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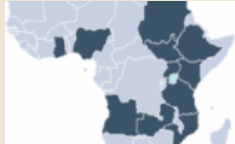
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Guest post: Russia's war in east Ukraine – time for the diaspora to step up

Aug 27, 2014 1:13pm by guest writer

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By Stefan Jajecznik and Taras Kuzio

As fighting in the Donetsk and Luhansk regions intensifies, the first foreign member of the Ukrainian military has become a casualty of Russia's proxy war. Codenamed 'Franko', Mark Paslawsky who grew up in the Ukrainian diaspora in New Jersey and was a West Point-trained officer in the US

Rangers, gave up his US citizenship for a Ukrainian passport and the chance to serve in the Donbas volunteer battalion, one of more than 20 in Ukraine's newly formed National Guard.

Paslawsky (pictured above) was wounded by shrapnel on August 18 during a firefight with separatists and Russian paratroopers in the outskirts of the regional capital of Luhansk. With no air ambulance available he could not be saved by medics. He was buried this week.

His English language twitter feed (@BSpringnote) offered a rare insight into day-to-day experience on the front line in this conflict that has already claimed the lives of 800 Ukrainian troops and police in five months – 200 more than the number of British soldiers and RUC killed during the 'Ulster troubles' over the course of three decades – and those of more than 2,000 Ukrainian civilians. Paslawsky recorded his frustration with the weaponry available to volunteers, the criminal behaviour of the separatist and Russian forces they fought against and the poor quality of food provided.

Ukrainian volunteer battalions such as his have taken the brunt of the fighting against Russian-backed separatists and Russian 'green men'. Although Vladimir Putin, Russia's president, attended ceasefire talks in Minsk on Tuesday, on the same day 30 Russian tanks and APCs crossed into the southern Donetsk region; the Azov volunteer battalion is now in a fierce firefight with them. On Monday, similar incursions had resulted in the capture of ten Russian paratroopers.

During Russia's proxy war in the Donbas more Serbs have gone to fight on the separatist side than members of the Ukrainian diaspora. Paslawsky was the only member of the Ukrainian nationalist and anti-Russian diaspora to have volunteered to fight for Ukraine, an ironic fact considering Ukrainian émigrés were the subject of incessant attacks by Soviet and Russian propaganda for their allegedly 'extreme

nationalism’.

The same Ukrainian diaspora communities who idolise nationalist leaders have been unable to raise significant funds for the Ukrainian military and National Guard. Such funds could have been used to buy bulletproof vests, night vision equipment and medicines and possibly to hire contractors to train and advise the Ukrainian security forces. In Ukraine, volunteers are providing the army with everything from food to body armour to medical kits while, volunteers are increasingly doing the actual fighting, the Kyiv Post has reported.

In the decades following World War II, the first generation émigrés of the Organisation of Ukrainian Nationalists (OUNb) led by assassinated leader Stepan Bandera raised large amounts of money for a ‘Liberation Fund’ to support the fight for Ukrainian independence. The UK, with its unique and extensive community of Ukrainian clubs and bars, was the source of the greatest diaspora contributions to the Fund.

With Ukraine bankrupt and its military depleted of resources, the Fund would have been ideally placed to provide resources for the country’s first de facto war with Russia since Ukrainian partisans fought Joseph Stalin’s Soviet Union in the 1940s. But the Fund is either depleted or the younger generation, primarily born in the west and now leading émigré nationalist organisations, are no longer able to solicit large donations. The Ukrainian diaspora community in the UK is in decline and the Association of Ukrainians in Great Britain has been quite passive.

There are prominent figures in the diaspora communities with ties to Ukrainian nationalist politicians but their silence is deafening. The OUNb – the most vilified of all Ukrainian organisations by the USSR and still by Russia today – resembles a rabbit caught in headlights.

While it cannot be accused of complete inaction, the diaspora’s current fundraising pales in comparison with those of Ukrainian citizens who, despite earning far less than their émigré counterparts, have managed to collect over \$2m for the military alone, as well as for medicines and food. The average wage in Ukraine is less than \$500 a month. Nevertheless, Valeriy Padziak, a publisher from Uzhorod currently visiting the University of Toronto, told us that he and many other Ukrainians donate 10 per cent of their salaries each month to the military.

Although there are 1.2m people of Ukrainian decent in Canada, the Canadian Ukrainian Congress (KUK) has been unable to raise \$1m (and we have not heard of monthly donations). The majority of those most active in fundraising in the Ukrainian diaspora are from the fourth wave that has recently emigrated from Ukraine. Indeed, protests in Toronto have been low in turnout and dominated by the fourth wave diaspora.

Franko’s example is unlikely to be repeated by other members of the Ukrainian diaspora. But there are other ways they can help. This would require the same levels of leadership, political will and commitment in the Ukrainian diaspora that Ukrainians at home have shown in the face of Russia’s invasion and occupation of Crimea and its undeclared proxy war in the Donbas.

Stefan Jajecznyk is a journalist specialising in the politics of Ukraine and the former Soviet Union; he was a volunteer on the Euromaidan and an observer in Dnipropetrovsk during the May elections. Taras Kuzio is a research associate at the Canadian Institute for Ukrainian Studies at the University of Alberta and has travelled extensively to Kiev and eastern Ukraine during the Euromaidan and separatist conflict.

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