reputation of the states concerned. Second, these individuals may arguably become more of a security risk, notably by travelling to another conflict. Third, the families and communities of the individuals concerned may develop grievances, especially if they perceive other types of foreign fighters to receive a more lenient treatment.

A potential ripple effect is that of social polarisation. Terrorist activities might affect social cohesion, foster extremism, and a cycle of violence. In the last few years, Europe has seen the rise of populist parties, many of which have been critical of migrants and asylum-seekers, notably by linking them to terrorism.[75] As a result, overall, the political environment in Europe has become less hospitable to minority groups, as seen in the case of Alternative for Germany, for instance. This party has recently met with some electoral success, having included in its

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[73] Adam Hoffman and Marta Furlan, 'Challenges Posed by Returning Foreign Fighters', *George Washington Programme on Extremism*, 2020, available at: https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Challenges%20Posed%20by%20Returning%20Foreign%20Fighters.pdf (accessed on 9 August 2020), pp. 16-20.
[74] Tamara Laine, '"Passing the Buck": Western States Race to Denationalise Foreign Terrorist Fighters', *Journal of Peacebuilding & Development*, Vol. 12, No. 2, 2017, pp. 22-35.
[75] Sarah Léonard and Christian Kaunert, 'Refugee Flows and Terrorism in the European Union: Securitization through Association'; Sarah Léonard and Christian Kaunert, *Refugees, Security and the European Union*, London: Routledge, 2019.

manifesto that 'Islam is not part of Germany'.[76] In an even more extreme fashion, the English Defence League (EDL) can be seen as a reaction – however paranoid and fuelled by untruths – to jihadism and terrorism, albeit expanded to all Muslims.[77] Finally, it is necessary to also consider the wider consequences of the phenomenon of foreign fighters at the individual level. Given the negative experiences that they may have had during the conflict in which they took part, they are more likely to face mental health challenges, without being able to access to the kind of support normally available to servicemen.

The Case of the Right-Wing Foreign Fighters in Ukraine

This section presents the results of the application of the four-part analytical framework outlined above to the case of right-wing foreign fighters taking part in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

Conflict Context, Objectives, Opportunities, and Long-Term Participation

Against the backdrop of largely incompatible visions for their own future[78], the tense relations between Russia and Ukraine turned into an open conflict in 2014, when 'anonymous troops bearing no insignia [but] being widely recognized as belonging to the Russian army' invaded and seized the Crimean Peninsula.[79] Following a show referendum, the territory was then annexed by Moscow. Subsequently, pro-Russian militants and protesters – some local, others having travelled from further afield - began to seize government buildings in eastern Ukraine

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[76] Reed et al., 'The Four Dimensions of Foreign Fighter Threat', p. 8.

[77] Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Hans Brun, 'A Neo-Nationalist Network: The English Defence League and Europe's Counter-Jihad Movement', *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence*, 2013, available at: https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ICSR-Report-A-Neo-Nationalist-Network-The-English-Defence-League-and-Europe%E2%80%99s-Counter-Jihad-Movement.pdf (accessed on 30 July 2020).

[78] For more on the crisis, please see the following sources: Erika Harris, 'What is the Role of Nationalism and Ethnicity in the Russia-Ukraine Crisis?', *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 72, No. 4, 2020, pp. 593-613; Taras Kuzio, 'Russia-Ukraine Crisis: The Blame Game, Geopolitics, and National Identity', *Europe-Asia Studies*, Vol. 70, No. 3, 2018, pp. 462-473; Tatyana Malyarenko and Stefan Wolff, 'The Logic of Competitive Influence-Seeking: Russia, Ukraine, and the Conflict in Donbas', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, Vol. 34, No. 4, 2018, pp. 191-212.

[79] Kacper Rekawek, *Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: The Brown-Red Cocktail*, London: Routledge.p. 24.

and demanded the organisation of similar referenda.[80] In summer 2014, Russian armed forces units also entered the Donbas region and fighting intensified. As a result, it was estimated that, even before the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, there had been about 10,000 civilian casualties in this conflict.[81]

Foreign fighters began to appear on either side of the conflict in Ukraine in 2014 and joined the units that accepted foreigners. Pro-Ukraine military units that have comprised foreign fighters include the Georgian Legion, the Aidar Battalion, and – arguably the most noted - the Azov Battalion[82], the latter of which was described by Umland as having been 'created, in May 2014, by an obscure lunatic fringe group of racist activists'[83]. According to Murauskaite, '[by] various estimates between 1,500 and 2,000 foreign fighters from 54 different countries [came] to take part in the conflict in Ukraine on either side of the battle between 2014 and 2019', 'no small number of [whom] were ethnic Russians and/or Russian-speaking citizens of the foreign countries'.[84] However, following the so-called Minsk II agreement, an end was put to the Ukrainian volunteer battalions, including some that had hosted foreign fighters. Those battalions were then integrated into the National Guard or the military.[85]

Amongst the foreign fighters having travelled to Ukraine were a few hundred Western individuals with far-right views.[86] The aim for many appears to have been obtaining experience of fighting. It is important to note that the Ukrainian authorities have neither sought to

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[80] Egle E. Murauskaite, 'Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: Assessing Potential Risks', Vilnius: Vilnius Institute for Policy Analysis, 2020, available at: https://vilniusinstitute.lt/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/FOREIGN-FIGHTERS-IN-UKRAINE-ASSESSING-POTENTIAL-RISKS.pdf (accessed on 15 January 2021), p. 3.
[81] Council on Foreign Relations, 'Conflict in Ukraine', available at: https://www.cfr.org/global-conflict-tracker/conflict/conflict-ukraine (accessed on 28 July 2020).
[82] Murauskaite, 'Foreign Fighters in Ukraine', p. 7.
[83] Andreas Umland, 'Irregular Militias and Radical Nationalism in Post-Euromaydan Ukraine: The Prehistory and Emergence of the "Azov" Battalion in 2014', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 105-131.
[84] Ibidem, p. 4.
[85] Rekawek, *Foreign Fighters in Ukraine*, p. 45.
[86] Murauskaite, 'Foreign Fighters in Ukraine'.

deliberately attract foreign fighters with far-right leanings nor hosted them in their military units with a view to training far-right terrorists.[87] Nevertheless, the conflict in Ukraine has provided far-right terrorist fighters with an opportunity to network transnationally.[88] Importantly, although the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to a renewed influx of foreign fighters in the conflict, although in smaller numbers than anticipated or initially announced, this new cohort of foreign fighters has been described as largely apolitical.[89]

Physical Threat

As previously mentioned, one of the most pressing concerns for Western governments when dealing with foreign fighters is the direct physical threat that they may pose upon their return.[90] This threat not only encompasses terrorism, but also other forms of criminality and political violence.

Regarding the foreign fighters in Ukraine, there have been a number of documented instances of human rights abuses, including arbitrary detentions, enforced disappearances, and torture, in which foreign fighters from the then Azov Battalion participated.[91] Thus, although this only concerns a small number of individuals, some foreign fighters may have operated with

[87] Kacper Rekawek, 'Career Break or a New Career? Extremist Foreign Fighters in Ukraine', *Counter-Extremism Project*, (2020), available at: https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP%20Report_Career%20Break%20or%20a%20New%20Career_Extremist%20Foreign%20Fighters%20in%20Ukraine_April%202020.pdf (accessed on 31 July 2020), p. 3.
[88] Atlantic Council, 'Why Azov Should not be Designated a Foreign Terrorist Organisation', 2020, available at: https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/ukrainealert/why-azov-should-not-be-designated-a-foreign-terrorist-organization/ (accessed on 28 July 2020); Soufan Center, 'White Supremacy Extremism', p. 31.
[89] Kacper Rekawek, 'A Trickle, Not a Flood: The Limited 2022 Far-Right Foreign Fighter Mobilization to Ukraine', CTC Sentinel, June 2022, pp. 6-14; Murauskaite, 'Foreign Fighters in Ukraine'; Rekawek, *Western Extremists and the Russian Invasion of Ukraine in 2022*.
[90] ABC News, 'Five Australians Free to Return After Fighting in Ukraine Far-Right "Finishing School" Alongside Russian Nationalist Militia', 2019, available at: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-23/five-australians-free-to-return-after-ukraine-conflict/11004438 (accessed on 21 February 2020); Soufan Center, 'White Supremacy Extremism'.
[91] Human Rights Watch, '"You Don't Exist" Arbitrary Detentions, Enforced Disappearances, and Torture in Eastern Ukraine', 2016, available at: https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/07/21/you-dont-exist/arbitrary-detentions-enforced-disappearances-and-torture-eastern (accessed on 6 August 2020).

impunity in conflict zones, before returning with experience and skills that will make them higher security risks. They may have also gained access to weapons and ammunition during the conflict. The fact that there appears to have been very limited control from European authorities over the movements and activities of these foreign fighters only heightens this problem.[92]

With regard to the specific issue of the possible linkages with terrorist activities, one can also point at some cases. For instance, French right-wing extremist, Grégoire Mouteaux, before being arrested, had obtained weapons from eastern Ukraine and had planned to carry out attacks against mosques and synagogues during the 2016 European football championship.[93] As is often the case, major conflicts become areas from which weapons can be sourced for other purposes. Moreover, it has been shown that two organisations linked to Russia and the Russian Imperial Movement (RIM) have used the conflict in Ukraine for learning skills with the intention of using them back home, namely the Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve and the Nordic Resistance Movement.[94] The latter, a neo-Nazi organisation, was notably responsible for an attack on a Gothenburg refugee centre in 2017.[95]

Turning to other forms of political violence, several of the extremists involved in the conflict appear to see it 'as one of the front lines in a global war between competing ideologies', with

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[92] BBC, 'The Briton Fighting "Other People's Wars"', 2018, available at: https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-43899959 (accessed on 21 January 2020); Newsweek, 'Disbanded Brothers: What Happens When Ukraine's Foreign Fighters Return Home', 2015, available at: https://www.newsweek.com/2015/11/13/disbanded-brothers-what-happens-when-ukraines-foreign-fighters-return-home-390551.html (accessed on 13 February 2020).

[93] France24, 'Ukraine Convicts Frenchman over Euro 2016 Attack Plot' (2018), available at: https://www.france24.com/en/20180522-ukraine-terrorism-convicts-frenchman-over-euro-2016-football-france-attack-plot (accessed on 2nd March 2020).

[94] Rekawek, 'Career Break or a New Career?'.

[95] Counter-Extremism Project, 'Nordic Resistance Movement', 2020, available at: https://www.counterextremism.com/threat/nordic-resistance-movement-nrm (accessed on 9 August 2020).

some of them viewing Syria as another part of the same fight.[96] Moreover, there have been examples of some using the so-called 'Yellow Vest' protests as an opportunity for disorder.[97] Thus, the physical threat posed by returning foreign fighters is not limited to acts of terrorism, but may take the form of other acts of political violence.

Organisational Challenges

In addition to the direct perpetration of violence, returning foreign fighters may pose longer-term challenges. An important factor to consider in that respect is the possible pool of extremists with whom foreign fighters can link up once returning home. For instance, it has been suggested that there may be as many as 32,000 right-wing extremists in Germany - 1,000 of whom would be primed for violence.[98] There have been reports of attempts to recruit for Ukraine in the British far-right scene by, among others, an Italian neo-Nazi known as Francesco Saverio Fontana.[99] If these fighters could tap into or offer leadership to these existing groups or form their own groups as entrepreneurs, violent activity could significantly rise. Nevertheless, it is important to acknowledge that several prominent right-wing terrorist attacks were actually carried out by lone attackers – rather than groups - in recent years, although such individuals may have belonged to broader, social extremist networks.[100]

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[96] ABC News, 'War Junkies: Why Foreign Fighters are Flocking to Ukraine', available at: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-05-04/ukraine-foreign-fighters-meger/11054728 (accessed on 30 July 2020); Koch, 'The Non-Jihadi Foreign Fighters', p. 6.

[97] Bellingcat, 'At Ukraine's Asgardsrei, A French Connection', 2020, available at: https://www.bellingcat.com/news/2020/05/01/at-ukraines-asgardsrei-a-french-connection/ (accessed on 31 July 2020).

[98] The Economist, 'Germany is Belatedly Waking up to the Threat of Far-Right Terrorism', 2020, available at: https://www.economist.com/europe/2020/02/27/germany-is-belatedly-waking-up-to-the-threat-of-far-right-terrorism (accessed on 24 March 2020); The Guardian, 'Neo-Nazi Groups Recruit Britons to Fight in Ukraine', 2018, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/02/neo-nazi-groups-recruit-britons-to-fight-in-ukraine (accessed on 24 March 2020).

[99] Hope Not Hate, 'State of Hate', 2018, available at: https://www.hopenothate.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/State-of-Hate-2018.pdf (accessed on 4 August 2020).

[100] Florian Hartleb, *Lone Wolves: The New Terrorism of Right-Wing Single Actors*, Cham: Springer, 2020; Lars Berntzen and Sveinung Sandberg, 'The Collective Nature of Lone-Wolf Terrorism: Anders Behring Breivik and the Anti-Islamic Social Movement', *Terrorism and Political Violence*, Vol. 26, No. 5 (2014).

Another challenge concerns ideological diffusion, in the sense that terrorists often inspire each other with their writings and actions. For example, Breivik's manifesto has been widely distributed and has often been cited by other right-wing terrorists as a source of inspiration. Brenton Tarrant, who committed a terrorist attack in Christchurch (New Zealand) in 2019, has notably declared that he had been heavily influenced by Breivik.[101] Foreign fighters and far-right groups and individuals have attempted to disseminate their material online and through other means. They have also used religious symbols to appeal to a wider audience. For instance, right-wing extremists fighting in Syria have used crusader symbols on Facebook and Twitter.[102] This could be seen as an attempt to mimic jihadists in order to ensure that their message resonates with a wider and more powerful transnational identity movement. Such a strategy may be seen as more likely to succeed than highlighting overt links to fascism. Conspiracy theories have also become an important aspect of extreme beliefs, particularly on the far right.[103] For example, 'white genocide', that is, the idea that mass immigration and high birth rates among non-white groups will lead to the extinction of white values and western civilization, has become popular among white supremacists.[104]

Such beliefs are shared by some of the foreign fighters who have travelled to Ukraine. Those may not present themselves as belonging to the far-right and may prefer to be considered as conservative or nationalist.[105] Nevertheless, as shown earlier in this article, hostility to liberal democracy would locate them on the far right. It is also interesting to see the mention of ideas of a 'European Reconquista', harking back to the Christian defeat of the Muslims on the Iberian

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[101] New York Times, 'The Anatomy of White Terror', 2019, available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/18/opinion/new-zealand-tarrant-white-supremacist-terror.html (accessed on 2 March 2020).

[102] Koch, 'The Non-Jihadi Foreign Fighters', pp. 9-10.

[103] Karen Douglas, Joseph Uscinski, Robbie Sutton, Aleksandra Cichocka, Turkay Nefes, Chee Siang Ang, and Farzin Deravi, 'Understanding Conspiracy Theories', *Advances in Political Psychology*, Vol. 40, No. 1, 2019, p. 11.

[104] Brenton Tarrant, *The Great Replacement*, online manifesto, 15 March 2019.

[105] Rekawek, 'Career Break or New Career?', pp. 11-12.

Peninsula a few centuries ago, thereby suggesting that Islam would constitute a problem for Europe.[106] As shown by Rekawek, some extremist foreign fighters in Ukraine have 'limited historical knowledge' and exhibit 'puzzlement when confronted with the "inappropriate" nature of their messaging'.[107] From that perspective, the fact that they cannot see themselves as being on the extreme right, but rather as individuals holding perfectly acceptable views, suggests that these foreign fighters could attempt to normalise such discourse in their home countries among those willing to listen. An enhanced status through their experience in Ukraine might make them more successful in their attempts.

Thus, the danger here is that extremist ideas are increasingly normalised and become therefore more difficult to dislodge from the public discourse.[108] Worse still, they may incite individuals to commit acts of violence, as seen in the case of the October 2018 Tree of Life synagogue attack. Another example is that of Darren Osborne, who carried out a terrorist attack against Muslims in London in 2017, having been significantly influenced by extremist content posted online.[109] Foreign fighters could perform particularly important roles in spreading extremist ideas over time, notably through posting propaganda online, inspiring and connecting with other like-minded individuals. In that respect, one can highlight the activities of the Azov Battalion, which, according to the Soufan Center, ran at some point 'a "Western Outreach Office" to help recruit and attract foreign fighters that travel to train and connect with people

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[106] Tim Lister, 'The Nexus Between Far-Right Extremists in the United States and the Ukraine', *CTC Sentinel*, Vol. 13, No. 4, 2020, p. 35.
[107] Rekawek, 'Career Break or a New Career?', p. 12.
[108] Robert Brotherton, Christopher French, and Alan Pickering. 'Measuring Belief in Conspiracy Theories: The Generic Conspiracist Beliefs Scale', *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol.4, Article 279, 2013.
[109] The Guardian, 'Neo-Nazi Groups Recruit Britons to Fight in the Ukraine', 2018, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/02/neo-nazi-groups-recruit-britons-to-fight-in-ukraine (accessed on 3 August 2020); The Guardian, 'Conspiracy Theories Like QAnon Could Fuel "Extremist" Violence, FBI Says', 2019, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/aug/01/conspiracy-theories-fbi-qanon-extremism (accessed on 3 August 2020).

from like-minded violent organizations from across the globe'[110], as well as youth camps teaching basic military skills and ideology.[111] Some individuals were caught distributing propaganda for the battalion, providing advice about how foreign fighters might travel to Ukraine and offering information on building weapons.[112] However, it is important to note that several researchers have suggested that the foreign fighters now active in Ukraine are overall more apolitical than the foreign fighters who had arrived in the early stages of the conflict[113], which may therefore decrease the likelihood of their involvement in propaganda activities.

Wider Societal Consequences

Beyond the risk of violence by the foreign fighters themselves or by those groups and individuals who might be susceptible to their influence and direction, there may also be wider societal consequences to the return of foreign fighters. This is because right-wing foreign fighters may not only connect with far-right extremists, but also with a much wider right-wing audience. Indeed, various issues related to culture, language, and religion have become more debated in Europe in recent years, just as asylum and migration have become more salient issues, notably through the construction of linkages with terrorism, especially after several terrorist attacks in 2015-2016.[114] These political dynamics may render some political leaders more wary of highlighting the issue of right-wing terrorism for fear of alienating some of their existing or potential supporters.[115] Over time, this likely empowers extremist individuals and gradually legitimises their beliefs, which may eventually encourage violence. Byman, for

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[110] Soufan Center, 'The Transnational Network That Nobody is Talking About', Intelbrief, 22 March 2019, available at: https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-the-transnational-network-that-nobody-is-talking-about/ (accessed on 18 January 2022).
[111] Lister, 'The Nexus Between Far-Right Extremists in the United States and the Ukraine', p. 35.
[112] Soufan Center, 'White Supremacy Extremism', p. 31.
[113] Murauskaite, 'Foreign Fighters in Ukraine'; Rekawek, *Foreign Fighters in Ukraine*.
[114] Reed et al., 'The Four Dimensions of the Foreign Fighter Threat', p. 8; Léonard and Kaunert, 'Refugee Flows and Terrorism in the European Union'.
[115] Walter Laqueur and Christopher Wall, *The Future of Terrorism: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Alt-Right*, New York, NY: Thomas Dunne Books, St Martin's Press, 2018.

example, has shown that hate crimes jumped by 200 per cent in those American counties that hosted Trump rallies.[116] Across many European states, anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim language has become more widespread, as epitomised by the Prime Minister of Hungary, Viktor Orbán.[117]

Such dynamics may arguably have three significant consequences in Europe. First, governments and security services might turn a blind eye to right-wing terrorism, individualise it[118], or otherwise attempt to downplay it due to the politics of the time. Second, these political developments may potentially legitimate far-right movements and contribute to enabling, possibly even encouraging, violence. Third, it might lead to the mobilisation of targeted groups who might seek to defend themselves if they perceive efforts from the authorities to defend them as insufficient. Thus, tensions may be brewing in society, with the possibility of escalations in violence, especially if it is perceived that some individuals or groups inciting or enacting violence are not appropriately stopped and punished. In that respect, the more robust EU approach to jihadist foreign fighters stands in contrast to what appears to be a lack of common European strategy on the matter of foreign fighters travelling to Ukraine.

As with right-wing terrorism more generally, there has been a tendency to view far-right individuals in EU states as lone actors or individuals suffering from mental health issues. This may lead to accusations that right-wing terrorism is not being taken seriously by authorities[119],

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[116] Daniel Byman, 'Is Right-Wing Terrorism Rising', *The National Interest*, 2019, available at: https://nationalinterest.org/feature/right-wing-terrorism-rising-73241 (accessed on 21 January 2020).
[117] Politico, 'All the Terrorists are Migrants', 2015, available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/viktor-orban-interview-terrorists-migrants-eu-russia-putin-borders-schengen/ (accessed on 3 August 2020).
[118] Berntzen and Sandberg 'The Collective Nature of Lone-Wolf Terrorism', p. 759.
[119] Daniel Koehler, 'Violence and Terrorism from the Far-Right: Policy Options to Counter an Elusive Threat', ICCT Brief, The Hague: ICCT, 2019, available at: https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2019/02/Koehler-Violence-and-Terrorism-from-the-Far-Right-February-2019.pdf (accessed on 11 January 2023).

which will only heighten tensions amongst communities.[120] Consequently, this may embolden such individuals and groups, allowing them to seek out like-minded people on their return, as limited thought appears to be given to their disarmament, demobilisation, deradicalisation, disengagement, and reintegration. The fact that such individuals do seem to have been ignored by the authorities might also generate fear among the minorities that right-wing individuals target. The worst-case scenario would be reciprocal violence, as foreseen by theories of cumulative and reciprocal radicalisation.[121] With right-wing, left-wing, and religious extremists returning home and present in societies, violence amongst them in Europe is possible. In addition, individuals might play a role in radicalising others, which would point towards greater political polarisation.

Finally, attention is drawn to the social consequences on an individual level. One of the most important is the occurrence of mental ill-health as a result of conflict experiences, including post-traumatic stress disorder, in the same way that some members of armed forces have been affected (the so-called 'veteran effect').[122] Such problems might be even more challenging for foreign fighters because they are unlikely to receive the support that armed forces often provide (although it is not always taken up by those in need).[123]

In sum, there is some evidence that far-right foreign fighters on both sides have used Ukraine as a training ground, with seemingly greater organisational support from Russia, although it is important to emphasise that the number of European far-right foreign fighters who have

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[120] Soufan Center, 'White Supremacy Extremism', p. 42.
[121] Roger Eatwell, 'Community Cohesion and Cumulative Extremism in Contemporary Britain', *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 77, No. 2, 2006, pp. 204-216; Tahir Abbas, 'Far Right and Islamist Radicalisation in an Age of Austerity: A Review of Sociological Trends and Implications for Policy', 2020, available at: https://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/TahirAbbasAusterity.pdf (accessed on 3 March 2020).
[122] Politico, 'Ukrainian Veterans War Within', 2017, available at: https://www.politico.eu/article/ukraine-war-trauma-treatment-battle/ (accessed on 9 August 2020).
[123] De Roy van Zuijdewijn, 'Terrorism and Beyond', pp. 90-91.

travelled to Ukraine is very small. Nevertheless, those may prove to constitute a challenge to the EU and its Member States, especially when adopting a long-term perspective. In particular, these foreign fighters may tap into existing extremist networks, behave as entrepreneurs or offer ideological guidance.

Conclusion

This article set out to investigate the phenomenon of far-right foreign fighters travelling from Europe to Ukraine. After noting that it had not publically received much consideration from the EU to date, especially in comparison with jihadist foreign fighters, it showed that right-wing foreign fighters have also received considerably less attention than the foreign fighters who travelled to Iraq or Syria in the academic literature. The article argued that this is surprising, since there have been some indications, as notably shown by some cases in the United States, that returning far-right foreign fighters may represent a security threat once they return to their country of residence. In order to assess this threat more accurately and systematically, a four-component analytical framework was developed and subsequently applied to the case of far-right foreign fighters travelling to Ukraine.

On that basis, the following concluding remarks can be made. First, although far-right extremists travelling to Ukraine constitute only a very small proportion of all the individuals joining the conflict and have turned up in smaller numbers than what had been predicted at some point, they represent a security risk to the EU and its Member States. They are likely to have acquired new skills, including combat experience, which may help them plan and conduct terrorist attacks, in addition to having possibly developed their networks, acquired weapons and ammunition, and seen their status and leadership increase in their community. Therefore, it is necessary to take a comprehensive and long-term view of the threats that they might pose

as returnees. Second, despite these concerns, it is important not to exaggerate the scale of the presence of far-right foreign fighters in Ukraine, notably because this may play into the hands of the Russian authorities that have described the invasion of Ukraine as a 'denazification' mission. Third, whilst fully keeping the previous point in mind, it would nevertheless be in the interest of the EU and its Member States to place the issue of far-right foreign fighters travelling to Ukraine on the policy agenda, even if their number is relatively small. This is particularly important considering the rise of right-wing political violence, the potential for transnationalisation, the current strength of societal discontent in some European states, and the mainstreaming of previously fringe beliefs. A more coordinated approach towards dissuading those at risk of travelling to Ukraine could be developed, alongside preparing for the eventual return of those who have already travelled to the area. In particular, these foreign fighters may need access to specialised care, as they may be experiencing post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental health issues, which might put them at risk of harming themselves or others. Moreover, it will be necessary to have clear plans in place for managing the return of those foreign fighters with extremist views, such as far-right views, involving experts in deradicalisation and disengagement. Finally, the EU and its Member States should also not only consider the security risks posed by their own far-right scene, but should also take into account the security risk posed by Russian far-right groups, which have ties with other extremist groups across Europe.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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