

Looks can be deceiving: Extremism meets paramilitarism in Central and Eastern Europe

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**COUNTER
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) host a variety of paramilitary organisations. Some of these consider themselves anti-systemic, i.e. anti-democratic, anti-liberal, nativist, authoritarian and also, at times, pan-Slavic or pro-Russian (apart from the Ukrainian case).
- They are sometimes an integral part of the far-right political scene (Hungary, Ukraine) or exist largely outside it (Czech Republic, Slovakia) but their members share a lot of views with e.g. the broader Western European far-right or its most aggressive and militant component, the extreme right-wing (XRW).¹
- CEE paramilitary groups are transnationally connected but their connections are directed eastward (i.e. with Russia or Russian groups or individuals). At the same time, the region's far-right radicals and right-wing extremist would be more, albeit not exclusively, oriented towards the West – as is demonstrated during trademark “nationalist” events in CEE – for example, the Independence Day March in Poland or the Day of Honour in Hungary, which attract a wide range of right-wing extremists from Europe and the United States.
- The CEE far-right radicals and right-wing extremists are often perceived as militant, but their organisations are not paramilitary in nature (apart from the Ukrainian case). Their disconnect from the local paramilitary scenes is not the source of their international appeal. The pull factor of these networks and their inspiration for networks in the West mostly stems from the perception among right-wing extremists in the West that CEE is a homogenous, traditional, Christian, “white” region of Europe in which right-wing extremists are allegedly free to “be themselves.”
- At the same time, some Western right-wing extremists have demonstrated that they seek opportunities to gain paramilitary experience and training in the CEE. Such training, however, rarely is conducted with likeminded individuals from the CEE or the region's paramilitaries. It is mostly acquired individually and in a commercial fashion at one of the region's many shooting ranges, clubs or academies. These at times offer sophisticated training options for both local and foreign clients, without stringent know your customer protocols.

1. For more on the “far/extreme/radical right” debate see: Anders Ravik Jupskås and Iris Beau Segers, “What is right-wing extremism?,” C-REX, 31 August 2020, <https://www.sv.uio.no/c-rex/english/groups/compendium/what-is-right-wing-extremism.html>, accessed: 6 May 2021. This report uses the term “far right” while describing the wider nationalist, xenophobe and authoritarian milieu, “extreme right” to describe its most militant and violent element, and “radical right” – its illiberal but not violent, often politically minded elements.

- Two potential developments would constitute a particular worrying threat for policymakers and security authorities:
 - If the Western right-wing extremists were to connect with some of the region's pan-Slavic paramilitaries (e.g. via joint Russian acquaintances). The Czech case of the so-called "Czechoslovak Soldiers" described in this report is the indicative for such a potential development.
 - If the Western right-wing extremists make more concerted use of the sprawling paramilitary infrastructure in Ukraine which, despite external concerns, has so far been geared towards local customers, including members of local right-wing extremist organisations, some with a record of (para)military activities.
- Consequently, the policy recommendations of this report are aimed towards mitigating these two potential threats. They advise a focus and further analysis of the CEE's pan-Slavic and non-governmental paramilitaries and their links to Moscow, advise involving Ukrainian authorities in collecting information about foreigners seeking training there, similar to the already ongoing cooperation between the Ukraine and the United States, and explore the possibility to restrict travel of high-risk violent right-wing extremist individuals in order to bar them from accessing the commercial training infrastructure. Finally, the report suggests exploring the existing Czech legal arrangements that bars paramilitary training for civilians as a potential blueprint for similar legal mechanisms.

INTRODUCTION

This report is the result of the author's work on a variety of endeavours with the Counter Extremism Project (CEP), namely a 2020-21 research project on radical foreign fighters who fought in the war in Ukraine¹ and an ongoing project on the transnational connectivity of the Western extreme right commissioned by the German Federal Foreign Office.² This publication was preceded by CEP's internal round of confidential consultations with experts on the broader far right and right-wing extremists in November of 2020, and a webinar on the "paramilitarism meets extremism" issue in Central-Eastern Europe (CEE) held in April 2021.³

All of these activities demonstrated that during the last decade, the global far right and right-wing extremist milieu — previously dominated by American or Western European influences and organizations — has seen the arrival of new players as well as the development of new arenas or conduits for their activities. These are individuals and networks in the Ukraine and CEE EU Member States.⁴ This report analyses this topic further, focusing on the attraction the CEE region and wider Eastern Europe presents for Western extremists vis-à-vis training, especially paramilitary training, opportunities. It looks at the paramilitary-extremist East-West connections, their nature and strength, and explores whether these go beyond the region and reach Russia, which enjoys a fair degree of popularity amongst the CEE paramilitaries and extremists. While doing so, it challenges some of the commonly held assumptions concerning the region, such as the perception that it constitutes somewhat of a centre for right-wing extremism. As will be shown below, however, looks can be deceiving. Moreover, the report will outline that the existing paramilitary milieu structure often exists largely independent of the local right-wing extremist scene and maintains vibrant Eastern, but not necessarily Western, connections. Finally, the report identifies the sprawling, but privately owned, not ideological oriented paramilitary infrastructure. It is commercially oriented and overseen by the local police forces. Its paramilitaries are not extremists in a strict sense. However, these structures are clearly unwitting potential host of training activities by visiting foreigners, including some right-wing extremists from the West.

The report will focus on several case studies in the following countries: the Czech Republic (and Slovakia), Hungary, Poland and Ukraine. It is based on interviews with members of the right-wing extremist scenes of these countries, local experts on right-wing extremism and/or paramilitarism and on open-source queries. The report concludes with a set of practical policy recommendations on how the potential security risks highlighted in the report could be mitigated.

CZECH REPUBLIC AND SLOVAKIA

PARAMILITARIES LOOKING EASTWARD

Events in April 2021 brought the issue of paramilitarism to public attention in the Czech Republic. The country found itself in a diplomatic spat with Russia after accusing its military intelligence agency, GRU, of organising the bombing of ammunition depots in Vrbětice.⁵ Following mutual expulsions of diplomatic personnel from Prague and Moscow, the Czech Republic's police decided to also move against the local paramilitary scene in general and a group called the Czechoslovak Soldiers in Reserve for Peace (*Českoslovenští vojáci v záloze za mír* or CSRP). According to media reports, this organisation stands accused of sending its members to train in the Donbas region in support of the so-called "separatists."⁶ Since 2016, the Czech Republic's domestic security agency (BIS) has reported that the local paramilitary scene uses contacts with "Russian spies" while turning its members into foreign fighters.⁷ This perceived connection may have been one of the reasons why legal action was brought against the pro-"separatist," and by default pro-Russian, paramilitaries at this particular time. At the same time, since 2020, several cases against individual foreign fighters who returned from Donbas are currently ongoing at different court levels in the Czech Republic. With the initial sentences reaching their final confirmation and are becoming legally binding, the police seem to have decided to arrest the key members of CSRP.⁸

CSRP formed in 2015 as a self-defence, grassroots group that claimed to stand ready to assist the Czech state during "emergencies." The group was led by a former high-level Czech military officer, who stepped down from the army and publicly called NATO a "criminal organisation." The group's alleged motto was the phrase, "we are against war. Our politicians and not Russian soldiers are our enemies." Its members also had a history of threatening local politicians with violence if the Czech Republic was to find itself in a conflict on the side of NATO. The group spoke of an "international elite" or "economic elite" that allegedly promotes the agenda of "representative democracy to further weaken the citizens' freedom and power."⁹ With allegedly 2000 active members in 2015, CSRP may not fit precisely within the definitions of right-wing extremism (or even the broader far right) commonly found in Western publications of this phenomenon. However, the members of the group espoused strong anti-immigrant, nativist and homophobic views, and the group rose to fame during the 2015 migration crisis. The wider milieu in which the group operates defines itself first as pan-Slavic, pro-"peace," and peddles post-communist nostalgia. In this sense, the group formally had relatively little in common with the local "nationalist" scene, with some exceptions – especially related to the Freedom and Direct Democracy (*Svoboda a přímá demokracie* or SPD). The SPD is radical right/libertarian party with 22 members in the Czech parliament.¹⁰ This proximity was demonstrated when some of the prominent members of the SPD were photographed with CSRP leaders.¹¹ However, in the years following 2015, CSRP the group lost its radical appeal and slowly turned dormant, becoming increasingly a collection of paramilitary hobbyists who sought contacts with the Czech security sector on the local level and attempted to organise public awareness or education campaigns.¹²

By 2021, CSRP seemed irrelevant, and so did the other militias/self-defence groups that appeared around 2015. One issue, however, seemed unusual. This relates to one particular member of CSRP. This individual fought in Donbas and subsequently returned home. However, compared to some of his “colleagues” whose cases were progressing through the courts,¹³ he did not face any legal sanctions for his actions during the conflict in Ukraine.¹⁴ Interestingly, this individual was amongst the CSRP members arrested in April 2021, during the diplomatic spat with Russia. At the same time, another arrestee in April 2021 was an Orthodox priest from a town close to the German border, who jokingly referred to himself as a “Kremlin agent,” and allegedly sent money to Czech fighters in Donbas.¹⁵ While his brazen behaviour may have contributed to his recent arrest, his case could also be revealing for a different reason. The Czech-German border region had been in the news for reasons related to topics at the intersection of extremism and paramilitarism/paramilitary training. According to media reports, different German XRW individuals travelled to shooting ranges in the area to hone their skills.¹⁶ If such activity was to be connected with locally operating Czech paramilitaries, with some potential connections to Russia – as is allegedly the case with CSRP – this would constitute a clear threat, indicating a truly transnational extremist arc, binding Western European extremists and Central-Eastern European paramilitaries with connections to Russia.¹⁷

EXTREMISTS LOOKING WESTWARDS

The members of the German branch of Combat 18 indeed have a documented history of training and purchasing munitions in the Czech Republic.¹⁸ Furthermore, the so-called Gruppe S, allegedly a German terrorist organisation, planning Christchurch-style attacks on Muslims in Germany, reportedly attempted to purchase weapons in the Czech Republic.¹⁹ These relatively new connections, however, are not the only ties that bind the extremist scenes of the Czech Republic and Germany. Reports indicate that German extremists took part in anti-Roma demonstrations in the Czech Republic more than a decade before the arrest of the members of Gruppe S.²⁰ In addition, according to a Czech expert on the extremism scene, German extremists have attended historic re-enactment events in the Czech Republic, as well as “sporting days” organised locally and may have used these as a cover for training with their likeminded Czech colleagues.²¹

Apart from the (attempted) arms purchases or training, the German-Czech extremist relations also have a longer history. For examples, reports outline that German extremist groups, such as Freies Netz Süd was involved at building trans-border connections at the beginning of the previous decade.²² Such contacts, and exchanges, are not unusual since the Czech, and to a lesser extent Slovak, far-right or right-wing extremist scenes have a long tradition of “looking up” to their German counterparts and adopted “importation of concepts, such as leaderless resistance” from their German counterparts.²³

In this sense, a connection between e.g. XRW individuals based in Germany and their Czech counterparts was almost natural, especially in the light of what they define to be their “common enemies,” such as the Roma or refugees and immigrants.²⁴ Furthermore, the Czech Republic

has long been perceived as a country “with far less restrictive gun control policies than these of the majority of EU Member States,”²⁵ and a country in which it is allegedly possible to almost take a gun off a supermarket shelf. Paradoxically, the efforts of Anders Breivik, who failed to actually obtain guns while shopping for firearms in Prague before his infamous attacks, did not significantly change this inaccurate perception of the Czech Republic,²⁶ in the minds of many right-wing extremists. This perception is likely also influenced by the fact that “historically the former Czechoslovakia was a world leader in the production and export of armaments.”²⁷

IT IS NOT THE GUNS

In fact, the problem lies not in the access to guns but the freely available paramilitary infrastructure in the country. There are around 200 commercial shooting ranges in the Czech Republic. In comparison, Poland, which has a 3.5 times larger population hosts only 125, despite that it experienced its own paramilitary boom in the last few years.²⁸ Based on current law, the Czech shooting ranges can allow gun owners to technically entrust their guns to others. The conditions are that these other individuals have passed the relevant training and are under the gun owner’s constant supervision, ensuring that the guns are not handled against the required conditions. The owner of the weapon shall also ensure that the person does not handle the weapon in violation of the Weapons Act.²⁹

This infrastructure exists independently of the networks of Czech extremists or paramilitaries and should not be necessarily seen as an enabler for either of the two groups or their alleged foreign “guests.” The Czech Republic indeed tops the regional chart as far gun ownership by civilians is concerned (12.5 per 100 persons compared to 2.5 for Poland, 6.5 for Slovakia and 10.5 for Hungary). However, the Czech Republic still falls behind other European countries such as Germany or France (both at 19.6 per 100 persons).³⁰ Nevertheless, the Czech Republic still suffers from the reputation (just like Slovakia) of a place in which one can allegedly easily purchase deactivated (but also active – on the black market)³¹ arms, and ammunition. These were sold – among other outlets – by the state itself throughout 1990s (both before the emergence of Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1993 and afterwards) when the country had been effectively demobilising its military resources immediately after the end of the Cold War.³² Slovakia responded to criticisms of its allegedly lax laws in this sphere in 2015. The new law stipulated that foreigners are no longer able to purchase weapons solely on the basis of an ID card. However, some of the guns in question allegedly rapidly changed hands immediately prior to the new law’s enactment and subsequently may have potentially been available on the black market.³³

The Czech Republic demands a special arms consignment note issued by the local police. The note is also only provided to individuals who are able to prove they have been authorized to import weapons by their host country, if a foreigner wishes to obtain such weapons. Moreover, after January 2021, the Czech Republic requires individuals with permanent residence in the country to register a purchase of a deactivated weapon with the police,³⁴ which has a track record of intercepting criminals returning from Slovakia with such newly acquired weapons.³⁵ Additionally, the Czech Republic also took action to counter the threat from

paramilitary groups. In early 2021, parliament voted through a bill which “banned armed groups,” described as “armed, paramilitary in nature [...] intended for the armed pursuit of goals based on political, religious or other ideologies, [handling] weapons, [seeking] to gain access to weapons, or [organising] people who possess/handle weapons.”³⁶ In effect, this dictated the end of Czech paramilitary groups, which by 2020 had already been in decline. Already for several years, these groups had failed to rejuvenate the 2015 enthusiasm for their anti-immigrant vigilantism and attempts to infiltrate other “outdoor” groups, such as the proponents of survival activities to widen their influence. Nevertheless, they retain some visibility. For example, in 2020, the remnants of the paramilitary group National Militia (*Národná domobrana*) took part in demonstrations protesting against COVID-19 restrictions in the Czech Republic.³⁷

SLOVAKIA

Despite differences between various paramilitary organisations, their mere existence, and professed anti-state character, was seen by some experts as a marked difference between the Czech Republic and Slovakia vis-à-vis the intersection of paramilitarism and extremism.³⁸ According to some experts, paramilitary networks in the Czech Republic offer a – albeit remote – possibility of a varied extremist local market connecting with Western extremists on paramilitary issues. On the other hand, experts assess that the paramilitary structures in Slovakia, with allegedly far weaker anti-state structures, can only cater to the needs of foreign visitors at commercial shooting ranges or clubs. A case in point is the perpetrator of the shootings in Hanau, Germany in 2020 who killed ten people.³⁹ Apparently, he was able to obtain paramilitary training in Slovakia. However, according to media reports, he was not connected to his ideological Slovak counterparts and his training was a purely commercial transaction.⁴⁰

This does not mean, however, that similar to the Czech Republic, pan-Slavic, pro-Russian, anti-liberal and anti-Western paramilitary organisations like the Slovak Conscripts (*Slovenskí branci*) do not continue to operate in the country. Their members, like the “militia” members in the Czech Republic have a track record of attempting to ingratiate themselves with the security authorities by offering and running paramilitary training in local schools and participating in disaster relief efforts.⁴¹

Furthermore, Slovak paramilitaries also trained at a paramilitary camp run by a Slovak member of the Night Wolves, a Russian motorcycle club, known for its pro-Moscow political stance and its role in supporting the annexation of Crimea.⁴² Members of the Slovak Conscripts attended paramilitary training in Russia,⁴³ and one of its former members joined the pro-“separatist” forces in the war in Ukraine.⁴⁴ This is an indication that also the Slovak paramilitary milieu which professes anti-state, if not radical or extremist, has stronger transnational connections to Russia than to extreme-right wing networks in Western Europe. At the same time, as was the case of the perpetrator of the attack in Hanau, commercial training activities do exist in Slovakia and might occur in parallel and/or regardless of the local paramilitary/extremist scene,⁴⁵ as it is generally the case in the whole of Central-Eastern Europe. Given the allegedly

lax security procedures at potential training venues, cases like that of the Hanau shooter might fall through the cracks amidst of dozens, if not hundreds, of clients of the shooting ranges, clubs or “academies” that do not pose a security risk.

HUNGARY – PARAMILITARIES WITHOUT VIOLENCE

The emergence of the political party Jobbik, which at its peak won more than 20% of votes in the Hungarian parliamentary election, seemed like a perfect example of a successful far-right milieu in 21st century Europe. Nicknamed “a far-right for the Facebook generation,”⁴⁶ it also maintained a paramilitary arm, *Magyar Gárda* (Hungarian Guard). Jobbik skilfully utilised paramilitarism and its guard, styled as a Hungarian version of the U.S. National Guard, to create a brand appealing to the younger generation and as a tool to attract and recruit new members to the party’s ranks. A subsequent court ban on the Guard did not hamper the activities of other, more militant, far-right organisations of which many are still in existence today. The broader far-right milieu in the country styled itself along a paramilitary look, promoted issues such as building bridges to Hungarian communities in neighbouring countries and at times acted on these. This significantly limited its ability to win friends abroad.⁴⁷

More extreme elements, which emerged in 2018 to form *Legio Hungaria* (LH), had more success with attracting international contacts. This was particularly the case for events that it created, such as its Day of Honour, i.e. the commemoration of the attempted breakout of German and Hungarian forces from Buda in February 1945, at that time encircled by the Red Army.⁴⁸ Subsequently, LH was able to connect and invite speakers to Budapest from the so-called Russian Centre, functioning within the broader Azov movement in Ukraine.⁴⁹ Most surprisingly, LH also hosted a delegation of the far-right Ukrainian *Karpatska Sich* (Carpathian Sich or KS) in Hungary. This was no small feat given the political tensions between Kyiv and Budapest over the fate and status of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine.⁵⁰ At the same time, the Day of Honour attracted likeminded individuals from Germany, Czech Republic, France, Bulgaria, Sweden and Russia. The linkages were described by members of the LH as a “kind of a diplomatic custom for them to invite us too, and we invite them to these events as well.” Simultaneously, LH was keen on “experiences” of their counterparts, such as their German guests in their everyday “nationalist” activities.⁵¹

Hungary’s broader far right and its right-wing extremist milieus, allegedly vibrant, militant and internationally relevant, had in fact been ambushed by the conservative Hungarian government. After 2010, the government “has taken a number of topics and messages from the far right from the very beginning (e.g. in the fields of cultural and remembrance politics, economic and social policies and in foreign politics).” The uncompromising anti-migrant stance taken by the Hungarian government in 2015 pushed the broader far right as well as its right-wing extremist elements into an enviable position in which the government sought “[to control] the entire political right to rule over its topics and keep its actors in check.”⁵² Simultaneously, the government’s turn towards Russia in its foreign policy robbed the pro-Kremlin far right in

the country of another raison d'être as it had previously been the country's leading pro-Russian voice. As Jobbik, its formerly main proponent, was rebranding itself as a more centrist political force (in response to the governments far-right turn), the milieu carried on and provoked cultural wars in Hungary from which the conservative government could prosper.⁵³ This, however, does not mean that the XRW political violence would be tolerated. This was especially the case after the 2016 scandal which saw a member of the paramilitary group Hungarian National Front, whose members trained with the Russian GRU operatives, shot a policeman.⁵⁴ From 2016 onwards, the Hungarian far right continued to be dominated by paramilitaries. These entities, however, had no chance to practice violence.

As was observed elsewhere, "one unique segment of the Hungarian far-right scene is the community of activists who live here or visit the country often." These, however, "do not involve themselves in the lives of Hungarian far-right organisations, and use the country solely as a physical base," for example in order to establish publishing houses in Hungary.⁵⁵ In short, their activities are aimed at non-Hungarian organisations, although they would be attending "nationalist" but not paramilitary events in the country.⁵⁶ These individuals might see Hungary as their true Shangri-la to some extent since their views are part of the mainstream there. Hungary is a predominantly conservative, culturally, ethnically and racially homogenous, and the government espouses anti-globalist, illiberal views similar to the views held by many right-wing extremists. Finally, Budapest is relatively cheap and well connected to the West from which they hail.⁵⁷ Problems arise, however, when such expats take a more direct approach towards Hungarian politics. One such case involved James Dowson and Nick Griffin of the extreme right-wing group Knights Templar International (KTI). This group had raised funds for far right and extreme right-wing organisations in the region, including more paramilitary-oriented Bulgarian border vigilantes. Consequently, KTI was gaining influence over some of the regional groups. Such activities were viewed as a national security threat by Hungary's Counter Terrorism Centre and, upon its advisory, the two aforementioned individuals were expelled from Hungary.⁵⁸ Therefore, Hungary is not as welcoming to the Western far right and right-wing extremists as many foreign extremists assume. Furthermore, it is very likely that external connections related to violence and paramilitaries would constitute an immediate red flag for the Hungarian authorities and compel it to act.

"A BUNCH OF PACIFISTS?" POLAND'S FAR-RIGHT AND PARAMILITARISM

INTRODUCTION

After 2015, Poland's far right political turn received significant international coverage. One media report stated that "60,000 nationalists march[ed] on Poland's Independence Day [...for] white Europe."⁵⁹ Such hyperbole in the media, notwithstanding, the local, multi-dimensional and metastasising broader far-right and XRW scene is complex. Poland's far-right and right-wing extremism milieu as well as its paramilitarism and radical right parliamentary politics are often discussed as emanating from the same source,⁶⁰ but these are three distinct phenomena.

These areas sometimes overlap but have not been successful in morphing into a militant behemoth capable of attracting like-minded proponents of violence from abroad. This is not to suggest that the Polish far right or its right-wing extremists lack vibrancy or a potent political infrastructure nor that it has failed to gain recognition by its foreign counterparts, who visit the country and forge contacts with Polish comrades. However, such connections tend to be more ideological and less violent militant in nature.⁶¹ At the same time, however, just like in Poland's Eastern or Southern neighbours, a range of private companies stand ready to provide paramilitary training to foreigners, provided appropriate remuneration.

NO SHANGRI-LA?

Seen from outside, the period of 2014-15 could be, theoretically, seen as a watershed moment for Poland's far right. Firstly, Poland saw the migration crisis and the rejection of the "refugee quotas," alongside its Central European neighbours. This cemented the reputation of the "Eastern" EU members' as rigidly right wing on migration issues.⁶² Secondly, the arrival of a new conservative government, which allegedly steered the country radically to the right, seemed to have established another Central European champion of traditional values alongside Viktor Orban's Hungary.⁶³ Thirdly, the country experienced a boom of paramilitary activities since the start of the conflict in the Ukraine in 2014.⁶⁴ Consequently, the Polish state attempted to harness the growing interest in paramilitarism in order to create its own territorial defence troops (*Wojska Obrony Terytorialnej* or WOT).⁶⁵ As this process unfolded, some expressed unease with the controversial (i.e. politicised), "paramilitaries,"⁶⁶ especially as the government was allegedly being dominated by a far-right party.⁶⁷ Fourthly, images of the aforementioned Independence Day celebrations, which after 2015 "attracted radicals from the whole of Europe,"⁶⁸ completed a worrying storm of far-right imagery emanating from Poland. It might have seemed as if the country was becoming a far-right, or worse, a right-wing extremist Shangri-la in which radicals of the world could finally be themselves.⁶⁹ However, this does not adequately reflect the situation in the country, in particular as far as the intersection of paramilitarism and extremism is concerned.

In fact, the Polish far right in general, and the right-wing extremist scene in particular, is vibrant and metastasizing but did not simply emerge as a reaction to the 2015 migration crisis. Its rise, as well as its internal quarrels and fragmentation, preceded that crisis as did the growth of its trademark *Marsz Niepodległości* (Independence Day or MN).⁷⁰ Furthermore, its militants continuously oppose any alliance with the conservative government.⁷¹ They also do not agree to further mainstream its signature event, the MN.⁷² In parallel, those elements that entered mainstream politics experienced electoral success when running against the established right in 2019.⁷³

Alongside these developments, the country witnessed a spectacular paramilitary boom as part of a grassroots reaction to the conflict in neighbouring Ukraine. This conflict fed genuine fears of Russian aggression via a so-called hybrid war.⁷⁴ Surprisingly, this boom happened largely without the far right. Several members and former members of Polish far-right organizations characterized this boom in the following manner: "it was in the mainstream," and "it was for

hobbyists, not for ideologues or politicians, not for us.” Some of these members admitted to participating in activities such as visiting shooting ranges, “running around the woods with an air gun.” However, according to them this was the full extent of paramilitary activities of members from the far right and right-wing extremist milieu in Poland. Several experts and researchers covering the extreme right in Poland confirmed this characterisation. They explained that the milieu might be militant in tone and at times prone to violent actions, but it falls well short of paramilitarism.⁷⁵ Interestingly, the majority of the Polish far-right extremists sided with Russia during the conflict in the Ukraine. However, even the few pro-Ukraine nationalists in the milieu indicated that “if one was to look for paramilitarism on the nationalist [far right] scene then they would have to visit Ukraine, and not our country [Poland...] They are real militants, in comparison to them – we are a bunch of pacifists.”⁷⁶

Lastly, the boom was spurred by the Russian aggression in Eastern Ukraine, and the milieu was not in tune with the popular feelings in Poland, which were critical of Russia. However, the militantly geared activists of the milieu,⁷⁷ or the similarly dressed members of National-Radical Camp (*Obóz Narodowo-Radykalny* or ONR) that marched in rows and flew their so-called “falanga flag,”⁷⁸ conveyed a completely different message to outsiders.⁷⁹

POLAND FAR-RIGHT’S PARAMILITARISM AND THE INTERNATIONAL ANGLE

As was shown, the Polish far right in general and its extremists in particular dabbled in paramilitarism. However, this has hardly been its *spécialité de la maison* when connecting with likeminded individuals and networks from abroad. Poland’s Falanga party, led by an individual hailing from a military family, allegedly had a “militaristic tone” and its members were keen on more than “just walking around mountains and sleeping in tents. We felt we should have trained with replica guns, acquaint ourselves with military and guerrilla tactics.”⁸⁰ The organisation successfully infiltrated the Kraków chapter of the legally functioning (re-established in 1990) *Strzelec’s* (Rifleman), pro-defence paramilitary and patriotic organisation.⁸¹ Its members also ran “anti-Banderite” (i.e. anti-Ukrainian nationalist) patrols in the Polish Bieszczady mountains, situated on the Polish-Ukrainian border, allegedly to help intercept “illegal migrants or [Ukrainian] militants.”⁸² These patrols were largely a source of ridicule from the scene’s observers.⁸³ However, Kraków’s Falanga members subsequently escalated their militant adventurism to a new, transnational level. In 2018, some of them, allegedly acting after receiving financial inducements from Manuel Ochseneiter, a worker of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party, firebombed a Hungarian cultural centre in Western Ukraine.⁸⁴ This act further inflamed tensions between Kyiv and Budapest as the perpetrators attempted to attribute the attacks to the Ukrainian far right. Falanga’s leader refuted accusations that the party behind the attack and condemned the members involved in it. Nevertheless, it was undeniable that his party had known Manuel Ochseneiter, the editor-in-chief of the German *ZUERST!* magazine, who had allegedly paid for the attack, for years. In 2015, Falanga’s *Xportal.pl* had already interviewed Ochseneiter.⁸⁵ Moreover, Ochseneiter also launched a “geopolitical” podcast with Mateusz Piskorski.⁸⁶ Piskorski is a former parliamentarian and the leader of the pro-Russian *Zmiana* (Change) party. He is a self-confessed organiser of “potentially all [of Poland’s] pro-Russian circles.”⁸⁷ The *Zmiana* party in turn counted Falanga members among

in its ranks, therefore completing the full circle of paramilitarism, extremism, infiltration, pro-Russian sentiment, and support from Western networks in this case.

Another Polish right-wing extremist organisation, with simultaneous international and paramilitary orientations, has been the National Rebirth of Poland (*Narodowe Odrodzenie Polski* or NOP). One unique characteristic of NOP was its long-standing objective of boosting its international activities and outreach while joining “extremist internationals” such as International Third Position (ITP) or the European National Front (ENF).⁸⁸ Contacts with right-wing extremist parties such as the German NPD were allegedly forged on the back of NOP’s “European euphoria,” and its intention to become a part of a “nationalist international.” The party was said to have developed “unrivalled” range of international links, including with likeminded counterparts in Romania, Germany, England, Czech Republic and Slovakia. The aim was to cooperate in forging a “European national revolutionary” front.⁸⁹ Public acknowledgments from David Duke of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK)⁹⁰ and visits from Britain’s National Action, later proscribed in the UK,⁹¹ or Nick Griffin from the British National Party followed.⁹² At the same time, with some senior members of NOP leaving as economic migrants to the UK, the party became a fixture on the British right-wing extremist scene. Reports indicate that some of its members participated in paramilitary trainings (the so-called Sigurd Camp) in the UK with some of their British contacts, namely the New Dawn, a coalition supporting Greece’s Golden Dawn party, once a role model for many right-wing extremists in Europe.⁹³

Between 1999 and the early 2010s, NOP organised its annual summer camp called “Cross and Sword” and hosted some of the European “third position” luminaries, such as Derek Holland, and “other representatives of nationalist movements from Europe.”⁹⁴ In reality, however, the camp – an annual meeting for the members of the party – had more in common with a survivalist-sporting outing and was not necessarily an outright paramilitary event. Nevertheless, it also featured shooting competitions and discussions on topics such as “how to become a political soldier.”⁹⁵ The party hired a camping site in the Polish Table Mountains and the camp would fly a “Falanga” flag. The camp attracted up to 70 people each year and featured foreign participants from Romania, Czech Republic or Germany. In the words of an early organiser, the camps were more about “drinking [...] walking tours, shooting with a paintball gun, plus a bonfire [...]”⁹⁶ The establishment of the summer camp followed on from a longer tradition. Throughout the 1990s, prior to the establishment of the summer camp members of the NOP and international contacts of the group from Russia, the UK, Slovakia, France and Italy, including members of Blood and Honour, attended more selective and paramilitary trainings in the same Table Mountains.⁹⁷

The summer camp idea was picked up by other organisations such as the ONR. This group took its activities, aimed at “increasing one’s level of fitness [...] and] integration of nationalist milieu,” across the border into the Western Tatra mountains in Slovakia. These ONR trainings also allowed the group to strengthen its contacts to its Slovak counterparts.⁹⁸

Such camps, however, cannot be characterised as proper paramilitary training activities. One expert explained that these camps aimed at fostering team spirit and integration into nationalist ranks, a chance for a cheap holiday with likeminded individuals.⁹⁹ One example of this is *Projekt Wypad* (Project Outing), an initiative that allowed “angry youth [...] mired in the materialistic world [...] is looking for any way to actively and interestingly spend its free time, far from the big city buzz [...]”¹⁰⁰

PARAMILITARY BOOM MEETS FOREIGNERS

As was shown, the Polish broader far right and right-wing extremist milieu, albeit militant in tone and appearance and with far reaching transnational connections, has not been a major source of paramilitary expertise for its foreign counterparts. At the same time, members or veterans of the foreign XRW milieus sought – and in some cases – received paramilitary training in Poland in recent years. Thus, the primary issue concerns the source of this training. As it has become clear, such training does not appear to have been provided along ideological lines but was provided from a commercially oriented paramilitary training infrastructure. The biggest controversy connected to such a training was the case of the Poland’s European Security Academy (ESA). ESA “provided sophisticated training geared towards combat application to elements of Ukraine’s controversial Azov Regiment, also known as the Azov Battalion.”¹⁰¹ This case created a lot of public controversy internationally. Some observers defended ESA, claiming that “a handful of soldiers from the Azov Regiment who were transitioning from the military to private contracting took a couple of training courses. Hardly a big deal.”¹⁰² At the same time, ESA’s founder promised to “close the gaps in the recruitment procedure as there is no place for neo-Nazis.” According to him, this situation, which involved a number of Azov affiliated individuals participating in a series of different courses between 2015 and 2017, was due to the “sloppiness of our Ukrainian partners.”¹⁰³ Potentially, another similar controversy might have arisen in 2019 when Poland expelled Anton T. He was one of the members of the Nordic Resistance Movement (NRM) who trained in Russian Imperial Movement’s Partizan camp. Subsequently, these individuals, including Anton T., were involved in a spate of bombings in Sweden in 2015 and 2016. Reportedly, in 2019, Anton T. visited Poland to receive further paramilitary training, presumably with a private provider.¹⁰⁴ Since he had a prior criminal record, he was intercepted by the Polish security forces and extradited from the country.

These incidents clearly demonstrate that these individuals found Poland attractive as a destination for their paramilitary training. This was the case either due to their “professional” careers, as in the case of the Azov veterans, or their militant activism, as was presumably the case with the Swedish NRM. It is likely that their main objective was to utilise the country’s growing paramilitary infrastructure, which mushroomed after the paramilitary boom.¹⁰⁵ This private, commercially oriented infrastructure combined with broader access to semi-automatic weapons at some of these ranges or clubs provides for an attractive environment for paramilitary enthusiasts as well as, potentially, foreign extremists. This professional training infrastructure allows clients to hone their shooting or tactical skills. As was shown, elements of this exist also in other neighbouring countries and seem to be on offer to most of the foreigners

as the local providers “do not have the technical capacities or legal authority to verify whether someone presents a valid ID.”¹⁰⁶ If, as is the case in certain such establishments, all is needed to gain access to such training are self-signed declarations on one’s lack of criminal record and unproblematic health condition, then it should not be surprising that almost any foreign clients are able to gain access to such training – as was the case with the Hanau shooter described within the Slovak section.

UKRAINE – INTERNALLY FOCUSED PARAMILITARY FAR-RIGHT?

During this research, members of the CEE “nationalist” (as they would call themselves) or far right and right-wing extremist milieus repeatedly compared their alleged “pacifism” to the attitudes of their Ukrainian counterparts (see: the Polish case above). Moreover, far-right and right-wing extremist experts from the CEE region stressed that the local self-defence/militia/paramilitary groups are no magnet for ideologically (i.e. far-right or right-wing extremist) minded Westerners. However, they would admit that “their” (i.e. Czech, Hungarian, Polish or Slovak) far-right and right-wing extremist milieus had been an attraction for Westerners extremists in the past. Nevertheless, according to the assessment of these observes, this attraction shifted to the Ukraine after 2014.

Nowadays, if one is looking for a European broader far-right and especially right-wing extremist milieu with a paramilitary structure, Ukraine is an obvious choice. The local right-wing extremist scene is full of individuals with war experience and veterans¹⁰⁷ who “made their names during the war and its experience is central to who they are. This is key, fundamental, it is their social capital, image but also identity.”¹⁰⁸ They moulded the local scene and, until now, make up its leadership and are its most influential voices. Far-right, or more specifically, right-wing extremist organisations in the country are still run along military lines, including entities such as (general) staff openly operate paramilitary arms.¹⁰⁹ Their members, many of which are war veterans, are often grouped in quasi or informal NGOs. Since private military companies (PMCs) are illegal in Ukraine, these quasi NGOs are involved in paramilitary training and lobby for the creation of Ukraine’s Territorial Defence, similar to forces existing in other CEE countries (e.g. Poland) or the Baltic states.¹¹⁰ The country’s far right sees this entity as a potentially great outlet for further recruitment and a chance to effectively run or maintain a major influence, via embedded members as well as government-run and -sponsored structures – in this case, paramilitary in nature.¹¹¹ Many members of the Ukrainian XRW networks are already engaged in paramilitary activities and consequently perceive themselves as perfect candidates, to help “professionalise” this proposed volunteer force. This attitude was openly displayed on 10 April 2021 when the National Corps, the political arm of the Azov movement, held an “open military event – Let’s Defend Ukraine,” i.e. joint training for “representatives of veterans’ and patriotic organizations, as well as owners of weapons.”¹¹²

Experts pointed out that members of Ukraine's XRW organisations profess "readiness to fight in the streets,"¹¹³ are no strangers to martial arts trainings,¹¹⁴ and run survival/paramilitary summer camps.¹¹⁵ Therefore, one could argue that the milieu possesses vast experience in the development and maintenance of advanced paramilitary structures and consequently would be able to transfer these skills also to others. Furthermore, members of this milieu have also access to a well-developed commercially oriented paramilitary training infrastructure in the country. This commercial structure caters to growing numbers of paying customers, including companies purchasing training for their staff. Friendly combat clubs or "academies," or shooting ranges, often founded by war veterans themselves, also act as venues for such training. Moreover, some veterans, with varying degrees of connections to the existing XRW networks, have set up NGOs that imitate PMCs.

Some observers highlighted that these overlapping structures are at the centre of the current internal security challenges that Ukraine is facing. These structures are not primarily, as is often perceived in the West, externally focused or aimed at winning friends abroad and attracting them to train in the sprawling paramilitary infrastructure.¹¹⁶ They are primarily internally focused with different companies, groups or NGOs staffed with war veterans of "nationalistic" convictions available for hire as a political or business muscle,¹¹⁷ undermining the government's monopoly on violence. Some experts describe such entities as newly minted *titushki*, effectively thugs for hire, a phenomenon long present in Ukrainian socio-political reality,¹¹⁸ albeit in recent years developing in a more "civilised" and "professional" manner.¹¹⁹ Ukraine is currently rocked by a scandal involving the arrest of a former volunteer battalion commander who fought during the conflict in the Donbas region. He subsequently was elected to the Ukrainian parliament. This individual is charged with leading a PMC, which is illegal in the Ukraine. The employees of this PMC are alleged to have effectively become "a paramilitary formation" in the service of one of Ukraine's oligarchs.¹²⁰ Interestingly, the PMC employees allegedly also received training in the Polish ESA, mentioned above.¹²¹

According to such assessments, former networks of young, masked and track suit-clad thugs have now been replaced by more disciplined veterans/paramilitaries, often wearing tactical gear, which provide "special" services to paying clients. No foreign input is needed or to some extent, appreciated, to perform such services locally in Ukraine. Such activities are happening in parallel to outright political violence perpetrated by the country's far-right and right-wing extremist groups, such as the attack on a pro-Russia party HQ in Kyiv¹²² or attacks on ideological opponents, minorities, etc.¹²³ This does not mean that that elements of the country's far-right and right-wing extremist networks are not interested in forging militant or paramilitary connections across borders. For example, Tradition and Order (TO), an associate of the Azov movement, boasts that it maintains a branch in Germany and admits to "sharing expertise" with likeminded individuals from Germany and other countries.¹²⁴ Some of the movement's observers, however, are not convinced of TO's paramilitary potency as the ranks of its German branch are said not to be numerous.¹²⁵

Moreover, as Western observers concentrate on the better known and larger Azov movement, they risk missing relevant potential links amongst smaller Ukrainian organisations, such as the *Karpatska Sich* (Carpathian Sich or KS). Prior to the late 18th century, the city of Sich was an administrative and political centre of the Zaporozhian Cossacks. It is located in Central-Eastern Ukraine. In previous years, KS has staged “Radical Alliance/European Brotherhood” marches in Western Ukrainian city of Uzhorod to commemorate the short-lived (1938-1939) statelet of Carpatho-Ukraine (1938-1939). During these marches, KS was joined by representatives of Serbian and Hungarian likeminded organisations.¹²⁶ This is significant since any alliance, especially with a “nationalist” Hungarian organisation, would be unthinkable until recently. The onset of the “modern day” far-right and right-wing extremist scene, which focuses on shared ideas “against liberalism, separatism, the “Russian world,” the EU, capitalism, chauvinism, perversion and the left facilitated this wider cooperation. Consequently, KS marches featured “a new [...] generation of conscious Nationalist warriors [who] were marching for race, tradition, the memory of our glorious heroes, nation and brotherhood.”¹²⁷ KS also organised summer camps which attracted the group’s foreign associates/members.¹²⁸ In 2019, KS advertised on its Telegram channel a “military-tactical training” with the members of the “brotherly European movement.”¹²⁹ Such a development, if repeated and made permanent, should be of concern for authorities in Central-Eastern Europe.¹³⁰ KS seems to be dedicating significant efforts in this regard. This enables foreign extremists to bond with their Ukrainian counterparts both in a political as well as in a paramilitary sense. These connections are a potential security risk since foreign militants and extremists can take advantage of the paramilitary experience of their Ukrainian hosts, which honed their skills during the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. In addition, such connections can also spill westward. For example, KS attends the Day of Honour celebrations in Hungary, a central event for far-right militants and right-wing extremists from a range of countries, including representatives of German right-wing extremist organisations.¹³¹

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report argued that the CEE is not necessarily a Shangri-la for Western far-right militants or right-wing extremists. This also relates to the issue of paramilitary activities. A very well-developed paramilitary training infrastructure is available in the region. However, this infrastructure is commercially oriented and not controlled by local radicals whose militancy is often overestimated (Poland) or hampered by the government (Hungary). Furthermore, several leading paramilitary players are government affiliated and controlled (Poland) or seemingly ideologically at odds with the Western XRW scene (Czech Republic and Slovakia).

Consequently, Western radicals who attempt to utilize this infrastructure for their purposes, such as the Hanau shooter, do not involve themselves in the intricacies of the regional extremism-paramilitarism axis. They tend to obtain their training privately, potentially under false names, most likely skipping the scant security protocols that these privately run training facilities employ.

Therefore, two major security concerns arise for Western security authorities. The first is the potential connection between Western right-wing extremists with likeminded CEE paramilitaries. Although CEE paramilitaries deny that their orientation is far right or right-wing extremist, they nevertheless share many ideological stances with Western radicals. This ideological proximity can allow for closer cooperation in the future. Furthermore, CEE paramilitaries have established connections to Russia that are similar to some parts of the Western right-wing extremist scene. These shared eastward looking networks can be strengthened at any point.

The second concern is the risk that Western right-wing extremists obtain paramilitary training through Ukrainian networks and training facilities. Although these Ukrainian training networks are currently more internally focused, their commercial orientation also allows for the training of foreigners. Consequently, the current situation can develop into a major security threat for Western security authorities. The possibility of a truly transnational and paramilitary XRW arch stretching from Moscow via CEE into the heart of Western Europe is not unthinkable.

The following four recommendations aim to mitigate the two concerns outlined above and reduce the risk of the development of a transregional extremist-paramilitary axis.

- 1) Look East to look West. It is important to further study and assess the professedly anti-Western, anti-liberal, pan-Slavic paramilitary/militia/self-defence non-state groups operating in CEE. One particular focus should be on analysing their level of transnational connectivity in two directions. On the one hand their connectivity to Western European right-wing extremist networks, groups and individuals should be better understood. On the other hand, in order to assess the risks that these networks pose, it is also crucial to assess their connections to Russian networks groups and organizations. In this regard, both westward as well as eastward transnational connections are relevant. Even if direct

connections to Western European right-wing extremist networks are not strong, shared connections to Russian networks can still act as a facilitating factor connecting Western European violent right-wing extremists to paramilitary structures in neighbouring states (e.g. Czech Republic).

- 2) Impress upon the Ukrainian authorities the concern that the country's growing paramilitary training infrastructure can be misused by violent right-wing extremists from Western Europe. As dismantlement of this infrastructure would be political costly for Kyiv at this point, Ukrainian authorities could be asked to collect and collate information concerning the training of foreigners in these facilities and transfer this information to the respective authorities in the country of origin of the trainees. In particular, this should be the case for foreign radicals connecting with their ideological counterparts in the Ukraine while training. The Ukrainian security authorities have responded positively to similar calls from U.S. authorities and established an effective cooperation mechanism. As a result of this cooperation, Ukraine expelled individuals who attempted to set up a local chapter of the Atomwaffen Division. A similar cooperation should be established with EU security authorities, especially in the light of the EU's assistance to Ukraine.
- 3) In addition to attempting to designate extremist or paramilitary partners of Western European extremists or paramilitaries as terrorist organisations or introducing bans of their foreign organisations in the EU, authorities could as a first step ban travel into the Schengen zone of the leaders of these "enabling," non-EU outfits and freeze their assets.
- 4) Assess whether the Czech "anti-paramilitary" law, which bans groups intent on arming themselves regardless of their ideology, could be a model for legislative frameworks of other EU Member States. This could enhance efforts of those governments wishing to control the non-state element of the paramilitary phenomenon within their jurisdiction.

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125. Author's interview with Michael Colborne, a journalist who is preparing a book on the Azov movement, 10 May 2021.
126. See: https://t.me/karpatska_sich/1991 for the announcement of the march on the group's telegram channel of 6 April 2019, accessed: 28 April 2021.
127. See: https://vk.com/wall-74692354_2755, 23 March 2017, no longer active VK profile of "Reconquista Europe," a Ukraine based outfit in support of a transnational far right alliance, accessed: 28 April 2021.
128. See: <https://www.foiaresearch.net/person/bjorn-sigvald>, accessed: 28 April 2021 for photos from such a camp featuring a Swiss alleged KS member.
129. The issue was discovered by Oleksyi Kuzmenko, see: <https://twitter.com/kooleksiy/status/1385690583570788356>, accessed: 28 April 2021.
130. As noted by Christopher Miller, currently *BuzzFeed News* national security correspondent, who spent 11 years in Ukraine, different "Ukrainian far-right paramilitary groups" advertise, "on an almost daily basis," public training sessions. On 17 May one was said to have published such a call, in Ukrainian – which limits the number of potential foreign recipients of the call, with a googledocs form to fill out. See: <https://twitter.com/ChristopherJM/status/1394751158455967747?s=20>, accessed: 19 May 2021.
131. Kacper Rekawek, Alexander Ritzmann, Hans Jakob Schindler, *Violent Right-Wing Extremism and Terrorism – Transnational Connectivity, Definitions, Incidents, Structures and Countermeasures*, Berlin: Counter Extremism Project, November 2020, https://www.counterextremism.com/sites/default/files/CEP_Study_Violent_Right-Wing_Extremism_and_Terrorism_Nov_2020.pdf, accessed: 9 February 2021, p. 16.