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The Complex Intricacies of Ukraine's Foreign Militias



The patches worn by the Georgian Legion. Photo Credit: Eurasianet.org

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The patches worn by the Georgian Legion. Photo Credit: Eurasianet.org

The Various Foreign Militias Aiding Ukraine Conflicting Political Ambitions and Goals for the Region

There are many foreign paramilitary organizations aiding Ukraine against Russia, each of these organizations having their own personal goals for the area in which they are fighting. One such group is the Russian Volunteer Corps (RVC). The RVC “was founded by a far-right Russian national last August and comprises Russians who have been fighting in and for Ukraine against their own country.”¹ Its current claim to fame is its assault on the Belgorod region in Russia during May 2023.² While Russia claims Ukraine's involvement is evident in the attack, the government of Ukraine naturally denied these allegations. However, the RVC claims that they carried out the attack with Ukrainian support. A claim that has been backed up by analysts, who argued that Ukrainian intelligence played some form of support in the Belgorod attack.³ Currently, the exact number of the organization is currently unknown, but it is estimated that membership ranges anywhere from 30 to 150 soldiers. The soldiers that carried out the attack answer to the Civic Council, an organization of Russian emigrants from the various

¹ Tom Balmforth and Max Hunder , “Who Are the Freedom of Russia Legion and Russian Volunteer Corps?,” ed. Timothy Heritage , Reuters, June 5, 2023, <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/who-are-armed-fighters-russias-belgorod-region-2023-06-05/>.

² Balmforth and Hunder, “Who Are the Freedom of Russia Legion and Russian Volunteer Corps?”

³ Yuliya Talmazan, “Who Are the Anti-Putin Groups behind the Dramatic Raid into Russia?,” NBCNews.com, May 26, 2023, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/belgorod-raid-russian-volunteer-corps-freedom-russia-legion-rcna86168>.

republics that make up Russia and desire to achieve self-determination for its people. Under the leadership of Anastasia Sergeyeva, the Council's main objective is to raise money and train soldiers.⁴ After its attack on Belgorod, the most notorious element of the RVC is its blatant endorsement of Neo-Nazism and white supremacy as embodied by its founder, Denis Kapustin. Kapustin makes his bigoted views no secret, calling himself White Rex, only allows ethnic Russians to become members of the group, and frequently making anti-immigrant posts on the social media platform Telegram.⁵ As if this were not horrific enough, Kapustin has been in direct contact with known American Neo-Nazis Christopher Polhaus, a notorious transphobe, and Robert Rundo, a participant in the now infamous Charlottesville rally.⁶ This has created a rather complicated situation for the parties involved. Kapustin has expressed his desire to see the overthrow of the Russian as the most effective means of preserving Ukrainian sovereignty, which fuels Russian accusations of the RVC being Ukrainian-backed militants. To make matters even worse for the West, the RVC weapons used to attack Russian were American-made ones meant for protecting Ukrainian soil.⁷ Combined this with evidence of Kapustin's ties to American fascists, and Russian propaganda claims of "de-Nazifying" Ukraine suddenly carry more weight in the international community. However, the likelihood of foreign Neo-Nazis traveling to Ukraine is highly unlikely as they would have to travel through NATO member nations, which would result in American security officials being contacted. Furthermore, the Neo-Nazis that are in Ukraine have seen very little front-line action. However, this does not mean that there are not legitimate concerns regarding the possibility of these Neo-Nazis returning to their home countries and using their training to spread their hateful beliefs more effectively. Regardless, it is undeniably a problem that Ukraine must take action against, as it could prevent Ukraine from being accepted into the EU or NATO.⁸

⁴ Sergey Satanovskiy, "Who Are the Russian Volunteers Fighting for Ukraine?," dw.com, May 25, 2023, <https://www.dw.com/en/who-are-the-russian-volunteers-fighting-for-ukraine/a-65722771>.

⁵ Talmazan, "Who Are the Anti-Putin Groups behind the Dramatic Raid into Russia?"

⁶ Ben Makuch, "Russian Militia Has Links to American Neo-Nazi and Anti-Trans Figures," The Intercept, July 7, 2023, <https://theintercept.com/2023/07/08/american-neo-nazis-ukraine-war/>.

⁷ Talmazan, "Who Are the Anti-Putin Groups behind the Dramatic Raid into Russia?"

⁸ Makuch, "Russian Militia Has Links to American Neo-Nazi and Anti-Trans Figures."



Members of the Kastus Kalinouski regiment practicing tourniquet tying. Photo Credit: Sam Skove for Foreign Policy.

The RVC is not the only foreign paramilitary group in Ukraine that seeks oust the authoritarian ruler of its home nation. Founded in March 2022, the Kastus Kalinoŭski Regiment is a Belarusian militia dedicated to helping Ukraine bring about the downfall of Putin’s rule over Russia as its members see Russia as a threat to both the security of Ukraine and Belarus. However, it should be noted that the members of the regiment are not far-right extremists, but rather more moderate nationalists who believe that by helping Ukraine overthrow Putin, they will “put an end to the history of the existence of Lukashenko’s regime in Belarus.”⁹ It is the authoritarianism of Lukashenko that serves as the impetus for the swelling of the regiment’s numbers. Many of the troops of the Kastus Kalinoŭski Regiment are so fearful of Lukashenko that only agree to give interviews under the precondition of being able to use fake aliases as due to fleeing conscription, their family members back in Belarus could be in danger. In fact, some of the fighters of the regiment lied to their families about where they were in order to guarantee the safety of their loved ones. So intense was the political repression of the Lukashenko that many members of the regiment had been apolitical before the war. This initial lack of deliberate political beliefs sets it further apart from the RVC.¹⁰ The regiment takes its name from Kastus Kalinoŭski, the leader of an 1860s uprising in what is now Belarus and Lithuania against the Russian Empire. For these revolutionary deeds, Kalinoŭski is revered as a hero amongst the people of Belarus. The regiment is divided into two battalions: Volat and Litvin. Each of these battalions is named after a fallen member

⁹ “About The Kastus Kalinoŭski Regiment,” The Kastus Kalinoŭski Regiment, accessed September 15, 2023, <https://bel.army/en/about/>.

¹⁰ Sam Skove, “Meet the Belarusian Regiment Fighting for Ukraine,” Foreign Policy, February 20, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/02/20/russia-war-ukraine-belarus-kastus-kalinouski-regiment-soldiers-fighting/>.

of the regiment.¹¹ The soldiers of the regiment wish to continue the revolutionary legacy for which they were named as some desire the violent removal of Lukashenko, although they acknowledge that the likelihood of this is highly unlikely without foreign assistance.¹² In the event the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment is successful in freeing Belarus from tyranny, its members hope that Belarus will be able to join the European Union and NATO. The reason for this is the belief that the military technology and weaponry provided by NATO is essential to ensure the safety of smaller nations like Belarus.¹³



A Georgian fighter in Ukraine. Georgian Service Photo Credit: RFE/RL

For some foreign fighters in Ukraine, they see the beleaguered nation as the first step in freeing their own homeland from a Russian occupation similar to Ukraine. In a preview of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, in 2008, the nation of Georgia would be threatened by Russian-backed separatists in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Roughly 15 years later, parts of Georgia are still under Russian occupation. “For many in Georgia, Russia's invasion of Ukraine evokes memories of their country's own conflict with their powerful neighbor and former overlord.”¹⁴ The commander of the Georgian Legion, Mamuka Mamulashvili is the living embodiment of this belief, with his war against Russia beginning in Georgia

¹¹ “About The Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment.”

¹² Skove, “Meet the Belarusian Regiment Fighting for Ukraine,”

¹³ “About The Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment.”

¹⁴ Nino Tarkhnishvili, “The Georgian Fighters Who Went to Ukraine to Finish Their Own War,” RadioFreeEurope/RadioLiberty, August 7, 2023, <https://www.rferl.org/a/georgia-war-russia-continued-ukraine/32538061.html>.

when he was 14. This war against Russia is a family affair, with his own father accompanying him to Ukraine before eventually passing away from diabetes and a sister who currently serves in the Georgian Parliament. Mamuka's men became the first unit of foreign fighters to become a part of the regular Ukrainian military. In other words, the Georgian Legion has much more explicit support than the RVC. In the leadup to the outbreak of full-scale war with Russia, the Georgian Legion began imparting its combat experience onto thousands of civilians and soldiers. The first battle between Georgian Legion and Russian forces during the invasion of Ukraine was at Hostomel Airport, which was located near the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv. Mamuka was surprised by the rapid arrival of Russian helicopters, estimating that there were 33 of them. It is argued by some that this airport battle was the key to Kyiv's successful defense. Mamuka described how his men were under equipped to the point that they eventually ran out of ammo. For the Georgian Legion, witnessing the horrors of Russian helicopters deliberately laying waste to civilians was a horror that they were all too familiar with. Setting it further apart from radical organizations such as the RVC is the Georgian Legion's commitment to rigorously weeding out any recruits that have extremist beliefs.¹⁵ Currently, membership in the legion ranges from 800-1,000 fighters, with half of them being ethnically Georgian while the other half is a mixture of different nationalities.¹⁶ The Georgian Legion is mainly responsible for reconnaissance and special operations. Life on the front lines for the Georgian Legion is difficult as they are subject to airstrikes by drones and thus desire their own artillery and air defense systems for protection. As such, like all of the other foreign paramilitary organizations in Ukraine, the Georgian Legion greatly desires Western support as it is deemed to be critical for success.¹⁷ The Russian government has expressed great rage at the Georgian people's continued defiance of its rule, as in July 2023, it charged 70 members of the legion in absentia. Mamulashvili himself was charged with the recruitment and training of "mercenaries."¹⁸

¹⁵ Luke Coffey and Mamuka Mamulashvili, "Conversation from the Front Lines with Commander of the Georgian Legion ...," 2-5, Hudson Institute, December 15, 2022, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/media.hudson.org/Transcript+A+Conversation+from+the+Front+Lines+with+Commander+of+the+Georgian+Legion+Mamuka+Mamulashvili.pdf>.

¹⁶ Tarkhnishvili, "The Georgian Fighters Who Went to Ukraine to Finish Their Own War."

¹⁷ Coffey and Mamulashvili, "Conversation from the Front Lines with Commander of the Georgian Legion ...," 6.

¹⁸ "Over 70 Georgians Prosecuted by Russia in Absentia for Fighting in Ukraine," Civil Georgia, July 29, 2023, <https://civil.ge/archives/553611>.



*Volunteer Maga poses for a photo in the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion base in Kyiv.
Photo Credit: Ed Ram via the Guardian*

Similar to the Georgians, the people of Chechnya also feel a sense of solidarity with Ukraine due to having their homeland occupied. The Chechen Republic of Ichkeria was formed in 1991 following the dissolution of the USSR, fighting two wars to ensure its survival only to be brought under boot and heel by a then up-and-coming Vladimir Putin in 1999.¹⁹ During these wars, the entire nation of Chechnya was destroyed, with the capital city Grozny being wiped off the map and a quarter of a million civilians tragically losing their lives.²⁰ Ever since 2014 with the conflict in the Donbas, many Chechen militants have been present in Ukraine and have only increased their numbers since the outright invasion by Russia. One of these militant groups is the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion. Named after the first president of Chechnya, its members stand in opposition to Putin and his Chechen lapdog, Ramzan Kadyrov. Kadyrov, the current ruler of Chechnya, is held in contempt for the cruelty he inflicts upon the population and attempts to whitewash it through the use of TikTok. Many members of the battalion are political refugees of the Kadyrov, feeling grateful that Ukraine allows them to freely practice their Muslim faith. The battalion is revered for its presence in combat, having aided in the sabotaging of Russian attacks on Kyiv and the liberation of Iziium.²¹ Currently, there are

¹⁹ Harold Chambers , “Chechens Fight with Ukrainians against Russia,” New Lines Magazine, April 5, 2023, <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/chechens-fight-with-ukrainians-against-russia/>.

²⁰ Patrick Reeve and Ivan Pereira, “Chechen Volunteer Fighters Back up Ukraine’s Russian Resistance ,” ABC News, April 13, 2023,

²¹ Daniel Boffey, “‘We’re Fighting for a Free Future’: The Chechen Battalions Siding with Kyiv,” The Guardian, January 30, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/30/chechen-dzhokhar-dudayev-battalion-kyiv-ukraine-putin-ramzan-kadyrov>.

approximately 50 Chechens in the Dudayev Battalion, with Crimean Tatars also making up a sizable portion of the battalion as they are also an ethnic group that has suffered at the hands of Russia. These men have volunteered “because they are all too familiar with the violence wrought by Russia's government.”²² Much like the Georgian Legion and the Kastus Kalinoŭski Regiment, the troops of the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion have expressed a desire for more Western support as they desperately in need of a means to counter the Russian artillery they are facing in Bakhmut. Further complicating their plight is the lack of funding as the Ukrainian government, forcing them to rely on donations for survival. The most likely explanation for the lack of funding might be the prevailing dislike of Chechens amongst the general Ukrainian populace due to a combination of Islamophobic propaganda spread by Russia and the unpopularity of the Kadyrov regime. However, despite these odds, the men of the battalion hope that their heroics on the battlefield will inspire the current generation of Ukrainians to be more supportive of them.²³ In addition to having overcome a lack of support from Ukrainians, the Dudayev Battalion must also overcome a lack of support from their fellow Chechens. These divisions are rooted in Chechnya's wars against Russia in the 1990s. Muslim Madiyev, the deputy commander of the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion, had served as the vice president of the security council of President Aslan Maskhadov. Madiyev and his men are backed by the Presidium of the Ichkerian Government, a Chechen diaspora group in-exile, which has asked Muslims from around the world to enlist in the Dudayev Battalion. These Muslims communities, or jammats, are rooted in the Chechen wars, with religion and loyalty to commanders being the basis for units. Other Chechen groups include Akhmed Zakayev's Cabinet of Ministers, which is effectively committed to nationalism and loyalty to Zelensky through the Separate Special Purpose Battalion (OBON). In opposition to Zakayev, Zhaloudi Saralyapov's Ichkerian Parliament endorses the Sheikh Mansur Battalion, another militant Chechen group in Ukraine. The leaders of these groups have all been attempting to fill the political void following the loss of Chechnya's independence. Simultaneously, from the ashes of the now defunct independent Chechnya, arose a new generation of Chechens that believed in an amalgamation of Islamic conservatism and secular nationalism. It is this new generation that detests Zakayev as they came of age during Kadyrov rather than the dissolution of the USSR. The divisions amongst the Chechens are further complicated due to politicians all claiming that their preferred Chechen militant group is the one true successor to the Ichkerian armed forces, although none of the Chechen militant groups engage in this behavior themselves. However, despite all these divisions, the Chechens are united in their opposition to defeat Russia and see their

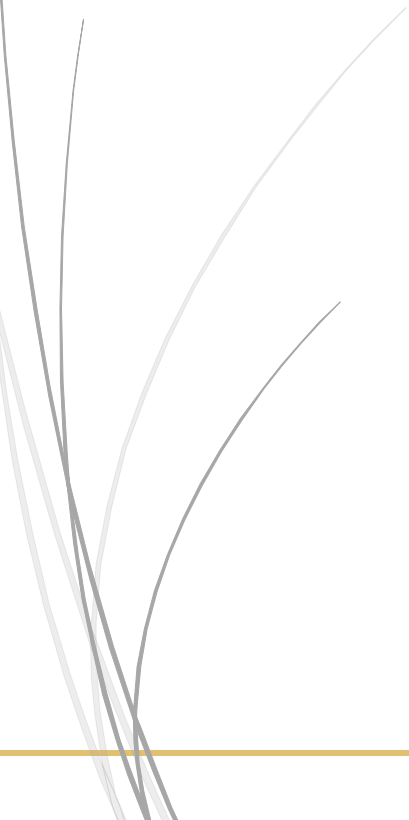
²² Reevell and Pereira, “Chechen Volunteer Fighters Back up Ukraine's Russian Resistance.”

²³ Boffey, “‘We're Fighting for a Free Future': The Chechen Battalions Siding with Kyiv.”

homeland free once more as evidenced by the presence of all Chechen militant groups fighting together in Bakhmut.²⁴

One can clearly see how these foreign paramilitary groups are similar and different from one another. All of them wish to see the removal of Putin, with Chechens and Belarusians also desiring the removal of the collaborationist rulers of their homeland. Some like RVC and the Georgian Legion, while vastly different in terms of politics, are similar in terms of internal unity and vision for what they want out of this war. Others, such as the Dzhokhar Dudayev Battalion, stand in opposition to other Chechen militant groups. There is also the issue of how these different militant groups feel about another and the thought working together, even if it is indirectly. The RVC, for obvious reasons, probably detests the members of the Dudayev Battalion, who understandably feel the same way. Perhaps the Georgian Legion and Kastus Kalinoŭski Regiment may view the Dudayev Battalion more favorably, or maybe they have succumbed to Russia's bigoted propaganda. Regardless, these groups have made sure that different groups of people from around the world will have a stake in the outcome of the Ukraine conflict.

²⁴ Chambers , "Chechens Fight with Ukrainians against Russia,"



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