



The war in Ukraine through far-right and jihadist lenses

European View
2022, Vol. 21 (2) 163–170
© The Author(s) 2022
DOI: 10.1177/17816858221129957
journals.sagepub.com/home/euv



Sara Brzuszkiewicz

Abstract

This article examines the most widespread stances on the war in Ukraine taken within the far-right and the jihadist milieux. Within these contexts, positions are far from unified and the different narratives exploited on the topic reflect the heterogeneity of the radical postures. Far-right movements and supporters express views ranging from open hostility to Russia and President Vladimir Putin to complete mistrust of NATO and the West. This makes it possible to find these groups on both sides of the battlefield. However, it is necessary to emphasize here that the narrative about Ukraine being run by fascists is no more than Russian propaganda, designed to discredit Ukraine's efforts to defend itself against Russia's aggression and weaken international solidarity toward Kyiv. Similarly, a number of jihadist groups and ideologues urge their followers to join the conflict regardless of the side in order to harm unbelievers or, on the contrary, to stay away from it as this would imply giving assistance to the impious. The Russian war against Ukraine is having significant implications for both far-right and jihadi networks, both of which might be able to capitalise on events in organisational, political and communicative terms.

Keywords

Narratives, Propaganda, Russia, Ukraine, Far right, Jihadism

Introduction

On 24 February 2022 Russia launched an unprovoked war against the sovereign country of Ukraine and started the latest phase of the bloody conflict that was initiated in 2014 with the Russian annexation of Crimea and the ongoing attempts to annex Donbas. The end is not in sight, and the political, economic and social implications of this war are becoming clearer every day. Less well known is the intersection between the conflict in Ukraine and phenomena related to individual and collective radicalisation. Radicals from extremely different backgrounds, including the far-right and the jihadi milieux, are

Corresponding author:

S. Brzuszkiewicz, European Eye on Radicalization.
Email: sara@eeradicalization.com

asserting their stances on the conflict and deploying old and new narratives to lead recruits, followers and sympathisers to embrace a particular position over the events.

Terrorism is nourished by extremely distorted communication and, well in advance of becoming a set of violent deeds, radicalisation relies on a rhetorical dimension of communicative and symbolic actions (Russo 2022). In this respect, the diverse far-right and jihadi landscapes have been increasingly involved in the conflict from a wide array of perspectives, including multiple forms of distorted communication.

This article examines some of the most relevant positions on the war in Ukraine taken within the far-right and the jihadist milieu and argues that, within these contexts, the stances adopted are far from homogenous. Understanding the heterogeneity of the radical postures surrounding the event is crucial for helping Western policymakers and analysts to recognise and interpret the relationship between the war in Ukraine and radicalisation, two phenomena that are too often dealt with separately but are in fact deeply interconnected.

Through open-source analysis and within the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis, the first section focuses on the far right's complex relationship with the present war and the delicate balance between the Near and the Far Enemy. Using the same methodology, the second part of the article scrutinises the jihadi landscape in relation to the war in Ukraine, analysing the most widespread narratives centred on it and the ideological components upon which they rely.

The far right: between the Near and the Far Enemy

While Ukraine has been fighting to defend its sovereignty against Russia's aggression, the far-right milieu worldwide has been exploiting the Kremlin's war against the country as a valuable resource for propaganda and narratives that are attracting an increasing number of sympathisers. The Ukraine war has sparked a wave of activism among European far-right leaders, who have urged their followers to take part in the fight to defend Ukraine and collect money in support of the cause.¹

A number of groups view the conflict as a training ground for their members, a chance to gain weapons and a hub through which to connect with fellow radicals, as happened in the jihadi field in the case of Afghanistan several decades ago (1979–89).² In many of the exchanges between members of online far-right forums, these radicals seem to be anti-liberal, anti-globalist ethno-nationalists who believe that Western countries are now ruled by weak politicians and businessmen who are incapable of—and unwilling to—defend 'Western civilisation', a notion that is based on a false sense of homogeneity in terms of blood and culture. Consequently, they think that it is only through a bloody uprising and a violent dismantlement of the corrupted democratic institutions that Western civilisation can be saved.

Supremacist movements are developing the narrative that Ukraine should be used as a training ground for individuals to gain combat experience for the future ethnic

conflicts that they believe are coming to their homelands (Katz 2022). This idea of waging war against the Far Enemy abroad in preparation for the fight against the Near Enemy has similarities with the way jihadi groups viewed the Afghan experience before the ascent of al Qaeda. In other words, both the jihadists who went to Afghanistan and the far-right radicals who are now going to Ukraine used or will use the battlefield to gain experience for a future in which they might fight the Near Enemy, the enemy at home.

In the case of the 1980s' jihadists, the Near Enemy was embodied by the secularised and Westernised Arab governments ruling their home countries, while in the case of many far-right groups, the Near Enemy consists of an array of figures, ranging from politicians to immigrants.

Fawaz Gherghes explains that, although the Afghan jihad against Russian military occupation ultimately bred a new generation of *transnationalist* jihadists—who were emboldened by the Russian defeat and decided to internationalise jihad and export the Islamist revolution worldwide—it did not, in itself, constitute a shift by jihadists away from localism to globalism (Gherghes 2009, 12). At that time, Ayman al-Zawahiri, who was then in the top ranks of al-Jihad al-Islamy, repeatedly stated that he and his fellow jihadists had gone to Afghanistan to establish a safe haven for jihadi action from which to launch attacks against the Egyptian regime: 'A jihadi movement needs an arena that would act like an incubator where its seed would grow and where it can acquire practical experience in combat, politics and organizational matters' (Al-Zawahiri, quoted in Mansfield 2006, 28). He also stated that, 'The problem of finding a secure base for jihad activity in Egypt used to occupy me a lot . . . I could establish a secure base for jihad action in Egypt' (Al-Zawahiri, quoted in Mansfield 2006, 28–9).

These declarations support the hypothesis that Afghanistan was used by jihadists as a training camp to give them new skills and expertise useful for their national jihadi project. Localism, not globalism, informed the thinking and actions of the mujahidin who initially fought in Afghanistan. The internationalisation of jihad and the shift from the Near to the Far Enemy would occur only at a later stage, with the ascent of al Qaeda as the primary jihadi actor worldwide.

Decades later, the pattern of exploiting a foreign country as an arena in which to gain experience and a network seems to be making a comeback in the ranks of the radical right. Since 2015, over 17,000 foreign fighters have travelled to Ukraine from 50 countries (Shuster-Perrigo 2022) and, while the majority of these fighters are not radical ideologues, security consultants find similarities between the current situation in Ukraine and the Afghan scenario in the 1980s (Byman 2022; Gosselin-Malo 2022).

However, it is necessary to emphasize here that the narrative about Ukraine being run by fascists is no more than Russian propaganda, designed to discredit Ukraine's efforts to defend itself against Russia's aggression and weaken international solidarity toward Kyiv. During the federal election of 2019, the coalition of extreme-right parties, including the

Azov movement's National Corps, received a total of 2.15% of the votes and no seats in parliament (Likhachev 2019). Nonetheless, Western media has come to develop a sort of Azov obsession, making frequent reference to the notorious Azov Regiment, a paramilitary militia formed in May 2014 to fight the Russian forces in Donbas.

However, one key factor is missing in all of the analyses of the Azov: the difference between the Azov movement and the Azov Regiment (Ritzmann 2022). There is no doubt that the Azov movement is a key player in the transnational extreme right and has deep ties to far-right radicals in various EU countries and the US. As far as the regiment is concerned, however, it was integrated into the Ukrainian National Guard by the state in 2015, and since then has operated under the command of the Ministry of the Interior. In all probability, as a result of this there would have been a sort of internal migration of the most radical leadership from the regiment to the movement, which still includes smaller militias and has paramilitary training facilities (Ritzmann 2022).

The positions and narratives spreading within the far-right realm, however, are not unified. While some groups side with Russian President Vladimir Putin, others stand with the far-right components of the Ukrainian forces. And while Nicholas Potter, a researcher and journalist at the Amadeu Antonio Foundation, says the pro-Ukrainian side is slightly more popular among German neo-Nazis (Knight 2022), the scene is, nonetheless, a real patchwork.

On the one side, there is historical hostility towards Russia, especially in Central Europe. Although the Communist era ended long ago, anti-Communism still plays an important role for some right-wing fringes, offering further evidence of the creative use of history made by radicals of all kinds. On the other side, in a relevant part of the far-right imaginary, 'When Putin wins, men will again be men and not women, electricity and fuel will become cheaper, Islamization will end, and the Green Party leftists will all be locked up', notes a brief, yet effective Telegram compilation of some of the contemporary far right's major tropes (Knight 2022).

In other words, the far right is caught in a dilemma: Russia symbolises the historical enemy reminiscent of the Communist spectrum, but Putin is seen as capable of opposing NATO and the alleged moral corruption of the West. Western decision-makers, commentators and analysts should avoid the risks of essentialising the identity of the actors on the ground and simplifying the positions and narratives involved in the conflict. This will ensure that they avoid being blindsided by possible developments in the near future, such as an increase in the number of foreign fighters on both sides or new splits and alliances within the far-right galaxy.

The jihadists and the unbelievers: to fight or not to fight?

Due to the compartmentalised approach that the West tends to adopt when it comes to international affairs, the influence of the war in Ukraine on the jihadi milieu has been largely overlooked, and so has the risk of exploitation of the conflict by violent Islamists.

As the eyes of the world have inevitably turned to Ukraine, the jihadi threat seems to have fallen out of fashion. In fact, the war between Russia and Ukraine could have implications for jihadist organisations both in terms of communications and operations.

The most widespread reaction to the war among jihadists is jubilation. They are celebrating the conflict between Ukraine and Russia (Kfir 2022) because two ‘nations of unbelievers’ are fighting each other (Anti-Defamation League 2022). Consequently, some radical ideologues have given their followers moral permission to join either side, as fighting for either would contribute to the cause of jihad.

Jihadist groups have developed a narrative that stigmatises both sides as common enemies and hostile to Islam. In an editorial published in its magazine *al-Naba*, the Islamic State defines the war as a ‘punishment imposed on Christian unbelievers who are guilty of exporting their battles to Muslim countries’ (Garofalo 2022). A second group of radicals, however, has chosen to take a side. In Ukraine, Muslims make up about 1% of the population and their numbers jump to about 12% in the Crimean Peninsula, which Russia annexed in 2014 (Allam 2022). Therefore, several jihadi groups maintain that the presence of a Muslim minority in Ukraine, no matter how small, is sufficient to justify participation in the fighting and to protect Ukraine against the Russian ‘crusader’ enemy.

On the other side, Muslim leaders in Russia back the government, with many acting as an echo-chamber of the Kremlin about the alleged fascist threat in Ukraine. They portray the war as a jihad against the same Western powers that—in their eyes—have bombed and invaded Muslim nations, and this revanchist narrative has gained momentum within some jihadi circles. The oxymoronic term ‘hostile neutrality’ (i.e. that it is legitimate to fight for either side as it would mean harming unbelievers), support for Ukraine and support for Russia can all be detected within the radical milieu, which makes it crucial to monitor and analyse the diverse narratives that are being exploited by these groups so as not to disregard any possible future scenario.

Similar to the hostile neutrality approach, but with opposing consequences, is the position of jihadists who reject possible choices between the two nations of unbelievers. Like those radicals who support joining either side because they are both seen as formed of ungodly infidels who can be harmed, this segment rejects helping either side because it believes that infidels should not be helped. This group relies exclusively on the dichotomy between ‘Muslims and non-Muslims’, thus stopping Muslim fighters from dying for unbelievers. Its radical propaganda is largely built upon the notion of the Enemy, and the war in Ukraine represents a fertile ground to strengthen this narrative.

Historically, the West and Russia have been the main objects of radical Islamist rage. The jihadi media have often made Russia a target because of Russia’s oppression of Muslim Chechens, its presence and deeds in the Northern Caucasus, and its active role in Syria. The Islamic State has often targeted Russia through the media, for instance with the publication of the Russian-language magazine *Istok* (The Source)³ and the production of several Russian-language videos by the al-Hayat media centre.

Hatred of the US and its allies represents a cornerstone of the global jihadist ideology of recent decades and has always been better understood in the West. Russia, however, has a significant jihadi problem. In the last decade, thousands of fighters from Russia—mainly from the North Caucasus—and the former Soviet Republics have joined a diverse array of jihadist organisations. The number of foreign terrorist fighters in each country who have joined the Islamic State in Syria and Iraq varies: as of 2019, roughly 800 in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, between 1,500 and 3,000 in Uzbekistan, around 1,900 in Tajikistan (Zhirukhina 2019) and at least 400 in Turkmenistan (Barrett 2017).⁴

Conclusions

Neither on the far-right nor on the jihadi spectrum is the response to the war in Ukraine homogeneous. On the far-right fringes, Putin is the strongman opposing the corrupt economic, political and cultural influence of NATO and the Atlantic hemisphere. For other groups and individuals on the same spectrum, the anti-Communist rhetoric against Russia and the transnational links to the Ukrainian far right are pull factors for joining the Ukrainian side against the invasion. For this group, the opportunity to gain experience and networks for future insurrections in their homeland against the Near Enemy—their governments—by fighting the Far Enemy abroad—Russia—represents a life-changing possibility.

Within the jihadi milieu, the narratives are also scattered. Some radical leaders allow their followers to join either side as this implies harming the other side, which is equally formed of unbelievers, while others warn against joining the conflict since it would mean helping such *kuffār*.⁵ Those who choose a side either stand with Putin, who is finally opposing those Western powers that have been oppressing Muslims and interfering in Middle Eastern affairs for decades, or stand with the attacked Ukraine, a country with a significant—historically more than numerically—Muslim minority.

In this complex scenario, Western policymakers and analysts need more sophisticated analyses of the actors involved in the conflict, particularly with regard to their drives, interests, networks and narratives. Without these they may miss the bigger picture created by the war in Ukraine and radicalisation, two phenomena that are seemingly distant but in fact are deeply interconnected. The Russian invasion of Ukraine will likely have consequences for both far-right and jihadist international networks, which might develop in ways for which we should be prepared.

Notes

1. Mainly through PayPal and cryptocurrencies such as Bitcoin, Ethereum and Tron.
2. These fighters were known as Afghan Arabs (or Arab Afghans). They were Arab mujahidin who went to Afghanistan during and following the Soviet–Afghan War to help fellow Muslims fight Soviets and pro-Soviet Afghans. Estimates of the number of foreign volunteers who took part in the conflict range between 20,000 and 35,000.
3. Four issues of which were published until 2016.

4. While the figures from the four Central Asian states come from government officials, Turkmenistan stands apart from these and other sources had to be used due to a lack of official information.
5. Arabic for ‘unbelievers’ (sing. *kāfir*), a key word in the jihadi vocabulary.

References

- Allam, H. (2022). For Muslims in Ukraine, war revives questions of faith and belonging. *The Washington Post*, 28 April. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2022/04/28/ukraine-muslims-decry-russian-invasion/>. Accessed 1 August 2022.
- Anti-Defamation League. (2022). White supremacists, other extremists respond to Russian invasion of Ukraine. 3 March. <https://www.adl.org/resources/blog/white-supremacists-other-extremists-respond-russian-invasion-ukraine>. Accessed 1 August 2022.
- Barrett, R. (2017). *Beyond the Caliphate: Foreign fighters and the threat of returnees*. The Soufan Center. October. <https://thesoufancenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Beyond-the-Caliphate-Foreign-Fighters-and-the-Threat-of-Returnees-TSC-Report-October-2017-v3.pdf>. Accessed 1 August 2022.
- Brzuszkiewicz, S. (2017). Political de-radicalization: Why it is no longer possible in the *wilāyāt* system of the Islamic State. *Journal for Deradicalization*, 9(Winter), 185–204. <https://journals.sfu.ca/jd/index.php/jd/article/view/76>. Accessed 1 August 2022.
- Byman, D. (2022). Foreign fighters in Ukraine? Evaluating the benefits and risks. *Brookings*, 3 March. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/03/03/foreign-fighters-in-ukraine-evaluating-the-benefits-and-risks/>. Accessed 1 August 2022.
- El Guendouzi, Y. (2022). From Afghanistan to Ukraine: A new future for foreign fighters in Europe? *European Eye on Radicalization*, 2 May. <https://eeradicalization.com/from-afghanistan-to-ukraine-a-new-future-for-foreign-fighters-in-europe/>. Accessed 1 August 2022.
- Garofalo, D. (2022). Potential implications and threats of jihadist terrorism in the Russia–Ukraine war. *Special Eurasia*, 16(6). <https://www.specialeurasia.com/2022/02/24/russia-ukraine-terrorism-jihad/>. Accessed 1 August 2022.
- Gherghes, F. (2009). *The Far Enemy: Why jihad went global*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gosselin-Malo, E. (2022). The Ukraine war and the risk of a new foreign fighters wave. *Institute for International Political Studies*, 3 March. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/ukraine-war-and-risk-new-foreign-fighters-wave-33919>. Accessed 1 August 2022.
- Katz, R. (2022). Neo-Nazis are exploiting Russia’s war in Ukraine for their own purposes. *The Washington Post*, 14 March. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/outlook/2022/03/14/neo-nazi-ukraine-war/>. Accessed 1 August 2022.
- Kfir, I. (2022). Will Ukraine become the Syria of the extreme right? *European Eye on Radicalization*, 4 March. <https://eeradicalization.com/will-ukraine-become-the-syria-of-the-extreme-right/>. Accessed 1 August 2022.
- Knight, B. (2022). Germany’s far-right split by Russia–Ukraine war. *Deutsche Welle*, 28 March. <https://www.dw.com/en/germanys-far-right-split-by-russia-ukraine-war/a-61283065>. Accessed 1 August 2022.
- Likhachev, V. (2019). *Far-right extremism as a threat to Ukrainian democracy*. Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/analytical-brief/2018/far-right-extremism-threat-ukrainian-democracy>. Accessed 1 August 2022.
- Louis, N. (2022). Ukraine could become a training ground for neo-Nazi groups. *European Eye on Radicalization*, 24 March. <https://eeradicalization.com/ukraine-could-become-a-training-ground-for-neo-nazi-groups/>. Accessed 1 August 2022.

- Mansfield, L. (2006). *In his own words. A translation of the writings of Dr. Ayman al-Zawahiri*. Old Tappan, NJ: TLG Publications.
- Ritzmann, A. (2022). The myth far-right zealots run Ukraine is Russian propaganda. *Euronews*, 12 April. <https://www.euronews.com/2022/04/12/the-myth-far-right-zealots-run-ukraine-is-russian-propaganda-view>. Accessed 1 August 2022.
- Russo, M. (2022). Violence as distorted communication: A fresh perspective on modern terrorism. *European Eye on Radicalization*, 9 May. <https://eeradicalization.com/violence-as-distorted-communication-a-fresh-perspective-on-modern-terrorism/>. Accessed 1 August 2022.
- Zhirukhina, E. (2019). Foreign fighters from Central Asia: Between renunciation and repatriation. *Institute for International Political Studies*, 3 October. <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/foreign-fighters-central-asia-between-renunciation-and-repatriation-24072>. Accessed 1 August 2022.

Author biography



Sara Brzuszkiewicz is an advisor for *European Eye on Radicalization* and a faculty member for the Master in Middle Eastern Studies programme at the Graduate School for Economics and International Relations (Milan). Her research interests focus on radicalisation and de-radicalisation, jihadism in Europe and the violence of involuntary celibates.