
For Land and Race –

**The impact of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine
on P/CVE: VRWE fighters and VRWE dynamics**

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Summary

The war in Ukraine involves right-wing extremists groups on both sides of the conflict, with nationalist and racist ideologies at the core of their involvement. International networks play a key role in recruiting foreign fighters for volunteer battalions. The article summarises current developments and the impact on EU member states.

The illegal and illegitimate Russian war of aggression against Ukraine not only presents political and military dimensions, but also ideological and extremist aspects. In addition to regular military units, violent right-wing extremist (VRWE) groups are fighting on both sides of the conflict, mobilising nationalist and racist ideologies as core elements of their involvement. International networks play a special role in recruiting foreign fighters for volunteer battalions. Current developments regarding the Russian war of aggression, VRWE foreign fighters and the impact on member states of the European Union will be further discussed in the article.

This article is a presentation summary on the current developments on VRWE related to the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine, which was delivered during the EU RAN cross-cutting meeting on "The impact of the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine on P/CVE: VRWE fighters and VRWE dynamics" on the 26th April 2023 in Brussels, Belgium.

Recruitment via Telegram

Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, right-wing extremist chat groups received a significant amount of engagement and attention from the right-wing scene with some individuals (not unlike on Tinder) searching for carpools to the war zone. One could read on Telegram messages such as: "Hi can you please forward a message since two of us are trying to get a carshare going from Germany to Ukraine". It was indicated earlier in the chat that entry into Ukraine was possible without any difficulty due to the open border. Other chat participants asked questions about weapons and equipment, to which a chat admin replied by stating: "We have enough weapons." In contrast to 2014 and the subsequent years, the mobilisation by VRWE activists from Ukraine of foreign fighters in 2022 were also conducted in German, English and other languages to make it easier to establish contact with volunteers in foreign countries. After 2014, there was already a lively international exchange and an attempt to establish long-term structures. In Germany, they tried to establish a branch of the Ukrainian group „Misanthropic Division“¹. According to one of the leaders, language barriers made it difficult to establish this structure in the long term.²

In addition to the pragmatic approach to recruitment, transnational information and propaganda channels developed with a whole network of Telegram channels of different right-wing extremist groups and hooligans.

Furthermore, right-wing extremist labels such as "Sva Stone"³ and "Runic Storm"⁴ sell online racist and war-glorifying merchandise in the context of the war. „Sva Stone“ for example sponsors and supports military units such as „Special Forces LEGIO V“ with clothing, and both groups promote

¹ The Misanthropic Division, also referred to as Division Phoenix since 2016, is a transnational neo-Nazi collective headquartered in Ukraine, characterised by some sources as a paramilitary faction, while others categorise it as a social movement. Its inception dates back to 2014 when it emerged as a participant in the Euromaidan demonstrations aimed at opposing the administration of Viktor Yanukovich. Several of its members subsequently joined forces with the Azov Battalion and UAF in the Donbas territory to combat pro-Russian separatist factions.

² See also: The Brown Internationale. Online: <https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/zeitgeschehen/2021-02/fascism-international-right-wing-extremism-neo-nazis-english>

³ The Sva Stone brand is closely associated with the Azov Regiment and also hosted the Fortress Europe festival. Founded in 2010, the brand is owned by Arseniy Klimachev, who tried to build a B&H division in Ukraine in the 1990s and is still the leader of the longest serving Ukrainian right-wing rock band Sokyra Peruna. (See also: Robert Claus: *Ihr Kampf: Wie Europas extreme Rechte für den Umsturz trainiert*. 2020.) Self-description of Sva Stone's main customers: „young sporty Ukrainians and Europeans, who prefer high-quality clothes of European production in casual style with an appropriate ideologic context.“

⁴ Runic Storm is a right-wing extremist clothing brand founded in Kyiv in 2015. Since its creation the brand was called WALKNVT until it changed its name to Runic Storm in 2022. Among other motives, the brand sells exclusively clothing of the right-wing extremist group Misanthropic Division.

each other's Telegram channels. The war before 2022 and the situation after the Euromaidan have pushed these brands in their relevance as well as perception.⁵ A similar effect can currently be observed.

Both shops use war-related narratives and create corresponding motives, such as the notorious quote: "Russian warship, go fuck yourself" the theme was used by „Runic Storm“ shop. This quote was taken from a real-life exchange between Ukrainian soldiers on an island in the Black Sea and an officer of the Russian Navy in February 2022. Other textile merchandises have designs with references to National Socialism with for instance, a modified SS skull and unofficial division patches that signal the affiliation to a unit or a political stance. T-shirts signalling support for irregular units such as the „Misanthropic Division“ are distributed internationally and have also been worn by participants in violent-right extremist marches in Germany. In addition to these designs, the „Runic Storm“ shop sells an adaptation of the logo of the *The North Face* brand. The modified design is then called "The White Race". *The North Face* is taking legal action against the unauthorised use and racist alteration of the logo by the shop. The shop shared the cease-and-desist letter on the use of the *The North Face* logo with a racist comment on its Telegram channel.

The online chats of these brands on telegram not only serve to sell products, but are also a forum for the international exchange of like-minded people. President Volodymyr Zelenskyy is also a frequent topic of the discussion. In particular, his Jewish ancestry is a recurring theme. In the discussions, it becomes clear that the president is seen as an „evil to be endured“ and with whom one has „to come to an arrangement on the other side“. A user with the name Tiwaz writes: "Zelensky is still a jew, guys. Don't fight for him, fight for your country and race, hail Victory." The administrator of the group supports this and writes: "Azov is fighting against communism and only fight for them people not for a president." Referring to the time after the war, another user writes: "who gives a fuck about jewish zelensky on NS chat? after war he will be another enemy like putin is right now." Even though some users praise Zelenskyy's "civic nationalism", the consistently shared opinion made clear by another user: "I agree with soldiers that Zelensky should be hung but I don't involve Russia in any way shape or form. Both Putin and Zelensky need to be gone".

Ukrainian Volunteer Battalions

In Ukraine, it is mainly the so-called volunteer battalions that are recruited from right-wing extremist and nationalist forces. These are groups such as the "Misanthropic Division", "Right Sector"⁶, "Carpathian Sich"⁷ as well as various groups around hooligan associations and the "Azov Movement". Noteworthy is the close association some of these groups have to right-wing

⁵ See also: Robert Claus: *Ihr Kampf: Wie Europas extreme Rechte für den Umsturz trainiert*. 2020.

⁶ Right Sector, or "Pravyi Sektor" in Ukrainian, is a heterogeneous coalition of Ukrainian nationalist organisations spanning the right to right-wing extremists spectrum. The group's genesis can be traced to November 2013, when it emerged as a right-wing paramilitary alliance of various ultranationalist organisations during the Euromaidan uprising in Kyiv, where its militant supporters engaged in confrontations with police. Subsequently, on 22 March 2014, the coalition transformed into a political party and reported an estimated membership of around 10,000 individuals.

⁷ Carpathian Sich (Karpatska Sich) also the Carpathian Sich National Defense Organization. A paramilitary organisations in Carpatho-Ukraine in 1938–9, formed in November 1938 from units of the Ukrainian National Defense. Nowadays there is a new group with the name Carpathian Sich. That group employs an emblem that features a modified version of Ukraine's national symbol, a trident, with a sword replacing the middle prong. This modified trident is a common symbol among right-wing factions and movements in Ukraine. Although the emblem itself does not contain any hate symbols, it is suggestive of the group's right-wing extremists ideology. Notwithstanding this, Carpathian Sich has been known to utilise various symbols that are commonly associated with hatred, such as the Celtic cross, the black sun, the sun wheel, the Wolfsangel, various runes, and the Nazi salute.

extremist parties. Most of these groups were founded in 2014 in connection with the Maidan⁸ and have been active ever since. The political position of the „Azov Battalion“ and the „Azov Movement“⁹ is controversial. While the political classification of the Azov Movement is undisputedly extreme right-wing, this is more difficult to ascertain in the case of the Azov Battalion. Indeed, being part of the Ukrainian armed forces some argue that there is a clear depoliticisation of the Battalion, which is questioned in turn by critics in part or in principle. For recruitment, recruits made use of long-developed networks that evolved in the sports sector from hooligan and MMA milieus. An example from Dresden illustrates this clearly. There, hooligans sprayed a supportive graffiti. It says "Glory to Asov" in large blue and yellow letters. In addition, the logo of Asov and the right-wing extremist numerical code "1488". The number "14" stands for the 14 words of David Lane and "88" for the eighth letter of the alphabet. The number "88" therefore stands for Heil Hitler, a widely used cipher. These images are distributed by a hooligan chat group that is administered from Ukraine and whose users are located internationally. In addition, connections in the music scene, like National Socialist Black Metal or Hatecore were relevant for networking, as were the connections between parties and individuals who lobbied on behalf of the Ukrainian right-wing extremists scene abroad in recent years.

These actors see themselves as defenders of Ukraine against the "Russian aggressor" or alternatively the "Jewish-Bolshevik aggressor" and they also use anti-Semitic, anti-Russian, anti-Muslim and racist rhetoric. On the Russian side, racist, imperialist and nationalist narratives are used to legitimise the war of aggression. Above all, Putin's narrative of the special operation to denazify Ukraine, which is in concrete contradiction to the situation on the ground, if one considers the right-wing extremist references of his units..

Russian Volunteer Battalions

In Russia, too, right-wing extremist forces are fighting on the side of the separatists in eastern Ukraine. Here it is mainly members of the "Russian Imperial Movement" (RIM), a neo-Nazi organisation that advocates for a "Greater Russia" and which also has links to the Russian government. Some RIM members have volunteered to fight in eastern Ukraine and to provide support to the separatists with weapons and propaganda. Other far-right groups such as the mercenary group "Wagner"¹⁰, or "Rusich"¹¹ and the "Battalion Sparta"¹² are also active in this

⁸ See also: The Maidan protest movement <https://www.britannica.com/place/Ukraine/The-Maidan-protest-movement>

⁹ The Azov Movement, which emerged from the Azov Regiment as an anti-Russia militia during the early stages of the conflict in Ukraine, has become one of the most prominent neo-Nazi groups on the far right in Ukraine. This White Nationalist movement has gained notoriety for its extremist ideologies and has been a source of concern for human rights organisations and anti-racist activists both within Ukraine and internationally.

¹⁰ The Wagner Group, or "Группа Вагнера" in Russian, is a paramilitary organisation that operates in a manner resembling a private military company (PMC), as well as a network of mercenaries or a de facto private army for Russian President Vladimir Putin. The group operates outside of the law in Russia, where private military contractors are officially prohibited. Although the Wagner Group itself is not characterised by a specific ideology, several of its elements have been linked to neo-Nazism and right-wing extremism.

¹¹ The Sabotage Assault Reconnaissance Group "Rusich" (DShRG), or "Диверсионно-штурмовая разведывательная группа «Русич»" in Russian, is a far-right and neo-Nazi paramilitary unit that has been involved in the Russo-Ukrainian War. The group, which is led by Alexey Milchakov and is part of the Wagner Group, has fought against Ukrainian forces since its founding. "Rusich" fought alongside pro-Russian separatists in the Donbas war from June 2014 to July 2015, and it has been fighting in the Russian invasion of Ukraine alongside Russian troops.

¹² The Sparta Battalion, also known as "батальон «Спарта»" in Russian, is a military group associated with the Russian-backed Donetsk People's Republic (DPR) in eastern Ukraine. The unit has been actively involved in the Donbas conflict and the 2022 Russian invasion, operating as a people's militia and fighting against the Ukrainian Armed Forces. Established in 2014, the group was initially under the command of Arsen Pavlov, who was also known as "Motorola," until his death in October 2016. Subsequently, Vladimir Zhoga, or "Vokha," a native of Sloviansk, took over leadership until he was killed in March 2022. In 2022, the Sparta Battalion was integrated into the Russian Armed Forces. The Sparta Battalion has been characterized as a Russian ultranationalist group, and according to the European Eye on

conflict. These groups in particular are accused of war crimes and human rights violations on a considerable scale. In the case of the Wagner group, a classification of the group as a terrorist organisation is being discussed by European Union. Individual actors, such as the Russian MMA fighter Mikhail Turkanov (The Pitbull), were awarded by the government for special services in the "denazification" of Ukraine.¹³ Turkanov himself is covered with right-wing extremist tattoos, including swastikas, and makes no secret of his political affiliation. Again and again, there are pictures of Russian soldiers wearing right-wing extremist symbols or symbols that make a clear reference to National Socialism for example, the SS skull or motifs from northern mythology.

Here, too, the martial arts sector is used for recruitment; furthermore, Russian communities in Germany are targeted and considerable resources are spent on disinformation campaigns. Messenger services such as Telegram play a prominent role.

Foreign Fighter

The role of right-wing extremist fighters and Foreign Fighters (FF)¹⁴ in this conflict is controversial. While the Ukrainian government and its supporters argue that the volunteer battalions, which also include the foreign fighters with right-wing extremist backgrounds, play an important role in the fight against the separatists and that their ideological views are not representative of the majority of the Ukrainian population, critics accuse these battalions of insufficient engagement with the examination of the backgrounds of these individuals. There is also criticism in Russia of the involvement of right-wing extremist groups in this conflict. Critics see the support for the separatists as part of an aggressive foreign policy, which is primarily supported by nationalist and militarist forces.

There are reports about the participation of individual fighters from other European countries such as France¹⁵, Germany¹⁶, Poland, Ireland¹⁷, Spain, Italy¹⁸, Sweden¹⁹ and many more who have joined the volunteer battalions in Ukraine. Basically, it is important to draw a distinction between individuals who join regular armed forces from those who integrate informal combat groups. On the one hand, the volunteer units of Ukraine consist of mercenaries and individuals with more or less previous military experience and are an official part of the Ukrainian armed forces. On the other hand, there are groups that are not officially part of the army and thus have no military status. Many of the foreign fighters with an extreme right-wing background join these latter groups, which makes it difficult to assess the situation, since the only information available about

Radicalization, it employs a mixture of Russian imperial symbols and "symbols of the Spartan military culture, well-known drivers of the far-right".

¹³ Russian MMA fighter sporting neo-Nazi tattoos awarded medal for role in 'denazification' of Ukraine <https://bloodyelbow.com/2023/02/07/russian-mma-fighter-neo-nazi-tattoos-awarded-medal-denazification-ukraine-war-putin/>

¹⁴ Foreign fighters are individuals who are recruited or voluntarily travel to a conflict zone with the purpose of training and/or fighting with a specific group. These individuals may have various motivations for their travel, which can include political, ideological, or religious reasons. See also: International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) https://www.theiacp.org/sites/default/files/all/i-j/IACP-COT_ForeignFighters_FINALAug12.pdf

¹⁵ Foreign Fighters in Ukraine could be a Time Bomb for their Home Countries <https://theintercept.com/2022/06/30/ukraine-azov-neo-nazi-foreign-fighter/>

¹⁶ Der Neonazi an der Front <https://taz.de/Rechtsextreme-im-Ukraine-Krieg/!5907691/>

¹⁷ Too young and no military experience: concerns over Irish men volunteering to fight in Ukraine <https://www.irishtimes.com/ireland/2023/01/09/gardai-raise-concerns-about-suitability-of-irish-men-volunteering-to-fight-in-ukraine/>

¹⁸ Don't go to fight in Ukraine, Italian foreign ministry says <https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/dont-go-fight-ukraine-italian-foreign-ministry-says-2022-03-24/>

¹⁹ How a War on the Edge of Europe Became a Training Ground for the Far-Right <https://www.vice.com/en/article/88ngmx/ukraine-war-far-right-decade-of-hate>

these groups is what they themselves publish and propagate via social media. Therefore, there are hardly any reliable figures.

Russian separatists are also said to have foreign volunteers in their ranks. According to the German government, the majority of volunteer fighters with an extreme right-wing background originating from Germany are fighting for Ukraine. Often without prior military training and without an official military status, they constitute a risk in many respects. The ideological reference and legitimisation for these individuals' involvement in the war can be explained by the individual's sense of a common history in the Second World War (ie. the fight against Russia as an anti-communist struggle), personal relationships and the idealisation of Ukraine as the last place of a "white Europe" that has to be defended. The German Ministry of Interior speaks of a low, double-digit number of fighters in the region. However, no reliable figures can actually be used. Of the 38 who left, 28 have a connection to right-wing extremism. Five of these 38 are said to have taken part in combat operations and six are said to still be in the war zone in 2022.²⁰

Case Study: Fighting and Delivering

Especially in the confusing first days of the war of aggression against Ukraine, there was a particular dynamic in which it was very easy for volunteers to enter Ukraine and join foreign volunteer battalions, especially as it is not considered a criminal offense to join these foreign volunteer battalions. Some individuals arrived in Ukraine with their own vehicles or by bus (for example Flix Bus) and train; sometimes these journeys were declared or camouflaged as humanitarian aid. The term humanitarian aid was also often used as a cipher in relevant RWE forums to paraphrase that someone wants to take part in armed combat.

Personal connections as well as multilingual recruitment and communication in right-wing extremist Telegram channels facilitated the entry of volunteers. Additionally, the involvement of volunteers in these battalions is highly varied. Some are individuals from the right-wing extremist scene who can provide logistical support as they are based in Ukraine, have good connections to Germany, and possess the logistical infrastructure to ensure the transportation of militarily relevant goods. One of these actors is a German neo-Nazi from Munich. He runs a logistics company in Odessa. Even though he is not entirely uncontroversial in the German right-wing extremist scene, he has the necessary and helpful networks. Several times he has been convicted because of dangerous physical assault, commercial fraud, insult, trespassing, damage to property and other criminal offences. In Ukraine, he is described by a Ukrainian neo-Nazi, who himself has several convictions and is associated with far-right militants, as a famous German neo-Nazi who supports the Ukrainian armed forces. While they pose for the camera at the stand in Odessa to share the picture on social media.

Others, like Solingen resident Stephan K., directly participated in combat operations. Stephan K., who was also active in the right-wing extremist scene in Germany, was initially a member of the „Russian Volunteer Corps“ (RDK)²¹ and then switched to the official Ukrainian army (at the Karpatska Infantry Battalion) after being injured.

²⁰ Neonazis wollen an die Front. Online: <https://taz.de/Krieg-in-der-Ukraine/!5835674/>

²¹ The Russian Volunteer Corps (RVC) is a paramilitary organization that emerged in August 2022 amidst the ongoing conflict in Ukraine. The group asserts that it is composed of Russian emigrants fighting against Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and claims responsibility for a recent attack in Bryansk Oblast. The RVC has been associated with far-right and neo-Nazi ideology, and its purported ties to Ukraine's armed forces have been contested by Ukrainian military officials. The Russian government has accused the RVC of carrying out a cross-border "terrorist attack," while the Ukrainian government has denied involvement and suggested that the incident was either a false-flag operation or an attack by anti-government partisans within Russia. The founder of the RVC is Denis Kapustin, also known as Denis Nikitin, a Russian

Stephan K. readily gives information about his political views and motivation to fight in the war in an two-part interview published on the homepage of a right-wing extremist micro party. He describes how he travelled to Ukraine on a Flixbus, that he is now part of the official Ukrainian armed forces and illustrates the article with pictures of himself. In terms of his motivation, he says there:

„Politically, my motivation was first and foremost that I am a European nationalist and I naturally wanted to support a country like Ukraine, where people attach great importance to their own cultural identity, in its struggle to protect and preserve this identity. On the other hand, I think I'm also protecting Germany to a certain extent here. [...] And as a nationalist, I see it as my duty to fight Putin and his neo-Bolshevism. The most effective fight in my eyes in this case is with a gun. I don't want to see a second attempt to infest Europe with the red plague.“²²

In the interview Stephan K. describes that he had no previous military experience. However, as he says, *"through contacts, he had had the opportunity to shoot with different firearms. I also attended tactical training several times. However, everything was outside the Bundeswehr.“²³*

This description suggests that he had participated in paramilitary exercises beforehand, either independently of the contacts in Ukraine or in connection with them. What is clear, however, is that this kind of training has happened in the past²⁴ and that groups like the „Russian Volunteer Corps“ prepare volunteers accordingly. A fact that also points to what can be expected of these networks in the future, especially because they will have the networks, experience and access to weapons. Asked about his wishes for Germany and Europe, he says *"that nationalism awakens in all European countries. That people realise that nationalism is the only healthy form of government for one's own country. And a dream would be a Europe of national fatherlands“²⁵*. He sees this more strongly developed in Ukraine than in other European countries.

He was recruited for the „Russian Volunteer Corps“ by Denis "Nikitin" Kasputin, a Russian native who lived in Germany for a long time and is internationally connected, particularly due to his activities in the MMA field. He owns the right-wing extremist label "White Rex"²⁶. According to his own statements, Stephan K. decided to leave the volunteer unit to obtain official documents and eventually obtain Ukrainian citizenship. In early 2023, Stephan K. announced that he wanted to develop his own German volunteer battalion as part of the Ukrainian Armed Forces and was looking for support, fighters, and donations. Referring to his volunteer corps, he wrote in a Telegram group: *"The unit is under the military, it is not a PMC group“*. Stephan K. is under investigation in Germany, as he is alleged to have been photographed with a swastika.

neo-Nazi football hooligan. He lived in Germany from 2001 for several years. He later returned to Russia and founded the neo-Nazi clothing brand White Rex in 2008. In 2017, he moved to Ukraine.

²² Im Gespräch mit einem deutschen Freiwilligen. Online: <https://der-dritte-weg.info/2023/01/im-gespraech-mit-einem-deutschen-freiwilligen-teil-1-2/>

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ See also: Robert Claus: *Ihr Kampf: Wie Europas extreme Rechte für den Umsturz trainiert*. 2020.

²⁵ Im Gespräch mit einem deutschen Freiwilligen. Online: <https://der-dritte-weg.info/2023/01/im-gespraech-mit-einem-deutschen-freiwilligen-teil-2-2/>

²⁶ White Rex is a neo-Nazi network operating as a clothing brand and organiser of martial arts tournaments in Russia. Its founder, Denis Nikitin (also known as Denis Kapustin), promotes their ideology through various means, such as organising large MMA tournaments, holding concerts, and catering to right-wing hooligans. The brand claims that their aim is to promote the "spirit of the warrior in our people" and anchor the sport in the healthy part of European youth. White Rex's visual language reflects this ideology, featuring a stylized Viking with a Kolovrat sun symbol in the background, reminiscent of neo-Nazi and far-right symbols such as the swastika or the Black Sun. The clothing line includes motifs of medieval warriors, firearms, cutting and stabbing weapons, as well as Nazi symbols like the number 88 or the 14 words by David Eden Lane.

Conclusions

Overall, this conflict highlights how nationalist and racist ideologies continue to play an important role in the 21st century and can be mobilising influences in conflict situations. The involvement of right-wing extremist in this conflict raises questions about the responsibility of governments and the international community, which should be committed to upholding human rights and protecting against discrimination.

Recent developments around the group "Order of Hagal," which planned attacks in Italy²⁷, and the arrest of right-wing extremist activists in France, demonstrate that these international networks are already functioning and have consequences for member states. In late April 2023, two right-wing extremist activists returning from Ukraine were arrested with military equipment. They were found to be in possession of illegal assault rifle magazines and optical sights and were arrested at the Bercy bus station. They were sentenced to 15 months in prison for undermining state security, 9 of which were suspended.

These developments, along with those in the conflict zone, highlight the need for action and intensive engagement with the developments and their consequences for member states and practitioners.

- **VRWE foreign fighters pose a security risk for the EU and its Member States**

The presence of VRWE foreign fighters traveling to Ukraine pose a security risk for the EU and its Member States (MS). Although they make up a small proportion of individuals joining the conflict and have turned up in smaller numbers than expected, it is important to take this issue seriously. There are hardly any reliable figures and the situation can change at any time.

- **Do not exaggerate their numbers**

It is also important not to exaggerate the numbers of FF's and VRWE involved in the war, as this could play into the hands of the Russian authorities who have described the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine as a special 'denazification' mission.

- **The EU and its MS should place the issue of VRWE / FF's traveling to Ukraine and Russia on the policy agenda**

Despite these concerns, the EU and its MS should place the issue of VRWE / FF's traveling to Ukraine and Russia on the policy agenda. Even if their numbers are relatively small, this is an issue that cannot be ignored. By addressing this issue, the EU and its member states (MS) can help prevent the spread of VRWE and maintain the security of the region.

- **MS & Practitioners should be prepared for returning FF's**

MS and Practitioners should be prepared for returning FF's. Need for clear plans in managing returning FF's – involve experts in deradicalisation. In particular, the legal classification of VRWE / FF's activities and reaching target groups are challenges for MS and practitioners. Unlike the situation in Syria, this is not an asymmetric war and participation in warfare is not illegal in most MS.

- **Analysis, monitoring and awareness**

²⁷ Italian Cops Take Down Occult Neo-Nazi Group Preparing Violent Attacks. Online: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/4axpeq/italy-neo-nazis-order-of-hagal>

Continuous analysis, monitoring and awareness of the situation is needed to develop and adapt plans for returnees in MS. There is an urgent need of a clearer picture of the situation on the ground.

Furthermore, there are additional challenges that practitioners and EU MS are confronted with. These include, among others, the following topics:

- Identify **actors** who **actively or passively support VRWE networks** and FFs in different ways
- The linking of **combat-experienced fighters / activists and access to weapons** and the associated networks poses a particular challenge for the member states in the future. This is especially important as international activists from the VRWE scene have already carried out weapons training in Ukraine and other former war zones in the past.
- Strengthened **international VRWE networks** and the VRWE relevance of these networks for the development and expansion of structures in MS.
- **Lone actors with** international networks and access to weapons in context of the war of aggression against Ukraine.
- **Hero worship – FF's / VRWE's groups** and persons honoured for their activities in the war.
- **Weapons:** Accessibility of weapons in MS & accessibility of training for people from MS as well as the import and trade in parts of weapons.
- **Trauma related problems:** Identification of people and their welfare needs who were part of irregular military units.
- Rise of **racist and war-glorifying propaganda and recruitment**. Especially via messenger services like telegram, which sometimes have over 100,000 users.
- The **role of messenger services** and other social media in recruitment, disinformation and the spread of propaganda.

The involvement of European foreign right-wing extremists raises questions about Europe's role in this conflict and highlights that nationalist ideologies can also be mobilising across borders. It is important that the international community takes stock of this issue in order to take appropriate measures to prevent the participation of foreign violent-right extremists in armed conflicts and prepares for the potential return of these individuals.