Foreign Mercenaries, Irregulars and 'Volunteers': Non-Russians in Russia's Wars

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Executive Summary

- The outbreak of instability in southeastern Ukraine witnessed Russia's increasing reliance on ethnically non-Russian people. Among these, the most important groups included ethnic Serbs (this group primarily participated in hostilities in Donbas); Eastern Slavs (Ukrainians and Belarusians, whose participation, especially the former, went well beyond the post-Soviet area, such as serving in Syria and Sudan); Muslims and other non-Russian nationalities of the Russian Federation (as well as non-Muslim populations of the South Caucasus), and Western Europeans (primarily French, Spaniards and Italian nationals).

- In relying on ethnically non-Russian people for (para)military functions, Russia *de facto* resumed policies implemented or maintained by previous political regimes (the Soviets and to a greater extent, Tsarist Russia), signifying continuity and tradition in its approach.

- Different groups of non-Russian peoples employed after 2014 have performed different functions, ranging from information-propaganda (primarily ascribed to fighters coming from the European Union) as a means to demonstrate to the Western world the "righteousness" of the Russian cause in Ukraine, to (para)military (a.k.a. mercenary) functions. As such, non-Russian mercenaries and "volunteers" in Russia's shadow wars have served as both a tool of "soft power" and an actual instrument of "hard power" politics.

- The employment of non-Russian fighters fulfilled Moscow's foreign policy objectives. The involvement of foreign fighters—whom the Russian side presented as "volunteers" concerned about "the fate of Russian speakers in Ukraine"—played into Moscow's narrative that Russia is ready to stand up for its compatriots abroad.

- The involvement of non-Russian fighters in various shadow conflicts also assisted Moscow domestically, in strengthening certain minority groups' (such as Chechens, Buryats and Kalmyks) loyalty or connection to the Russian state.

- In the future (with Russia expanding its outreach to other regions outside the former Soviet space), the share and scope of involvement of non-Russian people in conflicts/zones of instability on behalf of Moscow can be expected to grow. One specific area of concern is the Balkan region. Evidence for this could already be seen in Moscow's role in the unsuccessful coup in Montenegro (2016), the active participation of Serbian mercenaries in the Donbas conflict, as well as the training of Serbian youth by members of Russian private military company E.N.O.T. Considering this trend, pro-Russian and Moscow-backed forces in the Balkans may increasingly seek to destabilize the region with the help of irregular militarized forces.

- When seeking to involve foreign militants (especially from Western Europe), Russia primarily appeals to radical forces (utilizing ideologies of xenophobia and ultra-conservatism). The actual impact of this approach on Europe has been relatively limited to date. However, it represents a potentially dangerous long-term trend, given the rise of nationalism and political extremism in many EU countries.

Introduction

During a press briefing in late 2017, Ihor Guskov, the then–chief of staff of the Security Service of Ukraine (SSU), claimed that "no less than one third of the members of [Russian private military company] Wagner Group are not ethnically Russian people and are not fluent in the Russian language."[1] Such recruitment of non-Russian people to take part in Russia's "shadow operations" is crucial for three reasons. First, the employment of non-Russian people for (para)military operations was a distinctive feature of the pre-1991 period; and currently, this trend is experiencing a new upsurge. Second, the use of these groups (especially adherents to religious creeds other than Russian Orthodoxy) enables Moscow to spread its influence to various regional conflicts around the globe and helps it to inject itself as an intermediary there. Third, the recruitment/employment of specific ethnic groups provides insight into those geographic areas Russia considers to be of strategic interest. Specifically, the following study looks at four macro-groups that have been documented joining Russian irregular or mercenary formations:

- Ethnic Serbs;
- Eastern Slavs;
- Muslims and other non-Russian peoples;
- Central and Western Europeans.

The main research objective is to discuss both essential "organizational" elements (composition, operative tasks, operative areas, key functions performed) and reflect on the motives that drove the above-mentioned groups into participating in various conflicts since 2014 that Russia sparked, fueled or became party to later. The chronological scope covered by this paper includes the years 2014 to 2018, with special attention given to the most acute phase of the Ukrainian crisis (April 2014–February 2015).

The Serbs: Ideological Allies, Pan-Slavic Brothers or (Covert) Mercenaries?

While speaking in October 2017, then–SSU head Vasyl Hrytsak stated that "there are about 100 militants from the Balkans fighting in Russia's PMC [private military company] Wagner Group."[2] Whereas, other data provided by the Ukrainian Security Service around that time suggests the actual number serving in Wagner's rank and file might be as high as 300 militants.[3] Available information drawn from the SSU data as well as independent journalist investigations points to numerous cases of Serbian citizens taking part in the Ukrainian conflict on the side of the self-proclaimed, Moscow-backed Luhansk and the Donetsk "people's republics" (LPR, DPR). Much of the evidence for their involvement comes from the Ukrainian government's prosecution of Serbian fighters following their capture. The best-documented instances included Serbs joining the following entities:[4]

Militant Formations With Ethnic Serb Participation

The International Brigade ('*Pyatnashka*'): The majority of Serb militants (nine individuals) convicted so far by the Ukrainian authorities for fighting in Donbas on the side of the DPR-LPR had served in the so-called International Brigade. This volunteer unit "participated in almost all the breakthroughs of the army of New Russia [*Novorossiya*] on all fronts [primarily, the battles of Shakhtarsk, Ilovaysk and Vuhlehirsk]… [I]t was engaged first in defense and then in driving out the enemy from the territory of the Donetsk airport." The main duties and responsibilities of its Serbian fighters[5] were primarily concerned with various auxiliary functions, including guarding checkpoints, defending fighter positions, securing buildings and unloading humanitarian aid. Despite a dearth of reliable supporting data, the *Pyatnashka* was arguably the most "international" brigade fighting on the side of the separatist forces (it was later integrated into the structure of the DPR Republican Guard as the "8th Rifle Assault Brigade"): aside from the Serbs, it also included "volunteers" from Slovakia and the Czech Republic (Czechia). From the point of view of operations, the brigade (along with the Sparta and the Somali Battalions) was involved in defensive and counter-offensive operations, with the Second Battle of Donetsk Airport (September 28, 2014–January 21, 2015) presenting the best-known example. At the same time, the brigade was tasked with covert operations in the rear of the Ukrainian Armed Forces, intelligence gathering, and various subversive missions.[6]

The Seventh Brigade: Three convicted Serb nationals fought for this unit. At least during 2015, its Serbian volunteers were apparently primarily tasked with securing buildings in Donetsk.

The Serbian Hussar Regiment: Seven Serbs were convicted for involvement with the Serbian Hussar Regiment. Placed under the command of Alexander Zakharchenko (the so-called prime minister of the DPR), this group was tasked with securing military facilities and military checkpoints in the Debaltseve region and the city of Alchevsk. Interestingly, the name of this regiment draws on deep historical traditions going back to the 18th century, when the identically named Serbian Hussar Regiment—a military unit of the Russian Imperial Army—consisted of ethnic Serbs and a number of Ukrainian Cossacks (later joined by similar Hungarian, Georgian, Moldavian, Bulgarian and Macedonian regiments[7]). The historical namesake for this unit took part in several wars and regional conflicts fought by the Russian Empire, including the War of the

Polish Succession (1733–1735), the Russo-Swedish War (1741–1743), and the Seven Years' War (1756–1763). From a propaganda angle, the modern-day namesake regiment was, thus, meant to showcase the continuity and tradition of Russia's military "cooperation" with Balkan (and South Slav, in general) Orthodox populations.

Wagner Group: According to Guskov, the SSU's former chief of staff, "At least seven Serbian mercenaries were fighting in eastern Ukraine as part of Wagner"[8]; in reality, the number was almost certainly considerably larger. In effect, an investigation carried out by the Ukrainian news outlet *Fontanka* revealed that during summer 2014, Wagner already included a full platoon (around 32 men) consisting of ethnic Serbs, which was headed by the war criminal Davor Savičić (nickname Elvis). Savičić had fought in Yugoslavia, in the 1990s, alongside another Serbian war criminal, Željko Ražnatović (*nom de guerre* Arkan),[9] and was allegedly responsible for the killing of six civilians in Bosnia. As *Fontanka*, learned, the Wagner Group platoon headed by Savičić was attracting Serbian mercenaries in 2014–2015, during the most acute phase of the hostilities in Donbas.[10]

First Slavic Unit: Four Serbian citizens were convicted for fighting with the First Slavic Unit, based in Novoazovsk. Their formation primarily performed auxiliary missions concerned with securing military facilities.

Batman Unit: The Batman Unit took part in a number of combat engagements, including the Battle for the Donetsk Airport and the Debaltseve Battle. Ukrainian authorities convicted one Serbian citizen of involvement with this unit.

Rezanj Unit: This militant unit "was formed at the very beginning of the fighting in eastern Ukraine as a scout diversion group with people from all former republics of the USSR [Union of Soviet Socialist Republics]." It was tasked with "counter-intelligence protection." Information on the number of associated Serb fighters convicted later by authorities is not available in open sources.

Serbian Motivations

At this juncture, it is useful to try to elaborate on the motivations of those Serbs who joined the Moscow-backed separatists in their fight against the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Mainstream information outlets (based on Russian sources,[11] accounts of Serbian fighters[12] and observers[13]) suggest that the Serbian fighters were all volunteers (at least when it came to their funding) and were mainly driven by brotherly feelings toward the Russians involved in the Donbas conflict. This may be partially true—but with certain crucial reservations. While some Serbians may, indeed, have been driven by ideas of "brotherhood" and "solidarity" with Russia, based on anti-Western sentiments, others apparently joined the conflict under the influence of economic stimuli. Aside from the unsuccessful attempt to carry out a coup in Montenegro in 2016 (where Russian involvement was clearly visible),[14] the Russian state played an important (albeit covert) role in recruiting foreign militants to fight in Ukraine. As investigative journalists revealed, Serbian "volunteers" were paid approximately $10,000 per month (although later the salary decreased dramatically) while fighting in Donbas.[15] At the same time, the Russian side assisted in the logistics, including financing one-way air flights (Belgrade–Moscow) for Serbian volunteers as well as bus tickets (Moscow–Rostov-on-Don) to a training camp and, later, to Donetsk itself.[16]

Importantly, the recruitment process (in its entirety) relied on the Kosovo Front (*Kosovskii Front*)—a Russian nationalist organization actively working in the Balkans. Interestingly enough, the leader of the organization, Aleksandr Kravchenko, took part in the civil war in the Balkans in the early 1990s and fought in Bosnia alongside Igor Strelkov (a.k.a. Girkin).[17] The organization has organized and carried out a number of provocations in Kosovo.[18] After the outbreak of hostilities in southeastern Ukraine, the Kosovo Front started to actively support anti-Ukrainian separatists "with various means," which apparently included the recruitment of ethnic-Serb militants.[19]

The Role of Belgrade

To date, the Serbian government, which should have played the main role in precluding its citizens from taking part in the hostilities in Ukraine, has remained rather evasive and inconsistent on this question. This led to a diplomatic scandal between Kyiv and Belgrade, when Ukraine's ambassador to Serbia, Oleksandr Aleksandrovych, declared,

> Serbia is not doing enough to solve this issue… Not one Serbian citizen has been put in prison for his mercenary activity against Ukraine. If I am wrong, I invite the Serbian government to disprove my words… Ukrainians do not come to Serbia to kill Serbs… Russia trains Serbian mercenaries to kill Ukrainians. Russia used Serbian extremists to [carry out] a *coup d'état* in Montenegro. Russia encourages Serbian separatism in Republika Srpska to destabilize Bosnia-Hercegovina. Russia uses [the] Serbian factor to destabilize Macedonia. Russia plays an active role in pitting Serbian Kosovars against Albanian Kosovars. Russia sells its airplanes to Serbia to create tensions with Croatia…[20]

In response, Vučić dramatically sharpened his rhetoric, stating that he (and his country) will not be lectured by a state that suppresses its own minorities.[21] Those combative sentiments were echoed by the Serbian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which accused Ukraine of not reproaching "its [Ukrainian] mercenaries who fought on the side of Croatia, whom they [the Ukrainian authorities] never condemned."[22]

It is important to note that despite the well-known and factually proven evidence of Serbian militants' participation in hostilities in Donbas, and Belgrade's declarative determination to stop it, Ukrainian intelligence notes that Serbian militants have continued to arrive in the zone of hostilities. The last recorded instance occurred in early 2018, when a "group of Serbian snipers were spotted near the 31st block post on the Bakhmut highway," allegedly the same group "that had been working for several months in the Donetsk and Luhansk oblasts."[23]

On the surface, Serbian authorities did launch a series of investigations in 2018 and even convicted 28 militants of mercenary activities[24]; but the number of Serbian militants that is known (revealed by the SSU and journalist investigations, above) profoundly exceeds the number of court sentences. Of course, one of the reasons behind this disparity may lay in the fact that some Serbian militants have decided to stay (and settle down) on the territory of self-proclaimed DPR/LPR that they call "*Slavianoserbia*," with the city of Bakhmut as its administrative center.[25] Bakhmut (at

the time called Artemivsk) and the surrounding areas were eventually retaken by Ukrainian forces in July 2014.[26]

Another reason for this gap between the suspected number of Serbian fighters in Donbas and the number actually brought to justice for their mercenary activities could be related to the position of the government in Belgrade, which appears to have been somewhat lenient toward Serbs fighting in Ukraine. As noted by the president of the Serbian Euro-Atlantic Cooperation (SEAS) Foundation, Vencislav Bujić, "We [Serbia] have hundreds of such [pro-Kremlin] organizations, movements, leaders. And, as far as I am concerned, the Serbian government is supportive of those."[27] Indeed, a closer look at Serbia's domestic political landscape points to a number of factions that have conspicuously demonstrated support for pro-Russian militants in Ukraine. Convicted war criminal Vojislav Šešelj, a former deputy prime minister of Serbia (1998–2000) and the founder and president of the nationalist Serbian Radical Party (SRS), has openly stated that "Serbs have a historical right to *Slavianoserbia*." Additionally, he rudely insulted the Ukrainian ambassador to Belgrade[28] and expressed pro-Russian positions.

Two other Serbian nationalist movements—the Serbian League (one of the main proponents of a Serbian-Russian alliance) and the Movement of "1389" (primarily championing Serbia's reunification with Kosovo)—have also openly assumed a pro-Kremlin (and explicitly anti-Ukrainian) stance. In particular, on November 7, 2016, the two organizations jointly commemorated the dead separatist leader "Motorola" (Arsen Pavlov, a Russian citizen and a commander of the Sparta Battalion) by unveiling a mural dedicated to him in the Serbian capital.[29] Commenting on this, the head of "1389," Misha Vatsich, stated, "We would like to confirm our firm connection between the Serbian and Russian nations… We guarantee that Serbia will never introduce sanctions against brotherly Russia"; whereas Goran Milenkovic, the secretary general of the Serbian League, said that the Serbian delegation "had paid a friendly visit to Donetsk in July 2016."[30]

Yet another example of Serbian nationalist forces involving themselves in the Ukrainian crisis is the Unité Continentale—a far-right group founded in Belgrade in 2014 (and allegedly disbanded in 2015) by citizens of France, Serbia, Poland, Brazil and Belgium. Apart from calling the French government "a puppet of Brussels" and accusing the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) of being "a terrorist military alliance that uses the French army to serve the interests of banks," the group supports an ideology that mixes Neo-Eurasianism (elaborated by Aleksandr Dugin[31]) with the ideas of Ferenc Szálasi (the leader of the Hungarian extreme-right Arrow Cross Party).[32] Members of this group (to be discussed in further detail below) took an active part in hostilities in southeastern Ukraine on the side of the Moscow-backed separatists.

In 2018, Russia was also notably implicated in a scandal of great magnitude that required the personal involvement of Serbian President Vučić—the so-called "Zlatibor affair." Specifically, Serbian police closed down a military-patriotic youth camp run by the Veterans of the Yugoslav War Society and the E.N.O.T. Corp, a Russian PMC that had earlier taken an active part in hostilities in Donbas. Most importantly (as revealed by the organizers of the camp), the enterprise was fully supported by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and the Serbian Ministry of Internal Affairs had been informed well in advance (but apparently failed to take any action)[33]—a

revelation that has raised numerous questions regarding the Serbian government's potential involvement at the outset.

Related Balkan Initiatives

Russia's attempts to extend its influence in the Balkans by igniting regional anti-Western/anti-NATO sentiments while using the Ukrainian conflict as a pretext extend beyond the Republic of Serbia. Namely, in September 2016, the Balkan Cossack Army was created in Kator, Montenegro, with the alleged aim to "unite all Cossacks, volunteers and pro-Russian patriotic organizations across Serbia, Republika Srpska, Macedonia, Montenegro, Greece and Bulgaria." Headed by Victor Zaplatin—who participated in military conflicts in Transnistria, Abkhazia, Bosnia and the Donetsk region—the Balkan Cossack Army has established close contacts with the Union of Donbas Volunteers (a shady organization, created in Russia, allegedly used for recruiting militants for Russian PMCs), the Night Wolves motorcycle gang (close to Vladimir Putin), the Russian House–Russian Center of Science and Culture in Belgrade,[34] and such prominent public figures as Emir Kusturica and Milorad Dodik (the Serb member of the tripartite presidency of Bosnia-Herzegovina).[35]

The Eastern Slavs: Ukrainians and Belarusians

Russia's annexation of Crimea and the ensuing destabilization of southeastern Ukraine created a large zone of instability, putting millions of Ukrainian citizens under Russia's direct control. The destabilization in Ukraine also affected other countries in the region, notably neighboring Belarus. The war in Donbas notably triggered the emergence of groups in both Ukraine and Belarus ready to participate in the conflict (driven by various motives) as well as take up arms around the world with Russian involvement.

Ukrainians

The former chief of staff of the Ukrainian Security Service, Ihor Guskov, declared in fall of 2018 that "Ukrainian citizens, including residents of Crimea who have received Russian citizenship, comprise approximately 10 percent of Wagner Group," adding, "many Ukrainians who fought in Donbas would later take part in hostilities in Syria, travelling there three to four times."[36] According to Guskov, "[A] separate group consisting of ethnic Ukrainians under the name '*Karpaty*' [Carpathians] was created" in advance of Wagner's involvement in Syria. The SSU revealed that ethnic Ukrainians were sent to Syria for the first time in 2015.

Russian sources have confirmed this information, while providing additional details. One of the recruiters of Ukrainian militants, Mikhail Polynkov, defined the *Karpaty* as "the attacking core. People, who […] are sent [to the most difficult areas]. They engage in the battle first. Their wages are lower in comparison with others." Whereas, investigative journalist Irek Murtazin added that Ukrainians who joined Wagner were not necessarily dwellers of the occupied territories. For instance, he said, "[H]aving met with the guys who were liberating Palmira for the first time, I learned that, during the operation, 11 Ukrainians were killed […] they [Ukrainians] were from the rear part of Ukraine. Also, people who had problems with the law in Ukraine found shelter in

Russia and joined so-called Wagner."[37] As noted by multiple sources, Moscow actively used the Black Sea Fleet to transport many of these Ukrainian mercenaries to Syria.[38] By 2017, several sources claimed that the total numbers making up Wagner Group's "Ukrainian branch"—subsequently renamed '*Vesna*' (following the nickname of its commander, Russian citizen Captain Alexey Dmitriev, allegedly killed in Syria in 2017)[39]—reached 100 to 150 militants. The unit included "dwellers of 'Cossack' Russian regions and approximately 15–20 Chechens."[40]

After the death of *Vesna's* leader in Syria, the group's traces have become less visible; but this does not mean that recruitment of Ukrainians was discontinued. On the contrary, between 2018 and 2019, a new trend evidently took shape. As stated by the SSU, Crimea became one of the main centers for recruitment of new militants for Russian PMCs, with local military commissariats (*voenkomati*) assuming the role of an "umbrella" under which the recruitment process is currently taking place. For instance, Guskov claimed that the Ukrainian Special Services "uncovered multiple instances of our 'former' citizens taking part in it [Wagner's activities]. Moreover, today, we can say that in Crimea another recruitment round for PMC Wagner has taken place—those people are to be sent to Sudan."[41] He added that "these are the Russian military commissariats that play a key role in recruiting personnel for Wagner Group. Many of those who have participated in Wagner's Sudan 'voyage' are still living in Crimea." Importantly, the SSU former chief of staff outlined yet another interesting trend reflected in the growing recruitment of Crimean dwellers, whose total participation in Russian PMCs has allegedly surpassed the total numbers of fighters coming from the Donetsk and Luhansk "people's republics."[42] Some sources mainly attributed this trend to the simplified procedures for obtaining Russian passports for Ukrainians and Crimean residents as well as economic stimuli.[43] So far, ethnic Ukrainians/Ukrainian citizens have been documented taken part in mercenary activities for Wagner Group in Ukraine, Syria, CAR and Sudan.[44]

Belarusians

Citizens of Belarus have also been spotted within the rank-and-file of Russian PMCs. But their level of involvement appears to be significantly lower compared to both Serbs and Ukrainians. Incidentally, however, there seems to be some common traits between Belarusians and Serbs in terms of their recruitment patterns, based on the information unearthed to date. According to available data, two such main recruitment paths have been identified.

The first one is related to various "national-patriotic movements" and nationalist groups directly connected to Russian radical nationalists and neo-Nazi organizations. One such example is Russian National Unity (RNE), which (since early 2014) has sought to recruit young Belarusians to join anti-Ukrainian forces in Donbas and create "volunteer groups to fight the Kyivan junta." The RNE has further encouraged those unable to provide direct assistance on the battlefield to use "all other means available to confront the Kyiv-based regime."[45] For now, no reliable data on the number of people who may have been recruited via these networks is available; but the totals are unlikely to be high. One of the reasons is the general marginal status of the RNE and other pro-Russian militant organizations inside Belarus.

More worrisome, on the other hand, may be the second line of recruitment: local elite military forces. In particular, Ukrainian media outlets have investigated Dmitry Makarevych, who served

in the 5th *Spetsnaz* Brigade of the Armed Forces of the Republic of Belarus. The 5th *Spetsnaz* Brigade, a unit within the Belarusian Special Forces, is headquartered in the town of Marjina Horka. The elite brigade's members are known to have taken part in the Libyan civil war on the side of Muammar Qaddafi,[46] thus acting as Russian proxies in this regional conflict. Belarusian *Spetsnaz* from the 5th Brigade later fought in the Ukrainian conflict on the side of separatist forces.[47] An October 2018 interview with one former Wagner fighter (who was engaged in hostilities in Ukraine and Syria) corroborates the above-cited reporting. Namely, the one-time Wagner militant stated that, while fighting in Ukraine, he "met many citizens of Belarus […] at least two in Wagner Group [itself…], all in all, around ten […] mainly former members of the [Belarusian] security services and the military."[48]

Incidentally, in March 2019, the State Security Committee of the Republic of Belarus (KGB) launched an investigation, based on information provided by the SSU, looking into Belarusian citizens allegedly taking part in hostilities in Syria. To date, 11 such mercenaries have been publicly identified.[49] Nevertheless, Belarussian sources continue to report that "the KGB has not sent [as of 2019] any subpoenas to the indicated persons."[50]

Muslims and Non-Russians

Historically, the employment of ethnically non-Russian peoples in (para)military missions has been an important pillar of Russian military tradition (particularly, before 1917). Moreover, it has often been an effective way of integrating these groups into the architecture of the Russian state without breaking their traditional lifestyle and habits, thereby avoiding alienation and protest movements.[51] This practice (mostly abandoned between 1917 and 2013) received a new impetus after the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis and Russia's increasing involvement in the Middle East as a result of the Arab Spring (which started in late 2010)—regions with predominantly non-Russian populations. The largest groups of non-Russian peoples employed by the Russian side include:

Buddhist Minorities in the Russian Federation

Ethnic Buryats and Kalmyks, two of the main Buddhist minorities within Russia, have both been identified taking part in hostilities in southeastern Ukraine at least until early 2015. As argued by various Ukrainian sources, one of the main recruitment points for Buryat fighters was the city of Kyakhta (in the Republic of Buryatia), which is home to military detachment 69647 of the 37th Separate Rifle Brigade. Soldiers from this brigade may have taken an active role in the battles of Ilovaysk (August 7–September 2, 2014) and Debaltseve (January 14–February 20, 2015), as suggested by images and other evidences.[52] At the same time, some interesting insights can be drawn from interviews with two ethnic-Buryat troops who took part in these operations. Both of them (contract soldiers), Bair Guroyev[53] and Dorzhi Batomunkuev, served as members of a tank crew in the 5th *Tatsinskya* Tank Brigade. Speaking with *Novaya Gazeta*, Batomunkuev revealed some interesting facts pertaining to various organizational and operative aspects related to Buryat involvement in Donbas:[54]

- Their recruitment was completely voluntary, allowing some soldiers and officers to refuse to partake in hostilities (without apparent repercussions). Also, after being recruited for the

mission, they (and other recruits, all of whom were contract soldiers) were not asked to take a "leave" while operating in Ukraine.

- Military exercises were used as a pretext to move toward the Ukrainian border (and subsequently cross it). Yet, the interviewee acknowledged that "everyone was perfectly aware of where we were going" (which was not a common practice during the Soviet period).

- The process involved complete discretion (their documents had been taken away) and informational opaqueness (all cell phones and other means of exchange/transmission of information were to be surrendered). But on several occasions, this secrecy was pierced (interviews and images became openly accessible). Importantly, after these and numerous similar episodes (not merely in Ukraine but in Syria as well), Russia tightened its grip over information security as a means to decrease (and, if possible, eliminate) such incidents in the future. Aside from adopting the New Information Security Doctrine (2016),[55] the Russian government took a much tougher stance on the use of social networks by contract soldiers.[56] At the same time, the authorities allocated some additional supervisory powers/responsibilities to the Federal Security Service (FSB)[57] and other power structures.

- The Buryat recruits operated in company-based armored units (10 tanks) that would later (when in Ukraine) be rapidly reassembled into battalions (30 tanks), with each battle tank accompanied by three infantry-fighting vehicles (BMP), one medical car and five Ural tracks with military supplies. As described by Batomunkuev, during his incursion into Ukrainian territory, approximately 120 tank crew members ("almost all of them ethnic Buryats") and 31 main battle tanks crossed the border.

Incidentally, aside from the Buryats, Kalmyks from the 7th Military Base (a part of the 49th Army, located in the Southern Military District) were also engaged in hostilities on Ukrainian territory.[58] The employment of these two ethnically non-Russian groups (Buryats and Kalmyks) does not appear to be coincidental. First of all, it could be related to the Kremlin's desire to increase loyalty and support among Russia's Buddhist population (whose overall number may already have exceeded one million[59]) living in far-flung (and traditionally unstable in terms of wages and living standards[60]) areas such as Buryatia, Kalmykia, Tuva, and Altai and Zabaykalsky regions. The second reason may be related to Mongolia (which directly borders on some of Russia's main "Buddhist regions"), where 53 percent of its population is Buddhist.[61] As noted by Eurasian nationalities scholar Paul Goble, Russian influence on Ulaanbaatar has been experiencing a visible decline, particularly since 2003—a fact that troubles Moscow.[62] The Kremlin may be looking to use Russian Buddhist populations (akin to its employment of the Chechens in reaching out to the Middle Eastern powers) as a part of cultural diplomacy toward Mongolia.

Muslim Citizens of the Russian Federation

Russian Muslims have also taken an active part in Russia's involvement in regional conflicts after 2013. As stated by the mufti of Stavropol Krai, Mukhammad Rakhimov, in November 2014, during the 3rd Stavropol Forum of the World Russian People's Council (WRPC), "Muslims are fighting on the side of the local militia [pro-Russian separatists in Donbas]. We are helping our

brothers to defend Russian people there, in the eastern parts of Ukraine. I know for a fact that there are many Muslim guys from Chechnya, Dagestan, the Karachay-Cherkess Republic, Kabardino-Balkaria and even Stavropol Krai […] we all need strong Orthodoxy… When Orthodoxy is strong, it will be defending us, I mean traditional Islam."[63] Among the main groups of Muslims taking part in Kremlin-waged conflicts abroad are the following:

Idel-Ural Peoples: The cumulative number of Idel-Ural peoples in the Ukrainian conflict is said to be approximately 150 (although, it may have been higher). Among these Middle-Volga "volunteers," Russian sources identify two main groups who were primarily motivated to participate in the Donbas war by the Russian World (*Russkiy Mir*) ideology.

First group apparently construes the Russian World as the construction of a "Soviet Union 2.0." As such, its members perceived the developments in Donbas as a "war against Ukrainian fascism, and the cult of [Stepan] Bandera as an alternative to the Soviet model," imposed by anti-Russian forces on the Ukrainian southeast. In other words, it would be fair to say that this group "shares Soviet ideological beliefs."[64] The second major group perceives the Donbas conflict as part of "Russian irredentism"—Russian neo-imperial nationalism that believes in the "legitimacy of Russian involvement in Donbas as a reconstruction of the Russian Empire in its pre-1917 borders." Vasily Ivanov, from the Russian Institute of Strategic Studies (RISS), argues that "many Muslim volunteers from the Volga region share a dual identity: they think of themselves as both Russians and Tatars."[65]

It is interesting to note, based on reported evidence, that while fighting in Ukraine, Tatar "volunteers" "do not demonstrate a single [unified] stance on adherence to Islam": while some purposefully showcase their Islamic identity, other are said to have converted to Orthodoxy or Slavic Native Faith[66] while fighting in Ukraine. The motivation of the Tatar "volunteers" is explained by Russian sources in the following way: "fighting for Novorossiya, they [Tatars] are fighting for Russia's interests, where traditional Islam must not let such anti-Russian groups as Wahhabis, Hizb ut-Tahrir and the Nur movement triumph."[67]

South Caucasus Groups: Members of South Caucasus ethnic groups (the above-mentioned *Piatnashka* battalion was headed by an ethnic Abkhaz and a number of his compatriots[68]) were also involved in the Ukrainian crisis. Namely, South Ossetians took part in hostilities in Donbas, fighting with the Vostok Battalion.[69] Reportedly, they later provided security for Sergey Kurginyan, an ultra-conservative thinker and leader of the Russian nationalist movement Essence of Time, during his stay in Donetsk.[70] Moreover, South Ossetian volunteers took part in the acute conflict that broke out later between Kurginyan and Igor Strelkov/Girkin.[71] In addition to acting as bodyguards to some pro-Russian figures, Ossetian militants may have taken part in urban fighting in Donetsk. According to their own accounts, urban warfare "is our special strength."[72] By December 2014, South Ossetians apparently left the Donbas region and returned to South Ossetia at the request of Leonid Tibilov, then the "president" of the self-proclaimed republic.[73]

North Caucasus Nationalities: Ethnic groups in the Russian North Caucasus, meanwhile, have played a far greater and more noticeable role in Moscow's foreign conflicts. Their actual participation goes far beyond the Ukrainian conflict *per se*. Within this large group, two leading sub-groups should be identified.

- *The Ingush people*. Ingush participation in the Donbas hostilities was personally admitted by Yunus-bek Yevkurov (then the head of the republic of Ingushetia) in July 2014. In his statement, Yevkurov—who, incidentally, himself participated in conflicts on the North Caucasus and the Balkans as a member of the Russian *Spetsnaz*—noted, "[F]or now, we know of 20–25 ethnic Ingush fighting in Ukraine, four of whom have been killed." He added that he opposed his co-ethnics taking part in what he called an "intra-Ukrainian conflict."[74] He also asserted that the motivations of Ingush militants may have differed from person to person, ranging from ideology and "patriotic feelings" to pecuniary (mercenary) interests.[75] Later (2017), Ingush soldiers were dispatched to Syria, where they performed the role of military police and auxiliary tasks (including rendering physical protection to Russian air forces and civilian specialists) in the so-called De-Escalation Zones.[76]

- *Chechens*. Ukrainian sources—including representative of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine Vadym Skibitsky and the then-coordinator of the Informational Resistance investigative platform, Dmytro Tymchuk—have argued that Russian forces located in Chechnya (military equipment and probably some ethnic Chechens as well) were transported to Crimea by sea (through the Kerch Strait) and air (from Anapa-based airports on board Ilyushin Il-76 strategic airlifters) to participate in the annexation of the peninsula in March 2014.[77] Later, with the outbreak of hostilities in the Donbas region, Ukrainian, Russian and Western information outlets produced numerous articles on Chechens taking part in hostilities on the side of the separatist forces. However, it needs to be pointed out that actual details on this matter tend to be scarce and frequently filled with contradictions. At some point, the Chechen fighters narrative may have been used by the Russian side as an element of its information warfare against Ukraine (to intimidate Kyiv) and, separately, to boost Chechen head Ramzan Kadyrov's image both domestically and abroad.[78]

  Perhaps the most frequently referred-to group allegedly consisting of ethnic Chechens fighting in eastern Ukraine was the so-called Death Battalion. In an interview with *Reuters*, the battalion's deputy commander, nicknamed Stinger, stated, "There are about three hundred of us in Donetsk region. We have battlefield experience from 10 to 20 years starting from 1995… Now we are (former) soldiers and officers of the Russian army, of Russian special forces, mostly veterans of war campaigns." As added by *Reuters*, some members from this unit might have fought against Russia in the 1990s but later were pardoned by (former Chechen president) Akhmad Kadyrov.[79] Unfortunately, the lack of credible data on numbers of Chechen fighters in Donbas makes it difficult to accurately estimate their casualty figures. With Russian mainstream and official sources remaining (purposefully) vague, it is only possible to refer to other information outlets and their estimates. One anonymous source argued that, while in Donbas, Chechens suffered heavy losses (dozens of fallen fighters from Gudermes, Shali, Urus-Martan), which were "purposefully concealed by the local authorities." The source also made a distinction between two groups of militants—some headed to Donbas in pursuit of money, whereas some were sent by the local authorities on "business travel" (*komandirovka*) as a career

booster.[80] That implies the heavy involvement of local Chechen authorities in the process of recruitment and logistical support.

More details pertaining to Chechens' role in Russian (para)military campaigns have been brought to light following Moscow's entry into the Syrian conflict. It is important to highlight the changing trajectory of this group's employment. Chechen fighters' functions—unlike, for example, the tasks entrusted to Wagner Group (in Ukraine and Syria), which was primarily engaged in frontal attacks resulting in relatively high level of human casualties—by and large resembled functions regularly carried out by Western Private Military Security Companies (PMSCs) and, to some extent, Russia's Special Operations Forces (SOF). Namely, the Chechens sent to Syria (Aleppo)—the first 500 contract soldiers[81] were dispatched in December 2016[82]—formed the backbone of the military police and forces responsible for patrolling and providing physical protection of cargo supplies.[83] As noted by Russian sources, the whole process of assembling this force and coordinating its logistics was vested upon Adam Delimkhanov, a member of the Russian State Duma for the United Russia party and a close associate of Lev Dengov (one of the Kremlin's key figures in relations with Libya).[84] Another interesting aspect was revealed by Ruslan Numahadzhiev, the commander of the Chechen military police battalion in Syria. Specifically, he added that Chechens also carried out sapper works and training of Syrian military personnel. Importantly, Numahadzhiev argued that the Kremlin's goal in sending Chechens to Syria was premised on "our [Chechens and Syrians'] proximity in terms of religion and traditions. We understand each other […] we are seeking to improve the image of Chechens among ordinary Syrians."[85] In effect, this quality (the ability to successfully collaborate with locals) is one of the main distinctive features of the Russian SOF (created in 2015), a force seen by Russia's General Staff as a hybrid between classical Soviet-type *Spetsnaz* (capable of operating in small highly maneuverable groups/units) and larger army-type formations composed of "highly qualified professionals."[86]

Western and Central Europeans

Citizens of the European Union have also taken part in hostilities in southeastern Ukraine on the side of the self-proclaimed and Moscow-backed "people's republics." Yet, both their participation and Russia's objectives toward this group were totally different (in the scope, motives and actual impact) in comparison with the above-discussed ethnically non-Russian peoples. First, the cumulative number of these individuals did not exceed one hundred (at most) participants, meaning that their actual impact in military-related terms was rather meager. Second, their motivation for joining—a mixture of romanticism, distorted perception of the Ukrainian conflict, far-right anti-migrant sentiments (with a tint of white supremacism), coupled with a rejection of NATO and/or the US—cannot be defined as a pecuniary-driven. It was mainly premised on ideology, which, to some extent, could be compared to the motivations of members of the International Brigades (*Brigadas Internacionales*) fighting on the side of the Republicans during the Spanish Civil War (1936–1938). On the one hand, this draws on their relatively low level of military preparation; but on the other hand, it could set a dangerous precedent once the militants have returned to their home countries. Third, the Russian side did not require (and did not expect)

members of this group to conduct the vast bulk of the fighting. More important was the information-propaganda effect of the Europeans' participation as a means to demonstrate to both the domestic audience and foreign observers that Russia is not alone—that the alleged "Ukrainian fascism" is abhorrent to a European audience as well.

Russia has notoriously been trying to use the European Far Right and other marginal forces (especially, from France, Hungary and Poland) as well as their ties with Russian ultra-conservative philosopher Alexander Dugin in order to widen intra-European cleavages, inflame anti-EU/NATO sentiments across Europe, and ignite tensions between the EU and its immediate neighborhood (especially, Ukraine). Out of this wide variety of extremist European groups and individuals,[87] it is worth highlighting the following:

French Nationals

French citizens Victor Alfonso Lenta, Guillaume Lenormand, Nikola Perovic, Mika Mma, Renaud Pyrenes (Renaud Regeard), and Guillaume Lextradé have all been documented fighting in Donbas on the side of the Russia-backed separatist forces. All of them, prior to their arrival in Ukraine, had been associated with various ultra-nationalist organizations such as Les Identitaires, Jeunesses Nationalistes, Parti de la France, Troisième Voie, and Section Pyrénées. Perhaps, the most interesting personality from the above-mentioned French radicals is Victor Lenta (born in 1988) a French citizen with Columbian roots. Before his departure to Ukraine, he had served in the French military (according to him, he had been deployed to Afghanistan, Chad, the Ivory Coast, and Gabon) and lit a mosque in Colomiers on fire to commemorate Adolf Hitler's birthday. Importantly, in early 2014, he (and a group of extreme-right colleagues) organized a radical, anti-Western organization/movement in Belgrade called Unité Continentale.[88] Along with Section Pyrénées (created by Renaud Pyrenes),[89] Unité Continentale has notably been trying to recruit Frenchmen to participate in hostilities in Ukraine.

As argued in an investigation conducted by *Informnapalm*, the views and rhetoric of the above-mentioned groups directly mirror "an incarnation of Dugin's Eurasianist Fascism," which rejects "globalization and liberalism, preaching at the same time for the destruction of the EU." Their ideology perceives Russia "as the last bastion in a struggle against US imperialism and the stagnating West." Furthermore, they view the Ukrainian conflict as one element of a wider war against the US, which supposedly intends to invade this East European country.[90]

Some additional insights can be drawn from interviews by several of the French militants provided to Russian information outlets. Repeatedly, they touched on themes related to the "necessity to confront the US," the "fight against deviant behavior and Western liberalism… which has turned France into Africa, where the whole order is commanded by radical Muslims and migrants," and support for Russia as "the last remaining bastion of traditionalism and European conservatism."[91] As stated in March 2015 by Guillaume Lenormand, "The majority of French nationalists are convinced that our government is extremely corrupt, while the EU and NATO are dragging us to the bottom and destroying our country." He also noted that approximately 10–15 French nationals "might be now taking part in hostilities […] some with prior military experience, some without any." In his interview, Lenormand highlighted two important aspects. First, he revealed that, prior to his departure to Ukraine, Unité Continentale organized training courses ("in small highly

maneuverable groups tasked with reconnaissance-subversive operations") that was fully commensurate with NATO standards. This implies that the preparation of these militants was carried out by professionals familiar with NATO training techniques. Second, he argued that he noticed "multiple problems in command and control (C2) as well as communication between the units [separatists] acting in line with Soviet military patterns… [I]f they [separatists] were to adopt NATO tactics, the army of Novorossiya would have suffered fewer casualties."[92] At some point (although this has not received any factual backing to date), Russian PMC members and irregulars (primarily, from the Prizrak Brigade) fighting alongside foreign militants, might have picked up some of these techniques

Southern Europeans

Primarily represented by Spaniards and Italians, Southern European volunteers in Donbas had "considerably" different motives and backgrounds from their French colleagues. Spanish nationals, mainly represented by non-partisan individuals close to various leftist forces and soccer fans, were primarily driven by "a desire to return the favor for the Soviet support of the Republican government during the Spanish Civil War […] we [Spaniards] are here [in Donbas] to confront Fascism [sic] and help the local population."[93]

In the case of Italian militants, the situation is far more complex and more far reaching than may appear on the surface. Italian forces were represented by neo-fascist or ultra-conservative groups such as Lega Nord (at least 40 militants[94]) and the Millennium (in contact with Dugin since at least 2012)[95]—but the actual involvement may have been much more extensive. In 2018, Italian police uncovered a nationwide network focused on recruiting Italians to fight in Donbas. One of its members, Gnerre Orazio Maria (incidentally, the founder of the "Consolidation of Solidarity with Donbas" organization), visited eastern Ukraine and established steady contacts with the separatist authorities. The police learned that the recruits were paid approximately 300–400 euros per month—though the money may not have been the volunteers' main motivation. As noted by Italian journalist Luciano Trapanese, "Antonio Cataldo is the key figure in this network… He is known to be an experienced mercenary who has fought in Libya […and] received his training in Panama… He has become an example for those Italians who are eager to fight in Ukraine."[96] Judging by the example of Russian "volunteers" in the early 1990s (the "South Caucasus–Transnistria–Balkans" axis), many of them were motivated by the prospect of being able to gain necessary fighting experience to later join Western PMCs and/or domestic criminal gangs. This may also have been the case for Italian militants, although evidence for it is currently scarce.

Central Europeans

A small number of extreme-right Poles and the Hungarians also established cordial ties with the pro-Russian separatists. The common traits shared by these two groups is reflected in their adherence to the ideas promulgated by Dugin (Neo-Eurasianism) as well as a desire to "protect" their respective ethnic minorities on the territory of Ukraine. It should, however, be pointed out that neither of these two forces could be said to have played a decisive role in terms of either military achievements or bringing in large numbers of participants (the actual number of both Hungarians and Poles taking part in the Ukrainian conflict did not exceed a handful). Yet, their political impact (especially, in the case of Hungary) may be considerably higher.

Perhaps, the most well-known Polish far-right ultra-nationalist militant in this group was Bartosz Bekier.[97] Aside from establishing contacts with Denis Pushilin (the former head of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic), Bekier traveled to Syria in June 2013 and met with the then–Syrian prime minister Wael Nader Al-Halqi and Faisal Mekdad the Syrian deputy foreign minister. He also appeared in Lebanon, where he saw representatives of Hezbollah and condemned "American and Zionist [Israeli] imperialism."[98]

Hungary's relationship with Ukraine is inseparable from the issue of the Hungarian minority in the Zakarpatia Oblast; and the two countries experienced a dramatic downturn in political relations after 2014. Indeed, the nationalist Movement for a Better Hungary (*Jobbik*) party had established close ties with the Kremlin (through Dugin) even prior to the outbreak of the Ukrainian crisis. In mid-2014, news appeared on social media about the creation of the Saint Istvan Legion (*Szent István Légió*), which allegedly called for volunteers to head to Donbas to "fight against the EU, the US and their puppets—Kyiv-based authorities."[99] However, this may have been an integral part of the information confrontation purposefully launched by Russian and pro-Russian forces as a means to further divide Ukrainians and Hungarians and bilateral relations.[100] That objective appears to have been largely accomplished.[101]

Conclusion

In its employment of non-Russian peoples in regional conflicts with Russia's (in)direct participation, Moscow has been guided by three main (although, frequently intertwined) motives. First, Russia was genuinely trying to recruit non-Russian militants. Indeed, judging by the actual results—major military encounters in southeastern Ukraine and missions carried out by Chechen military police in Syria—this was at least partially successful. Second, Russia has sought to upgrade the level of loyalty among its non-ethnic-Russian citizens by including such groups in regional conflicts and highlighting their role as defenders of the Russian state. As noted, this mode was extensively and successfully used during the pre-1917 period (when non-Russian peoples not only participated in foreign conflicts but were also sometimes turned into elite paramilitary formations close to the throne). Third, the Kremlin seeks information-propaganda and non-military accomplishments, with citizens of the EU and the Serbs having been allocated the key role. Within this realm Russia, is not counting on any immediate effect (although, some signs are already apparent). Rather, it is primarily concerned with more long-lasting results that could include the EU softening its stance toward Russia's behavior in Ukraine (including the potential lifting of economic sanctions); creating a rift both within the EU and between the bloc and its immediate neighborhood; as well as straining relations between the EU (and its individual members) and NATO and the US in particular.

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