Foreign Policy – 19.10.2015

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They Came to Fight for Ukraine. Now They’re Stuck in No Man’s Land

Вони прийшли воювати за Україну. Зараз вони застрягли на нічийній землі

У травні 2014 Рудольф, студент з Гомеля, побачив публікацію на Facebook, яка його надихнула. «Це не війна Росії з Україною; це війна між свободою і беззаконням», – писав Семен Семенченко, активний блогер на Facebook і командир батальйону «Донбас». Він закликав співчуваючих росіян і білорусів прийти на допомогу своєму сусідові у важку хвилину, оголосивши про те, що він набирає до себе іноземних громадян, «які поділяють наші погляди і хочуть допомогти». Рудольф взяв академічну відпустку в університеті і поїхав до Києва. Він записався в батальйон Семенченко. «Я вважав своїм обов'язком захищати Україну від російської агресії, яка поширюється на всі сусідні країни», - розповів колишній студент-програміст. Тепер, через кілька місяців після того, як він перестав брати участь у бойових діях, Рудольф застряг в Києві, переїжджаючи від одного друга до іншого. 90-денний термін безвізового перебування на Україні, дозволеного для росіян і білорусів, давно минув, і те, що він входив до батальйон «Донбас», стало відомо білоруському КДБ. Він не може повернутися додому. Рудольф – тільки один з декількох сотень іноземних волонтерів, в основному росіян і білорусів, які опинилися в скрутному становищі в Україні. І це після того, як вони ризикували життям, борючись на боці уряду в Києві, і їм були обіцяні за це паспорти. У той час як їх батальйон увійшов до складу Національної гвардії, їх особисті документи так і не були до кінця оброблені, і це значить, що вони не отримали на виплат, ні громадянства.

http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/10/19/ukraines-abandoned-soldiers-russian-belarusian-volunteers/

When separatists started a war in eastern Ukraine, hundreds of Russians, Belarusians, and other foreigners came to Kiev’s defense. Now they’ve been abandoned.

In May 2014, Rudolph, then a 19-year-old student in Gomel, in eastern Belarus, saw a post on Facebook that inspired him. "This is not a war of Russia with Ukraine; this is a war between freedom and lawlessness," wrote Semen Semenchenko, a prolific Facebook blogger and the commander of the Donbass Battalion, a volunteer paramilitary unit fighting against Russia-backed separatists in eastern Ukraine. The commander called on sympathetic Russians and Belarusians to come help their neighbor in its time of need, announcing that he was recruiting foreigners "who share our views and want to help."

Rudolph took an academic leave from his university and left for Kiev. He signed up with Semenchenko's battalion, which became part of the Ukrainian National Guard and assisted the Ukrainian Army in Luhansk and Donetsk, the two regions partially seized by rebels who declared independence. "I saw it as my duty to defend Ukraine from Russian aggression which spreads to all neighboring countries," the lanky former computer science student told me last month. He worked in the battalion's radio communications unit as Ukraine's forces took back Artemivsk, Lisichansk, and other towns while losing vast territories along the Russian border last summer. The conflict is now frozen, a quagmire that has claimed 6,800 lives.

Now, months after he left the fighting, Rudolph is stuck in Kiev, living on friends' couches. He still wears fatigues, with a pre-Soviet, red-and-white Belarusian flag patch sewed onto the sleeve. He is desperately trying to legalize his new Ukrainian life. The 90-day, visa-less stay that Ukraine allows Russians and Belarusians has long expired, and his participation in the Donbass Battalion has been leaked to the Belarusian KGB, a close ally of Moscow. He can't go home.

Rudolph is just one of several hundred foreign volunteers, mostly Russians and Belarusians, who are stranded in Ukraine after risking their lives fighting for the government in Kiev and being promised passports in return. The Ukrainian military has been closed off to foreigners so these sympathizers of the Maidan revolution have opted to join the ranks of the dozen or so volunteer battalions defending Ukraine against what was seen as an invasion by neo-Soviet master Moscow. Most seem to be driven by a deep aversion to President Vladimir Putin's policies, which Russian fighters say have degraded their country's economy and society and many Belarusians say are turning their country into a protectorate with a military presence.

"Show that the face of Russia is not Putin," Semenchenko wrote on Facebook on May 14, 2014, days after rebels in Ukraine's eastern regions of Luhansk and Donetsk organized a "referendum" for independence and a month into Kiev's operations to put down the separatist insurgency with an inexperienced and woefully underfunded army.

Men answering the call trained with the National Guard, went through a background check, and pledged allegiance to Ukraine before they joined the fight. Interior Minister Arsen Avakov hailed them as heroes and promised them "fast-track citizenship" as they waited to be naturalized, according to Rudolph and other former volunteers. While their battalion became part of the National Guard, their individual paperwork was never fully processed by the government — which meant they received no pay and citizenship never came, but the men figured that the details would be sorted out later, after the separatists had been defeated.

"Finally, they pushed us out to the east without resolving this problem. We thought, 'OK, we will go on to win and then raise this issue again. But in the end it so happened that the troops' advance turned to withdrawal, then to a frozen conflict, and everyone without documents was basically purged into civilian life without any means of existence," Rudolph told me as we sat in a café in downtown Kiev. He later went back to the front lines — but with a militia group that neither asked for nor promised him any official paperwork. But since returning, he's been stuck.

Last December, Gen. Alexander Rozmaznin estimated that Ukraine's forces contained "about [a] thousand" foreigners. Statistics on their nationalities are not public, but he said they include people from the former Soviet Union and beyond, including France and the United States. Rudolph told me he personally knows 50 former volunteers like him scattered around Ukraine with no documents. The total number is estimated to be in the several hundreds. Many could be in hiding, since their illegal status in Ukraine could lead to deportation by officials enforcing immigration laws.

Some are in especially dire conditions. Sergei, a young Russian opposition activist from the city of Ulyanovsk who fought for the Shakhtarsk Battalion — a volunteer force answerable to the Interior Ministry which was later dissolved for looting — was stopped in Dnipropetrovsk in July and given orders to leave the country. Scared of going back to Russia, he headed back to the conflict zone, where last month he stepped on a mine and nearly lost his legs. Migration officials brought his deportation injunction to the hospital's intensive care unit just as his friends were crowdfunding for his surgery on Facebook.

Yulia has found herself in a similarly tight spot. The petite 20-year-old, who goes by the nom de guerre Valkrie, left her home in southern Russia to join the Maidan demonstrations shortly after they broke out. Later, she fought for the Aidar Battalion, a nationalist volunteer group that fought in Luhansk and was made part of the Ukrainian military this year but also has a reputation for human rights abuses. Yulia lost her passport in a fire during combat. Several months ago, she gave birth in Ukraine but cannot get a birth certificate or medical care for her baby.

Commanders of Ukraine's volunteer battalions had written to President Petro Poroshenko several times over the past year with lists of foreign fighters who deserve citizenship. They received no response from the president's office. But it's not like the government wasn't opening its arms to foreigners. On Dec. 2, 2014, Poroshenko, who has the authority to grant citizenship by decree, handed out Ukrainian passports to several non-Ukrainians tasked with economic reform, including American investment banker Natalie Jaresko, now finance minister, and Lithuanian investment banker Aivaras Abromavicius, who became the country's economy and trade minister.

"I want to also say hello to my fighting comrades," Poroshenko said in a speech before the parliament in Kiev that day, by way of responding to the battalion commanders' requests to naturalize their foreign fighters. "Your appeals to the president of Ukraine regarding granting Ukrainian citizenship to Russians and Belarusians who defended the honor of the country and independence of the state together with you — I will sign the decree to give them Ukrainian citizenship as promised," he said to a standing ovation from jubilant lawmakers.

Many more months went by, but only two foreign volunteers had their Ukrainian nationality handed to them by presidential decree, fighters said, dismissing their cases as political flukes. Meanwhile, Russian authorities launched probes against several men who fought for Ukraine, while Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko ominously promised to "deal with everyone fighting in Ukraine when they come back."

Sympathetic lawmakers have put forth two bills this year that purport to help out foreign soldiers by easing residency and citizenship procedures for those who want to serve. On Oct. 6, the parliament voted to legalize service by foreigners in the armed forces. Even if the bills, which have floated around parliament for months, are passed, they are not going to help those whose legal stay in the country has already run out. Their heroism on the front lines last year has no legal weight in the face of migration officials doing their jobs.

"It is clear to me that the citizenship mechanism has to be simplified for them, but why this wasn't put to a vote is hard to say," said Natalia Veselova, a member of parliament from the pro-European Self-Reliance party. Veselova was one of the people behind creating the Donbass Battalion last year. (Semenchenko, the battalion's commander, is also a member of parliament now.) "I cannot understand why, but there is no political will [to resolve the issue]," she said. Although the government does not want to "give shelter to criminals" by blanket naturalization, she said, cutting volunteers loose effectively makes criminals out of them in their own countries. "These people can be prosecuted at home simply because they volunteered for us."

The foreigners resent the fact that Russians like Maria Gaidar, a former member of Russia's opposition, was granted citizenship when she was made deputy head of the Odessa region. In May, Mikheil Saakashvili, the former president of Georgia, was flown into Odessa from exile in Brooklyn and made head of the region. He was also given citizenship. Along with Gaidar, Poroshenko gave a Ukrainian passport to Vladimir Fedorin, a Russian-born journalist, who edited the Ukrainian edition of *Forbes*. Overall, 707 people were granted Ukrainian citizenship by presidential decree in the first eight months of 2015, according to official statistics. Some of them are clearly handpicked government officials, but the list of names is not made public — raising further questions among those who fought.

"On what merit?" Gennady, a 35-year-old Russian who was a platoon commander on the front lines in eastern Ukraine this spring, said of Gaidar's citizenship. "If we must be government workers like her to qualify for citizenship," he said, "I'm ready to work any job, even as a driver. We don't ask for any money or a salary." Gennady's legal stay in Ukraine ran out when he was in the hospital with an injury he acquired in May during a sortie into separatist territory in Pisky, near Donetsk. "At any moment, police can stop me on the street and deport me," the former fighter with Right Sector, a nationalist group active near Donetsk, said by phone from an undisclosed city in Ukraine, where "kind people" are helping him out. "This is simply unfair to the guys who put their lives on the line for Ukraine's independence."

Dmitry, another former Donbass Battalion fighter, said the volunteers' case shows that the Ukrainian leadership simply cannot be trusted. "To me, personally, our story is a marker. When Poroshenko goes on television and says, 'Russia attacked, but we have no money for tanks' — I can understand that. But he promised us passports, that costs nothing, and it takes five minutes to sign a decree. Why doesn't he do it? Perhaps he does not want to. Then perhaps he does not want to win the war either," he said.

Dmitry, a 40-year-old Belarusian, moved to Ukraine in 2007 and lives near Kiev with a Ukrainian wife and child. He has residency in Ukraine, but his situation is still fickle as he will need to renew his passport in Minsk, the capital of Belarus, when it expires soon, which he is afraid to do after fighting against the Russia-backed rebels. "We are completely disenfranchised and defenseless, and there is nothing we can do," he added.

Dmitry says the "humiliation" of foreigners who fought for Kiev is compounded with his own experience at the front, where disorganized command led to massive casualties in the town of Ilovaisk. Suspicious of the "humanitarian corridor" offered to encircle Ukrainian troops, Dmitry decided to break away from his unit and make his way out on his own terms with a small group of fellow fighters. He walked for five days before being able to call for assistance to reach Ukrainian ranks 50 miles away. He was lucky: Hundreds of those who listened to their commanders were either killed or captured and subjected to forced labor by rebels. The Ilovaisk massacre, which is still being investigated by Ukraine, is arguably the darkest hour for Ukraine's

Army — one that commanders blame on Russia's misinformation but that soldiers like Dmitry put wholly on Kiev's generals.

Foreign fighters, like many of their Ukrainian comrades, blame poor military leadership for the ultimate failure to seize territory back from the rebels. Red tape prevented the enlistment of willing volunteers while unmotivated draftees were not given proper training and went numb with fear — and alcohol — upon reaching combat zones. Dmitry listed the Ukrainian forces' bloodiest failures: "We lost the [Donetsk] airport; we lost Ilovaisk; we lost Debaltseve," he said. And yet none of these defeats led to any change in the top command.

"Once an entire company simply ran away from the sound of our own machine gun," said Rudolph, recalling an incident in the winter, when he went back to the front lines briefly to join Right Sector — the only unit that would still take foreigners at that time. When Right Sector wasn't fighting, its members fought against drinking in the army by raiding local shops and moonshine producers and dumping out alcohol.

Russian media has made headlines of "foreign mercenaries" from the United States and Scandinavia making money by killing civilians for pleasure in "fascist" battalions run by right-wing extremists, particularly Right Sector and the Azov Battalion.

The Russian reports are largely exaggeration, but they contain a grain of truth. Neo-Nazis, some coming from as far away as Sweden, have been openly active in Azov, an ultra-right outlet**,** which has a Wolfsangel on its emblem and which U.S. congressmen have called a "neo-Nazi paramilitary militia." Right Sector, which was instrumental in the Maidan protests and now also has a political party, has regularly clashed with police and denounced the West as causing "moral decay" in Ukraine through "homosexual propaganda."

But it's not just ideology that brought fighters to far-right groups. Some told me that they ended up joining Right Sector simply because it waived the bureaucracy of the other battalions for people who wanted to join the combat. They also rejected allegations that they were mercenaries. None of the half-dozen foreign fighters I interviewed received any government money for fighting, with most help and supplies coming from donors. Only one, a Russian, said he got any money at all — 4,500 Ukrainian hryvnia (about $200) over four months of fighting from nongovernmental sponsors.

The foreigners now fear that they are becoming victims of a burgeoning political struggle between the battalions and a government in Kiev that aspires to join the EU and wants to shed any association with the far-right, white supremacist ideology — even if the far-right groups helped the undisciplined Ukrainian army in its weakest moments last year. There are at least 100 Russians in Azov, according to one member, Alexei Filippov, a 27-year-old former Russian military officer who hitchhiked to Ukraine's frontier in February and announced to the stupefied border guards that he wanted to fight for their country.

Filippov, a self-described Buddhist with a short, dry cackle for a laugh, went through naval academy in the Russian Far East and served in the Naval Infantry and later the SOBR, the special forces unit of the Russian Interior Ministry used in hostage operations and against organized crime. He said he was apolitical before the Ukraine conflict, but started following social media accounts of right-wing battalions as he became turned off by Russian state media coverage.

"I thought, 'What sort of nonsense is this?'" he said of the made-up stories on Russian state television, which, among other outlandish claims, accused the Ukrainian army of crucifying children. When he began to argue about the war in Ukraine, his friends accused him of being "for the Americans" and turned away from him, he said. "Finally, my girlfriend said, 'Why don't you go ahead and fight for these fascists?'"

"I sat there and thought, 'Why not?'" he said, crushing five sugar cubes into his green tea in a central Kiev café. He packed his special forces gear and went to Ukraine to join Right Sector, the group most vilified by Russian media. After spending time on the front lines near Donetsk, Filippov joined Azov, and he now works as an instructor at one of its training bases.

"I thought if we defeat these quasi-separatists and Ukraine begins to flourish, Russians will see that Ukraine's revolution was beneficial and start to demand changes from Putin," he said. Through the conflict, his idealism about Ukraine's new pro-Western leadership wore off, while far-right ideology made an impression. He started quoting Hitler and Nietzsche on his social media pages. Yet, he says, the only reason he is still in Azov is because he cannot work anywhere else while he is in the country illegally. He wants to move on to work for Ukraine's special forces once he gets a passport.

"The main thing for me is to get citizenship so that everything doesn't end like this: 'It's great that you came and fought for us, now fuck off.'"