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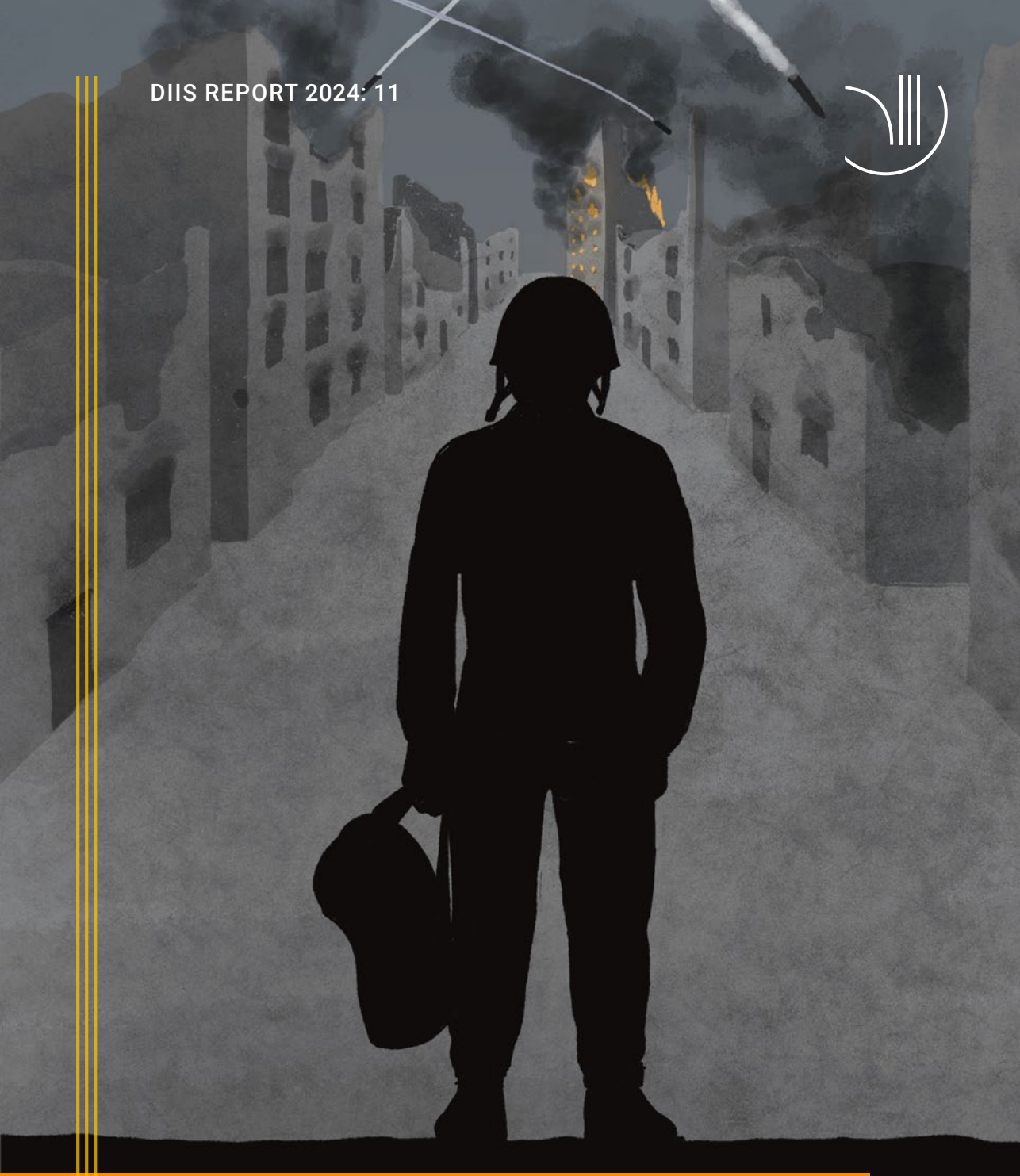

UKRAINE'S INTERNATIONAL LEGION AND ITS VOLUNTEERS

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ABSTRACT

The Russian war on Ukraine brought many surprises, one of which was the establishment of the International Legion for Defence of Ukraine. Thousands of international volunteers from numerous countries including Denmark flocked to join the legion – some veterans from their national armies, some untrained novices, and some with violent histories from extremist environments or other conflict zones. They were met by a chaotic scene in which an entire legion was being improvised in real-time, where security was low, and where informal militias were operating alongside the official legion. This report outlines the improvisation of the legion and tells the story of Danish volunteers. It highlights how this mobilisation prompts a re-evaluation of conventional notions of warfare and the role of individuals within it, potentially challenging governments to determine their stance towards citizens participating in foreign conflicts. Finally, it offers recommendations for the development of rehabilitation initiatives for returned volunteers.

Photo and description: E4D2YT. Florian Bachmeier / imageBROKER.com GmbH & Co. KG / Alamy Stock Photo. Swearing-in ceremony of volunteers after a three-week military training. Ukraine, April 2014.

AN IMPROVISED LEGION

When Ukrainian President Zelenskyy made the invitation for 'Anyone who wants to join the defence of Ukraine, Europe and the world [to] come and fight side by side with the Ukrainians' on February 27, 2022, only three days after the Russian incursion into Ukraine (Zelenskyy 2022), he may not have expected his call to be answered by the reportedly 20,000 foreign nationals from more than 50 countries claimed by Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba less than one week later (Salo 2022). This number includes an undetermined number of Danes who travelled to Ukraine to join the swiftly improvised International Legion of Defence of Ukraine (ILDU). Most have since returned home, while others remain with the legion or other unofficial militias in Ukraine. Two years after the initial mobilisation of ILDU, this report looks back at how the legion was improvised and its potential relevance for future volunteering practices.

The formation and popularity of ILDU holds relevance for Danish security and defence, not only because Danes volunteered, but also because a significant proportion of them were veterans from the Danish military. They had been trained by and had served in the Danish military before traveling to Ukraine. This not only raises concerns about their conduct abroad and questions about how they return but also commits us to considering future scenarios when such a mobilisation may be repeated.

The overwhelming popularity of ILDU also raises larger questions about whether international legions are becoming a feature of international conflicts to be considered more comprehensively. International legions question the function of soldiering as an institutionalised commitment to the nation-state principle, challenging foundational principles established following the Peace of Westphalia. Furthermore, concerns arise about how to mitigate the increased risk of violence against civilians, particularly women and children, in conflicts with a substantial presence of foreign fighters.

This report aims to introduce the Ukrainian International Legion, the volunteers who joined it, the challenges it faced, and its broader implications. Additionally, it will put forward steps that could be taken towards those who have returned or will return to their home countries. The report is based on in-person and media interviews with volunteers and Ukrainian organisers of the international legion, as well as internal reports produced by volunteers in the international legion and reported by the Ukrainian media. Names not reported in the media have been anonymised to safeguard participants.

THE GHOST OF 2014

When President Zelenskyy announced his call for foreign war volunteers, it sparked concern amongst security analysts recalling the mobilisation of foreign fighters in 2014 when Russia-backed separatists seized parts of the Donbas region. Though it was estimated to be one of the largest foreign fighter mobilisations in history (Rękawek 2022a), the 2014 mobilisation was somewhat overlooked politically as it occurred alongside the rise of ISIS and its attraction of jihadist foreign fighters to primarily Syria. Yet, the 2014 effort had raised some security concerns across Europe due to how Ukrainian extremist far-right units like the Azov Battalion/ Regiment or Right Sector had enlisted foreign nationals supporting violent far-right ideologies, and how these individuals subsequently utilised that experience to become extremist 'influencers', strengthening transnational far-right networks.

Given the large foreign volunteer numbers quickly claimed by officials in Kyiv in 2022 and given far-right groups' track record of recruiting foreign fighters from their broad international networks, there were concerns that the mobilisation would include extremist individuals seeking out established avenues for joining extremist groups. During the peak period of travel to Ukraine, counter-terrorism police were stationed at the departure gates of a major British airport, questioning passengers bound for Ukraine about their travel purposes. This concern also seemed palpable within the Ukrainian government. Already in 2020, Ukrainian intelligence had released a video of the deportation of two American members of the violent far-right group The Base seemingly to send a signal of non-tolerance of such elements (Makuch & Lamoureux 2021). By 2022, the Ukrainian authorities seemed keenly aware that if such far-right groups again succeeded in mobilising scores of foreign fighters, it would play directly into Russian propaganda painting the Ukrainian resistance as 'nazi'.

However, the Russian war on Ukraine was met by different reactions from international far-right networks. While some groups, such as Feuerkrieg Division or Thule Gesellschaft, were supportive of Ukraine's Azov Battalion, others opposed it claiming that Azov had become too embedded within the state structure under President Zelenskyy, who is Jewish. A significant number of the international far-right networks, such as the Freie Sachsen, aligned themselves with Russia, while still others sought to dissuade their followers from involving themselves in the conflict at all. The Base founder Rinaldo Nazzaro labelled it a 'NATO proxy war', urging his followers not to serve as foreign volunteers, while the Nordic Resistance Movement urged 'all nationalists thinking of going to fight in Ukraine' to instead focus on what they could do for the 'Nordic peoples'. German neo-Nazi party Nationaldemokratische Partei released statements detailing their opposition to the 'brother war'.

Even though Azov at times put out conflicting messages and did mobilise a relatively small number of international volunteers, they appear to have focused on mobilising Ukrainian volunteers, in line with their post-2014 attempts to gain influence in domestic politics (Rękawek 2022b). Azov recruiters appearing in virtual chat rooms more often directed international volunteers towards the official ILDU channels. More often than recruiting volunteers, international far-right networks were utilised to seek funding and other material support for Azov, the Right Sector, or other smaller Ukrainian far-right groups such as Revenge, Blood & Honour or Brotherhood. The neo-Nazi media group American Futurist even replaced its online guide for how to join Azov with a Monero address to which funds could be sent, saying 'We feel it's better if we keep our youth here rather than sending them to an almost certain death when they can be of better use to our cause here in the US'.

GOVERNMENT CONTROL

The Ukrainian government mitigated the risk of a significant far-right mobilisation damaging its international image and legitimacy by asserting near-complete control of the mobilisation of foreign fighters and the way it was branded. Rather than allowing foreign fighters to join through informal channels set up by militias as was the case in 2014, the Ukrainian authorities established a state-controlled International Legion to include foreign volunteers, recruiting through official channels and international embassies. Though some veteran foreign fighters from 2014 did return to Ukraine in 2022, overall, these two mobilisations should be considered distinct. Though the Georgian Legion – originally a moderate foreign fighter group active in 2014 – was seemingly allowed to continue to include foreign fighters in 2022 under more lenient contracts than ILDU, the official legion does seem to have included the largest number of foreign volunteers, and overall succeeded in becoming the public face of the 2022 foreign fighter mobilisation.

The legion's formation held strategic significance for the Ukrainian government; it internationalised the global image of the conflict as part of an effort to garner military support from western powers and allies. Symbolically, the international legion mobilisation represented a contrast between individual morality and ethics, and the lack of resolute political action. Russia sought to counter this favourable image by labelling all foreign volunteers as mercenaries and warning that if captured, these volunteers would be treated as such. This came amid international awareness and criticism of the involvement of the Russian private military company, the Wagner Group, in the war – apparently in an effort to leverage the negative imagery associated internationally with the Wagner Group on the volunteers in Ukraine, to counter Ukraine's effort to brand ILDU as an idealistic show of international solidarity.

Ukraine's public messaging around ILDU emphasised individuals joining from all over the world and presented the war as a civilisational battle beyond national interests, with universal values at stake. The image of international volunteers joining the cause gave an aura of legitimacy to Ukraine's claim of the war being a fight opposing fascism (Tang 2022). It helped to portray Ukraine as a nation in need of solidarity and aid, amplifying the urgency for collective action amongst Western powers and allies. The mobilisation of international volunteers thereby served as a strategic effort to highlight the global impact of the conflict and put pressure on the international community. To rival Ukraine's mobilisation of international volunteers, Russia's Defence Minister claimed in March 2022 that over 16,000 prospects from the Middle East had applied to volunteer with the Russian forces. However, even

though Russia did recruit a significant number of foreign fighters during the conflict in 2014, such a mobilisation did not seem to materialise on the ground in 2022.

Particularly in the beginning of the war, the international legion seemed to be of primarily symbolic significance, as Ukraine struggled to manage the mobilisation which initially drained far more resources than it contributed. As an example, volunteers collected donations via GoFundMe to fund their trips which could have made a greater impact if donated directly. Housing, training, and equipping volunteers required significant resources, and the volunteers generally offered limited skills and commitment, and at times posed a direct risk to their surroundings. Furthermore, Ukraine's branding of the legion was soon challenged by volunteers criticizing its setup, accusing its leadership of corruption, and deserting in a very public manner (Rękawek, 2023). Some of these challenges were partially resolved by focusing recruitment efforts on military veterans with specialised skillsets likely to give Ukraine's defence forces an advantage on the ground. However, it remains unclear whether the strategic benefits of such recruitment efforts ever came to outweigh the costs.

The formation of the foreign legion therefore served several purposes: 1) centralising foreign fighter mobilisation within a state-controlled recruitment and structure; 2) holding symbolic significance as an internationalisation of the conflict; and 3) boosting battlefield capacities.

THE LEGION SET-UP

The International Legion's organisation improved gradually over six months. The initial recruitment process was set up to operate via application forms on government websites and the defence attachés at Ukraine's international embassies. The embassies were supposed to vet and screen individuals, checking criminal records or veteran papers and screening for unwanted persons. However, it became obvious that the interest from volunteers overwhelmed the capacity of the embassies during a busy time when they had other urgent affairs to attend to. As a result, this initial selection process appeared inefficient particularly during the first few months when applications were at their highest. Prospective volunteers in virtual chat rooms were expressing their frustration at not receiving responses from the embassies after submitting their applications to enlist. As a result, many of them chose to enter Ukraine through the border with Poland, where recruiters in Lviv and Kyiv were enlisting for various military units and militias. The border areas also served as

social hubs where potential volunteers connected with each other to navigate the chaotic situation.

Faced with a situation draining more resources than it was adding capabilities, Ukraine focused more narrowly on seeking only those with specific military training or experience, such as special-forces veterans or snipers. 'We can only really refresh veterans with experience and introduce them to particular weapons systems or tactics' (ILDU organiser, interview April 2022). The ILDU spokesperson emphasised that, 'The message we want to get across is that we're really looking for people with combat experience, because we're not an army school' (Bell 2022). New volunteers would get three to five days' training. Staff informed them that the first two days would be devoted to rudimentary map-reading and medical skills; on the third day weapons would be handed out and volunteers would practise firing them on a range; then all of them – regardless of their prior experience – would be dispatched to the front.

Over the course of Spring 2022, the organisers of ILDU also further emphasised that suitability for inclusion was determined on the basis of mental health screenings as much as physical fitness or skills, after ILDU had been the subject of unflattering stories about characters with serious mental health issues joining the legion. A Danish volunteer, Mads-Emil, told Danish media about meeting a fellow Danish fighter visibly struggling with mental health problems, sitting fully clothed in the shower staring blankly at the wall (Jørgensen 2022).

The actual count of foreign fighters for Ukraine in 2022 is disputed and no official number has been released. The commonly cited figure of 20,000 appears to refer to the number of individuals who expressed interest in joining e.g. through the website or embassies, but it is unconfirmed how many went on to become enrolled in ILDU (Makuch 2023). It also does not include those who joined unofficially or those who enlisted in groups other than ILDU.

One CNN report states the number as being 'in the low thousands' (Marquardt 2023), highlighting that this includes all individuals entering Ukraine with plans to enlist but may not reflect those ultimately assigned to fighting units; only around 10 percent of applicants were assessed as having relevant military experience suitable for immediate deployment. In Autumn 2022, Kyiv Independent reported a figure of 1,500, while sources quoted by Vice estimated it as between 1,000-3,000 (Makuch 2023). The Ukrainian embassy in Denmark reported in March 2022 that around one hundred people had left for Ukraine from Denmark since the Russian invasion

(Svendsen et al. 2022), but it is unclear whether this number only includes volunteers with the legion or also encompasses humanitarian volunteers and expat Ukrainians in Denmark. At the time, a coordinator of Swedish volunteers stated that hundreds were preparing to depart from Sweden (Samuelsson 2022).

Gradually, ILDU divided into two groups and later extended with two more smaller groups. The first consists of infantry battalions within Ukraine's Ground Forces and includes less experienced volunteers and veterans with no or limited combat experience. This unit is estimated by sources quoted in Kiev Independent to make up two thirds of ILDU with approximately 1,000 volunteers. The second comprises special task battalions that include veterans with specific skillsets. They function under the Main Directorate of Intelligence and make up about a third of the legion, with their numbers reportedly peaking at around 500 individuals (Myroniuk & Khrebet 2022a). When international units are deployed to the front, they are typically divided into smaller teams and matched with Ukrainian units already on the battlefield that align with their skillsets or specialisations. This integration is vital as it has legal implications for its members as combatants under the international legal framework for armed conflict.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK

ILDU volunteers may share characteristics with more traditional foreign fighters in that they travel to another territory to engage in an armed conflict they are not initially a party to, motivated by a particular cause or idea that connects them to the conflict. The case of ILDU also follows the pattern discerned by David Malet, indicating that transnational recruitment occurs when actors attempt to broaden the scope of conflict to increase their resources and maximise their chances of victory. However, there are definitional variations of fighting abroad with political and legal implications for those involved. These include a) the term Foreign Terrorist Fighter used by the UN Security Council's resolution 2178 to describe foreign individuals who join a terrorist organisation, b) Legionnaires defined as 'foreigners who are neither citizens nor subjects of the country whose military they serve' (Grasmeder 2021) and who are protected under the 1949 Geneva Convention, or c) mercenaries primarily enlisting for profit and not fighting with a recognised military unit, as defined by Additional Protocol I. The distinctions between volunteers, terrorists, and mercenaries have significant implications for their treatment and accountability.

ILDU operates within a legal framework that enables non-Ukrainian citizens to join the armed forces under Presidential Decree No. 248. This distinction aims to ensure

that volunteers in ILDU are recognised as legionnaires, distinguishing them not only from the mercenaries Russia claims them to be but also from the term 'foreign fighter', which is more commonly associated with individuals fighting for non-state groups involved in insurgency or terrorist activities. Upon arrival, some volunteers were surprised or uneasy when ILDU asked them to sign a contract that lasted for the full duration of the war. However, as well as assessing their dedication to fighting long-term, the contract also ensured that they were officially enlisted in an official army and entitled to salary, treatment at military hospitals, insurance as well as specific treatment under the Geneva Conventions and International Humanitarian Law (IHL) which does not apply to actors considered mercenaries.

However, this does not guarantee their treatment if they are captured by enemy forces that consider them mercenaries. With a monthly salary of 7,000 hryvnia a month, it is hard to claim volunteers fight for profit. Yet the difficulty in proving or disproving mercenary status amplifies diplomatic challenges for their home countries, including concerns about mistreatment, lack of POW status, and the complexities of hostage diplomacy in the event of capture. and diplomatic challenges. In a Ukrainian separatist area controlled by Russia, two Britons and a Moroccan man who fought for the Ukrainian military were sentenced to death on June 9, 2022. Though this is widely considered a violation of IHL, Russia justified the sentencing by claiming that the individuals were mercenaries (Reuters 2022).

ILDU volunteers enjoy a certain level of autonomy, allowing them to shift between combat duties, taking leave in Kyiv or their home countries, and performing support roles. This flexibility blurs the lines as regards when they may be subject to different legal statuses. Apart from volunteering and private military firms, there are instances where journalists crossed over from being press representatives to joining the legion. Malcolm Nance, a former US veteran turned reporter on MSNBC, joined the volunteer coordination office after publicly abandoning his press credentials to join the legion (Brisco 2022). There are also reports of journalists crossing into engagement rather than just reporting; for instance, Danish photojournalist Jan Grarup admitted he helped load a missile (Goos 2023). Furthermore, aid workers have been observed walking a fine line between humanitarian aid work and military logistics or alternating between military and humanitarian roles. The blurred lines between combat duties, journalism, and humanitarian aid work in Ukraine has created ambiguity regarding who typically participates in war and under what circumstances.

Photo and description: 2MWE7ET. Sipa USA / Alamy Live News / Alamy Stock Photo.
An international legion foreign volunteer soldier at Kyiv Central Train Station. February 2023.

INTERNATIONAL VOLUNTEERS

A RAGTAG LEGION

Volunteers joining ILDU share a common narrative which echoes President Zelenskyy's message that the conflict in Ukraine is an epic battle against Russian tyranny, with broader implications for Europe (Tang 2022). With a foundational narrative so broad and open to individual interpretation, many volunteers were likely not those whom Ukraine's Ministry of Defence had hoped to attract.

Both in-person and media interviews showcase a diverse group of volunteers with varying backgrounds. Several individuals mix personal stories about overcoming personal crisis or divorces with strong expressions about the invasion of Ukraine. An American veteran who had served in Afghanistan said he considered a job in consulting, but it did not seem appealing. 'There was this degree of emptiness and

existential dread […] It felt like the breaking point. I could either ignore what's happening in Ukraine, and ignore this call for help, or I could dive back into the abyss completely to try to find the light' (Stein 2023). Similarly, a volunteer who previously served in the British army says in a media interview that; 'This war has been a terrible, terrible thing for Ukraine, but the last nine months have been the best, most enjoyable of my life. I can't go sit in an office and do PowerPoint for the next 50 years […] There's a part of me that's doing it for the right reasons, and there's part of me that's doing it for the violence, it's kind of a bit of both' (Ibid.).

This complex motivation of finding existential purpose in Ukraine while escaping personal impasses in life reflects the stories of many ILDU volunteers. An American volunteer labels it the 'Valhalla mind-set'; 'Wanting to die a soldier's death while taking out as many Russians as possible. [Volunteers] felt an alienation from what was going on in the world […] Everybody there was a romantic in some way, and a lot of them had their hearts broken. But all were also idealists who wanted to be part of something bigger than themselves' (Stein 2023). A Danish volunteer, Mads-Emil, claims to have met volunteers he characterises as war junkies, whom he claims had little interest in helping the Ukrainians but were primarily motivated by the possibility of being given a weapon (Jørgensen 2022). According to the Georgian Legion's Commander Mamulashvili, these kinds of volunteers have presented a vetting challenge, as he was concerned about including 'bloodthirsty guys who want to come and just shoot somebody' (Blatchford 2022).

Many volunteers made their way to Ukraine relatively spontaneously without any qualifications, plans, instructions, or contacts. Illustrating the range of volunteers involved in mobilisation across different groups in the country, are a luxury watchmaker and techno DJ (Livingstone 2022), a convicted Norwegian nazi propagandist (Svendsen & Skille 2022), a Norwegian gang member who requested to sacrifice a goat to the Norse gods (Jørgensen 2022), a disillusioned American veteran who was about to start a meditation retreat in the Himalayan mountains (Stein 2023), and even the Instagram-friendly grandson of US Senator Robert F. Kennedy (O'Kane 2022).

One ILDU official revealed in an interview that during the biggest wave of mobilisation, organisers would spend 10 minutes or less checking each volunteer's background. This contributed to what a New York Times investigation described as a situation where people 'who would not be allowed anywhere near the battlefield in a U.S.-led war, are active on the Ukrainian front — often with unchecked access to weapons

and military equipment' (Scheck & Gibbons-Neff 2023). In an interview, volunteer Ben Lackey admitted to having lied about being an army veteran so he could join the Legion (Ibid.). Danish Storm Karl Balderson declared that 'I have never used an assault weapon – but I have been a sailor for six years' (Den Uafhængige 2022). A 65-year-old retired engineer with no military experience and a methamphetamine conviction from 2019 said in an interview that he felt he 'had no excuse to say, "Well, I shouldn't go", seeing as he had "shot rifles since I was 13"' (Scheck & Gibbons-Neff 2023), while a French volunteer cited his hundreds of hours playing the computer game Call of Duty when asked about his military experience (Livingstone 2022).

Subreddit communities such as r/VolunteersForUkraine, with more than 40,000 members mainly from the United States and Canada, functioned as a platform for discussing funding, logistics, and practicalities, where the route from fantasies of war to real-life plans was particularly short (Owen 2022). That many volunteers planned to stay in Ukraine for weeks rather than months further gives the impression that some volunteered on a whim. Some veteran-led subreddits sought to give reality checks with reference to the world of gaming, with one user warning 'Imagine you're playing a multiplayer game for the first time against people who have 1,000 hours in the game, but the first time you die, you're dead' (Ibid.). On occasion, such warnings were met with accusations of being pro-Russian sentiment.

Social media not only served as a point of connection between recruiters and volunteers, but also as platforms for sharing content about and crowdfunding the volunteers' journeys, dubbed 'warTok' in a New York Magazine article (Mobilio 2022). Volunteers posting on social media platforms ensured that ILDU was constantly broadcast to an audience that followed and funded them. The Dirty Dozen, a volunteer group with a particularly active social media presence managed by Norwegian field medic volunteer and former member of the Samic council in Norway, Sandra Andersen Eira, has used its online presence not only to communicate the war, but also to market merchandise with its logo (@DirtydozenEira 2023). An American veteran without combat experience was reported showing a journalist a TikTok video in which he asks his 75,000 followers for donations for fighting in Ukraine which had at the time garnered 1.4 million views (Stewart 2022).

One of the major support organisations for American volunteers, Ripley's Heroes, was initially lauded for embodying the American hero ideal suggested by its name. However, it later faced allegations of serious fraudulent activities involving donations (Scheck & Gibbons-Neff 2023). James Vasques, a standout member of the group,

developed a strong and loyal online fanbase of over 250,000 people at the height of the group's recognition. This following grew as they followed his divorce in the US and travels to Ukraine. However, he faced criticism over at least once sharing in real-time the precise location of a unit, as well as over allegations of fraud and misrepresentation regarding both his military background and his involvement in Ukraine (Ibid.). In addition, a private American military organisation, the Mozart Group, established by two American veterans to fight in Ukraine, was dissolved after one sued the other, alleging fraud amongst other accusations (Gettleman 2023).

Such exposés are widely discussed within the volunteer communities and on their online platforms. The Danish volunteer, Storm Karl Balderson, was accused by fellow international volunteers on Twitter of conning others for money (NolongerVictims), and Malcolm Nance called his fellow ILDU organiser, Emese Fajk, 'A literal con artist' on Twitter, with reference to her role in an Australian reality TV fraud scandal (Nance 2023), only to himself be labelled unfit and guilty of stolen valour by fellow fighters soon after (Scheck & Gibbons-Neff 2023). This theme of fraud was also echoed in Denmark, where a young volunteer closely followed by the Danish media, Mads-Emil, was revealed to have been convicted of fraud both before and after his stories about going to Ukraine emerged (Nielsen 2023), and when Danish media revealed that the main backer of financial support and aid for Danish ILDU volunteers, Christopher Clausen, had a record of fraud and was ultimately found guilty of defrauding 15 people connected to funding for the Danish volunteers in Ukraine (Shakir 2023).

THE STORIES OF DANISH VOLUNTEERS

On February 27, 2022, the Danish Prime Minister declared that there were no legal reasons to prevent travel to Ukraine for the purpose of fighting. She stated that it is 'a choice for the individual to make' for those who 'feel they have something to contribute to the conflict' (Politiken 2022). This declaration made travelling to Ukraine an individual choice and responsibility. As such, the message from the Danish authorities has been that there is little to stop Danes leaving to fight in Ukraine, but that they will enjoy few legal protections and no supporting efforts if they do. Shortly after, People and Security, together with Danish Veterans, published a press message in response to the increased interest in leaving that followed the Prime Minister's announcement. They encouraged individuals considering departure to give it appropriate thought, drawing attention to the lack of support for those who leave and emphasised that without combat experience, language skills, and necessary physical fitness, they risked being more of a hindrance than help. The risks faced by

Danes going to fight in Ukraine were further highlighted when a Russian list featuring names, nationalities, birthdays and passport numbers of hundreds of international volunteers involved in ILDU – including five Danes was circulated on the online platform Telegram (Tantholdt & Secher 2022a).

While a significant number of Danish volunteers were former soldiers in the Danish defence, including a Danish sharpshooter (Tantholdt & Secher 2022b), others lacked any previous war experience, of which a couple stand out. Volunteer Storm Karl Balderson was previously convicted for vandalism and making threats related to activism regarding wolves in Denmark (Keldorff 2022). An interview with Lars Grønbæk Larsen about his activities recruiting foreign fighters for Ukraine was featured on DR, without mention of his role as a prominent member of right-wing groups such as Dansk Front or Danish Defence League (Christensen 2022). Additionally, members of the Satudarah gang were reported to have volunteered and mobilised material support for groups in Ukraine (Radio4 2022). The following description of Danish volunteers does not aim to be a full or representative depiction of the Danish group of volunteers. Instead, it aims to provide an illustrative understanding of the general motivation and experience of those who participated in the interview study or spoke to media outlets.

Interviewees have indicated that before leaving for Ukraine, they had no specific connection or history with the country and harboured no animosity towards Russia. They did not share a particular ideological interpretation of the situation but generally claimed to be motivated by high yet vague ideals, saying 'I don't know, it just spoke to me. I think it is the right thing to do, you know. And I think it would be cowardly not to do it – I'm not scared of death because I don't think too much about it. I have always been quite ballsy, and I don't want to live a boring life. This just seemed like just the thing for someone like me. They could use someone like me, I think, to help them' (personal interview 2022). Another interviewee spoke in similar terms when he answered the question of how he came to decide to go, saying, 'I wanted to do something that matters, something genuine. I mean, I think I was doing okay but it just seems kind of pointless, you know. Like you're a sheep in the flock, or something' (personal interview 2022).

Several volunteers without a military background saw volunteering as an alternative to traditional military service. One interviewee had aspired to join the army earlier in life but did not believe that he could complete the required military education. Another expressed doubts about his ability to handle the rigors of soldiering due to

struggles with early mornings and discipline. When asked if he thought fighting in Ukraine would be different, he replied 'Yeah, it's like they really need people to come and help so I'd be doing it in my own way, like, in a way that suits me. That would suit me' (personal interview 2022).

Conversations in the Danish Facebook groups organising travels were noticeably devoid of political or ideological discussions, with participants primarily focusing on ground logistics and contractual requirements. Many involved had minimal knowledge of Ukraine or its language, evidencing the spontaneity with which they approached the decision to go to Ukraine to fight, despite the gravity of that choice. One interviewee describes his decision as a non-choice, saying 'I've always had something to prove. When Ukraine called for volunteers, I had no doubt in my mind that I would go. It was probably 48 hours from when I started thinking about it to having packed my bag' (personal interview 2022). Another interviewee also responded within days of Ukrainian President Zelenskyy's call for volunteers and went straight to the Ukrainian embassy the next morning. By that afternoon, he had been accepted and made arrangements to leave for Ukraine. When asked about how he came to make the choice, he says 'I didn't particularly have anything else to do. I was working shifts, so it was easy to take off. I had some money set aside for taking a trucker license that I could tap into' (personal interview 2022).

The Danish wave of mobilisation in the first few weeks of the war was marked by spontaneity and swiftness, facilitated by factors such as the conflict's proximity. Many individuals simply drove their cars from Denmark, some car-pooling with other Danes or Swedes, to cross the Polish border. The public consensus on hero-and-enemy positions made it easy to navigate without knowledge of Ukrainian history or politics. President Zelenskyy's broad call and the tacit approval from the Danish government were contributing factors, along with the organisation of the legion that lent fighting legitimacy and made enlistment seem straightforward. Though some volunteers complained about long waiting times and confusing instructions which led them to independently cross the border with plans to find recruiters upon arrival in Kiev, others simply filled out a Google form which collected their name, e-mail address, and rudimentary information about their military experience if any. After that, joining required only receiving a QR code and a meeting point.

Just three months into the war, many volunteers had already experienced setbacks: some regretted their decision to join before even entering a unit, while others faced rejection or deserted due to chaotic training situations. One interviewee was

surprised to learn that he was expected to commit to the Ukrainian foreign legion for the entire duration of the war. Faced with this reality, he turned around and returned home without crossing into Ukraine as originally planned. Additionally, rumours among foreign volunteers about passports being confiscated upon signing contracts added to his concerns. 'I did not want to risk getting stuck there!' he says. 'It was just a complete chaos [at the border]. I wasn't even sure it was the right people I was talking to there, like, were they even legit? Some totally dodgy characters there. I was not about to give my passport to any of them' (personal interview 2022). For some this unwillingness meant that they went home, while others became involved in humanitarian aid activities instead, and some chose to join groups such as the Georgian Legion or similar, more loosely regulated groups.

Several volunteers were shocked by the chaotic reality they found themselves in, which was far more alarming and unsettling than they had anticipated. The bases had low security levels and there was a lack of trust both in leadership and among the volunteers. Following a 30 high-precision missile strike on the Yavoriv training base that led to 35 deaths, purportedly due to Russia intercepting signals from over 10 British volunteers' phones, desertion spread rapidly throughout the legion (Hume 2022).

Volunteers were worried about having received less than a week of training, not understanding the training which was conducted in Ukrainian, not getting the right equipment and generally being underprioritised, being sent into combat without feeling ready, having concerns about the leadership and discipline, and witnessing the violence of war more intensely than expected. Military veterans experienced a stark contrast as they entered battle without the air support and advanced communication systems to which they were accustomed. Instead, they found themselves engaged in under-equipped, low-tech guerrilla warfare. Within days of expressing their willingness to sacrifice their lives for Ukraine on social media, some were already returning home.

Two interviewees who travelled together both returned to Denmark shortly after their one week of training with ILDU, and before having been assigned units and sent into battle. One interviewee who above described not feeling too worried about death, was shocked by how dangerous the situation had felt, saying 'There was no equipment, no one on the base spoke English. We were just supposed to walk to the frontline in our sneakers, like, what?! It was ridiculously dangerous. What were they thinking? I don't want to be on a base that gets blown up because people don't know

what they are doing there. I was expecting that there would be someone in charge, you know, like a commando structure. But no one knew shit. By the sound of it, I was supposed to be a field medic – how the hell was that supposed to work?' (personal interview 2022). Of the volunteers that do not turn back within the first six month, a small number continued to stay long-term. On April 28, 2022, TV2 reported that a 25-year-old Dane had been killed in Ukraine and that his body was unreachable (Tantholdt 2022).

Photo and description: 2KJXEPX. Antonin Burat / Le Pictorium / Alamy Stock Photo.
Civilian volunteers joined the military. Ukraine. March 2022.

CHALLENGES

The stories of the Danish volunteers reflect the dual challenges with which the ILDU set-up has struggled relating to a) volunteer dissatisfaction, and b) poor leadership.

VOLUNTEER DISSATISFACTION

The trend among the stories from personal interviews and media interviews of international volunteers shows that the spontaneous campaign of mobilisation was followed by a significant wave of desertion during the spring of 2022. This wave was followed by a further slow trickle of desertion over the summer before stabilising somewhat during the autumn.

The story of Henry Hoeft, a 28-year-old American veteran and member of the extremist anti-government militia the Boogaloo Boys, who left for Ukraine in 2022, serves as an illustrative example that echoes the experiences relayed by other volunteers. Before his departure for Ukraine, Hoeft was featured in a front-page article in the local newspaper and gained a significant online following on social media through his social media posts about his journey. He also fundraised for his trip this way while claiming 'I will be there for as long as it takes' (Stieb 2022). Around March 9, he joined the Georgian National Legion with fellow Boogaloo member Mike Dun. However, less than a week later, Hoeft posted a widely-reported Instagram story from Poland urging others not to volunteer, describing it as a 'trap' and a 'suicide mission', and emphasising that 'People need to stop coming here' (Dickinson 2022). He cited several of the most common complaints repeated by volunteers, including the chaotic sign-up process, signing contracts without English translation, unreliable instructions, lack of training and English-language instructors, orders that seemed senseless and suicidal, a lack of confidence in commanders or fellow volunteers, concerns about the security risks posed by social media or drug use, as well as shortages of protective equipment and a lack of 'fucking weapons' (ibid.). He claimed that when a group of volunteers refused to follow orders, they were threatened and feared for their lives. He left Ukraine disguised as an aid worker, out of fear that if he was caught, his passport would be cut up and he would be forcibly sent to the front lines (Rubenstein 2022).

The Danish volunteer Mads-Emil expressed similar concerns as he left Ukraine after less than a week in the country, dissatisfied with not receiving any military training during that time. He expressed frustration with the fact that too many volunteers lacked military experience and for that reason were not prioritised. Furthermore, he expressed worries about international volunteers disobeying orders by keeping their smartphones on and uploading pictures to social media while in situ (Jørgensen 2022). He found it absurd that he and others without specific expertise were tasked with building the entire digital security system for the commando central, to defend against Russian military hackers. Soon after volunteering, he worried that he was putting himself at risk for what he came to see as nothing more than a grand PR stunt (Ibid.).

The wide circulation of Hoeft's viral video, with Russian commentary mocking Ukraine's volunteer fighters added, led Hoeft to be called a Russian agent by other volunteers (Stieb 2022). Hoeft's reasons for leaving were challenged by fellow traveller Dunn, who posted a video on a now-banned TikTok account claiming to

have also left the unit but still being 'willing to give my all'. Further giving an insight into the frequent infighting among international volunteers on social media, a third American volunteer chimed in, claiming that both Hoeft and Dunn had in fact been rejected as volunteers because they failed the vetting process (Dillon 2022).

The video also hinted at the tensions between Ukrainian commanders and international volunteers, with Hoeft claiming that after the attack on the Yavoriv training facility, 'They are counting our dead as their dead', seemingly with reference to the Ukrainian authorities not reporting the full number of international volunteer casualties. In a later interview, Hoeft said 'They want to keep the casualties of their people to a minimum. So, if you have a bunch of foreigners that come to volunteer, send them first', and claimed that 'most of the Western equipment is going directly to the Ukrainian military' (Rubenstein 2022). Two German volunteers also relayed in a media and personal interview that they met a field medic who claimed to have overheard Ukrainian officers referring to the inexperienced international volunteers as 'cannon fodder' (Livingstone 2022).

Hoeft's reference to a group of volunteers refusing an order due to lack of safety gear and weapons reflects the general challenge of international volunteers' unwillingness to be managed and submit to military discipline. Danish volunteers have been reported to be interrupting commanders giving instructions (Jørgensen 2022) or considering military orders on a pick-and-choose basis (Kornø 2022). A Danish volunteer stated that, 'I wanted to be free to leave when I choose to. I mean, I came to help so I choose how I want to help. When I am the one showing up for them, they shouldn't tell me what to do or not' (personal interview 2022).

LEADERSHIP PROBLEMS

This lack of discipline amongst volunteers should be considered in conjunction with the widespread distrust of certain legion commanders, along with complaints of serious mismanagement. A detailed 78-page leaked report drafted by a group of international ILDU organisers collated numerous witness accounts regarding the alleged abuse of power by specific commanders as well as general mismanagement of the legion. Volunteers had reportedly filed several complaints without seeing any proper reaction and therefore turned to leaking the report to media and researchers to spur action. The report was corroborated and confirmed by the recognised media outlet, Kyiv Independent (Myroniuk & Khrebet 2022a; 2022b).

In the report, ILDU volunteers accuse one commander of antisemitism, heavy drinking, abusing power by ordering soldiers to get drunk before going to fight and to loot shops, and sexually harassing the legion's female medics. The same commander was also accused of stealing military equipment from the unit as well as from the soldiers who dubbed it 'tax'. Following the release of the report, this commander was exposed as an alleged former member of a criminal organisation from Poland, wanted at home for fraud and charged in Ukraine prior to the war with illegal possession of firearms including semi-automatic weapons.

Another Ukrainian commander faced heavy criticism in the report for behaving erratically and mismanaging the unit, sending unprepared soldiers on reckless missions. He was accused of leaving the squad behind to hold the front line without backup in an incident which led to multiple deaths and the capture of Andrew Hill who faced torture and possible execution in Russian-occupied Donetsk on accusations of being a mercenary before being released as part of a prisoner exchange (Beecher 2022). 'People are telling their families to blame [the commander], not the enemy, in case they die', one legionnaire's testimony reads. This commander is also accused of abusing power by staging an illegitimate trial for a volunteer who had been complaining about his leadership, accusing the volunteer of being a Russian spy. 'I have never seen in my life worse leadership. Please, for the love of God, replace him with anyone before good people get hurt or die', reads a testimony in the report.

The findings of the report underscored not only the potential compromise of the Legion's effectiveness but also the toll on volunteers' morale. One volunteer's testimony reads 'Several hundred have left the Legion, not because of fear but because of frustration with the leadership abilities'. Another volunteer expressed his frustration with the fact that the legion is led by what he calls a 'Polish gangster', complaining that 'It dishonors the Legion as a whole' (Myroniuk & Khrebet 2022b). The authors stressed the importance of shedding light on army mismanagement even during times of war to ensure the ability of ILDU to contribute meaningfully to the war effort. The report contained numerous suggestions compiled by the international volunteer organisers for reforming the legion in order to halt desertion, especially of highly-skilled veterans frustrated with mismanagement issues. First, the report called for a complete restructuring of the leadership level of the ILDU. Specifically, the report suggested that the ILDU leadership should be reformed in such a way that it would be led by international volunteers with experience as NATO officers able to implement effective training programmes and ensure strong communication and coordination among the units.

Second, the report argued for the need to professionalise the administration of the legion. The report contains claims that highly-professional and skilled volunteers also left the legion due to lack of administrative support, organisational mistakes, and problems with paperwork, such as failure to provide volunteers with official contracts and salary. 'A lot of really good special [forces] guys literally just said: "No, thank you. We can't work like that anymore"', one American volunteer claims (Myroniuk & Khrebet 2022a). For some volunteers, such administrative challenges meant that they were reliant on donations to remain in the legion. It also meant that they faced uncertainties about their legal status as combatants and their right to veterans' benefits when they were not provided with a contract.

Finally, the report suggests constructing a military identity for the legion, including a 'code of honour' and a pledge of allegiance, modelled on American military traditions. This seems to particularly have been the personal project of one of the report's authors, Malcolm Nance, who profiled himself as someone who sought to use his experience as an American veteran to bring order and discipline to the legion. While the suggested reform of leadership and professionalisation of the administration addressed challenges at the organisational level, the suggested 'code of honour' had a more emblematic significance aimed at establishing a sense of community, identity and loyalty at the ground level of the legion. Though purely symbolic with no real sanctions or legal framework, it was assumed that formulating a pledge of allegiance and code of honour would help to foster discipline and professionalism within the volunteer community. In turn, it was hoped that this would boost the legion's morale and counter the challenges to its reputation brought by the reports of mismanagement and misconduct.

The findings of the report raise broader questions about oversight and accountability within volunteer military formations and underscores the challenges faced by volunteers independently navigating internal issues within the organisations they join. While progress has been made in addressing some issues, the long-term viability of the ILDU project ultimately hinges on ongoing evaluation and adaptation to overcome the inherent challenges of managing an improvised volunteer legion that remain at the heart of the project.

Photo and description: MTWMTT. GRANT ROONEY PREMIUM / Alamy Stock Photo.
A young boy climbing on the war memorial sculptures, Kiev, Ukraine. May 2018.

A NEW WAY OF SOLDIERING

This international legion reflects a shift in the dynamics of international conflict and the evolving motivations driving individuals to participate in warfare, raising questions about our societies' relationship with war. If a door has been opened to the spontaneous establishment of international legions, allowing countries to attract citizens from other nations to join their fights, then traditional notions of national allegiance and identity may blur. The formation of international legions forces us to re-examine traditional ideas of loyalty, national identity, and the role of individuals in warfare, as volunteers may be motivated by a sense of purpose that goes beyond traditional boundaries and compels us to reconsider the conventional understanding of soldiering (Grasmeder 2021).

Research indicates that generally conflicts with a high number of foreign fighters tend to be particularly brutal. Foreign fighters may lack training in the laws of war and it may be difficult to ensure compliance therewith, as demonstrated when American volunteer James Vasques posted on Twitter, 'I don't think I have to worry about the Geneva Convention here' (Shoaib 2023). Danish volunteer Storm Balderson received criticism when images were circulated of him posing alongside dead bodies with their hands tied that appeared to be Russian soldiers (Jensen 2022). Foreign fighters may exhibit lower military discipline and have weaker control systems around them. Conflicts involving foreign fighters are also associated with a higher degree of violence against civilians, particularly women and children, including sexual violence (Moore 2019).

This raises questions about how to mitigate these risks and ensure accountability for potential war crimes in such environments. Veteran foreign fighters may also have an impact beyond the conflict they initially joined, as they may continue onwards to participate in more conflicts. In Ukraine, people who joined to fight in 2014 returned in 2022, while individuals who had previously fought with Kurdish groups such as the YPG also joined the fight reportedly forming the Dark Angels unit (Guillaume 2022). An American veteran who decided to join on his way home from YPG declared, 'No ideology, just didn't want to miss out'. Similarly, the Middle East Eye reported that Syrian rebel fighters who had fought President al-Assad's Russia-backed regime were planning to travel to Ukraine 'to confront Russian forces along with my Ukrainian brothers' (al-Aswad 2022; al-Kanj 2022). These examples point to the potentially long-lasting problems of internationalising conflicts through a foreign fighter mobilisation, and highlight the need for further research and understanding on the implications of foreign fighters, their actions, and their dynamic impact within different groups and across multiple conflicts in order to develop effective strategies for conflict resolution.

In a conflict where Russia is viewed as an unjust aggressor, Ukraine has been internationally seen as standing on moral high ground. This positive image has also rubbed off on volunteers who are largely perceived favourably (Tang 2023). Yet, the legion is also a place where people seek to restart stagnant lives, find a sense of purpose, or unleash unchecked violence. Whether they fight for idealism, adventure, or other reasons, it is important not to lose sight of the concerns associated with such mobilisation, many of which are associated with the phenomenon of foreign fighters. Even in non-extremist contexts or conflicts not dominated by terrorist groups, it is crucial for home countries to be aware of the experiences that individuals

may have had while fighting and their state upon returning home. Returnees could be dealing with PTSD and other mental health issues that existed prior to their trip but were exacerbated during their time abroad or which they acquired as a result of combat. They may reject the idea of a state monopoly on violence and feel above the law because they joined a fight out of a sense of duty which they consider their government to have failed to act on. There is a risk that this could lead them to develop anti-government attitudes if they do not receive the necessary assistance upon returning home.

In addition to the mental health burden, there are also concerns about the combat skills and potential violent tendencies of returnees. Some may have acquired skills in explosives or weapons use. For instance, Site reported in 2022 that a guide to making various types of thermite explosives was shared on 4chan in March, after a member inquired about sabotaging Russian invasion efforts. The bomb manuals were positively received, prompting another forum member to request more information. With increased awareness of the link between serious mental health issues and the risk of acts of violence, including public or mass shootings, it is crucial for countries to have mechanisms in place to assess and address these risks as individuals return from Ukraine, on occasions bringing their weapons back with them.

Previous research on foreign fighters has highlighted the importance of ensuring successful reintegration into society upon return by following up and assessing returnees' psychological needs and the potential risk they pose. Since 2015, Denmark has been establishing the necessary cross-sectional cooperation to handle this societal task covering social, security, and psychiatric domains. The Danish approach to this issue was previously considered progressive in Europe and served as a model for many other countries' reintegration programmes for foreign fighters. However, it appears that this approach has now been set aside concerning those who departed for Ukraine.

Learning from this mobilisation and the broader trend of foreign fighting, it seems relevant to develop national policies that outline the circumstances and conditions for Danes joining wars abroad in various capacities outside of the Danish defence. A proactive approach could clarify their status and systematise their treatment in the Danish system, including legal aspects, relevant national and international law, consequences for national army veterans, as well as ensure that tailored rehabilitation initiatives are in place to support and address the needs of returnees.

A key aspect of developing such national policies would be to collaborate with international partners and organisations to not only enhance Denmark's response towards the issue but also contribute to global efforts aimed at managing the reintegration of returnees into society. Additionally, it would be relevant to involve national stakeholders in the development and implementation of these policies to ensure that policies are practical, effective, and sensitive to individual circumstances. By taking a proactive, collaborative, and comprehensive approach to developing national policies on foreign fighting, Denmark can not only address the current challenges but also build a framework that can anticipate, adapt, and effectively respond to future challenges that are likely to arise in relation to foreign fighters.

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