The forgotten front: Dutch fighters in Ukraine

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From 2012 onwards the primary scholarly and media focus in regard to foreign fighters has been on the large number of Westerners joining jihadist groups in Syria and Iraq – including more than 300 from the Netherlands. Yet, much less attention has been paid to another conflict in the ring around Europe that attracted foreign fighters: the Russo-Ukrainian war, which followed from, among other things, the annexation of Crimea in 2014. This lack of attention is a logical consequence of the fact that the outflow of fighters from the West was not only much smaller, but also that it did not translate into a series of bloody attacks in European cities, including those perpetrated by returning foreign fighters from Syria and Iraq, in Brussels (May 2014, March 2016) and Paris (November 2015).

It is estimated that more than 17,000 foreign fighters joined one of the armed parties in the conflict in Ukraine. That number is considerable, although it should be noted that the majority of these fighters – some 15,000 – came from Russia. The remaining group consists largely of 1,800 Europeans, of whom about a third joined the pro-Ukrainian groups, while the remaining two-thirds went to the separatists. According to the Soufan Center, this influx of foreign fighters should be seen in the context of the transnational rise of right-wing extremism (or white supremacy extremism, as the Soufan Center prefers to call it). This claim corresponds to a wider trend in the academic debate, with scholars increasingly shifting their attention away from jihadism towards such an alleged extreme-right wing wave of terrorism. The concern of the Soufan Center is that similar to how Afghanistan became a rallying point for jihadist groups in the 1980s, Ukraine has now become one for right-wing extremists, who are being hardened there both ideologically and militarily. As MacKenzie and Kaunert recently noted, such claims of the country being a “battlefield laboratory” are gaining prominence.

Therefore, it seems high time to get a better understanding of the foreign fighters in Ukraine. Despite the fact that the conflict began in 2014 and most fighters travelled there in the first years, it remains a relevant case to study. The conflict is far from over, as was proven once again in April 2021, when tensions were rising with increased Russian troop mobilisation around the eastern Ukrainian border. That same month, the debate in the United States on whether certain local Ukrainian groups should be labelled as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) also redirected the spotlight on this forgotten frontline and its implications for other countries.

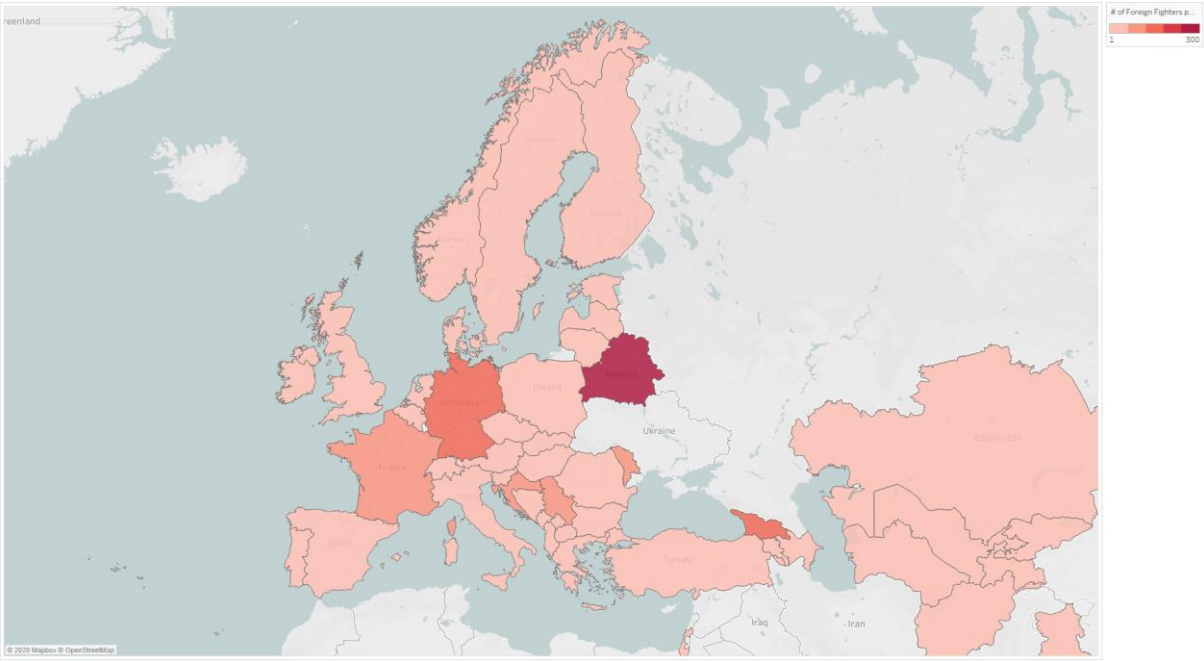

Figure 1: Numbers of travellers by country (excl. Russia) based on data from the Soufan Center. These numbers vary from 1 (e.g. Portugal) to 300 (Belarus).

Despite the importance of studying this conflict, systematic research into the backgrounds and motives of these foreign fighters is relatively scarce, especially compared to the rich literature on the backgrounds, motivations and activities of their jihadist counterparts. The recent study by MacKenzie and Kaunert on the alleged status of Ukraine as the “playground for the far-right” equally highlighted this lack of attention. This is problematic, since the claims made about the battlefield being a hub for right-wing extremism have important implications. It would mean that there might be a long-term impact of the presence of such fighters in Ukraine, beyond the direct effect they have on the conflict itself. The example of (potentially) adding groups to lists of designated terrorist organisations such as is happening in the US is an example of a response to worries about such scenarios. More research is needed to understand who these fighters are and what risks they might (not) pose upon their return. This

study aims to take a small step towards increasing our understanding of this issue. By mapping the Dutch group of fighters in Ukraine through the use of open sources, our research builds on previous studies by Sageman and Bakker. It essentially asks the same questions: who are they, where do they come from, and what drives them?

Eastern Ukraine: Battleground for civilian militias and international volunteers

The war in Ukraine is the product of a complex combination of factors – including social, economic and historical– but above all, it seems to be about the country's attitude towards the European Union and Russia. The suspension of negotiations on the forthcoming association agreement with the EU led to the mass pro-European street protests in November 2013. The violent escalation of these protests, which would eventually drive then-President Yanukovych out of the capital, resulted in military intervention by Russia: it annexed Crimea, claiming to protect the ethnic Russians there, and covertly supported armed pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Confronted with this separatist movement, Petro Poroshenko's new government faced a problem – after decades of corruption and neglect, the Ukrainian army's facilities and the morale of its troops were diminished. Poroshenko therefore decided to join forces with dozens of spontaneously-created volunteer militias. While these played an important role in stopping the pro-Russian advance, it became a major challenge for the government to control these groups, some of which started to commit war crimes. Whereas most battalions were later disbanded or incorporated into the Ukrainian army, some retained a degree of autonomy, often accompanied by extremist thinking. Two notorious examples are the Azov and Pravy Sektor (or 'Right Sector') battalions. Already in the autumn of 2014, *The Guardian* reported that a large group of Azov members would adhere to far-right or neo-Nazi ideas. They glorified Adolf Hitler's leadership, denied the Holocaust, and the battalion symbol showed the *sonnenrad* – a common symbol among neo-Nazis.

Pravy Sektor is also often described as ultra-right-wing or ultranationalist. Although Russian propaganda has been very effective in enlarging the fascist characteristics of these groups, it is clear that they adhere to ideologies at odds with liberalism and multiculturalism, and that group members generally distrust the "corrupt" politicians in Kiev. Interestingly, this contributes to the fact that the ideological differences between pro-Ukrainian fighters and their opponents on the pro-Russian side are sometimes very small.

The Dutch fighters in Ukraine

Several analysts believe that the largest influx of foreign fighters started in 2015. Based on its own research on these foreign fighters, the Soufan Center states that among the reportedly 17,000 fighters, at least eight are Dutch. Five of them are said to support pro-Russian separatists, while at least three would have joined the pro-Ukrainian side. However, this estimate of Dutch nationals joining the war in Ukraine is not undisputed. At the end of 2019, then-Foreign Minister Stef Blok replied in response to Parliamentary questions that the numbers could not be confirmed, although the involvement of Dutch nationals was "recognised". Therefore, a degree of uncertainty exists about the actual number of Dutch nationals in the conflict.

In order to provide more insight into these Dutch fighters, the authors were able to identify several cases, concentrating on Dutch nationals who travelled to Ukraine to join or support an armed group. Thus, one case (of a woman) has been included in which the support seemed to have been more indirect and not linked to fighting activities. It should be noted, however, that the sketches below are based on media sources as well as testimonies of these foreign fighters, who may have reasons to exaggerate their participation, weaken it, or possibly invent it altogether. In most cases, it is not possible to determine to what extent these individuals have actually contributed to the fight, or if they were just present in the conflict zone. Taking all of this into account, the sketches thus primarily offer an insight into how these Dutch fighters want to present themselves.

Pascal

In the fall of 2017, the Russian news site Federal News Agency broadcast a report from the frontline in eastern Ukraine. One of the soldiers interviewed was Pascal, then 38 years old and originally from Zeeuws-Vlaanderen (south-west of the Netherlands), who stated that he no longer wanted to live in "a society in which (hidden) fascism reigns". At that time, he had likely been fighting for a year for the army of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic. He had travelled to the region with his wife Ilse and their two young children.

In 2018, Pascal was interviewed by *Novini*, a Dutch media platform with close ties to the publishing house *De Blauwe Tijger* ("The Blue Tiger"). The latter was referred to in the periodic threat assessment of the Dutch National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV) as an "ultraconservative" source of "fake news and conspiracy theories". In this interview, Pascal stated that he had served as a NATO soldier in Bosnia and later became disillusioned with Western society and its foreign policy, which "causes misery" in countries such as Iraq and Libya. By staying in the

Netherlands and paying taxes, he believed he was part of the problem. He stated he gave up his Western existence and job as a truck driver with an above-average income to leave for eastern Ukraine and support a movement fighting against this Western European order. He claimed to have fought against the fascist *Pravy Sektor*, which he considered to have formed a coalition with the EU, and "right-wing parties that are walking around with swastikas or the *wolfsangel [both signs were frequently used by German army and SS divisions during World War II]*." In that same video, he is also critical of Dutch media, the public broadcasting agency NOS in particular, which would paint a distorted picture of the situation in Ukraine in order to legitimise Dutch foreign policy.

Ilse

Pascal's partner Ilse, 33 at the time of leaving for Ukraine, and the only woman among the Dutch fighters identified, has written several blogs about her life in Donetsk. She wrote that their decision to leave the Netherlands was a form of solidarity with people who were willing to pay a "great price" for their "freedom in making their own choices, away from the Western system of influence that has already caused so much misery in the world."[1]

Observing that the frontlines had remained static for some time, Ilse estimated that their children could live safely in the area. Moreover, after the war, she believed there would be great opportunities to "be part of a new system to be built, where the best of both capitalism and communism can still be implemented". The pair also built a "memorial forest" to not only "honour the victims of the MH17 crash," but also to show that they were not accepting "the political game [by the West] over the dead bodies of so many people."[2] She referred to the Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 (MH17), which was shot down above eastern Ukraine in July 2014, leading to the death of all passengers and crew. Among the passengers were 196 Dutch nationals. The Netherlands and Australia have been the driving forces behind the (criminal) investigations on the incident and hold Russia responsible. Russia has consistently dismissed any involvement.

Walter

Dutch nationals on the pro-Ukrainian side also responded to the MH17 downing. One of them is Walter, who was part of *Pravy Sektor* for several months. In 2015, aged 23, he was interviewed by the Dutch newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad*. In the Netherlands, he described how he led a life of little fortune after growing up away from his parents in a supervised residence. He increasingly engaged in theft and internet fraud,

allegedly motivated by boredom and a lack of perspective. In addition, Walter's mother suspects "that he is weakly gifted and might even be mildly intellectually disabled."

When his life seemed to be at a dead end, the MH17 crisis occurred. This appears to have been a turning point in Walter's life: he wanted to "give something back to the Netherlands" and fight against the "vandals responsible" for the disaster. Although he had no combat experience and did not speak English, Walter travelled to Kiev in the summer of 2014. This made him the first known Dutch national to have travelled to the front. Yet, after a month he briefly returned to the Netherlands so he could continue to receive his social assistance benefits. In the spring of 2015, after less than a year, Walter permanently returned to the Netherlands. He claimed he had "changed" and closed the book on his participation in the Ukrainian conflict. Although he would not discuss it in more detail, Walter claimed that he had been part of a medical team.

Sjoerd

Sjoerd, in his early twenties, also joined *Pravy Sektor*. He grew up around the town of Eindhoven (Noord-Brabant) and worked for a time as a rubbish collector and call centre worker. In an interview with the *Algemeen Dagblad,* an unnamed acquaintance described him as "a sweet boy, but often unreachable for his environment […] among other things, as the result of his autism." Further analysis of his blog and YouTube channel show a different side. His blog prominently features an image of a masked person delivering a Hitler salute to a German war flag with swastika dating from the period 1935-45. The blog seems to show a collection of ideologically infused hatred, racism, anti-Semitism and anti-modernism with the repeated use of far-right and neo-Nazi symbols, including the *sonnenrad* (a sun-like runic insignia), the *valknut* (symbol of three interlocked triangles) and the iron cross. Once in eastern Ukraine, a journalist from *The Washington Post* interviewed Sjoerd with an Italian neo-Nazi from the same unit in the spring of 2017. The journalist described him as an "archetypical war tourist."

That observation was reaffirmed when, after several months of training and fighting, Sjoerd decided to travel again. This time, Sjoerd travelled to Syria, to join the Kurdish (radical-left) YPG militia in the fight against Islamic State. "That war [in Ukraine] is about power, this one is about freedom," he said at the time. Sjoerd was killed by a car bomb near Raqqa in February 2018.

'Batavian Fascist'

Right-wing extremist ideas also seemed to have motivated a possibly fifth Dutch national who used the online name 'Batavian Fascist', and whose real identity the authors could not verify. This person was possibly born in the Netherlands in 1990 (based on his own claims and username). He claims to have joined a battalion of the pro-Ukrainian and right-wing nationalist called the *Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists* (OUN). He refers to his time on the frontlines as "boring", but useful, since this experience could help when a civil war would erupt in the Netherlands. He also said he was looking for other "men of action" on the now-closed Iron March forum. The Iron March forum ran until 2017 and was considered to be a gathering place for neo-Nazis, fascists and other right-wing extremists from around the world, including more Dutch nationals. One of the banners showed the text: "Gas the Jews! Race war now!"

The case of this so-called Batavian Fascist must be approached with great caution, as there is no additional evidence besides this person's claims that he had actually travelled to the conflict zone. Nevertheless, the authors have decided to include this case in the study because it illustrates how Dutch foreign fighters can potentially continue to engage with other foreign fighters long after their return from the Ukrainian front, spread extremist views or potentially inspire others to travel in that direction. Furthermore, it is the only Dutch case identified that explicitly links the experience and skills gained at the front to possible activities at home.

Conclusion

The relatively small group size of Dutch nationals in the Ukrainian conflict prevents us from drawing general conclusions based on their backgrounds and motivations. Looking at the different cases – with the exception of 'Batavian Fascist' due to a lack of reliable data – it is noticeable that no one has an apparent migration background or (ethnic) link to the conflict zone. The similarities more or less seem to end there. Walter and Sjoerd were in their early twenties when they left, while both Pascal and Ilse were in their mid-thirties. Whereas Walter was arrested by the police multiple times, no indications of a criminal past have been found for the other cases. Walter and Sjoerd seemed to have suffered from mental health issues, but this does not in any way presuppose a causal link with their decision to join the fight. Given their divergent characteristics and backgrounds, it is difficult to capture these Dutch fighters in Ukraine in a single, coherent profile – very much like their counterparts in Syria and Iraq.

The case studies also show the wide variety of factors that the foreign fighters cite as their motivations to travel to the conflict, such as political events, ideology, adventure or a sense of social relevance and search for meaning. Sjoerd, Pascal and Ilse shared

a certain distrust of Western governments, although the nature and scope differed. Sjoerd also expressed neo-Nazi and right-wing extremist beliefs, in line with the pattern described in the Soufan Center report. In the other cases, connections with right-wing extremist organisations or ideas are far from evident, or indirect. Pascal, for example, even claimed to fight "*against* right-wing parties". Thus, this study shows that the Dutch reality is far more complex and multifaceted than the white supremacy extremism-focussed perspective presented in the report by the Soufan Center.

The question now is how to proceed. Unlike Dutch fighters in Syria, these nationals have not joined groups currently designated as terrorist organisations. They have also not been in an area controlled by a terrorist organisation or in foreign military service with a state involved in combat operations against (an ally of) the Netherlands. As such, these prosecution grounds currently do not apply. However, the ongoing discussion in the US on designating some of the movements as a terrorist organisation (referred to above) shows that this situation could change. Moreover, the conflict in Ukraine appears to be far from over, given the recently escalating tensions.

Walter's case shows how easy it has been to travel freely back and forth between the Ukrainian front and the Netherlands. The question is not only whether it is desirable for Dutch citizens to play a role in foreign conflicts in the first place, but also to what extent these citizens pose a (latent) danger to national security upon their return. There are some examples from other European countries that showed how such returnees could pose a threat. For instance, in Italy, returned fighters from Ukraine were arrested for the illegal possession of automatic weapons and an air-to-air missile. In Sweden, right-wing extremists who were involved in a bomb attack on a refugee shelter had travelled to Russia to train alongside paramilitaries who had been involved in the conflict in Ukraine. There are also indications that returnees from the battlefield in Ukraine were involved in a (failed) coup to overthrow the government in Montenegro. As such, it is important to look more seriously at this forgotten front and category of foreign fighters. At the same time, as MacKenzie and Kaunert also noted, there is a real risk of exaggerating the threat posed by these fighters as well as the extent the conflict in Ukraine forms a "playground" for extreme right-wing movements. The Dutch cases, although small in number, also do not seem to provide direct proof for such an alarming scenario.

[1] Personal blog of Ilse, published in December 2017. Accessed on 4 January 2021.
[2] Personal blog of Ilse, date unknown. Accessed on 4 January 2021.
Note on sources: the authors chose not to directly link to primary sources such as blogs, forum posts or videos of the studied persons. These can be shared by the authors upon request.

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