Antiauthoritarian Leftists Foreign Fighters in Ukraine: Who Are They and What Are the Postwar Risks?

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 937
August 2025

Bertrand de Franqueville[1], *University of Ottawa*
Jean-François Ratelle[2], *University of Ottawa*

Since the 2014 Maidan Revolution and the war in the Donbas, far-right groups in Ukraine have drawn significant attention from academics and policymakers, particularly their influence and ties to transnational far-right extremists in Europe. However, antiauthoritarian leftist groups in Ukraine—despite their growing role and transnational recruitment after 2022—remain unstudied.

This policy memo examines key antiauthoritarian leftist militant groups within Ukraine's territorial defense forces and military fighting against the current Russian invasion. It explores their role in recruiting and integrating foreign anarchists and anti-fascists, including those coming from the former Soviet Union. Finally, it assesses the outlook for them after the war ends, with an eye to the potential risks posed to Western states by their skills and ideological motivations.

The Antiauthoritarian Left in Ukraine and the 2022 Russian Invasion

Before 2022, the Ukrainian left was highly fragmented, weakened by the dual pressures of far-right mobilization and state persecution. The diverse ideological tendencies, ranging from revolutionary anarchism to reformist socialism, struggled to find common ground, divided over key issues, most notably participation in the war effort in the Donbas, and hampered by interpersonal conflicts. Simultaneously, Russian and Belarusian antiauthoritarian leftist activists saw the Maidan Revolution as an opportunity to gain revolutionary knowledge and experience. Many traveled to Ukraine in 2014 and afterward, subsequently returning to their home countries. This laid the groundwork for long-term solidarity networks between the Ukrainian left and activists from neighboring states. These networks, built on shared experiences and ideologies, served as crucial channels for cooperation and mutual support in following years, helping

[1] Bertrand de Franqueville holds a PhD in political science from the University of Ottawa.
[2] Jean-François Ratelle is an adjunct professor at the University of Ottawa.

resist the erosion of Ukraine's antiauthoritarian scene. Shared struggles in neighboring states like Belarus and against repeated far-right assaults up to the end of 2021, as well as the looming threat of a Russian invasion, forged the networks into a fragile but meaningful alliance in 2022.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 spurred mobilization of these networks, which overcame fragmentation to unite under the banner of fighting "antiauthoritarianism" in Ukraine and abroad. Ukrainian antiauthoritarian leftist groups, both informal and formal, reorganized to support the national military mobilization, launched extensive recruitment campaigns abroad, and challenged Russia's propaganda in far-left circles. These activities were driven not only by solidarity but also by a strategic goal: enhancing activists' visibility and legitimacy and establishing a more prominent left in postwar Ukraine.

Many groups joined the territorial defense forces, including the Antiauthoritarian Platoon, composed of antiauthoritarian leftist activists with prior military experience (including veterans of the first Donbas war) and those with combat training provided by military instructors or clandestine anarchist networks. Anti-fascist activists, hooligans, and foreign volunteers formed the backbone of the Antiauthoritarian Platoon. By summer 2022, due to the military and administrative challenges of the war, particularly with foreign fighters and their legal status in Ukraine, the platoon had splintered, and the fighters spread across smaller units like the Kayfariki group.

Recruiting Abroad

From the start of the Russian invasion, Russians, Belarusians, and European fighters were actively recruited, with the war portrayed as socially/economically oppressed civilians fighting Moscow's tyranny. For these militants, their fight is framed ideologically not as direct support for the Ukrainian state but as resistance against Russian imperialism. They represent a diverse constellation of activists, some with an internationalist agenda but others focused on specific national issues in their home states. The former have fought in several places, including in Rojava (the "Democratic Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria") and against Islamic State, which has helped build solidarity networks and served as a training ground. While some fighters intentionally join preexisting Ukrainian antiauthoritarian leftist groups for ideological reasons, others align with ethnic groups from their home states, such as the Kastuś Kalinoŭski Regiment (Belarus). The motivations of Western and post-Soviet fighters vary, yet what many have in common is significant local militant experience, with some having traveled to participate in antiauthoritarian social movements and military conflicts abroad.

Western Antiauthoritarian Fighters: The Role of Internationalism

Since 2022, the various antiauthoritarian leftist militant groups from Ukraine have networked with like-minded European organizations, such as Black Mosquito, ABC Dresden, ACK Galicja, the Czech Anarchist Federation, and the Radical Aid Force, to attract donations and volunteers. This international support is essential for their activities, given the constant need for human and material resources amid the war. Ukrainian anarchist organizations have been successful at recruiting within the European Union thanks to orientation sessions, active networking, and ideological outreach. On top of the usual motivations observed with Western fighters like humanitarianism and anti-Kremlin ideology, the concept of internationalism has played a significant role. The narrative of an anti-fascist and anti-totalitarian revolution promoting self-government well aligns with the broader discourse around Ukraine's anti-imperialist struggle against Russian aggression.

Based on our assessment of leftist foreign fighters killed in Ukraine, backed by intelligence and media reports, it is estimated that, since 2022, between 100 and 150 European antiauthoritarian leftist have joined existing organizations in Ukraine to fight the Russians. While there are an estimated 800 French fighters in Ukraine, French intelligence has identified 40 ultraleft militants among them, compared to 120 with far-right affiliations. While the far-left militants are outnumbered by far-right fighters, they nonetheless represent a significant trend—one that is often overlooked and understudied by scholars due to the dominant focus on the far-right threat.

Recruitment tends to favor individuals with military experience, particularly veterans, whether of their national armies or of battles in recent conflicts, like for Rojava. In 2022, many Rojava foreign fighters traveled to Ukraine, viewing the war as part of a broader transnational anti-fascist and anti-imperialist struggle. As noted by Romain Huët, going to Ukraine allows them to recreate the intensity of the Rojava experience after a difficult return home, characterized by "social disadaptation," featuring legal problems, isolation, and depression. After struggling to reintegrate and often ostracized by their own country, these internationalist fighters saw Ukraine as an occasion to return to "the action." Focused on the means rather than the ends of struggle, they underscore the dangers related to the lack of proper reintegration.

At the same time, Ukraine has provided foreign fighters who previously fought in Rojava with an opportunity to reshape how Western states perceive them. While they were prosecuted and targeted for their involvement with the People's Defense Units (YPG) in Syria, those who later went to Ukraine, somewhat like Chechens fighting for Ukraine, have had some success in altering the narrative surrounding themselves and their militancy. Such "redemption" might ease their postwar reintegration to some extent, but it will not address their key

vulnerabilities: depression, the lack of a meaningful path after the war, and social isolation

Antiauthoritarian Fighters from the Former Soviet Union

Like other foreign fighters, mobilization among militants from the former Soviet Union is driven largely by a sense of solidarity with Ukrainians and a desire for revenge against the Russian state. However, what sets them apart is the intensity of their leftist, antiauthoritarian motivation, which is even more pronounced. In interviews conducted by one of this memo's authors, Russian and Belarussian fighters emphasize the significance of Ukraine as a launching pad for their struggle against the Putin and Lukashenko regimes.

Many of these activists had previously clashed with Russian nationalists and far-right extremists in street battles across Russia. Others engaged in underground activities against Russian and law enforcement and participated in the 2020–2021 anti-Lukashenko protests in Belarus. Forced into exile by state repression, they forged transnational ties among Slavic antiauthoritarian combatants and began forming new organizations in Ukraine. Drawing on their combat experience in Rojava, their anti-system activism in Belarus and Russia, their clandestine resistance to law enforcement, and their longstanding ties to Ukrainian leftist circles dating back to 2014, Belarusian and Russian fighters helped transform the antiauthoritarian movement in Ukraine from a loose network into a more organized and combat-ready force.

At the same time, more moderate anti-Putin groups, like the Civic Council, have also attracted Russian-speaking anarchists with their broad political platform that unites diverse nations, religions, and political ideologies. Like the ethnic battalions fighting for Ukraine, the antiauthoritarian leftist fighters from Belarus and Russia face evolving challenges regarding their status in Ukraine. For them, returning home is not an option, unless a social revolution, akin to Georgia's in 2003, takes place.

Ideological indoctrination on the front lines remains relatively marginal compared to other conflicts. The harsh conditions of trench warfare have constrained the ability both of antiauthoritarian leftist and of far-right groups fighting for Ukraine to promote their ideologies actively. Furthermore, both ends of the political spectrum have chosen to subordinate their ideology to the fight against Russia.

As has been observed in Chechen and Georgian units, fighters focus on the battlefield, leaving political debates to networks operating off the battlefield. However, the camaraderie forged in the trenches has provided space to share political grievances that extend beyond the overarching anti-Russian imperialism. In an interview conducted by one of the authors with anarchist fighters, they

emphasized a reluctance to discuss politics unless prompted. They pointed to the interdependence of various groups within a battalion, which necessitates the avoidance of ideological conflict. This indicates the limits of conducting ideological activities in Ukraine during the war. Yet while broad ideological debates remain secondary, this does not mean fighters are not contemplating their homecoming and the next phase of their ideological pursuits.

What's Next after Ukraine: New Targets, New Risks

In a previous memo, one of the authors examined the growing risks associated with fighters from Western states and the former Soviet Union coming home, particularly those who have gained specialized training in drone warfare. Antiauthoritarian leftist foreign fighters face similar vulnerabilities and risk factors. The unique nature of the current Russia-Ukraine war, coupled with the increasing reliance on drone technology, has impressed a state of hypervigilance, rooted in traumatic experiences. Disillusionment has already hit many fighters, reflected in a longing to return to the front lines and difficulty in adapting to ordinary life. Beyond the psychological toll, many injured fighters find themselves in precarious situations due to their ambiguous legal status, in Ukraine or in their states of origin, which increases their overall vulnerability and the likelihood of their bringing the fight to Western Europe. The situation is even worse for fighters who are unable to return to their home states and are prohibited from staying in Ukraine, like Russians and Belarusians. For them, organized crime and illegal stays in the Schengen Area might be the only alternatives.

From an ideological standpoint, the Ukraine war has not softened the anti-Western views of foreign activists. Although the antiauthoritarian leftist ideology encountered in Ukraine is opposed primarily to Russian imperialism, it is incongruous with a distinctly pro-Western position. Instead, Western imperialism is often criticized within a broader internationalist framework, which emphasizes solidarity against state oppression and authoritarianism. Fighters criticize Western hypocrisy in Ukraine, making sure to separate their perceived duty to fight Russian imperialism and their disdain for Western politicians.

They see their struggle as one against systems of domination and control, which is expanding in scope. European fighters have gained significant military experience, though this expertise cannot always be easily translated into activism or operations in their home states. In addition to the fighters, potential returnees include antiauthoritarian humanitarian activists, who have extensively networked with like-minded individuals and developed important skills while working for the Solidarity Collectives and other military units, such as in the fabrication of FPV drones.

Unlike their Russian and Belarusian counterparts, fighters from Western states have a range of indirect opportunities to advance their internationalist agenda within their domestic political landscapes. While some may withdraw and disengage from further militancy due to fatigue, others may return to their home political communities, often characterized by strong communal bonds, where direct action is frequently the preferred choice in the face of intense social struggles. That might include participating in traditional protests, alter-globalization mobilizations, anti-fascist actions, vandalism and sabotage targeting state property, environmental actions that may verge on eco-terrorism, cyberattacks, and Palestine solidarity initiatives.

This form of activism presents a more diffuse and indirect challenge for intelligence services than far-right and jihadist militants. Scholars have noted that most attempted domestic terrorist attacks carried out by returning jihadists tend to occur within a short period following their return from fighting abroad. In contrast, the threat from returning antiauthoritarian foreign fighters is murkier. The movement is highly fragmented, yet all splinter groups share similar anti-Western and/or anti-system perspectives. Their fight in Ukraine has not been one centered on Western liberal values or Ukrainian nationalism, but an opportunistic one based on the struggle against imperialism in general. Their ability to align themselves with socially acceptable and widely supported causes, such as in support of Palestine or climate advocacy, allows them to integrate into existing networks, bypassing the obstacles of building new antiauthoritarian movements upon returning to their home countries. These returning foreign fighters can draw on the skills they acquired in Ukraine to continue their anti-imperialist struggle—one that, crucially, could shift its focus from Russia to the West.

Antiauthoritarian leftist foreign fighters fall outside the scope of existing multidisciplinary research on reintegrating jihadist foreign fighters and addressing growing far-right networks in Western states. While intelligence services have flagged the risks from these fighters in Ukraine upon their return home, intervention teams have a limited understanding of the issues, the resources required to address the risks and vulnerabilities, and the broad range of ideological perspectives of this cohort.