

Career Break or a New Career? Extremist Foreign Fighters in the War in Ukraine



Kacper Rekawek, PhD

Affiliated researcher at Counter Extremism Project, associate fellow at GLOBSEC

@KacperRekawek

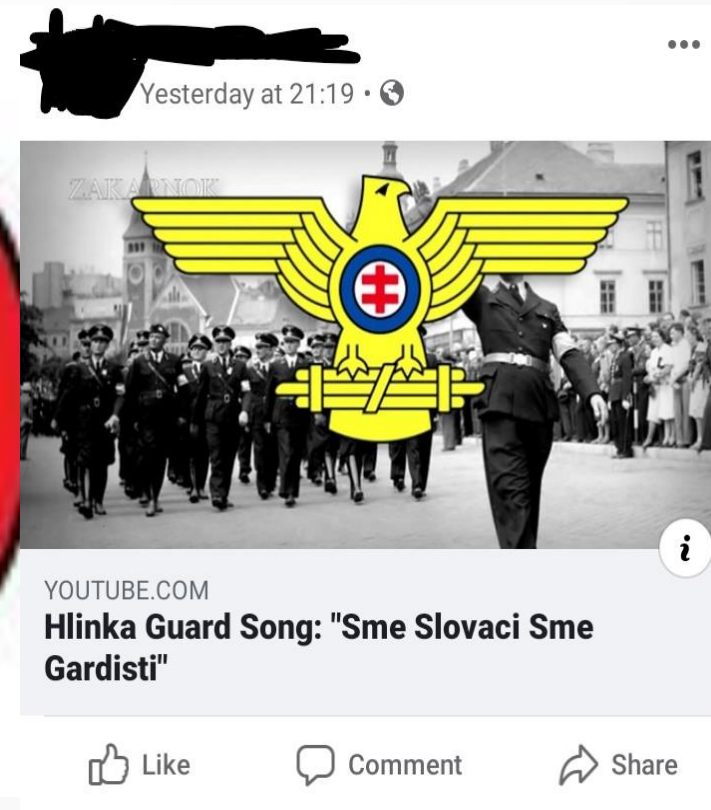
Introduction

- The “why” and cooperation with Counter Extremism Project
- One day in the Summer of 2014...

Who?

- When the count started (Winter 2014/2015): up to 600 non-Russians on both sides from 20+ nations
- September 2019 (by Arkadiusz Legiec): + 2000 non-Russians on both sides
- It is Russians + people from post-Soviet republics (Belarussians, Georgians etc.) + Westerners
- The Western detachment is largely an XRW detachment. A civil war amongst the European XRW? “A kind of an internal civil war, but people with the same values and the same objectives unite again once the dispute is settled.”

We are not a threat...



Go “there” because we are unhappy “here”

- “we simply can’t [achieve our political goals here – in the West]. For people [like us] who have these political ideas, the only option are prison, social death or madness.”
- “I was personally persecuted [...] And by persecution I mean the mainstream press had me depicted as something akin to a terrorist. [...] Some leftists wanted us to be officially compared to ISIS after we returned [...] It wasn’t possible really to regain a normal life.”
- “it is ‘fighting them there because we can’t fight them here’ [...] Think of the communist and anticommunist fighters of the Cold War. They would move wherever they could where they felt they had the occasion to serve their ideals.”

Why they go

- Fatalism :[“we] dream of ‘French Donbass’ even though it is quite obvious we don’t have the means to achieve it.”
- Adrenaline rush
- CV boost
- Humanitarian motivations
- Geopolitical motivations: the war in Ukraine seen as an expression of a global and ongoing conflict between the West and the East, the US versus Russia, Europe versus Asia etc.
- Ideological – nationalist or internationalist
- Because my family or colleagues, “mates” did it.

Categories of XRW fighters

1. resetters: new career
2. ghosts: career break, hiding
3. adventurers: restless, want another war

Postwar reality

“Majority are doing okay. They are not [private military] contractors as some wished to have become but they are not homeless, either.”

Or

“Redeployments”: Kurdistan, Montenegro, Syria, Libya, Paris (?)

A threat?

- “The concerned should fear their police forces more”
- Too few for a French Donbass
- If I do it then all will unite behind the “authoritarian” state
- “5-6 Americans?!?!?”

but:

- “redeployments”?, “Western foreign fighter society?”, militant European organizations which profited from the war?