

Guest post: far more Europeans join separatists in Donbas than Isis in Syria

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By Taras Kuzio of the University of Alberta

This week, St Petersburg hosted a bizarre gathering organized by the Rodina (Motherland) party of 150 European fascist and nationalist-populist political parties united in their opposition to the EU and US and in support of Russia's annexation of Crimea and invasion of eastern Ukraine. Rodina is the loyal nationalist ally of President Vladimir Putin's United Russia party and consequently plays a similar role to the Radical Party's alliance with the Serbian Socialist party.

Russia's alignment with European fascist and nationalist-populist parties would seem to contradict official rhetoric that has incessantly attacked the Ukrainian Euromaidan leaders as a fascist junta brought to power by western intelligence agencies. It also, as Timothy Snyder of Yale University has pointed out, recalls uncanny memories of the 1939-1941 Soviet-Nazi Pact that also had the goal of dividing European powers.

One sinister outgrowth of Russia's cultivation of extreme right and extreme left parties and movements in Europe is the large mobilisation of people travelling to the Donbas region of eastern Ukraine to fight for pro-Russian separatists.

There has been understandable outcry over the three young British girls who travelled to Istanbul on February 17 on their way to join Isis, the brutal terrorist organization based in Syria and Iraq. But what has gone unnoticed is the hundreds – far more Europeans than have travelled to join Isis – who have joined Russian-backed terrorists fighting Ukraine's legitimately elected leaders. The BBC reported that the influx of foreign fighters into eastern Ukraine "mirrors that of young Muslims from Britain and other parts of Europe travelling to the Middle East to fight in its wars".

Russian-backed separatists have attracted an eclectic mix of extreme left and extreme right followers, nostalgic in the former case for the USSR and the Spanish civil war and in the latter drawn by a common anti-EU and anti-US platform with Putin and the Donbas separatists. Greeks, traditionally the most pro-Russian nationals in the EU, the Hungarian Legion of St Isztvan, Serbs, French, Germans, Spaniards and volunteers from former Soviet republics such as Kyrgyzstan are fighting alongside separatists widely condemned by the UN and international human rights groups for crimes against humanity.

The eclectic group has included 20 Frenchmen from the fascist organisation Continental Unity formed in support of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and Serbian war crimes suspect Vojislav Seselj. France's far right National Front party has strongly supported Russia's annexation of the Crimea and invasion of Eastern Ukraine and has received a \$10 million loan from Russia.

Not surprisingly, there are reportedly over 100 extreme right Serbs fighting for what they see as a common Orthodox religious faith and historic ally. Russian nationalist Igor Girkin "Strelkov" ("Shooter") who commanded Russian special forces in western Donbas until summer of 2014 had fought for the Bosnian Serbs in the 1990s.

One hundred extreme right Germans are fighting alongside the terrorists according to Die Welt. Stephan Mayer, a member of the ruling Christian Democrats, told Die Welt that Germans who participate in civil wars should be taken to court, although presently the German criminal code only punishes those who fight alongside Isis.

The Spanish Republican Guard detained a group of extreme left-wing Spaniards on their return from eastern Ukraine. Angel Davilla-Rivas, one of the Spaniards, has two big tattoos of Soviet leaders Vladimir Lenin and Joseph Stalin and explained his decision to go to Eastern Ukraine as "gratitude" for Stalin's support for the Spanish Republicans in the 1930s.

British volunteers have not reportedly gone to fight for the Donbas separatists, although the National Front (NF) and UKIP have given



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British journalist Graham Phillips, who moved from the Conservatives to UKIP, has sent numerous pro-separatist reports for Russian media outlets and was detained on March 4 at Heathrow and questioned for four hours by Border Police under Schedule 7 of the 2000 Terrorism Act about his activities in the Donbas before being released without charge. The British Foreign Office is allegedly pressuring Phillips to halt his reporting from the Donbas.

Phillips does not hide his political sympathies for pro-Russian separatists and does not attempt to be impartial in a conflict zone, posting photos of him wearing lapel badges of Novorossiia (New Russia, the Tsarist term used by Putin and separatists to describe Eastern and Southern Ukraine) and cheering after separatists captured the strategic railway hub of Debaltseve.

Phillips' notoriety came into the public domain late last year when he interviewed Ukrainian prisoners and a wounded Ukrainian soldier. In the interviews, he repeatedly demands the prisoners explain why they have come to "murder civilians" and asks are they "ready to go home now and accept that it is Novorossiia here and not Ukraine". In the second interview Phillips aggressively interviews a severely burnt Ukrainian soldier prisoner.

European law enforcement have been understandably concerned at their citizens travelling to join Isis, yet they have largely ignored the many more far right and far left extremists that are fighting for pro-Russian groups in Ukraine. Recent detentions in Spain and the UK were hesitant, because law enforcement officers still lack political direction as to how to respond to Russia's support for the separatists.

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